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Gurkhas in Polish World War II Memoirs

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Abstract

World War II was an unprecedented opportunity for Poles and Nepali to encounter each other in an otherwise distant world. The complex wartime relations have only recently become of interest to scholars and the Poles' attitude toward the imperial Indian forces still needs to be investigated. This research attempts to assemble a picture of the Gurkhas as seen through published memoirs of military personnel, therefore opening a discussion on the Polish cross-cultural relations of that period. Furthermore, it aims to contribute to the largely overlooked historical Polish-Nepali relations, while adding to the discussion on the legacy of the global conflict and the colonial concept of the *Other*. This paper examines the memoirs of six veteran authors who included significant references to Gurkhas in their writing. Tadeusz Bodnar's input is the most valuable one since his account contains the most frequent and detailed descriptions of the Nepali, thus becoming a framework for the study of the five remaining authors. It appears that the lack of a direct colonial experience in the Polish collective memory was, to a certain extent, filled by the British military discourse.

Keywords: Gurkhas; World War II; II Polish Corps; personal narrative; martial race

Introduction

The Polish War Cemetery at Monte Cassino, Italy, is one of the most recognizable symbols of patriotism in Poland. It is one of four Polish World War II Military Cemeteries in Italy and the resting place of over a thousand soldiers who died during the battle. However, it is not commonly known in Poland that the Gurkhas of Nepal, soldiers of the British Indian Army, fought alongside the Poles during the Italian Campaign.[1] Nepalese soldiers have been serving the British Crown for over 200 years and have participated in all of Britain's major conflicts around the world. In the nineteenth-century British Empire, they became associated with the ideology of 'martial races' according to which some men – including the Scottish Highlanders and the Sikhs of Punjab, were naturally or culturally predisposed to war (Streets 2010, 385-6). The martial Gurkhas owed their fame to British officials whose written works became a 'distinctive genre' praising the soldiers' natural qualities, bravery, and loyalty (Caplan 1991, 572). For the soldiers of the II Polish Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Władysław Anders, war participation was a moral duty: they, too, associated ideal masculinity with loyalty and bravery. Their cooperation with the British Indian Army in the 1940s was an extraordinary occurrence and by observing their brothers in arms, the men learnt first-hand about the existing hierarchies embedded in the British imperial past.

This study focuses on establishing the scope of general knowledge of the Gurkhas that the soldiers of General Anders' Army might have had and aims to construct a believable general representation of the Gurkhas in the eyes of the Poles. Since the South Asians can be

considered the geographical Other, the analysis draws on the concept of binary oppositions common in the Orientalist discourse. As it can be assumed that Polish soldiers, in general, considered themselves to be Westerners (or white Europeans), I aim to establish whether their relations with the Gurkhas were characterized by the prevailing sense of cultural superiority typical for the colonial powers. The interpretation of the texts takes into consideration the broader historical, social and biographical context which influenced the authors' awareness of cultural differences and judgments.

'Strangeness' of war noted by Samuel Hynes (1997) constitutes one of the key motivations for writing among veterans. That feeling may be linked to the peculiarities of military routine or other bizarre moments when ordinary life meets with the reality of war. The act of remembering, which takes into consideration various aspects of the authors' present condition as well as the past, is linked to the similarly imperfect act of looking (or seeing?). Carl Thompson notes that narratives describing moments of cross-cultural conflict are capable of illuminating 'the mental maps that individuals and cultures have of the world and its inhabitants, and the larger matrix of prejudices, fantasies and assumptions' about the Other Thompson 2011, 136). The Poles gazing at the surrounding landscape and people could not be detached from the psychological relations of power that influence perception through various cultural filters.

