

Toward Postcolonialism in Polish History: On Racial Positioning and Historical Specificity

Piotr Puchalski

University of the National Education Commission

ul. Podchorążych 2, 30-084 Kraków, Poland

piotr.puchalski@uken.krakow.pl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4530-959X>

This article examines the historic racial positioning of Poland and the Polish lands. I argue that around the time of World War II, the Poles' understanding of their own global condition underwent a shift from colonial to postcolonial. Specifically, rather than imagining Poland as a potential colonial power, many Poles began to perceive their own fate as postcolonial, shaped by racial and exploitative policies. In turn, the perceptions of Poland as a postcolonial state and nation generated a wide range of attitudes toward Africa during the Cold War, which should not be studied solely through the lens of socialist ideas imposed by Moscow. I further contend that while it is essential to remain critical of narratives about East-South solidarity, we must also consider Eastern European contacts with the Global South as historically contingent upon the specific time period, physical context, and local hierarchies of power.

Keywords: history, Poland, postcolonialism, race, Africa.

In recent years, academia has produced a number of works that discuss Eastern Europe's colonial and racial status, both in relation to Western Europe and the Global South. The increasing prominence of this question can be illustrated by the publication of at least three collective works within roughly a year. For instance, *Constructing Race on the Borders of Europe...*, edited by Marsha Morton and Barbara Larson, analyzes racial inequities in the continent's geographically liminal spaces, such as Norway and Hungary. Implicit in this book is the thesis that dominant elites in these "postcolonial" (and colony-less) countries drew inspiration from some racial practices of European colonial empires.¹ Likewise, the theme of *The World Beyond the West...*, compiled by Mariusz Kałczewiak and Magdalena Kozłowska, explores the marginality of the lands situated between Berlin, Istanbul, and Moscow. Here, the authors discuss the colonial "in-betweenness" of European nations such as Poland in relation to their perceptions of the world beyond the continent, generally reaching the conclusion that despite their efforts not to mimic the West, Eastern Europeans often subscribed to or created their own racist tropes.² In a similar manner, *Central Europe and the Non-European World in the Long 19th Century*, edited by Markéta Křížová and Jitka Malečková, describes the complicity of Central European actors in the dissemination of Orientalist knowledge about Asia, Africa, and other parts of the globe.³

In this article, I build on this growing body of literature by drawing from my research—both published and ongoing—on Poland's colonial entanglements to propose a new way of understanding its relationship with Africa and other colonial spaces. Several theoretical frameworks already exist for interpreting Eastern Europe in colonial terms. For instance, Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum's concept of "colonial cloud" refers to a

- 1 Marsha Morton and Barbara Larson, eds., *Constructing Race on the Borders of Europe: Ethnography, Anthropology, and Visual Culture, 1850-1930* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021). See also my review of the work at <https://mosseprogram.wisc.edu/2021/09/23/puchalski/>.
- 2 Mariusz Kałczewiak and Magdalena Kozłowska, eds., *The World beyond the West: Perspectives from Eastern Europe* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2022).
- 3 Markéta Křížová and Jitka Malečková, eds., *Central Europe and the Non-European World in the Long 19th Century* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2022). See also my review of the work at <https://www.connections.clio-online.net/searching/id/reb-130978?title=m-krizova-u-a-hgg-central-europe-and-the-non-european-world-in-the-long-19th-century&rec-no=17&q=&sort=&fq=&total=7599>.

body of imperial knowledge accessible to all Westerners, as well as Eastern Europeans, who could both contribute to and draw from it. Barbara Lüthi, Francesca Falk, and Patricia Purtschert's notion of "colonialism without colonies" addresses engagement in colonial processes without territorial possessions; Aníbal Quijano's "coloniality of power" highlights the permeation of social orders and knowledge networks by colonialism; and Ulla Vuorela's "colonial complicity" examines colonial ambitions of nations that did not achieve territorial colonization.⁴ While these concepts are useful for understanding Poland's participation in colonial discourse and practice, they overlook the interdependence between Poland's subjugation by more powerful neighbors and its great-power ambitions, which Lenny A. Ureña Valerio aptly illustrates in her book on the colonial aspects of the German rule in the Prussian-Polish borderlands.⁵

More helpful in considering the Eastern European interplay between subjugation and the desire for compensation is Zoltán Ginelli's application of the concept of "transcoloniality," as was formulated by Olivia C. Harrison based on studies from the 1990s.⁶ According to Ginelli, this concept "offers a transformative geographical epistemology that connects and re-embeds colonial experiences on various scales in a decentered narrative by distributing agency through interconnected geographical overlaps, circulations, and translations."⁷ In other words, Ginelli's transcoloniality refers to the translation and transposition of colonial knowledge and practices

