

Polish refugees in Africa – Central Europeans and their position within colonial society

Preliminary remark

This text is a draft chapter of my dissertation about a group of around 20.000 Polish refugees who lived in camps in the British colonies in eastern and southern Africa from 1942 to ca. 1950. They came there mainly from eastern Poland ('kresy') and were first deported to Soviet labour camps in 1940. In July 1941 they were released and subsequently evacuated to Iran. Staying in refugee camps in Eastern Africa from 1942 on, most left the colonies until 1950 and were resettled to the UK and elsewhere. In my PhD project I analyse the relation of this large group of whites with the hosting colonial societies. I therefore look for interactions of the Polish refugees with different actors of these societies in British colonial records, Polish sources as well as in memories of refugees and former neighbours of the camps.

This chapter looks on the one hand at the interactions of Polish refugees and colonized Africans. On the other hand I connect my research to an ongoing debate about the postcolonial understanding in the study of Poland and try to add an argument from my case to this discussion.

1 Introduction

When looking for the transnational interactions of Polish refugees with their African neighbours I stumbled across some seeming similarities in the political and social situation of these two groups. Both groups were in their homelands in a position of marginalization and ruled by groups that understood themselves as different from them. Before coming to eastern Africa most of the Polish refugees lived in the area that became part of the Soviet Union and had been treated by the Soviets as enemies without rights. Even more clearly comparable to the colonial rule in Africa was the situation of Poles in the parts of the country that were occupied by Nazi-German forces. In the last decade there emerged a growing tendency in the literature to understand the German as well as the Russian/Soviet rule in Poland as forms of colonial domination.¹ If one takes these claims serious, the difference between colonized Africans and colonized Poles should not be that huge. And if one assumes that both groups were in a comparable situation, one could as well assume that at least the

1 See Cavanagh, "Postcolonial Poland"; Thompson, "Whose Discourse?"

Polish refugees realized this commonality in their encounter in and around the refugee camps. This feeling of commonality could then in turn result in acts of solidarity between actors of the two groups. To see how far this happened on the ground or not and how the empirical observations relate to the theoretical projection of postcolonial insights to East Central Europe is the aim of this chapter.

The outline will thus be the following: The first part consists of a critical review and of approaches to the understanding of Poland as a colony. In the second part I will take a closer look at my case and try to trace concrete acts of solidarity or discrimination in the interaction of Polish refugees and Africans during their stay there. In the conclusion I will then link the findings from my case to the general applicability of postcolonial insights onto Poland.

Point of departure

When the Afro-American scholar, activist and writer W.E.B Du Bois studied in Berlin in 1893 he had a conversation with his fellow student Stanislaus Ritter von Estreicher from Kraków. Du Bois was surprised to hear that Poles were also racially oppressed by Germans and that it was not only the oppression of Black people by white people in the US and Africa that formed the „*race problem*“.² As he thus went to Poland he encountered yet another aspect of racism. A cabman in a small Galician town directed him towards a Jewish hotel where he started to learn about “*the Jewish problem*”.³ In a text, published in 1952, he reflects this and his two subsequent visits to Poland and argues that his experiences with the anti-Polish and even more important anti-Semitic forms of discrimination helped him to “*emerge from a certain social provincialism*” and to broaden his understanding of the “*race problem*”.⁴

This learning process of Du Bois could serve as an illustration of the kind of encounters I am looking for in this chapter. He saw the similarities of discrimination and realized that it is not only the colour of the skin that is defining racism but that it is, as he wrote, “*a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice*”.⁵ Did the Polish refugees gain comparable insights? They came from a situation of marginalization by the Soviets and had experienced, through deportation and life in labour camps, very direct forms of oppression that were

2 The original text was published under the title „The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto“ in 1952 in the magazine „Jewish Life“ (reprinted in Du Bois, *The Social Theory*, 45–46). On more discussion about the text and its relation to Holocaust studies see Rothberg “W.E.B. DuBois.”.

3 Du Bois, *The Social Theory*, 45.

4 Ibid., 46.

5 Ibid.

strongly connected to their social and political classification. How did they regard their situation vis-a-vis the colonial society? And were there acts of solidarity that emerged out of the encounter?

2 German, Soviet and British colonialisms comparable?

I will first take a step back from the experiences of the Polish refugees and their African neighbours and consider the growing literature that is understanding German and Soviet rule in Poland as a form of colonialism. I will start briefly with German rule in “the East” before scrutinizing the Soviet-Russian example.

German colonialism in the East

The understanding of Nazi occupation in eastern Europe as a form of colonialism goes back at least to Aimé Césaire's 1955 claim that the problem Europeans had with Hitler was that he committed atrocities to white and not black people as they did in the colonies.⁶ Only with the rise of postcolonial theory and global history has this line of thought been taken up. The search for connections, entanglements and aspects that are out of the national frame opened up the possibility to apply concepts, terms and insights developed in other world regions.

In fact, when looking at the German occupation of Poland, there were quite some direct personal continuations from the former German colonial empire to the newly conquered eastern European countries⁷ and they used a rhetoric that was inspired by the earlier colonial project. Furber is quite clear on this: "*the Nazi occupation of Poland was a colonialist project*"⁸. He suggests that it was a special form of colonialism that anyway shared common features. German rule in “the East” was the rule of a minority that understood itself as different and superior to the local majority. German officials described the East in colonial terms as a land that had to be opened up and cultivated by racially superior people. The main difference to European colonialism in Africa was the relative geographical and cultural proximity, lack of liberalism, a “civilizing mission”⁹ and thus the extreme brutality.¹⁰

Like natives in African colonies, Poles (or rather Slavs) were perceived as racially inferior and

6 Cited in Furber, “Near as Far in the Colonies,” 543..

7 Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 450–57.