The processes of *gazing* and *othering* involve establishing hierarchies asymmetrical in their character as the Other is always devalued opposite the Self. By creating the Self and the Other, one constructs an image of themselves based on that binary logic and therefore limited in its scope. In addition, the reality of war forces a binary understanding of the world on those who live through it (McLoughlin 2009, 25). The division into 'us' and 'them' reinforces cultural stereotypes by reproducing Orientalist constructions in the portrayal of the Other. Although in the Polish war memoirs the authors do not openly confront any presuppositions about the Gurkhas, the Nepalis embody multiple Others. War thus becomes a 'contact zone' that Mary Louise Pratt defines as a social space 'where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' or 'the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict' (Pratt 1992, 7-8).

The lack of references to Nepali soldiers in the Polish World War II personal narratives is unsurprising for, overall, the events, or participants, that do not belong to the dominant mythopoeic representation of war do not attract much attention. The memoirs, which are at the core of the analysis, were selected from the general autobiographical genre concerning the stated period and excluded diaries and visual materials in order to reduce variables. Also, its scope was limited to the experiences of authors whose service took place in the Middle East, North Africa or Italy, for these geographical locations allowed for meetings with the Nepalis. Out of eighty pre-selected publications, only several proved to contain references to the Gurkhas – the most significant of them is Tadeusz Bodnar's account. In his memoir entitled *Znad Niemna Przez Sybir do II Korpusu* (1997), the author dedicates several long paragraphs to the Gurkhas, thus providing a valuable framework needed to construct a representation of the Nepalis from the Polish perspective. Other publications include Włodzimierz Drzewieniecki's *Angielski szlif: wspomnienie oficera sztabu 2. Korpusu* (2001), Władysław Górski's *Żołnierskim Szlakiem przez Tobruk i Monte Cassino* (1991),

Aleksander Grobicki's *Żołnierze Sikorskiego* (1989), Jan Kwoczyński's *Wojenne Gwiazdy* (2002), and Eryk Nanke's *Cena Bycia Innym* (2000), none of which has yet been translated into English.[2]

The main limitation of the study is the fact that, for many authors, it was difficult to draw a clear line between the Indians and the Nepali. It can be assumed that, due to misinterpretation, the overall number of references to Gurkhas is larger than presented in this study.[3] Apart from the inability to differentiate between the two peoples in terms of physical appearance, the peculiarity of the Polish language might have impeded proper understanding and the clarity of the discourse. In Polish, two English terms – *Indian*, used to name an Indian national, and *Hindu* referring to a person of the Hindu faith, can both be replaced with a single equivalent - *Hindus/hindus* - where *Hindus* refers to an Indian, *hindus* to a Hindu (Grzenia 2011). Furthermore, the Polish Language Dictionary of the Polish Scientific Publishers (PWN) extends the meaning of the Polish word *Hindus* to anyone living in the Indian Subcontinent ('Hindus', n.d.). The ambiguity poses a challenge in differentiating the Gurkhas from the Indians as the two can easily become one in terms of the place of origin (India), nationality (Indian), and religion (Hindu). For this reason, the analysis is based only on precise references to Gurkhas while broader references to Indians have been ignored.

Poles and Gurkhas in World War II

II Polish Corps, a military formation all authors served in during the war, was formed in 1943 as a result of the Sikorski-Mayski agreement. While stationed in the Middle East on training, the Poles performed security duties under PAIFORCE[4] alongside the South Asian soldiers from the Indian XXI Corps (Szczurowski 2002, 157). Once the training had been completed, the Poles were moved to Egypt where they awaited transport to Italy. By the time the first Polish units stepped onto Italian soil in December 1943, the 8th Indian Division had already crossed the Mediterranean. Soon afterwards, the 4th and 10th Indian Divisions also reached the peninsula. In the early months of 1944, the Poles encountered the 4th and 8th Indian divisions along the Adriatic coast of Italy ('The Tiger Triumphs' 1946, 31-8). However, before reaching Rome from the South, the Allies needed to capture the Abbey of Monte Cassino that towered over the only passable route to the North.

