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The 'Colonised Coloniser': Coloniality, Internal Colonisation, and the Anti-Ottoman Civilising Mission in Austria-Hungary

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Abstract

This article examines how colonial repertoires of knowledge, governance, and political imagination were deployed within the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (1878–1918). Rather than focusing on overseas colonial formations, it employs the figure of the "colonised coloniser" as a heuristic device to reconstruct how colonial repertoires were reconfigured within the continental setting of the Habsburg Empire. Drawing on postcolonial and decolonial approaches to coloniality, internal colonisation, and civilising missions, the article reconstructs the discursive and administrative configurations that legitimised the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a project of cultural transformation and state-directed modernisation. It argues that representations of Bosnia as a "future province" relied on anti-Ottoman narratives, Roman-Christian concepts of culture, ethnographic and archaeological knowledge production, and public health policies to legitimise a distinctive imperial civilising mission (*Kulturmission*). Around 1900, ethnonational Pan-Germanism inverted this imperial logic by representing Germans themselves as the colonised victims of the multinational state rather than as agents of imperial civilisation. By reconstructing this configuration of coloniality, the article contributes to debates on empire, coloniality, and internal colonisation in East Central Europe.

Keywords: coloniality; internal colonisation; coloniality of knowledge; Austro-Hungarian Empire; Bosnia-Herzegovina; civilising mission; Pan-Germanism; East Central Europe

1. Introduction

> *And this also," said Marlow suddenly, „has been one of the dark places of the earth." […] "I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day … Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday."* (Conrad, 1902/1916, 2–3/72)

The passage mobilises a discursive figure that is referred to in this article as the "colonised coloniser." In the opening of Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) evokes the idea that peoples once subjected to a civilising mission may subsequently claim the authority to continue it. Before Marlow embarks on his journey to the Congo, he reminds his British audience that they themselves had once been "savages," subjugated and civilised by Rome. The passage permits two contrasting readings. Rather than entering debates about Conrad's own position on empire, the present article employs the figure of the "colonised coloniser" as a heuristic point of departure for reconstructing a historically

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specific Habsburg discourse of imperial succession.[1] Unlike Conrad's Britons, who figure as a people civilised by Rome, the Habsburg case operates through a different logic of historical succession. The heuristic value does not lie in historical identity but in the political principle whereby incorporation into an inherited civilisation becomes the basis for its further transmission.

Although this figure is perhaps most familiar from Conrad's literary imagination, its historical genealogy extends beyond British imperial literature. Conrad's own East Central European background is relevant in this respect. Born into a Polish family in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire, he was familiar with the imperial realities of a region marked by shifting sovereignties and competing civilisational claims (Jasanoff, 2017, pp. 3–9). Rather than treating the "colonised coloniser" as a literary trope, the present article reconstructs it as a historically specific discourse of imperial civilisation that emerged within the political and cultural matrix of the Habsburg Empire. It argues that the figure is best understood in relation to projects of internal colonisation, imperial succession, and regional expansion that took shape in East Central Europe after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. As will become clear, the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 by no means marks the origin of Habsburg civilisational discourse. Rather, it serves as the analytical point of departure, since the constitutional reorganization of the Monarchy into a Dual Monarchy created the political framework within which the legitimacy of the Empire had to be renegotiated. The occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina after 1878 became the principal arena in which established civilisational narratives were reformulated as a supranational imperial mission.

The "colonised coloniser" refers to this specific mode of imperial self-legitimation. It denotes a configuration in which political actors derive authority for expansion from narratives of their own prior civilisation and Christianisation. In the Habsburg Empire, this discourse formed part of a specifically Roman Catholic understanding of culture, which conceived it less as civilisational or evolutionary progress than as the cultivation of land, administration, and Christian order (Fuchs, 2003, pp. 145–147, 212–213). Following 1867, this discourse informed projects of internal modernisation within the multiethnic Monarchy before being extended to Bosnia after 1878, where imperial rule was represented not as colonial conquest but as the political, cultural, and administrative restoration of a territory imagined as historically European. The present article does not argue that contemporaries explicitly referred to themselves as "colonised colonisers." Rather, it proposes the term as an analytical reconstruction of a civilisational discourse that became visible across political discourse, administrative programmes, scientific knowledge production, and public representations.

Recent scholarship has interpreted Habsburg rule in Bosnia-Herzegovina in markedly different ways. It has been described as a form of internal colonisation (Donia, 2007, p. 1), a "proximate colony" (Donia, 2014, p. 197), a civilising mission (Okey, 2007, pp. 26–29), a hybrid imperial formation (Ruthner, 2015, pp. 7–12; 2018, pp. 34–43; 2024, pp. 577–578), or, conversely, its characterisation as colonial has been questioned (Scheer, 2018, p. 45). These studies have convincingly demonstrated the colonial dimensions of Habsburg rule in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Most recently, Ruthner (2024, pp. 575–578) has synthesised these debates by arguing that Bosnia represents perhaps the clearest case of Habsburg colonialism within Europe while critically reassessing the rhetoric of the Habsburg civilising mission. Building on these predominantly postcolonial interpretations, the present article adopts a decolonial analytical perspective. Rather than asking whether Bosnia should be understood as colonial, it reconstructs the discursive configuration of self-legitimation through which this specific form of imperial expansion became politically intelligible and legitimate. The concept of the "colonised coloniser" is therefore proposed not as an alternative political

history of Bosnia, but as an analytical framework grounded in narratives of prior civilisation and Christianisation.