8 Furber, “Near as Far in the Colonies,” 542.

9 Although some decades earlier in there were notions of a civilizing mission in the WW I forestry discourse on the Polish Urwald (Sunseri, “Exploiting the Urwald,” 322).

10 Furber, “Near as Far in the Colonies,” 579.

incapable of civilizing the land.¹¹ Kopp argues in the same vein for understanding Poland in postcolonial terms, stating that colonial discourse constructs the essentialized *Other* as not only inferior but unable to change without foreign intervention.¹² The German colonial discourse on the East can also be traced back to the partition period. German-occupied Poland was imagined, like the North American frontier, as an area where the civilizing forces (Germans) fought against savages (Slavs) to bring order into the chaos.¹³

Applying postcolonial insights to the German discourse on Poland (or “the East”) seems convincing but from this angle it remains open if the colonized subjects shared experiences with other colonized people.

Soviet colonialism?

The experience of the Polish refugees I am concerned with was dominated by the conquest of the Soviets and the history of the eastern borderlands of Poland. Cooper regards the Soviet Union as an imperial form.¹⁴ In the same direction David Moore argues that the post-Soviet world can be understood as post-colonial.¹⁵ But he also points to the difference of Soviet-Russian rule in the Asian and the European parts. In the latter he sees a form of “*reverse-cultural colonization*” that differs from the common (European) colonialism in that it is not accompanied by *Othering* of the colonized as it were rather the Russians who were perceived to be inferior in terms of civilization.¹⁶ Thompson argues as well for a postcolonial understanding of the Soviet domination of Poland but admits that the Russians were not perceived as superior by the Poles.¹⁷ She argues that this lack of respect for the colonial power distinguishes Soviet colonialism from English and French colonialisms.¹⁸ In his history of East Central Europe, Janos goes even further to describe the peculiar situation of Soviet imperialism. He states that people from this region saw the Russians as “*charming primitives at best*” and perceived the empire “*as a political entity in which the culturally*

11 Ibid., 564.

12 Kopp, “Arguing the Case,” 157.

13 This is best illustrated by the allegory that Frederick II evoked when he called the Slavs 'his Iroquois' (Wilson, “Environmental Chauvinism,” 27). See Kolos “Wildness.” for more examples of the 'Indian' metaphor in Prussian as well as Polish discourse of the positivist period.

14 Cooper, *Colonialism*, 156.

15 Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?,” 115.

16 Ibid., 121.

17 Thompson, “Whose Discourse?”

18 Ibid., 6.

inferior were ruling peoples of greater sophistication and civility".¹⁹ The efforts to provide legitimacy through the promotion of Russian high culture²⁰ and the self-description as being further on the progressive path to communism²¹ did not really convince.²² As I understand the discourse of civilizational superiority/inferiority and processes of *Othering* as central to postcolonial understandings of colonial discourse I am not really convinced by the interpretation of Poland as Soviet colony.

From a postcolonial angle, different forms of colonialism have in common that they are "*relations of domination that are enforced with physiological, military, epistemological and ideological force and were legitimized through discourses of 'race' or 'culture'*"²³. While the Soviet domination in Poland was definitely one of military and physiological force, it was not legitimized through discourses of race or culture. The underlying class-based ideology rather stressed the general equality of the members of the working class.

But what is even more important for my case is: If the Poles were not driven to see themselves as inferior in the hegemonic discourse, than they would have had less reason to see themselves in the same category as the colonized Africans. If their culture was not devalued but "just" oppressed, their national identity and self-perception as more European and thus more civilized than the barbaric, Asian Russians would not have been touched. As Jolluck shows, many of the Polish victims of the 1940 deportations perceived themselves as civilizational superior against the people they encountered in the Soviet Union.²⁴ Although the deportees were completely powerless, their attitude towards Central Asians even resembled "*that of a colonial power towards its subject people*".²⁵ I don't want to start any comparative analysis of the personal suffering of colonized Africans, Polish deportees or anyone else. The point here is just, what a hegemonic discourse does to ones self-understanding and thus ones relations with other people.

19 Janos, *East Central Europe*, 238.

20 Ibid., 221.

21 Ibid., 236.

22 See for the ambiguous outcome of Soviet efforts to legitimize the 1939 westward expansion as a "civilizing mission": Amar, "Sovietization." Earlier attempts of the Russian Empire for social and cultural hegemony were as well "*only marginally successful*" (Mayblin, Piekut, and Valentine, "'Other' Posts," 7).

23 My translation from German: „Herrschaftsbeziehungen, die mit physischer, militärischer, epistemologischer und ideologischer Gewalt durchgesetzt und etwa über ‚Rasse‘- und ‚Kultur‘-Diskurse legitimiert wurden“ Castro Varela and Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie*, 13..

24 Jolluck, *Exile and Identity*.

25 Ibid., 244.

Colonial kresy?