The victory at Monte Cassino took four attempts and nearly six months to achieve. In the first assault, in January 1944, no Polish or Gurkha troops participated as the attack was carried out by the Americans alongside the North-African units of the French Expeditionary Corps. The second one involved the 4th Indian Division, which had been diverted from the Adriatic front, and the 2nd New Zealand Division. That unsuccessful attempt was followed by a third one in March: the Indians and the Kiwis managed to capture some strategic posts around the town of Cassino, but not the abbey itself. The Fourth Battle of Monte Cassino took place in May and saw the 2nd Polish Corps and the 8th Indian Division involved ('One more river' n.d., 18). After the victory, the three Indian divisions and the Polish Corps followed the retreating enemy to northern Italy.

Representation of the Gurkhas

Tadeusz Bodnar's first mention of the Gurkhas comes from the time when his regiment was stationed in Egypt. Shortly before departing to Italy, the author went with some friends to watch a belly dance show in a club in Cairo. During the night, he observed foreign soldiers who also gathered in the club. Bodnar describes the way they looked and behaved, and the

relations between different nations. Although it is not clear whether any Gurkhas were present in the club on that occasion, he writes:

> The Indians keep together and sit far from the whites as if they were afraid of them. Or perhaps they perceive they are inferior and know that a Briton could beat them up with a stick. They drink little and are neatly dressed. Some of them wear turbans on their heads and some don't. Gurkhas wear turbans and don't drink alcohol because their religion forbids that. They look like thugs and look around warily. I would rather avoid meeting them at night. (1997, 264)

The author seems wrongly convinced that the Gurkhas wear turbans and that their faith forbids them from drinking alcohol.[5] The excerpt shows that the author tried to distinguish between the Gurkhas and the Indians, but it seems that for him the Gurkhas were an Indian tribe or, in other words, among the Indians there were those who wore turbans (Gurkhas) and those who did not. It remains unclear why the author compared the Nepalis to thugs; the Polish word for a thug is *zbój*, and it was formerly used to call an outlaw or a highwayman. However, for Polish speakers, the word *zbój* also has an association with the legend of the Polish Robin Hood – known as Janosik – a bandit helping peasants in the Tatra mountains. All in all, Bodnar presumably did not intend to damage the Gurkhas' reputation by comparing them to outlaws (be they heroic or not), but primarily wanted to emphasize their threatening nature.

It appears that the author's first face-to-face interaction with the Gurkhas was at Monte Cassino. During the war, Bodnar was responsible for communications and he recalls being guided by a Gurkha soldier to the place where he had to fix a broken telephone line:

> It's dark and we can't see anything. Our guide is a Gurkha while a New Zealander, second lieutenant [Adam] Lorenz, and two other soldiers are going with him. They helped us carry cable reels, telephones and food provisions. We walked very slowly because of tree roots sticking out of the ground. Every now and then someone got caught in them or fell into a mine crater. We had to watch for mines and booby traps. The Gurkha soldier must have had tiger's eyes as he moved like a tiger, not even once falling or tripping over the roots. We didn't talk for we were in no man's land where all patrols met. In case we ran into a German patrol, we were instructed not to shoot but to use sidearms. (1997, 279)

In the passage, the author makes a comparison between a skilled, tiger-like Gurkha and the clumsy, graceless 'others'. By pointing out that conversations were forbidden in no man's land, Bodnar may have tried to justify his inability to get to know his guide. Notably, the comparison to a dangerous animal implies that the author might have been afraid of the mysterious Allied soldier, and therefore, did not exchange any words with him. Among the authors, only a single veteran appears to have spoken to a Gurkha soldier. Jan Kwoczyński recalls asking a Gurkha, whom he met in a canteen, for his *khukuri* knife in the autumn of 1944. Although the Nepali passes the weapon to the Pole, no conversation is recalled (2002, 241).