Instead of focusing on diplomatic and political decision-making, the article examines ethnographic, anthropological, archaeological, medical, and administrative knowledge produced during the occupation, arguing that these fields constituted the principal sites through which the Habsburg civilising mission was articulated, legitimised, and translated into practices of imperial rule. Drawing on these interconnected forms of knowledge production, the article develops the figure of the "colonised coloniser" as an analytical framework for understanding a distinctive mode of imperial self-legitimation that combined projects of internal colonisation with narratives of civilisational succession. The article proceeds in three steps. It begins by introducing coloniality, internal colonisation, and the civilising mission as conceptual frameworks for analysing East Central Europe. It then reconstructs the Austro-Hungarian discourse of imperial incorporation and examines its articulation in Bosnia after 1878. Finally, it analyses the ethnonational reappropriation of this imperial repertoire by Pan-German nationalism within the late Habsburg Empire.

2. Coloniality and Internal Colonisation Beyond the Atlantic World

2.1. Coloniality and the Atlantic Paradigm

Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has fundamentally transformed understandings of European modernity by foregrounding its colonial entanglements. Mignolo (2011, pp. 2–3) argues that European modernity presents itself as a project of progress, reason, and civilisation while simultaneously obscuring the colonial violence and exploitation on which it historically depended. From this perspective, modernity and coloniality do not constitute separate historical phenomena but two inseparable dimensions of the same historical process. Particularly relevant to the present argument is Aníbal Quijano's concept of the *coloniality of power*, which shifts attention from formal colonial rule to enduring hierarchies of civilisation, knowledge, and authority that persist beyond the age of empire (Quijano, 2000, pp. 533–534, 542–545). This perspective provides the theoretical point of departure for analysing Habsburg imperial expansion beyond the conventional history of overseas colonialism.

The analytical categories employed in this article refer to distinct dimensions of imperial rule. Coloniality refers to the broader civilisational order through which hierarchies of civilisation, culture, knowledge, and progress were produced. The civilising mission, or *Kulturmission*, denotes the discursive justification of imperial intervention. Internal colonisation refers to programmes of administrative, demographic, and agrarian transformation directed at territories incorporated into the Empire (cf. Hechter, 1975/1977, pp. 234–260; Donia, 2007, pp. 1–7; Etkind, 2011, pp. 4–7), while settler colonisation constitutes one possible instrument of such projects (cf. Wolfe, 1999; Veracini, 2010). The "colonised coloniser", finally, designates the discursive figure through which imperial expansion was legitimised by reference to narratives of prior civilisation and Christianisation.

The historical evidence on which these theories were originally developed is particularly compelling in the Atlantic world. The emergence of North Atlantic modernity, for example, cannot be separated from the dispossession of Indigenous populations, the enslavement and forced migration of Africans, and the extraction of colonial resources on a global scale. Precisely for this reason, coloniality has most often been theorised through the history of overseas empires, especially those shaped by settler colonialism (Wolfe, 1999; Veracini, 2010). The present article does not challenge this genealogy. Instead, it asks whether the Atlantic paradigm has also obscured forms of coloniality associated with continental imperial expansion, internal colonisation, and what Donia (2014, p. 197) has termed "proximate colonialism" in East Central Europe.

However, this Atlantic framing tends to reproduce an implicit distinction between colonial and supposedly non-colonial regions of Europe. East Central Europe, lacking major overseas possessions, has generally been assigned to the latter category. Austria, for example, long cultivated a narrative of historical non-coloniality based on the absence of overseas colonies (Sauer, 2012, pp. 6–7). Yet postcolonial scholarship has demonstrated that Austrian and Hungarian actors participated in Habsburg and other European imperial projects (Sauer, 2012; Loidl, 2017). Austrian actors—notably German nationalist middle-class networks, scientists, and explorers—were deeply entangled in the colonial projects of the German Empire (Sauer, 2002/2007, 2021). They also contributed to the production of colonial knowledge through scientific expeditions, ethnographic research, and imperial networks (Sauer, 2002/2007, 2021). Building on these findings, the following sections examine how coloniality operated within the Habsburg Empire through internal colonisation, civilisational discourse, and projects of imperial expansion in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

2.2. Internal Colonisation and Regional Expansion

The assumption of East Central European non-coloniality obscures forms of internal colonisation and regional expansion that cannot be reduced to overseas empire. Studies of state formation have shown that such projects frequently proceeded through the transformation of peripheral territories and populations. Classic studies such as Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Weber, 1976/1979) demonstrated how modernisation, education, military service, and administrative integration transformed rural populations into national citizens (see also Anderson, 1983). More recent scholarship has conceptualised comparable processes as forms of internal colonisation, particularly in relation to the Russian Empire (Etkind, 2011) and nineteenth-century Prussia. Blackbourn (2006/2008, pp. 33–96), for example, has shown how Prussian state-building was closely linked to projects of environmental transformation, agricultural improvement, the settlement of colonists from neighbouring regions, and social discipline that contemporaries themselves described as "innere Kolonisation". Although these cases differ substantially, they share a conception of colonisation as the cultivation and amelioration of land and the transformation of populations through settlement, administrative intervention, and territorial integration rather than overseas territorial conquest.

Despite their different historical contexts and analytical vocabularies, these studies share an interest in the transformation of territories and populations through projects of state-directed modernisation. Judson (2016, p. 4) characterises Habsburg "empire building" as a long-term effort to construct "a unified and unifying imperial state", a process he traces back to the reign of Maria Theresia. Within the Habsburg Monarchy, many of the administrative techniques later associated with projects of internal colonisation emerged well before imperial expansion into the Balkans. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Josephinist reforms introduced new forms of administrative centralisation, standardised governance, and territorial integration across the heterogeneous Crown Lands of the Monarchy, including the administrative incorporation and organised settlement of the formerly Ottoman province of Bukovina (Judson, 2016, pp. 58–78; cf. also Balázs, 1997, pp. 290–312).