Arguing against the simple equation of Poland as colony is Claudia Snochowska-Gonzales. She writes that postcolonial understandings of Poland are mainly formed in regard to the Russian/Soviet domination and have the political aim of painting the Polish nation as the innocent victim of its aggression.²⁶ She points to some aspects of Polish history and present that contradict this understanding of Poland as colonized victim. The myth of the eastern borderlands (kresy) is the most important for my case, as most of the refugees came from this region. This myth is based on the assumption that Poland is the last bulwark of European civilization against the Asian wilderness and its savage people.²⁷ As the “real Pole” is understood as the bearer of civilization, Polonisation in the eastern borderlands becomes colonisation.²⁸ This perception re-echoes in the post-1990 boom of Polish literature on the kresy and its centrality in national discourse. Bakula criticizes this literature from a postcolonial perspective and sees strong currents of *Othering* in the descriptions of the non-Polish inhabitants of the kresy and the ignorance of their perspectives.²⁹

The perception of the Polish kresy-inhabitants as colonizers is also found in the memoirs of a Polish refugees who stayed in Africa. In narrating the story of a friend who was deported from Równe district (now Rivne, Ukraine), Stefania Buczak-Zarzycka calls the region a “colonial area”.³⁰ The story of her deportation starts in November 1939 when a Soviet plane dropped leaflets urging the Ukrainians: “*Arm yourselves with shovels and axes and destroy the Polish gentry and townsfolk.*” In this reference class and nationality were clearly intertwined. The Polish settlers in the area were former soldiers of Piłsudski's Legion and Buczak-Zarzycka describes them as “colonialists”.³¹ Her usage of terms must not be understood as an analytical reflection but tells about the everyday usage and self-perception of kresy Poles.

With regard to perception and discourse there emerges a picture that is not a Polish colony with an imperial centre at each side, but rather a cascade of frontier regions from the west to the east. In the hegemonic discourse concerning civilizational stage (in the German-Polish case coupled with racial aspects) Germans were seen as superior to Poles who in turn saw themselves as superior to Ukrainians, Russians, etc. This cascade goes on if one looks at the Russian dominance in the east and south of the Soviet Union. Zarycki argues analogous that in the zone from Elbe river to

26 Snochowska-Gonzalez, “Post-Colonial Poland,” 716.

27 Ibid., 717.

28 Ibid., 718.

29 Bakula, “Colonial and Postcolonial Aspects” no pagenummer.

30 Zarzycki and Buczak-Zarzycka, *Kwaheri Africa*, 66.

31 Ibid.

Vladivostok this potential “Easternness” leads actors to “*orientalizing their eastern neighbors*” in order to underline their own belonging to the West.³² To be sure, this relation of superiority/inferiority is to be understood on a discursive level and does not imply that any culture, society or language is better than any other. It is rather a powerful legitimizing discourse of domination that is essential to my understanding of modern colonialism. Soviet attempts to change this discourse and to establish an image of the progressive, superior “*homo sovieticus*” did not really succeed.³³

Polish colonial attempts

What further contradicts the description of Poland as a colony are the attempts to become itself a European colonial power in the interwar period. Most important of these unsuccessful attempts was that they were supported by a popular mass movement. This movement, organized in the Maritime and Colonial League, had its peak in popularity immediately before the outbreak of World War Two.³⁴ Millions of Poles took part in the activities of the Colonial Days in April 1938 throughout the country.³⁵ All these ambitions were supported by the general self-perception of Poland as a European power. The colonies were supposed to provide raw materials and land for settlement.³⁶ In the face of threats from Germany and the Soviet Union these claims had the psychological function of keeping the morale high as well.³⁷ The mass mobilisations were to give more weight to the demands of Polish foreign politicians for a share of other colonial empires. One argumentation in the international arena was, that the Polish territory and people had been part of the German Empire. As such they should be entitled to the same share of former German colonies, that were ruled by other European powers under a League of Nations mandate. These attempts were unsuccessful, as the British foreign secretary simply refused to talk about it during the visit of his Polish counterpart, but it is telling about the self-perception of the Polish nation vis-a-vis the colonized parts of the world. Poland tried to be on equal footing with the European colonial powers and although it was not accepted as such, its position is still far from that of a colonized country in Africa.

Related to this is the importance of racism for colonial rule in Africa. While the Nazis tried hard to

32 Cited here from Zarycki, “Orientalism.” See also Zarycki, *Ideologies of Eastness*.

33 In fact, the term was coined as the title of an anti-Soviet satire (Sinowjew, *Homo sovieticus*).

34 Hunczak, “Polish Colonial Ambitions,” 648.

35 Ibid., 653.

36 Ibid., 656.

37 Ibid.

classify and distinguish between different racially defined groups this was much easier in parts of the world where the differences between ruler and ruled were more visible. The importance of visibility for control becomes obvious in the Nazi-law forcing Jews to wear a yellow star. Christopher Fyfe underlines the role of white rule as a system of control with the description of the white skin as uniform.³⁸ Like the uniform of the soldier or policeman signifies his authority, the white person in Africa was protected by its white skin. The visibility of difference was enforced through rituals of colonial officials that maintained “*the image of the white man as spectacle*”.³⁹ To be clear, the difference had to be created and carefully kept up by segregation, the dismissal of interracial relationships and whites who “went native”⁴⁰ but the visibility of skin colour helped a good deal to support this system of rule.