At some point during the battle of Monte Cassino, Bodnar was sent along a telephone line to trace where it was broken. After a period of heavy German artillery fire, he found himself near a Gurkha base. In his memoir he describes what he saw there:

> The line was broken in several places, so we had to replace a long part of the cable. We worked very fast in order to leave that place behind as quickly as possible. Many mules were hurt and Gurkhas finished them off with their knives. What a repulsive sight that was. I couldn't look at the mules or listen to the sound of their agony. (1997, 285)

Bodnar respects the soldiers for the mercy-killing and builds a picture of Gurkhas as sensitive and compassionate. By calling the sight repulsive, he implies that he would not have been able to finish off the suffering animals himself. The author mentions 'their knives' as it was probably the first time he had seen them. This may be due to the fact that his previous encounter with the Gurkhas had happened at night. Similarly to Kwoczyński, Bodnar admits being intrigued by the particular shape of the knife and, most likely, by the skill with which the Gurkhas used them.

References to the *khukuri* knife are a common theme in most of the descriptions of the Nepalese soldiers. In his memoir, Nanke recalls a ritual in which the soldier has to cut himself before returning it to its sheath if the knife was not used on the enemy because it 'has to draw blood' (2000: 120). Apparently, Kwoczyński learnt about the practice first-hand, because the Gurkha who had shown him the knife deliberately cut his finger before sheathing it. The Poles thus admits being unfamiliar with the custom and regrets exposing the Allied soldier to an unnecessary injury. This description makes Kwoczyński the only Polish soldier known to have held the knife during World War II – he devotes the following passage to that experience:

> The knife appears to be extremely light, it can be swung effortlessly thanks to the balance between the rather long, wooden handle and the curved blade. It is like a softened shape of a sickle. As we watch and praise, the Englishman focuses on its good balance. (2002, 241)

Although Aleksander Górski also refers to the knife when portraying Gurkhas in his personal narrative, only Bodnar recalls seeing the Nepali using the weapon to kill (the wounded mules). According to the British military writings on the Gurkhas, the *khukuri* is their national weapon, which the soldiers prefer to rifles (Caplan 1991, 586). The same preference is pointed out by Bodnar in a later excerpt regarding the knife (1997, 286). However, some authors wrongly call it *kindżał* which, refers to *khanjali*, a double-edged dagger used by the people of the Caucasus and the Turks. Although most of the authors noted the presence of the knives, only Bodnar and Kwoczyński use the proper name for it.

Having mentioned the Gurkhas in his account, Bodnar felt he should introduce his readers to their customs. Interestingly, no other similarly detailed presentation of an ally appears in his memoir. He writes:

> Gurkhas, whom I talk about so often for they were assigned to us as guides with mules, were good soldiers, very efficient in the mountains. The Germans were scared stiff of them. They belong to one of the Indian tribes; they don't cut their hair, have long beards and wear turbans on their heads. They rarely use their rifles, instead, they prefer their *kukri*. They walk lightly and silently; you can hardly hear them coming. You'd better avoid meeting them at night as the sight of them could scare you to death. When they've killed the enemy, they cut off their victim's ears which they then string on a rope and carry around their waist as a trophy. Well, this way at least they can prove how many people they've killed. (1997, 285)

Bodnar's use of the adjective 'good' in reference to Gurkha soldiers likely describes their military skill as he also states that the Gurkhas terrified the Germans. Considering the reputation of the German army and the efficiency of its soldiers, the author builds the image of the Nepali as extremely dangerous soldiers. However, as it is unlikely that a personal experience lies behind the statement, it can be assumed that it is based on hearsay. The source could have been tales of World War I soldiers that had been passed to the younger generation or accounts of some encounters between the Gurkhas and the Germans that took place in the