The replacement of Latin by German as the language of administration in 1784 formed part of this broader programme of bureaucratic modernisation and administrative integration (Kann, 1974, pp. 170–199; Balázs, 1997, pp. 205–211). German consequently acquired a privileged status as the official language and principal language of instruction, contributing to a hierarchy of languages and cultures in which German was increasingly represented as historically and literarily superior, particularly in relation to Slavic languages. In the Kingdom of Hungary, the introduction of German provoked considerable resistance and turned language into an increasingly contested political issue (Kann, 1974, pp. 203–204). The re-

forms thus established administrative practices and cultural hierarchies that later provided important preconditions for Habsburg projects of territorial integration and, eventually, internal colonisation.

Following the revolutions of 1848, and especially after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, projects of internal modernisation increasingly intersected with ambitions of regional expansion and political hegemony in South-Eastern Europe (Jelavich, 1969, pp. 40–49; Suppan, 1978, pp. 104–129). As the Ottoman Empire entered a period of accelerating decline, Bosnia came to be imagined as a neighbouring territory that could be politically incorporated and culturally "Europeanised". The occupation of Bosnia did not represent a radical departure from earlier Habsburg practices but extended existing forms of administrative integration and civilisational legitimation beyond the Empire's established borders. The following section examines the Roman-Christian concept of culture through which these practices were increasingly articulated and justified.

2.3. Civilising Mission and the Roman-Christian Concept of Culture

Although the concept of the civilising mission is commonly associated with the overseas empires of the nineteenth century, a comparable programme of moral improvement, administrative rationalisation, and agricultural "amelioration" also informed projects of internal colonisation within Europe. In this respect, the Habsburg Empire shared important features with other European projects of state-building. Yet whereas Prussian programmes of internal colonisation have frequently been analysed in terms of drainage, land reclamation, and the settlement of agricultural colonists from neighbouring regions (cf. Blackbourn, 2006/2008, pp. 65–70), Habsburg projects articulated these objectives through a specifically Roman-Catholic conception of culture.

By the late nineteenth century, conservative Catholic intellectuals distinguished "culture" from liberal, evolutionist conceptions of civilisation. Imperial prestige projects such as the Novara circumnavigation (1857–1859) by the Austro-Hungarian Navy contributed to the production of colonial knowledge and to the establishment of imperial scientific and ethnographic collections (Scherzer, 1864; cf. Sauer, 2021, pp. 68–73). As I have argued elsewhere (Fuchs, 2003, pp. 204–205), conservative Catholic thought increasingly articulated a specifically Roman-Christian conception of culture. Drawing on the widely shared Roman Catholic concept of *cultus*—understood as the cultivation of land, Christian worship, education, and patriarchal moral order—it reformulated this understanding of culture into an explicitly anti-liberal theory, deliberately opposed to liberal and evolutionist ("Darwinian") conceptions of civilisation. As Judson (2016, p. 321) emphasises, after 1867 questions of culture assumed renewed political significance within the Habsburg Empire and found their most ambitious expression in the occupation of Bosnia, which offered an unprecedented opportunity to realise a European civilising mission.

Such conceptions proved especially compatible with programmes of internal colonisation. The cultivation of land and the "improvement" of populations appeared as complementary tasks of government. In this respect, the Habsburg civilising mission differed both from liberal evolutionist conceptions of civilisation and from the racialised logics that informed many forms of overseas settler colonialism. It was within this Roman-Christian conception of culture that the figure of the "colonised coloniser" acquired its political plausibility; peoples who understood themselves as heirs to a Roman-Christian civilisation also regarded themselves as responsible for its further transmission. This understanding of culture supplied the civilisational idiom through which projects of internal colonisation and regional imperial expansion could be represented not as acts of conquest but as processes of restoration, cultivation, and incorporation.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, colonisation had become a remarkably flexible political and social vocabulary throughout East Central Europe. As Osterhammel (1997, pp. 9–11) has observed, colonisation cannot simply be equated with settler colonialism but denotes a much broader repertoire of settlement, cultivation, and social transformation. Against the backdrop of state-sponsored programmes of agricultural amelioration, public health and hygiene, and administrative and infrastructural modernisation, the language of colonisation increasingly extended beyond overseas expansion. Workers' settlements established in connection with railway construction, roads, and tunnels were commonly described as "colonies", while urban workers formed colonisation associations to acquire garden plots or build homes (cf. Van de Grift, 2015). Colonisation thus functioned as a widely shared vocabulary of territorial improvement, settlement, and social transformation rather than a term reserved exclusively for overseas empires.[2] Within this broader political and social field that the Habsburg Empire articulated a distinctive discourse of imperial succession.

2.4. The Colonised Coloniser: Imperial Succession and Civilisational Mission

The figure of the "colonised coloniser" brings into focus how imperial rule came to be legitimised through narratives of historical succession rather than claims of innate superiority. Within nineteenth-century European political thought, Rome remained the paradigmatic model of imperial succession. The Roman Empire appeared simultaneously as a conquering power, as the historical foundation of European law and political order, and, in later political imaginaries, as the matrix of a Roman-Christian civilisation. This productive tension between conquest and civilisation made Rome the principal historical model through which later empires interpreted and legitimised their own expansion.[3]

The dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 did not eliminate the political significance of Roman universalism. Rather, it generated competing claims to civilisational succession. Within the Habsburg Empire, imperial universalism found expression in projects of supranational governance and administrative integration. After 1867, these aspirations were increasingly articulated through a liberal language of progress, cultural development, and imperial integration (cf. Judson, 2016, pp. 218–233). This project found one of its most ambitious political expressions in the occupation of Bosnia (Judson, 2016, p. 321).