The Polish refugees who came to Africa were in no powerful position at all after they went through the Soviet deportations, forced labour and struggle for survival. But at the moment they entered the colonial situation they too wore the same uniform as British colonial officials or rich European settlers. Although their uniform looked a lot more ragged in the beginning it was still the uniform of privilege and this uniform could not be taken off.⁴¹ At the same time, they could not take off their experiences of suffering and being treated as second class human beings. So, in the following part I want to take a look at the way that Polish refugees reacted to the colonial situation they were brought in. Did they broaden their “provincialism” as Du Bois described his experience of seeing the remnants of the Warsaw ghetto? Or did they take advantage of the possibility to be elevated from oppressed to privileged?

3 Compassion of the “wretched of the earth”?

In October 1942 there appeared an article in the Luganda-language newspaper “Matalisi” about the first impressions of the Polish refugees that had just arrived in Uganda. Apart from such illustrative facts as that they were “*strong in built*” and their language was “*nice sounding but extremely difficult to write*” the writer stated: “*They do not practice discrimination.*”⁴² This statement reveals two interesting aspects: First, the writer felt the urge to point to the fact of non-discrimination shows that he found this exceptional. He did not make clear who discriminated, but one could guess

38 Fyfe, “Race,” 21.

39 Mohanty, “Drawing the Color Line,” 314.

40 See Stoler, “Rethinking Colonial Categories”; Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans*.

41 Fyfe, “Race,” 21.

42 Cited in Lwanga-Lunyiigo, “Uganda’s Long Connection,” 9.

that he had other whites in mind. The second point is the fact that they seemed to *not* discriminate. Against the backdrop of the experience of oppression and marginalization of the refugees this would strengthen the expectation of solidarity between the “colonized”.

Traces, pointing to a more egalitarian relation between Poles and Africans, are reports of sexual relations between Polish women and Ugandan men in the surrounding of Koja camp.⁴³ In Tanganyika and Northern Rhodesia similar relations were problematized as “*prostitution*” by the colonial authorities.⁴⁴ There were also marriages of Polish women and wealthy Indian plantation owners in Tanganyika⁴⁵ especially after the war ended and it became clear that Poland would be Soviet dominated. One example was a Polish woman who in May 1948 married an Indian “*in spite of every effort to dissuade her*”, as the Governor of Tanganyika noted.⁴⁶ Although the main reason for the engagement might have been to gain residence status and financial support in a time of uncertainty it nevertheless shows the openness to cross the societal boundaries of race.

One example of a compassionate relation is found in the memoirs of a refugee who stayed in Tengeru, Tanganyika. She writes that African small-traders frequently sold fruits and vegetables in the camp without permission. From time to time the camp police cracked down on them, beat and arrested them. To escape police, the fugitives were sometimes hiding under the beds in the Polish houses as the Poles “*sympathised with the victims and always tried to help them*”.⁴⁷ Another refugee, who stayed in Ifunda, Tanganyika, goes even further when she described the relation towards the camp-workers: “*Initially they looked at us as if we occupied an inferior status position, but after a little while we got to know each other and our daily contacts became rather cordial.*”⁴⁸ This statement is rather unthinkable in colonial discourse. The whole idea of whites being seen as inferior contradicts the colonial logic. The colonial master may offer a cordial relationship to his servants as well, but this is a different form of cordiality as he remains in the superior position. She goes on to explain this longing for a relation of equality:

“Actually the obligatory regimen of the settlement clearly forbade a display of friendship toward the natives, but gone through the Siberian Gehenna [hell, JL] we did not always understand the

43 Interviews with Edward Sinabulya, 15.04.2013 and Mukeera Kasule, 16.04.2013. Both had worked in the Polish settlement in Koja.

44 Tanzania National Archives (TNA) 176 /87, C.E.Hallam to DC Iringa, 3.04.46; National Archives of the UK: Public Records Office (PRO): CO 795/132/4, p.63, Acting Governor Lusaka to Secretary of State, 28.2.44. See also: Lwanga-Lunyiigo, “Uganda’s Long Connection.”

45 Plawski, *Torn from the Homeland*, 152.

46 PRO: CO 822/350, p.5, Acting Governor Tanganyika to Secretary of State for the Colonies, London, 21.6.51,

47 Plawski, *Torn from the Homeland*, 144.

48 Filomena Michałowska-Bykowska in Piotrowski, *Polish Deportees*, 162.

reason for this prohibition and explained our behavior by our felt need to treat everyone equally no matter what the colour of their skin.”⁴⁹

She describes the contradictions between the colonial system (in her case trickled down into the “*camp regimen*”) and her humanitarian impulse after the experience of oppression in the Soviet Union. The bare fight for survival in Siberia seems to have been more decisive than the general marginalization in occupied Poland.⁵⁰ But her story does not stop here. She explains that this general world-view manifested itself in donating clothes and blankets to poor African women and buying foodstuff from Africans, although forbidden. She then goes on to describe an incidence where African robbers broke into their house at night and the fear that this caused to their family and the other camp inmates. In the sequence of her narrative this could be understood as a learning process, that one should not be too friendly to unfamiliar people. What is omitted here is the relative wealth that the refugees enjoyed, otherwise they would have no possibility of donating things. This relative wealth coupled with the expected wealth of whites generally seems to be a factor behind the night-time robbery not mentioned here.

Another form of interaction on equal footing seemed to have been done by the outcasts and youngsters who joined together for cock-fighting⁵¹, drinking of locally brewed alcohol and petty crimes. The catholic priest Krolikowski described this in relation to problems with adolescents in the camps who were “[f]raternizing recklessly (...) with native youngsters”. After learning some “*native swear words as a joke*” their contacts became more serious and they engaged in unspecified deals in the marketplace.⁵² In this regard the adolescent refugees in Africa behaved like adolescent DPs in German camps after the war, for whom Louise Holborn states that they “*tended to seek their recreation among the less desirable elements of the German community.*”⁵³ While the more respectable parts of the refugee community did not engage so much with the German as well as the African population it were the youths and outcasts who seemed to be more open in this regard.