mountainous regions of North Africa (Tucker 1957, 197-8; Bishop 1976, 111-4). Conversely, the statement about the Nepalis being efficient in the mountains was most likely an assumption based on the author's own observations at Monte Cassino or an echo of the 'climatic' element of the martial race ideology. As far as the Gurkhas' origin is concerned, all authors save Górski elaborated on the matter. While Bodnar was convinced the Allied soldiers come from India, Nanke thought they come from Tibet; Kwoczyński on the other hand, noted the soldiers' 'Mongolian features and skin tone' (2002, 241). Two memoirists, Grobicki and Drzewieniecki, correctly identified the Gurkhas' as soldiers from Nepal. Notwithstanding the confusion, the authors accurately situated the Gurkhas' origins in the Himalayas, thus linking it to their superior mountain skills.

In the excerpt, Bodnar again refers to the *khukuri* knife adding that the soldiers preferred it to a rifle. Since firearms were commonly used during the war, the focus on the Gurkhas' use of knives reinforces the picture of a 'barbaric' Gurkha. The 'savage' soldier features also in the account of Nanke who recalls learning that the Nepali killed a troop of German soldiers with their *khukuris*. The news that reached the author's camp described the Gurkhas crawling to the enemy's cantonment at night and slitting the throats of the sleeping Germans (Nanke 2000, 120). Although Nanke seems to be sceptical about the story itself, he does not condemn the 'barbarous' act of killing the enemy in their sleep. Kwoczyński describes the Gurkhas as famous for their capacity of surprising the enemy and their ability to move 'like ghosts' at night. Interestingly, the author uses quotation marks when mentioning their ghost-like skills which may indicate a third-party origin of the words (2002, 241). As the Nepali preferred hand-to-hand combat, often risking their lives instead of keeping at the shooting range, to Bodnar they appeared fearless even though he does not state it explicitly. The Gurkhas' lack of fear is a recurring theme in the Polish soldiers' war memoirs and is consistent with the martial race theory.

In his presentation of Gurkhas, Bodnar mixes the Nepalis with the Indians in terms of religious practices, as it is the Sikhs, not the Gurkhas, who kept their hair uncut (Igielski 2008, 71). Similarly, Górski points to the Gurkhas as men wearing white turbans. With regards to the head cover, only Grobicki makes a clear distinction between the Gurkhas and the Indians as he mentions both: the slouch hats worn by the Gurkhas and the white turbans of the Sikhs in his memoir (Grobicki 1989, 114). Yet, having studied in England, he might have been exposed to some elements of British military discourse. The slouch hat features also in Drzewieniecki's personal narrative – the Gurkhas' particular head cover helped the author distinguish the soldiers of the 43rd Lorried Gurkha Brigade from other Allies when seen from above. In light of the studied publications, the difficulty in differentiating between the two nations is significant and most probably caused by the authors' lack of exposure and direct experience of the South Asians and their customs.

The description of the Gurkhas keeping cut-off ears as trophies might have been an echo of World War I stories in which the Germans are said to have complained against 'savage' colonial troops serving in the armies of France and Britain. The tales of the 'barbarous' Asian and African soldiers collecting such trophies circulated on both sides of the front line during the Great War and served propaganda purposes. The image of the ear-collecting Gurkhas was meant to terrify the Germans who were supposed to believe that the *khukuri* was also used to decapitate enemies. While the question of whether the colonial troops really collected trophies or not became irrelevant, the power of propaganda made the Europeans believe that they did (Harrison 2012, 118-25). As the interwar period did not last for long, the memories of the

1914-1918 conflict were still vivid in the 1940s. Since it is unlikely that Bodnar actually witnessed a Gurkha wearing a belt with ears attached to it at Monte Cassino, he most probably repeated the stories he had heard.