At the same time, this supranational universalism intersected with a range of ethnonational universalisms centred on language, education, and culture (cf. Judson, 2016, pp. 270–275). (Pan-)German cultural universalism formed one particularly influential strand of this broader constellation.[4] These strands were not mutually exclusive. Rather, they claimed universal validity while differing over the political community through which civilisation should be transmitted: the supranational Habsburg Empire in one case, and the German nation in the other. This overlap between supranational imperial universalism and German cultural universalism is particularly evident in the writings of the linguist Friedrich Müller (1834–1898), who contributed the ethnographic volume to the scientific results of the Novara circumnavigation (Müller, 1868). The Novara circumnavigation may be regarded as the Habsburg Empire's closest equivalent to an overseas imperial scientific expedition. Combining scientific exploration with imperial ambitions, it became an important site of imperial knowledge production and competing visions of civilisational mission (Scherzer, 1864; cf. Gombos, 2025). Müller's vision of Pan-German cultural universalism drew heavily on Hegelian conceptions of universal history, which he rearticulated as a universal Christian mission realised through colonisation. For him, colonisation represented the highest expression of Christianity because it alone enabled humanity to become "in the image of God" (Müller, 1868, p. XXVIII).

Müller's formulation is revealing because it links Christian universalism and colonisation through a logic of historical succession: civilisation imposes an obligation of further transmission. Colonisation thus appears less as an act of conquest than as the fulfilment of an inherited civilisational mission. The figure of the "colonised coloniser" should not be reduced to official Habsburg discourse. Rather, it emerged within a broader discursive field of competing universalist projects that differed in their political orientations while sharing the assumption that civilisation, once inherited, entailed a responsibility to transmit it further. Against this background, the occupation of Bosnia in 1878 could be represented not as the acquisition of an alien colony but as the restoration of a historically European territory whose civilisational trajectory had allegedly been interrupted by centuries of Ottoman rule.

3. Bosnia and the Articulation of a Civilisational Mission

3.1. Bosnia and Herzegovina as a Future Province

The occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina confronted the Habsburg Empire with the practical task of translating its supranational civilisational mission into forms of imperial governance. This section examines how political incorporation, scientific knowledge production, and administrative modernisation articulated and legitimised the occupation as the restoration of a historically European territory.

The Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878 differed in important respects from the acquisition of overseas colonies because it was conceived from the outset as the incorporation of a "future province" rather than the establishment of a permanently separate colonial possession. Under the provisions of the Treaty of Berlin, Bosnia and Herzegovina was occupied and administered by Austria-Hungary while formally remaining under Ottoman sovereignty (Vrankić, 1998, pp. 24–27, 37–43). Yet leading political actors consistently envisaged the territory as an integral part of the Habsburg Empire, a trajectory that culminated in its formal annexation in 1908 (Vrankić, 1998, pp. 28–32). The occupation was therefore represented less as the acquisition of foreign territory than as the gradual political, administrative, and cultural incorporation of a province understood to belong to the European historical sphere.

This understanding was characteristic primarily of official Habsburg discourse, as reflected in the policies of the Joint Minister of Finance, Béni de Kállay, the provincial administration, and the governmental programmes accompanying the occupation (cf. Ress, 2018, pp. 112–113). Kállay's political programme can be reconstructed from his pseudonymous publication *Die Lage der Mohammedaner in Bosnien* (Kállay, 1900). Kállay argued that Austro-Hungarian policy should not seek to destroy Bosnia's existing social structures or Muslim elites but rather adapt to local conditions (Kállay, 1900, p. 105), while guiding the province's gradual political and civilisational incorporation into the Monarchy. Equally important, he argued that the idea of the Habsburg Empire should take root among the population (Kállay, 1900, pp. 10–11), thereby representing imperial rule not as foreign domination but as a process of political and civilisational incorporation. This official programme of integrating and modernising Bosnia's Muslim elites did not replace the Austro-Hungarian *Kulturmission* but coexisted with it in an inherently ambivalent form. While Kállay sought the political integration and modernisation of Bosnia's Muslim elites, Muslims were simultaneously represented in administrative and scientific discourse as obstacles to civilisation, enemies of modernisation, and reservoirs of disease requiring hygienic and moral reform (Ruthner, 2008).

Pan-German nationalist politicians and newspapers, above all their spokesman in the Reichsrat Georg von Schönerer, by contrast, frequently criticised the occupation as an expensive and politically misguided undertaking, often portraying it as a costly and predominantly "Hungarian" enterprise that served Hungarian or Croatian rather than

German national interests, although around 70 percent of its costs were borne by the Austrian half of the Monarchy (cf. e.g., Delegation, 1878, p. 4; Anonymous, 1886a, p. 60). This Pan-German nationalist position makes clear that Pan-German critics rejected the supranational imperial elites and the "colonising" state through which colonial rule was exercised, while repeatedly insisting that the occupation failed to serve German national interests. More broadly, the occupation was received as a supranational project of the Austrian and Hungarian imperial elites and met with considerable scepticism in both the Austrian and Hungarian public (cf. Haselsteiner, 1996, pp. 49–63). Liberal and popular representations in both the German and Czech lands, meanwhile, tended to emphasise Bosnia's Oriental alterity and exoticism (cf. e.g., Stachel, 2003, pp. 259–276; Malečková, 2021, pp. 125–158). Bosnia thus emerged as a contested symbolic space in which official imperial and popular imaginaries interacted.