Illicit trading activities are a further example in this regard. In December 1944 a group of Polish refugees in a camp-lorry with large quantities of illegally purchased flour and sugar were stopped by police on their way back to Ifunda settlement.⁵⁴ Due to wartime shortages the prices and

49 Ibid.

50 As she was deported at the age of 12 this might not come as a surprise. About her see Urbanek, “Z Nieludzkiej Ziemi.”

51 See for example Zarzycki and Buczak-Zarzycka, *Kwaheri Africa*, 37..

52 *Stolen Childhood*, 110.

53 *International Refugee Organization*, 234.

54 TNA: 176/87, p.6, S.A. Walden (DC Iringa) to Camp Commandant Ifunda, 27.12.44.

quantities of these and other goods were strictly controlled. The flour and sugar of the refugees was confiscated and they were to be brought to court.⁵⁵ To get a milder treatment they were asked to reveal the names of their (assumedly Indian) suppliers but refused to do so.⁵⁶ The Director of Refugees complained that this was due to the fact that the Indians “*posed as the real friends of the Poles*” and told them that it was only the British government that prevented them from getting their fair share of goods.⁵⁷ The good relation of the Indian traders and their Polish customers can be explained through everyday pragmatic reasons: The Poles wanted the goods and denouncing their suppliers would hinder their further supply through them, but it also shows a considerable degree of distance from the colonial state. This reliance on their own means and distrust of officials is something quite logical for people who went through situations where officials threatened their lives and it was often the illicit trading of precious items they carried with them that helped them survive. The feeling of belonging to a nationally different group than the British and the non-permanent status as refugee could be other reasons behind this attitude. It was just not *their* state.

Contradictions

One point that contradicts the equation of the colonial and Soviet domination is the fact that there were some alleged communists among the refugees who supported anti-colonial strands within the African population. Of all the refugees it were some of the few pro-Soviet who seemed to have been most anti-colonial.⁵⁸ On a geopolitical scale this can be explained through the emerging Cold War and the competition to exert influence on future African states, but it could also be understood on ideological grounds and through the general rejection of colonialism from the communist side. While the European colonialists in Africa had the superiority and privilege of whites at the core of their world-view, the appeal of communism for the colonized was its siding with the oppressed of capitalism and colonialism alike.

When the Poles arrived on the Eastern African shores they carried like every human being cultural baggage with them. For the Poles this was first and foremost the humiliating experience of deportation, forced labour and fight for survival. But apart from that they were laden with the

55 TNA: 176/87, p.6, Pennington (Director of Refugees) to Camp Commandant Ifunda, 9.01.45.

56 The British officials even urged a Polish government delegate who was about to visit the camp to press on the refugees to reveal the names, although it remains unclear if he succeeded.

57 Ibid.

58 Bernhard Masiuk (a.k.a. Boris Afanasev) said he would support his African brothers in the fight against colonialism (TNA: 69/782, Officer i/c Police, Usa River to Director of Refugees, DSM, 3.11.52). Helena Luczyc was accused to have influenced Africans around Tengeru with communist propaganda (PRO: CO 822/146/1, Personal Summary, Helena Luczyc, attached to Beryl Hughes, Home Office, London to Dawson, Colonial Office, 9.11.50).

contemporary images of Africa prevalent in Europe. This started with the initial fear of cannibals and savage people that is remembered in many recollections. In the narratives this is usually followed by the relief upon arrival that Africans were friendly and not so dangerous.⁵⁹

In the Iranian transit camps rumours and possibilities about their future replacement were vividly discussed. Going to Africa seemed to have been the least preferred option among the Poles. Fears of the unhealthy climate, wild animals and “*half-wild people*” abound especially among the mothers.⁶⁰ As the first group of 500 were ordered to get ready for transportation their opposition was so heavy that British soldiers had to surround the camp in Teheran to make sure no one ran away. Nevertheless 300 managed to escape and were later persuaded through talks and lectures.⁶¹

The imagination about Africa came from a variety of sources. The little Stefania remembered the stories her grandmother told her about a mythical land beyond the “*Seven Great Seas*” where black naked people “*slept under the naked heaven*”.⁶² She further noted that she read Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *In Desert and Wilderness* (“*W pustyni i w puszczy*”) and therefore had a rather romantic notion of what Africa would be.⁶³ This book was immensely popular and Stefania was not the only refugee who had read it.⁶⁴ Anna Klobucka calls it “*the primary source of a Polish reader's awareness of Africa and its people.*”⁶⁵

In Desert and Wilderness is an adventure novel that was published in 1911 and set in the Sudan of the Mahdi rebellion (1881-1885) featuring as main characters a 14-year old Polish boy (*Stas*) and an English girl (*Nel*) who are kidnapped by Sudanese warriors.⁶⁶ The author Henryk Sienkiewicz was himself in Sudan in 1891 and apart from this Poland's most influential nationalist writer and Nobel Prize winner. The whole story is quite Eurocentric and racist, as *Stas* is portrayed as the superior and natural leader of the (mainly speechless) Africans whom he saves from the Arab slavers and stands clearly on the side of English colonialism against the Islamic rebels.⁶⁷ In view of a possible

59 See for example Plawski, *Torn from the Homeland*, 140; Zarzycki and Buczak-Zarzycka, *Kwaheri Africa*, 25; Krolikowski, *Stolen Childhood*, 87.