After that short general presentation, Bodnar returns to his memories of actually meeting the Gurkhas. He writes:

> One day I saw a Gurkha sitting down at the entrance of his shelter, cross-legged, in front of a tiny Buddha statue he had placed there. Although he was praying, the candlelight made his face look so terrifying, that to me he looked like Lucifer himself; and even I, who am not easily terrified, ran away quickly. (1997, 286)

It can be assumed that the soldier was indeed a Buddhist, even though the author might have as well oversimplified the scene. The candlelight in the description makes the reader imagine it as mysterious or exotic while the author familiarizes it by comparing the Gurkha to the devil. Since Lucifer features in his childhood memories, Bodnar recreates the feeling of fear he felt as a boy when he would hear adults tell horrifying stories. However, he may also be trying to dispel the demons from his childhood by emphasizing his own bravery, and at the same time justifying his instinctive reaction to the situation.

The embarrassment at his cowardly retreat makes Bodnar return to some general remarks on the Gurkhas:

> We didn't get into conflicts with them: they were well-mannered and always ready to help. They weren't afraid of dying, for their religion assured them that death in battle would send their soul straight to heaven. To us, their customs were preposterous. They didn't drink water from pots but scooped it up with their hands. They peed like women because their religion forbade them to touch their own body with a bare hand. (1997, 286)

The description of the Gurkhas' being 'well-mannered and always ready to help', which immediately follows the comparison to Lucifer, assures that the author's attitude towards the Nepali was ambivalent. Similarly to Kwoczyński, he portrays them as being terrifying, yet caring. When referring to their religious beliefs, Bodnar again exposes his lack of awareness and mixes facts. Although it is not clear whether the author really saw the Gurkhas performing any of the described actions, he admits that the customs were preposterous to him and his companions. Therefore, on the one hand, he seems curious about their customs, but on the other hand, limited in his judgments. It is clear that the author considers his own culture superior, despite his admiration of some of the Gurkhas' qualities. He contrasts 'them' with 'us' which for him may refer to all Poles, his fellow soldiers or, perhaps, all Europeans.

Bodnar's attitude toward the religious practices of the Gurkhas slightly differs from Grobicki's, who describes in detail a cremation ceremony he witnessed in April 1943. He observed the scene when a military van came near a tent where he was having lunch. Gurkhas got out of the van:

> took off their shoes and started piling up wood in the middle of the yard. When they finished, they brought a body wrapped in a white cloth, put it on the pile, poured liquid butter over it and set on fire. They stayed there for about half an hour or until the fire was well lit. Then they smashed the skull of the deceased with a large pole, locked the gate, put on their shoes and left. As the wood kept burning for the next two days, we smelled the odour of the body at breakfast. (1989, 114)

Although the author does not affront the Gurkhas' beliefs with his own, he is repelled by the fact that the cremation took place close to the dining area. Yet, despite complaining about the odour of the burning body, he appears to be culturally sensitive. However, he also states that the differences between 'them' and 'us' in terms of customs, language, culture, and religion were too great to overcome; he does not seem to regret that both the Poles and the Gurkhas remained strangers to each other in the end (Grobicki 1989, 114).

The Polish Self and the Nepalese Other

The fundamental inequality between the native object and the Western subject is a characteristic feature of the Orientalist discourse which is based on a racial, ethnic or gender notion of exclusion (Said 1979). The process allows the subject to locate itself opposite the Other, thereby reasserting their own position of superiority with all its advantages. The analysis of British military writing shows that the Gurkhas possess qualities attributed to Westerners despite at the same time being inferior due to their origin. The way of representing the Other is therefore a way to represent the Self, and the Gurkhas serve that very purpose of self-reflection (Caplan 1991). It is hard to imagine Polish memoir writers using the South Asian soldiers to self-reflect in a similar manner, for that had been influenced by decades of very close British-Nepali cooperation. However, as the process of 'Othering' by means of race is the result of an encounter (Fanon, 2008), it is likely that the Poles used the Other to self-reflect on their racial identity by placing the Self – the white – opposite the dark-skinned. Since in interwar Poland there were not many opportunities for racial self-reflection, those who enlisted in the army had a chance to do that in the Middle East or during exile in Siberia. While the Gurkhas may not stimulate the Poles to self-reflect on their political identity they do make them self-reflect on the racial and religious distinctiveness.