Within official Habsburg discourse, Bosnia increasingly came to be represented as a territory whose historical development had been interrupted by centuries of Ottoman rule. This interpretation did not merely describe Bosnia; it supplied the political rationale for intervention. Official reports, administrative memoranda, and contemporary publications portrayed the province as suffering from deficient administration, inadequate infrastructure, and economic stagnation (Anonymous, 1886a; cf. Ruthner, 2018, pp. 15–16). Such diagnoses legitimised intervention less as an act of conquest than as a programme of regeneration and restoration. Administrative reform, public health, education, and economic improvement were presented as complementary instruments through which a historically European territory could be reintegrated into the political and civilisational order of the Monarchy.

The Austro-Hungarian occupation and the eventual annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1908) could therefore be represented as the recovery and reintegration of a European space rather than as colonial expansion into a foreign Oriental world. Bosnia was imagined as a neighbouring territory that had historically belonged to the European and Roman-Christian world, but whose civilisational development had allegedly been interrupted by centuries of Ottoman rule. Within this framework, imperial intervention appeared not as a conquest of foreign territory but as the restoration of a historical continuity that Ottoman domination had supposedly disrupted.

This representation rested upon what Gingrich (1998, pp. 111, 117–120; 2015, pp. 62–63) has termed "frontier orientalism." Drawing on the long tradition of Habsburg-Ottoman frontier conflict and the idea of the *Antemurale Christianitatis* ("bulwark of Christendom"), the Habsburg Empire increasingly represented itself as the defender of Christian Europe against Ottoman expansion. This frontier tradition also sustained a counter-Ottoman vision of recovering territories that had once belonged to the European and Roman-Christian world. A distinct European and Christian identity was thus constructed through opposition to the Ottoman "Other" (Feuilleton, 1884, pp. 1–2).

This official conception distinguished the Habsburg project from many contemporary overseas colonial enterprises. Its long-term objective was not the maintenance of a separate colonial dependency but the gradual political, administrative, and cultural incorporation of Bosnia into the supranational order of the Empire. The realisation of this programme, however, depended upon new forms of scientific knowledge through which Bosnia could be rendered legible, classified, and governable. It is to these epistemic practices that the following section turns.

3.2. Scientific Expertise, Bošnjaštvo, and the Coloniality of Knowledge

As Donia (2007, p. 3; 2018, pp. 153–156) has argued, the Habsburg civilising mission rested upon a pervasive paternalism that conceived Bosnians as subjects requiring guidance, discipline, and gradual improvement. This paternalistic mode of government depended

upon the production of new forms of scientific, administrative, and historical knowledge. Immediately after the occupation, ethnographers and anthropologists,[5] historians, statisticians, physicians, and administrators were mobilised to investigate Bosnia, classify its populations, and document its material, historical, and cultural resources (Marchetti, 2013, pp. 109–112; Fuchs, 2003, p. 134). Knowledge production did not merely accompany political incorporation; it constituted one of its principal conditions. Scientific expertise became an essential instrument through which administrative authority was exercised and imperial rule legitimised. From a decolonial perspective, these practices may be understood as forms of the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2000, pp. 541–542). Before Bosnia could be transformed administratively, it first had to be rendered legible through classificatory practices. Scientific commissions, official surveys, statistical investigations, and historical research gradually produced an authoritative representation of Bosnia that rendered political intervention both necessary and legitimate.

One important example was the Ethnographic Commission established in 1884 to investigate Bosnia-Herzegovina's population, document its folklore, and survey its historical antiquities (Jahresversammlung am 12. Februar 1884, 1884, p. 18). The Commission established the idea that the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was "ethnographically one people," but deeply divided along religious lines (cf. Krauss, 1885, p. 85). Members of the Commission, including the South Slavic folklorist Friedrich Salomon Krauss[6] and the prehistorian Moritz Hoernes[7], actively participated in this process of epistemic appropriation. Yet the production of colonial knowledge was not simply imposed from above. Rather, it emerged through continuous negotiation between imperial administrators and South Slavic elites. Hoernes characterised both the educational level of the population and important local antiquities—notably the medieval tombstones (*stećci*)—as "primitive" (Hoernes, 1884, p. 107), while simultaneously valuing this "medieval" condition as the preservation of an unusually intact historical culture (Hoernes, 1884, p. 106). Rather than rejecting this civilisational framework, the local press relocated responsibility for Bosnia's alleged backwardness to four centuries of Ottoman rule, thereby reinforcing the narrative of historical interruption on which Habsburg intervention rested (cf. e.g., Feuilleton, 1884, pp. 1–2).

In response to these tensions, the Habsburg administration gradually adjusted its historical narrative. Subsequent archaeological investigations, including the excavation of Roman roads, settlements, and monuments, increasingly shifted attention towards the province's Roman and Western deep history (cf. Balić, 1971). Rather than simply emphasising Bosnia's alleged backwardness, this reinterpretation presented Ottoman rule as a historical interruption of an earlier European and Roman-Christian trajectory. In this way, archaeological knowledge reinforced the civilisational narrative through which Habsburg rule was represented as an act of restoration rather than conquest.

The Habsburg reinterpretation of Bosnia's Roman past also responded to competing national historiographies. As Malcolm (1994, pp. 27–42) has shown, Franjo Rački's influential Bogomil thesis identified the medieval Bogomils with the Western Cathars and attributed Bosnia's later Islamisation primarily to this allegedly foreign religious element rather than to the Catholic and Orthodox Slavic population. By contrast, the Habsburg administration increasingly promoted a narrative of Bosnia's inhabitants as ethnigraphically one people as the basis for a territorially grounded interpretation of modern Bosnian history that sought to transcend competing national claims. The debate thus concerned not only the medieval origins of Bosnian Muslims but also the political ownership of Bosnia's European past. This historiographical reorientation ultimately found political expression in the policy of *Bošnjaštvo* (German *Bosniakentum*).