60 Krolikowski, *Stolen Childhood*, 77.

61 Ibid.

62 Zarzycki and Buczak-Zarzycka, *Kwaheri Africa*, 2.

63 Ibid., 24.

64 Maria Dutkiewicz remembered that she read it in Kazakhstan before coming to Africa (Niedźwiecka, “*Armia Andersa*”). Irena Sikorska also writes: ‘Till now Africa existed only in my imagination, fed by books and films’ see Sikorska, “*Irena Sikorska’s Biography.*” The book could be ordered from a Polish store in Nairobi as well (Głos Polski (GP) 01.12.46, p.15) and one scout leader referred to it in a speech (GP 2.12.45 “*Kronika Harcerska*”, p.11).

65 Klobucka, “*Desert,*” 248.

66 Ibid., 247.

67 See for an elaborate postcolonial critique of the book: Klobucka “*Desert.*”

understanding of Poland as a colonized country Klobucka states that “*Poles reading In Desert and Wilderness (...) sided (...) with a European explorer's and colonizer's viewpoint on Africa, rather than with the plight of its subjugated peoples.*”⁶⁸ The close association of the Polish boy *Staś* with the English girl *Nel* makes this positioning quite obvious.

One scene of the novel is worth mentioning here: *Staś* fantasizes how it would be, if he could come back to Africa, conquer some land there, “*civilize the natives, establish in that locality a new Poland or even start at the head of a drilled black host for the old Poland and defeat its subjugators.*”⁶⁹ Although this is dismissed as a childish fantasy, it nevertheless is clearly the colonialist idea of taking and civilizing the land and its people that are passively waiting to be ruled. The idea to form a colonial army to fight for a European nation was interestingly enough been later put into practice in both World Wars.⁷⁰ It must be remembered that the novel was written at a time when there was no independent Polish nation-state. For the youth among them, there was not too much fantasy needed to see the parallels of the novel's main character and themselves.

When the Polish refugees arrived in Africa, they immediately felt the privileges of whiteness. During their deportation they were locked-up in cattle wagons and after release they squashed into every possible means of transportation. In stark contrast in Africa they could travel in passenger carriages, mostly even in the first class.⁷¹

The Polish newspapers that were published in Nairobi are a good indicator of the self-positioning of the Polish refugee elites. While the colonized were described rather paternalistic,⁷² commonalities with the British were instead emphasized. The common celebrations of 11 November are a good illustration, being at the same time Polish National Independence Day and British Remembrance Day. Poles were actively participating in the British celebrations underlining the “*Polish-British friendship*”.⁷³ The perception of firmly belonging to European civilization is found explicitly in a speech held at a public meeting in Koja settlement. The speaker therein described the „...*healthy Polish culture stemming from the trunk of Western-European civilization, Christianity and its idea*

68 Ibid., 247.

69 Cited in *ibid.*, 251.

70 In fact, *Staś*'s idea to use African colonial soldiers on the European battlefields was not so absurd in the context of the time as the French General Charles Mangin proposed this already in 1910 and underlined it with racist argumentation, cited in Rössel, “Die Front,” 12.

71 Wróbel, “Polskie Dominium,” 21; Tomaszewski, “Shade.”

72 One article described Africans as “big children” (Nasz Przyjaciel (NP) 08.12.46 “Takie duże czarne dzieci..” by Jerzy Dołęga-Kowalewski).

73 GP 21.10.45, “Przed 11-tym Listopada” by Chodzikiwicz and Krajowski; GP 25.11.45, “Z Osiedli”; GP 12.01.47 “Z Osiedli”.

of democracy".⁷⁴ Furthermore, Polish handicraft exhibitions, music and theatre performances were used to showcase Polish abilities to the European colonial public.⁷⁵

An interesting case is the story of the Kobak family. Jozef Kobak and his family were part of the very last refugees that stayed near Arusha, Tanganyika. He was allegedly engaged in illicit distilling and selling of alcohol to Africans and therefore categorized as a criminal in the British files.⁷⁶ Kobak was quite successful in his business as he was in possession of a motorcycle⁷⁷ and stayed in the up-scale Rex hotel when visiting Dar es Salaam.⁷⁸ His illicit business contacts with Africans nevertheless did not mean that he was anti-racist. When the nearby Greek school - where the children of the last few Polish refugees went after the Polish school closed down - was closed as well, his son was sent to the catholic St. Josephs school in Dar es Salaam. As soon as Mrs. Kobak found out that the school was "*entirely African*" she sent her husband there to get their son back.⁷⁹ Another incidence that occurred in Koja was only revealed in an interview with a former settlement worker.⁸⁰ One day an African driver had an accident with the camp lorry so that it overturned. As the car was quite badly damaged one of the Polish refugees, who was notorious for his violent behaviour towards Africans, rushed to the scene. He started beating the driver to death and according to Sinabulya he was never punished for this offence. Unfortunately there is nothing to be found on this incidence in the British archives.