In the analysis of Polish encounters with the Far-Eastern Other, Anna Kołos (2018) notes that the question of race had not dominated the discourse of the Orient before the early twentieth century. The Poles being themselves subject to 'orientalization' by the Germans[6], are known to have sympathised with other oppressed peoples such as the Marathas in India. At the same time, the Polish romantic tradition reinforced the image of the Europeans as the rightful masters of the world (2018, 123-4), thus creating a tension between a sense of belonging to the larger community of white Europeans and attachment to the national idea situated above racial categorisations. It is noteworthy that in the late nineteenth century, the Poles lived in a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-denominational society that saw race mostly through external physical features (Jahnke 2018, 17-113, Forajter 2014, 8). When in the 1920s the country lost much of its multicultural character (Czapliński 2018, 374) and Polish anthropology was gaining popularity, race became more commonly associated with cultural traits and social phenomena. However, according to Olga Linkiewicz, Polish scholars were not as keen as their Western counterparts to divide people into 'superior' and 'inferior' races (2016, 165). Even though the Polish view on race might not have been in line with racist ideology, still race was seen as being capable of shaping people's behaviour. It can be assumed that the echo of the partitions kept influencing the discourse for years to come creating dissonance and affecting the perception of the ethnic Other.

According to Maria Janion (2006), although the Poles show willingness to belong to the West, they do not seem to fit comfortably into the framework of 'Othering' by means of power. As Bodnar notes, it is the relations between the British and the Indians (or South Asians?) that are marked by subordination. A historical study of the British officers' attitude towards the native soldiers of the Indian Army conducted by Jeffrey Greenhut sheds some

light on its peculiarity – presumably similar power-relations were detectable on the front. Faced with inequality, the Poles opt to remain neutral observers, content in their own good-enough status of 'white men', not willing or interested in exercising dominance but simply accepting the *status quo* (Greenhut 1984,15-8). Apart from drawing attention to race and power, the encounter with the Gurkhas touched on two more notions of 'Othering', namely progress and rationality. By presenting the Nepali as regressive in their preference of weapons unsuited for contemporary warfare, primitive and simply barbarian, the authors put themselves in the position of progress attributed to the West. The 'irrational' Gurkhas can be seen waiting by the funeral pyre to crush the skull of a dead man or sporting their ear-decorated belts.

The analysis of the excerpts from Tadeusz Bodnar's memoir, complemented by the contributions of the remaining authors, also allowed for the confrontation of assumptions regarding their scope of knowledge and cultural awareness. While the stereotypical way of portraying the South Asians by stressing their religious or cultural 'exoticism' was to be expected, the influence of the British military experience on the perception of the Gurkhas was startling. Although the direct encounters between Bodnar and the Gurkhas were often followed by commentary drawing on the binary oppositions typical for the Oriental discourse on 'Otherness', it is the background knowledge that is a source of confusion. Since a significant part of the information presented by all authors does not come from the direct experience of meeting the Gurkhas, it must have originated from the British military discourse. Speculating further, it is possible that the physical differences were so self-evident for the British, that they did not see the need to elaborate on them, thereby providing the inexperienced audience with rumours of the 'brave' or 'loyal' Gurkhas from the 'Indian Army' without specifying who they actually were and what they looked like.

The ambivalent representation of the Nepali can be considered reassuring, though. The World War II propaganda machine was employed to dehumanize the enemy and direct anger and frustration to the other side of the front. The situation put the Gurkhas in an advantageous position compared, for instance, to the Japanese who were also perceived as brave but cruel (Fussell 1990, 117-9). Their animal-like ferocity together with their willingness to mutilate could be compared to Bodnar's representation of the trophy-collecting practice attributed to the Nepali. While the difference between the ambivalent and the negative, or the Self and the Other, lies on one's side of the frontline, the difference between the ambivalent and the positive may be a result of the Poles' lack of cultural awareness and a sense of superiority owing to racial identity. According to this line of reasoning, the Gurkhas are precisely where they should be in the eyes of the Poles.