Together with archaeological and historical research, the Commission contributed to a representation of Bosnia that situated the province within a Roman-Christian and European historical trajectory. By interpreting Bosnian history, archaeology, and cultural heritage within this framework, Habsburg scholars portrayed the Ottoman centuries not as a constitutive period of Bosnian history but as a temporary interruption of an older European continuity. The province's Roman past thus provided the epistemic foundation upon which the occupation could be presented as the restoration of a European historical order rather than as a new colonial conquest.

Rather than accepting confessional and increasingly ethnonational classifications of the population as Orthodox (Serbs), Catholics (Croats), and Muslims ("Turks"), the Commission emphasised the common South Slavic character of Bosnia's inhabitants and contributed to the construction of a territorially grounded category of Bosniaks. The policy of *Bošnjaštvo* sought to transcend confessional and emerging national divisions by promoting a specifically Bosnian territorial and political identity. Recent scholarship has interpreted this project as a form of colonial identity politics (Donia, 2018, p. 152; Ruthner, 2024, p. 577). While this interpretation is compatible with the present argument, the present analysis focusses instead on its function as a technology of imperial government that linked scientific knowledge, political integration, and administrative rule. Rather than institutionalising ethnonational or religious divisions, it sought to create imperial subjects through a shared territorial identity, thereby realising Kállay's programme of fostering identification with the Habsburg Empire (Kállay, 1900, pp. 10–11).

The production of knowledge was closely linked to projects of practical transformation. Educational reform, public health, administrative reorganisation, and infrastructural development were conceived as complementary elements of a broader programme of "regeneration". The recruitment of official women physicians to provide medical care for Bosnian Muslim women illustrates how the figure of the "colonised coloniser" operated not only through territorial incorporation but also through the intimate transformation of everyday life. Although women remained largely excluded from medical education in the Habsburg Empire, Governor Béni de Kállay deliberately recruited women physicians trained at Swiss universities because they were expected to gain access to Muslim women who allegedly remained inaccessible to male doctors (Fuchs, 2016, pp. 96, 100–101). Acting as state officials within Kállay's wider programme of administrative and social reform, these women physicians functioned simultaneously as medical experts, civil servants, and agents of imperial incorporation. Anna Bayerová, the first official woman physician appointed to Bosnia, later recalled that Kállay had personally instructed her to "help the villages" and to "civilise" Muslim women (Nečas, 1983, p. 254). His instructions make explicit that medical intervention formed part of a broader programme of social and civilisational transformation.

The official responsibilities of female physicians extended far beyond the treatment of diseases such as endemic syphilis. They were expected to disseminate modern hygienic practices, supervise childbirth and infant care, promote domestic reform and maternal education, and gradually reshape gender relations within Muslim households (Fuchs, 2016, pp. 116–121). Medical intervention thus became inseparable from broader projects of moral regulation, social integration, and administrative modernisation. Public health, hygiene, and the governance of gender relations consequently became central instruments through which the Habsburg civilising mission extended into the intimate sphere of everyday life.

These scientific and administrative practices reveal a distinctive form of imperial governmentality that differed in important respects from classical overseas colonialism. Their primary objective was not the administration of a permanently separate colonial dependency but the gradual incorporation of Bosnia into the supranational order of the Habsburg Empire through the production of governable imperial subjects. Ethnographic expertise,

archaeological reinterpretation, the policy of *Bošnjaštvo*, and programmes of public health and social reform thus formed mutually reinforcing elements of a broader project of imperial incorporation. Rather than organising imperial rule around ethnonational divisions, this project sought to govern Bosnia through the production of knowledge, the reconfiguration of historical memory, and the gradual transformation of everyday life.

3.3. Bosnia Between Provincial Integration and Settler Colonialism

Although the Habsburg administration officially pursued the incorporation of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a future province rather than a settler colony, alternative visions of the province's future circulated in the public sphere. Liberal publicists, clerical circles, and nationalist commentators proposed programmes of agrarian reform, European settlement, and demographic transformation that differed markedly from Kállay's cautious strategy of political integration. The debate surrounding the anonymously published pamphlet *Bosniens Gegenwart und nächste Zukunft* (Anonymous, 1886a), later attributed to the Viennese journalist Jacques Heinrich (Muharemović, 2013, p. 38, note 182), illustrates these competing conceptions of colonisation.

The anonymous author argued that Bosnia's economic and political transformation required a fundamental restructuring of its social and economic order. The province's Muslim landowning elite was presented as the principal obstacle to modernisation, and the pamphlet advocated agrarian reform together with the gradual emigration of the Muslim population (Anonymous, 1886a, pp. 2–20). Rejecting the official population statistics, the author portrayed Bosnian Muslims as a comparatively small group of immigrants of African and Asian origin rather than as an indigenous component of Bosnian society (Anonymous, 1886a, p. 1). In their place, he proposed the large-scale settlement of colonists from Austria and Hungary, arguing that Bosnia's population should increase from approximately 1.3 to 3 million inhabitants (Anonymous, 1886a, pp. 79–82). Colonisation thus served not merely economic purposes but also political ones: Catholic settlers were expected to strengthen the province's loyalty to the Monarchy while counterbalancing Serbian national aspirations. Against this background, the pamphlet denounced the existing "Hungarian regime" in Bosnia as fundamentally misguided (Anonymous, 1886a, pp. 60–61, 72–74).

