

Over half a century ago, a Polish historian Marian Małowist formulated a thesis that early modern Western European colonial expansion had been facilitated by prior economic subjugation of Eastern Europe. The old discussion revived in the early twenty-first century, provoked on the one hand by Kenneth Pomeranz's book, looking for reasons why early modern Asia had lost the economic race with Europe, and on the other hand by the works by Jan Luiten van Zanden who reinvigorated the discussion on the reasons for internal inequalities in the development of early modern Europe. While the gap between Europe and Asia has been dubbed in scholarship "the Great Divergence," the gap between Western and Eastern Europe has obtained an analogous name of "the Little Divergence."

The project aims at a comparative study of two European networks that in the seventeenth century extended from Europe to East Asia – namely the Jesuit Order and the Dutch East India Company (VOC). We want to specifically focus on the internal making and internal culture of these two "corporative institutions," especially the opinions of their members on what was "Asia" and what the "Asians" were like. Special stress will be laid on the presence of Central-Eastern Europeans in the bodies of both institutions under study, and the attitude of the "Western colleagues," mainly Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Flemish in the first case, and mainly Dutch and German in the second case, towards their colleagues from the east. The four following questions will be specifically addressed:

- 1) What were the similarities and differences in the modes of internal communication within these two "networks;" to what extent they were informed by different training, patriarchal culture, confession, etc.? Can we trace any differences in "corporative culture" that could be attributed to the Catholic character of missionary networks and the Protestant character of the VOC?
- 2) Did the missionaries and merchants, especially those who had visited many parts of the Asian continent, perceive "Asia" as a distinct unity and attribute certain uniform "Asian" qualities to its inhabitants?
- 3) What was the role played by Central-Eastern Europeans in these two global networks and whether the presence of the latter in these networks contributed towards sharpening a dividing line between "Europe/Europeans" and "Asia/Asians" or rather towards blurring this distinction?
- 4) How were the European missionaries and merchants perceived by the local inhabitants of Asiatic countries? Did the latter regard them as representing a distinct and uniform civilization or rather noticed internal differences between the newcomers?

The project's direct outcome would be a collective monograph, two PhDs, and a series of articles to be published in scholarly journals, as well as two international conferences. The project would also result in a database, containing the names of Jesuits and VOC functionaries, who were active in Asia and originated from Central-Eastern Europe. After the project's conclusion, the database would remain posted at the digital repository of the Institute of History of the University of Warsaw, in order to serve other projects and all scholars, open to corrections and updating. The team members also hope that their project would draw a larger audience towards global history, currently the fastest rising branch of historiography in the world that is still regretfully neglected in Poland.