In January 1945 the emerging anti-colonial struggle manifested itself literally at the gates of Koja settlement. The "Uganda Disturbances" were a series of strikes and riots throughout Uganda.⁸¹ In the course of the uprising strikers blocked the entrance of Koja camp and stopped a milk lorry from entering. As they started to spill out the milk cans camp police started quarrelling with them until troops from Kampala arrived and put down the riot by force, killing four protesters and injuring eleven.⁸² The Polish inmates of the camp did not actively engage in these events. The camp was

74 NP 30.06.45 "Dzień 21 Maja 1945r. w Koji" by T. Zemoytel, citing from the speech he made at the "Polish Countryside celebration" in Koja.

75 E.g. the exhibition in Kampala was attended by the European elite of the capital (GP 12.01.47, "Z Osiedli"). Another exhibition in Tengeru was reportedly popular with the "English society" (GP 27.01.46, "Z Osiedli").

76 PRO: CO 822/146/1, Josef Kobak (individual summary), 9.11.50.

77 TNA: 69/782, Acting PC Northern Province to Director of Refugees, DSM, 24.12.52.

78 TNA: 69/782, Campbell to PC Northern Province, 26.09.52.

79 TNA: 69/782, Troup to Director of Refugees, 18.09.52.

80 Interview with Edward Sinabulya, former African worker in the camp, Koja, Uganda, 15.04.13.

81 Thompson, "Colonialism in Crisis."

82 Ibid., 607.

seen as an institution of the colonial state and as such blocked by the strikers. In this situation, although they were not the target of the protests, the Poles nevertheless belonged quite clearly to the colonizer's camp.

Connected to the Polish colonial ambitions of the interwar period mentioned earlier, towards the end of the war Polish exile politicians in London discussed the establishment of a Polish dominion in Africa.⁸³ Their plans envisaged a territory where Polish refugees from Africa and DPs from Central Europe could concentrate. This Polish dominion was supposed to be in one of the former German or Italian colonies in Africa.⁸⁴ But not only Polish officials in London had such plans. In 1946 the Southern Rhodesian official Major Bagshawe proposed to settle some 400 Polish families in a part of the colony. His plan got an enthusiastic reply from the political representatives of the Polish refugees. They argued that his plan should be followed and extended to other colonies as well. The colonial governments however were fast to dismiss any permanent Polish settlement and Bagshawe was removed from his post.⁸⁵ Although these plans for a Polish colony failed, like the earlier interwar attempts, they nevertheless show the general understanding of being entitled to colonial rule.

5 Conclusion

In summary it can be stated that there were no big waves of solidarity between the Polish refugees and their African neighbours. Their behaviour seemed to have been generally less discriminating towards Africans but the social positioning on the side of the Europeans was the basic assumption. With the exception of few isolated ideologically motivated acts of Soviet-aligned communists there was generally a more humanitarian motivation. The reason for this humanitarian stance was to be found in the life-threatening experiences of deportation and life in the Siberian 'Gehenna'.

The simple equation of Poland as colony is ignoring the global dimension of colonialism and the importance of racism for European colonial rule in the non-European parts of the world. While East Central Europe was signified by the discursive colonization of the eastern neighbour, in relation to the global South the Poles perceived themselves as part of the West. Asians and Africans were definitely regarded as more "eastern" (i.e. less civilized) than even the easternmost Europeans. The situation of Polish exiles was quite different from African colonized as the national elites

83 Wróbel, "Polskie Dominium."

84 Ibid., 23.

85 GP 29.09.46 'Z Osiedli'; Kenya National Archives (KNA): AH/1/51, p.96A, Memorandum of Polish Civic Committee to A. Creech-Jones, Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, Nairobi, 22.07.46. See also Tavuyanago, Muguti, and Hlongwana, "Victims," 963 and Mlambo, "Some," 156.

understood themselves as part of the club of European powers, into which they were just not allowed in. The futile attempts to get colonies are the best illustration of this point. That the commonalities of oppression by a “foreign” power did not translate into acts of solidarity from the side of the Poles is no wonder. If they had a nation they would have wanted colonies as well. The struggle of Polish nationalists was the struggle to be accepted as a European nation, to be part of the West. This is a perspective that anti-colonial nationalists in Africa never had.

Literature

- Amar, Tarik Cyril. “Sovietization as a Civilizing Mission in the West.” In *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe. New Perspectives on the Postwar Period*, edited by Balász Apor, Péter Apor, and E.A. Rees, 29–45. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2008.
- Bakula, Bogusław. “Colonial and Postcolonial Aspects of Polish Discourse on the Eastern „Borderlands”,” 2007. <http://www.postcolonial-europe.eu/index.php/en/studies/68--colonial-and-postcolonial-aspects-of-polish-discourse-on-the-eastern-borderlandsq>.
- Castro Varela, María do Mar, and Nikita Dhawan. *Postkoloniale Theorie: eine kritische Einführung*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2005.
- Cavanagh, Clare. “Postcolonial Poland.” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (2004): 82–92.
- Cooper, Frederick. *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *The Social Theory of W.E.B. Du Bois*. Pine Forge Press, 2004.
- Fischer-Tiné, Harald. *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class And “white Subalternity” in Colonial India*. *New Perspectives in South Asian History* 30. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009.
- Furber, David. “Near as Far in the Colonies: The Nazi Occupation of Poland.” *The International History Review* 26, no. 3 (2004): 541–79.
- Fyfe, Christopher. “Race, Empire and the Historians.” *Race & Class* 33, no. 4 (January 4, 1992): 15–30.
- Holborn, Louise W. *The International Refugee Organization: A Specialized Agency Of the United Nations, Its History and Work, 1946-1952*. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- Hunczak, Taras. “Polish Colonial Ambitions in the Inter-War Period.” *Slavic Review* 26, no. 4 (1967): 648–56.
- Janos, Andrew C. *East Central Europe in the Modern World: The Politics of the Borderlands from Pre- to Postcommunism*. Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Jolluck, Katherine R. *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union During World War II*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002.
- Klobucka, Anna. “Desert and Wilderness Revisited: Sienkiewicz’s Africa in the Polish National Imagination.” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (2001): 243–59.
- Kołos, Anna. “‘Wildness’ as a Metaphor for Self-Definition of the Colonised Subject in the Positivist Period in Poland.” *The Journal of Education, Culture, and Society*, no. 1 (2011):

81–95.