The pamphlet immediately provoked responses from different political perspectives. Writing "from the Muslim point of view," Kapetanović-Ljubuša (1886), a prominent Muslim intellectual and later mayor of Sarajevo, rejected proposals for land reform and large-scale colonisation while affirming the loyalty of Bosnia's Muslims to the Habsburg Monarchy. Stressing their local origins and specifically Bosnian identity, he advocated the modernisation of Bosnian society through educational and cultural reform rather than demographic transformation. A second reply, *Bosnien unter österreichisch-ungarischer Verwaltung* (Anonymous, 1886b), dismissed the anonymous pamphlet as "clerical" and "ultramontane" (Anonymous, 1886b, p. 3), defended the government's educational, economic, and infrastructural policies, and emphasised the indigenous character of Bosnia's Muslim population (Anonymous, 1886b, pp. 22–23).

The anonymous author's subsequent pamphlet *Bosnien als Neuösterreich* (Anonymous, 1886c), published as a further reply *to Bosnien unter österreichisch-ungarischer Verwaltung*, reiterated these proposals while presenting agrarian reform, European settlement, and economic modernisation as the preconditions for transforming Bosnia into a genuine "New Austria" (*Neuösterreich*). The choice of title is revealing. Rather than simply designating an occupied territory, it projected Bosnia as a space of modernisation, colonisation, and gradual incorporation into the Habsburg imperial order. Colonisation and provincial integration thus appeared not as opposing political projects but as complementary dimensions of imperial expansion.

Although the Habsburg administration rejected the anonymous pamphlet's more radical proposals for large-scale land redistribution and the displacement of the Muslim population, it did not reject colonisation as such. Rather, Kállay's government pursued a more cautious strategy of state-directed internal colonisation that sought to reconcile agricultural development and controlled demographic change with political stability. Concerned not to alienate Bosnia's Muslim landowning elites, the administration generally avoided direct confrontation over landed property while quietly encouraging settlement on state-owned land. After state-owned land in the Prnjavor district had first been allocated to Bosnian families in 1890, eleven agricultural colonies of Danube Swabians from the Banat were established in northern Bosnia between 1892 and 1905 (Bethke, 2018, p. 242; Radanović, 2020, pp. 215–217). Their recruitment reflected the dual character of Austro-Hungarian internal colonisation: Bosnia offered state land for model agricultural settlements, while Hungarian regions such as the Banat constituted an important reservoir of land-hungry rural settlers, particularly Protestant Danube Swabians. Besides cultivating agricultural land, these settlements formed part of a broader programme of agrarian amelioration and were intended to demonstrate modern farming techniques to the local population, which often remained reluctant to adopt them (Radanović, 2020, p. 217).

These competing programmes demonstrate that Bosnia occupied an intermediate position between provincial integration and settler-colonial imaginaries. While radical publicists advocated demographic transformation through agrarian reform and European settlement, official policy pursued a more cautious programme of state-directed internal colonisation subordinated to the longer-term objective of imperial incorporation. Yet the language of civilisation and colonisation remained politically contested. The following section examines how this imperial repertoire was reappropriated and transformed by Pan-German nationalism within the late Habsburg Empire.

4. Contesting Imperial Universalism

The Habsburg civilising mission in Bosnia and the supranational universalism on which it rested did not remain uncontested. Although ethnonational movements across East Central Europe developed their own civilising and colonising discourses in support of competing national projects, Austro-German nationalism proved distinctive in directing this language against the Habsburg Empire itself. Instead of recognising the Monarchy as the bearer of civilisation, radical Pan-German nationalists increasingly represented it as a "colonial" oppressor that privileged Hungarian and Slavic populations over Germans. In doing so, they fundamentally reconfigured the discourse of imperial civilisation within a Pan-German *völkisch* framework.

The Pan-German critique of the Bosnian occupation formed part of a broader discursive reversal within the late Habsburg Empire. The same Pan-German actors who rejected Bosnia as a supranational imperial project increasingly reinterpreted multilingual regions within the Monarchy as sites of German dispossession and internal colonisation. This reversal became particularly pronounced in the linguistically mixed regions of the Monarchy, above all in Bohemia and Moravia, and in the southern borderlands of Styria and Carinthia, where "language boundaries" became central objects of nationalist mobilisation (cf. Judson, 2006, pp. 5–9, 15–18, 100–140). There, Pan-German nationalist organisations increasingly interpreted linguistic equality, educational reforms, and demographic change as evidence that the Habsburg state had abandoned its historic role as the "bearer of German culture". Although the imperial administration and much of the political elite remained predominantly German-speaking (and, in the Hungarian half of the Monarchy, Magyar), Pan-German nationalists increasingly interpreted the state's willingness to recognise national languages and accommodate competing national movements as a "betrayal of German

cultural leadership" (cf. Judson, 2016, pp. 292–299). Social and economic transformations were consequently reinterpreted as struggles for ethnic survival, while German-speaking communities increasingly represented themselves as victims of internal displacement and national oppression.

The reversal of imperial universalism into a Pan-German *völkisch* politics of cultural defence is particularly evident in the monthly journal *Heimgarten*, edited by the Styrian writer and journalist Peter Rosegger. *Heimgarten* increasingly depicted ethnic Germans as an indigenous community threatened by national displacement and cultural decline. The language of civilisation was thereby detached from the supranational project of imperial integration and redirected towards the defence of *Heimat*, ethnic continuity, and the preservation of an allegedly autochthonous Alpine Germanness (Rosegger, 1891, pp. 547–548).