Concluding remarks

On the one hand, the authors' references to the Gurkhas can be grouped into personal observations coming directly from the front, while on the other hand, some are derived from the general background knowledge they had. The scenes Bodnar witnessed at Monte Cassino create an ambivalent picture of the Nepali, while the other authors whose work was analyzed, largely fit into that framework. The Gurkhas are clearly admired for their physical prowess and their compassionate, sensitive nature. At the same time, they are masculine, warlike and terrifying, particularly to their enemies whom they mercilessly attack with their *khukuris*. The authors' background knowledge is not meticulous and can be attributed to the British military discourse that spread before or during the conflict. It can be concluded that an echo of the martial race theory influenced the Eastern European soldiers' perception of the Gurkhas in the

early twentieth century. The authors whose English was conversational tend to provide more accurate descriptions of the Allied soldiers' customs and determine their place of origin.

Bodnar is relieved that he does not have to face Gurkhas in battle, for they would be difficult to defeat – presumably because of their superior fighting skills. Perhaps, for this reason, he feels apprehensive toward them and goes so far as to compare a praying Nepali to the devil or all Gurkhas to thugs. Although it may seem like a warning against befriending them, it can also be seen as a way of justifying the author's uneasiness, or inability to approach them. In light of Bodnar's memoir, the Gurkhas serve their purpose best in battle and are no candidates for friends.[7] An aura of mystery surrounds their presence and descriptions of religious practices enrich the portrait of the Gurkhas by linking them to the Orient, which was gaining interest and popularity in Poland in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, they also play a role in distancing the authors from their brothers-in-arms by pointing to the unbridgeable cultural abyss between the two Others.

Overall, the study of the Polish perception of the Gurkha soldier is situated on the Euro-centric end of studies concerning twentieth-century colonial war participation, which is being challenged by scholars (Omissi 1994; Maguire 2017; Singh 2009, Ruiz 2009). The trend of bringing to light the cross-cultural experiences of multinational armies in unfamiliar environments can become of use to the political and military scientists who deem cultural awareness in contemporary warfare to be an important factor that influences the success ratio of operations (Schreiber 2013). Concomitantly, the study of war memoirs – 'a key constituent of the literature of war' (Woodward & Jenkings 2018), helps lay bare the nature of the phenomenon that 'concerns every individual' (McLoughlin 2009, 1). Although some readers view personal narratives of war as authoritative sources of knowledge while others dismiss them, they undoubtedly shape the cultural memory of military conflicts and shed light on the wartime Self and the Other.

Notes

[1] Many found their final resting place at the Commonwealth War Cemetery in the town of Cassino. The main resting place of the Gurkha soldiers in Italy is the Gurkha War Cemetery in Rimini located approximately a hundred kilometres away from the largest Polish War Cemetery in Bologna.
[2] All translations from Polish are mine, unless stated otherwise.
[3] For instance, Dionizy Dąbrowski (1998: 80-1) in his memoir describes seeing corpses of 'Indian' soldiers after the victory at Monte Cassino. He elaborates on the area surrounding the bodies and the circumstances in which the men died. It is likely that the deceased soldiers were actually Gurkhas who had become stranded and died at Hangman's Hill.
[4] 'Persia and Iraq Force' was responsible for securing the oil supply in the area as well as supply routes to the Soviet Union.
[5] Bodnar does not specify what religion that was.
[6] See also Skórczewski (2009).
[7] It is worth noting that Bodnar made friends with some Indians during his stay in hospital. After recovery, despite his poor English speaking skills, he spent some evenings in their tent (Bodnar 1997, 225-8)

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