- Kopp, Kristin. "Arguing the Case for a Colonial Poland." In *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, edited by Volker Max Langbehn and Mohammad Salama, 146–63. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Krolikowski, Lucjan. *Stolen Childhood: A Saga of Polish War Children*. San Jose, New York, Lincoln, Shanghai: Authors Choice Press, 2001.
- Lwanga-Lunyiigo, Samwiri. "Uganda's Long Connection with the Problem of Refugees : From the Polish Refugees of World War II to the Present. Paper for Workshop on 'Uganda and Refugee Problems', 20 December 1993, Makerere University." Makerere, Kampala, 1993. http://repository.forcedmigration.org/show_metadata.jsp?pid=fmo:1145.
- Madley, Benjamin. "From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe." *European History Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2005): 429–64.
- Mayblin, Lucy, Aneta Piekut, and Gill Valentine. "'Other' Posts in 'Other' Places: Poland through a Postcolonial Lens?" *Sociology* 50, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 60–76.
- Mlambo, Alois. "'Some Are More White than Others': Racial Chauvinism as a Factor of Rhodesian Immigration Policy, 1890-1963." *Zambezia* 27, no. 2 (2000): 139–60.
- Mohanty, Satya P. "Drawing the Color Line: Kipling and the Culture of Colonial Rule." In *The Bounds of Race. Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, edited by Dominick LaCapra, 311–43. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Moore, David Chioni. "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique." *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–28.
- Niedźwiecka, Dorota. "Z Armia Andersa - Pod Baobaby. Dzieci Z Czarnego Ladu." *Zesłaniec*, no. 49 (2011): 37–40.
- Piotrowski, Tadeusz, ed. *The Polish Deportees of World War II : Recollections of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal throughout the World*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2004.
- Plawski, Czeslaw. *Torn from the Homeland: Unforgettable Experiences During WW II*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011.
- Rössel, Karl. "»Die Front Ist Die Hölle« Im Ersten Weltkrieg Wurden Millionen Kolonialsoldaten Eingesetzt (Teil 1)." *iz3w*, no. 340 (February 2014): 12–15.
- Rothberg, Michael. "W.E.B. DuBois in Warsaw: Holocaust Memory and the Color Line, 1949-1952." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 169–89.
- Sikorska, Irena. "Irena Sikorska's Biography." Accessed July 2, 2013. <http://irena.sikorska.free.fr/>.
- Sinowjew, Alexander. *Homo sovieticus: Roman*. Zürich: Diogenes, 1987.
- Snochowska-Gonzalez, Claudia. "Post-Colonial Poland—On an Unavoidable Misuse." *East European Politics & Societies* 26, no. 4 (2012): 708–23.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (1989): 134–61.
- Sunseri, Thaddeus. "Exploiting the Urwald: German Post-Colonial Forestry in Poland and Central Africa, 1900–1960." *Past & Present* 214, no. 1 (2012): 305–42.
- Tavuyanago, Baxter, Tasara Muguti, and James Hlongwana. "Victims of the Rhodesian Immigration Policy: Polish Refugees from the Second World War." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, no. 4 (2012): 951–65.
- Thompson, Ewa. "Whose Discourse? Telling the Story in Post-Communist Poland." *The Other Shore: Slavic and East European Cultures Abroad, Past and Present* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–15.
- Thompson, Gardner. "Colonialism in Crisis: The Uganda Disturbances of 1945." *African Affairs* 91, no. 365 (October 1, 1992): 605–24.
- Tomaszewski, Irene. "In the Shade of the Baobab Tree." *Cosmopolitan Review* 6, no. 3 (2014). <http://cosmopolitanreview.com/baobab-tree/>.
- Urbanek, Bogdan. "Z Nieludzkiej Ziemi Do Afrykańskiego Buszu." *Temat Szczecinecki*, January

27, 2011.

- Wilson, Jeffrey K. "Environmental Chauvinism in the Prussian East: Forestry as a Civilizing Mission on the Ethnic Frontier, 1871–1914." *Central European History* 41, no. 1 (2008): 27–70.
- Wróbel, Janusz. "Polskie Dominium W Afryce?" *Biuletyn IPN - Pamięć.pl*, no. 7 (2012): 19–24.
- Zarycki, Tomasz. *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*. Routledge, 2014.
- . "Orientalism and Images of Eastern Poland." In *Endogenous Factors in Development of the Eastern Poland*, edited by M. Stefański, 73–88. Lublin: Innovation Press, 2010.
- Zarzycki, Alicia A., and Stefania Buczak-Zarzycka. *Kwaheri Africa. A Polish Experience 1939-1950, from Deportation to Freedom*. n.p.: n. p., 1986.