A literary representation published in *Heimgarten* by the Styrian politician and writer Karl Morré illustrates this discursive transformation. Although Lower Styria had long been characterised by mixed German- and Slovene-speaking settlement, Morré's "humoresque" (1899, pp. 546–550) reinterprets this longstanding coexistence by recasting German-speaking villagers as an indigenous community threatened by an allegedly "foreign" Slovene-speaking population. Processes of social mobility, linguistic change, and economic competition are thereby reframed as ethnic invasion, while programmes of Germanisation appear as acts of cultural self-defence against an allegedly advancing Slavic population (Morré, 1899, p. 547). Significantly, the social and economic transformations associated with labour mobility, commercialisation, and the growing presence of Slovene-speaking workers are frequently attributed to traders and intermediaries. In doing so, Morré's narrative also mobilises antisemitic stereotypes to characterise broader socioeconomic transformation processes perceived as threatening (Morré, 1899, pp. 547–548).

The repertoire of imperial civilisation thus assumed a fundamentally different political function. The civilising mission was no longer directed towards the incorporation of Bosnia into a supranational imperial order but towards the defence and regeneration of the German Volk within the Monarchy itself. What had served official Habsburg discourse to legitimate imperial incorporation was reconfigured within Pan-German völkisch thought as a narrative of ethnic victimhood and national regeneration. Coloniality was thus not abandoned but rearticulated within an ethnonational political vocabulary that challenged the supranational universalism on which the Habsburg Monarchy had claimed its legitimacy.

5. Conclusions

This article has argued that the coloniality of East Central Europe cannot be adequately understood through the Atlantic paradigm alone. While postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has fundamentally reshaped our understanding of European modernity by exposing its constitutive entanglement with overseas colonialism, it has devoted comparatively less attention to the imperial formations of East Central Europe. The Habsburg Empire did not develop a classical overseas settler colonialism. Yet it articulated a distinctive configuration of internal colonisation, civilisational discourse, and regional expansion that likewise relied upon hierarchies of civilisation and projects of political and cultural transformation.

Internal colonisation should therefore be conceptualised not merely as a metaphor for state-building but as a historically specific form of imperial government that invites comparative analysis alongside overseas empires. Such an approach is particularly fruitful for the former Ottoman borderlands of East Central and South-Eastern Europe, where territorial incorporation, administrative modernisation, scientific knowledge production, public health, and civilisational discourse frequently converged within projects of imperial transformation.

The figure of the "colonised coloniser" provides a conceptual lens through which this configuration can be reconstructed. Rather than legitimising expansion through claims of

inherent superiority, Habsburg imperial discourse grounded its authority in narratives of prior civilisation and Christianisation. Bosnia-Herzegovina was consequently represented not as a colony but as a historically European territory whose Roman-Christian trajectory had allegedly been interrupted by Ottoman rule. The occupation after 1878 became the principal arena in which scientific expertise, administrative reform, archaeological reinterpretation, *Bošnjaštvo*, and public health were articulated as complementary techniques of imperial incorporation.

At the same time, the Habsburg case demonstrates that coloniality constituted a contested political language rather than a coherent imperial doctrine. The supranational universalism of the imperial state encountered Pan-German *völkisch* projects that rejected imperial integration while appropriating and transforming its civilisational vocabulary. The discourse of the civilising mission was consequently redirected from the incorporation of Bosnia towards narratives of German dispossession, cultural defence, and national regeneration within the Habsburg Monarchy itself.

Approaching East Central Europe through the figure of the "colonised coloniser" does not seek to dissolve the differences between overseas colonialism and Habsburg imperial rule. Rather, it highlights the plurality of colonial formations within European modernity and invites a more differentiated understanding of coloniality beyond the Atlantic world. The Habsburg Empire suggests that coloniality assumed a historically distinctive form in East Central Europe, combining internal colonisation, supranational integration, and civilisational discourse within a continental imperial setting.

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Notes

1 For the extensive debate on Conrad's relation to imperialism, see Achebe (2016).

2 The broader semantic field of "colonisation" likewise encompassed a wide range of projects of settlement and territorial improvement, including emigrant "colonies" established by Poles from the partitioned territories, the seasonal cultivation practices of Bulgarian gardeners across the Russian and Habsburg Empires (Vukov, 2024), and both Christian and Jewish Zionist movements that promoted agricultural settlement in the Ottoman provinces (Ben-Artzi, 1997; Eisler, 1997).

3 While some authors celebrated Rome as the foundation of European civilisation, influential German historians increasingly portrayed the late Empire as a decadent consequence of cosmopolitanism and imperial overreach, thereby rejecting the Habsburg claim to supranational leadership within a future unified Germany (Rebenich, 2003).

4 Pan-Germanism emerged from nineteenth-century debates over German unification. While the Habsburg dynasty grounded its universal claims in the supranational imperial legacy of the Holy Roman Empire, Prussia increasingly advanced a more centralised and nationally homogeneous vision of German nationhood.

5 The term "anthropology" is used in its late nineteenth-century Central European sense, encompassing ethnography, folklore studies, prehistory, and related disciplines, as reflected in the activities of contemporary national anthropological societies and scholarly associations.

6 Friedrich Salomon Krauss (1859–1938), a Croatian-born Austro-Hungarian folklorist and ethnographer, was one of the leading collectors of South Slavic oral traditions and popular culture. His extensive ethnographic collections later circulated far beyond the Bosnian context. In particular his editions of the *Anthropophyteia*—collections of sexual folklore and customs—provided important comparative material for Sigmund Freud's reflections on the origins of civilisation, sexuality, and patriarchal social organisation.

Bosnian and South Slavic rural society thus became not only an object of imperial administration but also a privileged site for broader European theories of civilisation.

[7] Moritz Hoernes (1852–1917), prehistorian at the *Naturhistorisches Hofmuseum* in Vienna, played a central role in the archaeological investigation of Bosnia-Herzegovina after the occupation and served as editor of the *Wissenschaftliche Mittheilungen aus Bosnien und der Hercegovina* (Vienna, 1893–1916), the principal scholarly publication of the Bosnian Herzegovinian National Museum.

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