- 4 Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum, "An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Inter-imperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge," *Journal of Modern European History* 14, no. 2 (2016): 164–182, <https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2016-2-164>; Barbara Lüthi, Francesca Falk, and Patricia Purtschert, "Colonialism without Colonies: Examining Blank Spaces in Colonial Studies," *National Identities* 18, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2016.1107178>; Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1, no. 3 (2012): 533–580; Ulla Vuorela, "Colonial Complicity: The 'Postcolonial' in a Nordic Context," in *Complying with Colonialism. Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, ed. Suvi Keskinen et al. (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 19–34.
- 5 Lenny A. Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840–1920* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019).
- 6 Olivia C. Harrison, "Transcolonial Studies," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Literature*, May 24, 2023: 1–31.
- 7 Zoltán Ginelli, "Transcoloniality," in *Decoloniality in Eastern Europe: A Lexicon of Reorientation*, ed. Ana Vilenica (Novi Sad: New Media Center, 2023), 141.

across different geographical regions, positioning Eastern Europeans as both subjects of colonialism and colonial actors in their own right. Indeed, Ginelli's important contribution lies in suggesting that Eastern Europeans' adoption of colonial practices often served as a response to analogous forms of racialization imposed on them. For instance, Ginelli notes that "fears of German imperialism urged [Hungarian] 'folk writers' to center on 'race' and 'indigenusness' in order to preserve the Hungarian nation and culture."⁸ Implicit in this approach, therefore, is the necessity of mastering the historical (and literary) material spanning countries and continents and presenting it with proper care and nuance.

Despite Ginelli's inspiring call to arms, recent literature often lacks the specificity and contextual depth to adequately address the historical cases of Eastern European colonial entanglements. For instance, Bolaji Balogun's book *Race and the Colour-Line...* employs a sociological lens to uncover Poland's centuries-long involvement in colonial commerce, mental mapping, production of knowledge, and settlement projects. However, the author pays little attention to the historic socioeconomic realities of the Polish lands, presenting Poland's engagement in colonial actions as if it emerged in a domestic vacuum. He also fails to demonstrate any meaningful differences between Eastern European and Western racism, treating the two as if they originated from the same source and overlooking how the former may have affected the latter. This teleological approach, though perhaps unintentional, stems from Balogun's cherry-picking of material from the literature cited in his book.⁹ Similarly, Ivan Kalmar, despite offering valuable insights into Eastern Europeans' marginal or incomplete "whiteness," does not integrate historically specific instances of East-South interactions into his broader arguments, which leaves his study overly West-centric.¹⁰

8 Ibid., 143.

9 Bolaji Balogun, *Race and the Colour-Line: The Boundaries of Europeanness in Poland* (London/New York: Routledge, 2023); especially pp. 35-97.

10 See Ivan Davidson Kalmar, *White but Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022). In contrast, the collection edited by Siegfried Huigen and Dorota Kołodziejczyk, *East Central Europe between the Colonial and the Postcolonial...*, especially Jagoda Wierzejska's chapter, offers more insight into the interdependence between the colonial and the postcolonial in Eastern Europe: Siegfried Huigen and Dorota Kołodziejczyk, eds., *East Central Europe between the Colonial and Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

In response to recent publications in political science and literary studies, I find it crucial to underline the importance of historical specificity when discussing Eastern Europe's connections to the Global South in the analyses of Poland's racial position. Previously, I explored the phenomenon of colonial aspirations in semiperipheral Poland as related to its socio-economic problems, many of which stemmed from its precarious in-between position in the colonial world order of the interwar period. In *Poland in a Colonial World Order...*, I employed the ancient symbol of the uroboros—a snake devouring its own tail—to illustrate the eternal cycle of (post)colonialism in the Polish semiperiphery.¹¹ This cycle captures how Poland's postimperial status gives rise to and then undermines its colonial aspirations, while also reflecting the influence of Western hegemony in the Polish lands and its ripple effects on Polish colonial practices. In this article, building upon these ideas and incorporating my new research, I present other instances of Polish racial positioning in specific historical contexts. I propose that a productive way of understanding this positioning (or marginal whiteness) is through a postcolonial lens. Here, I use the term “postcolonial” not only as a theoretical framework but also to describe how members of a nation-state perceived their own fate as being shaped by racial and exploitative policies.

From colonial entanglements to postcolonialism

In my ongoing research project, I inspect the role of postcolonial discourse in the formation of the Polish state and its relations with Africa during the twentieth century. This discourse reflected a general belief that countries in both Eastern Europe and Africa were subjected to political, economic, and cultural domination by empires. In other words, I trace the emergence and consistent use of postcolonial concepts that positioned the Polish lands and Poland as marked by a form of colonialism comparable to that practiced in Africa. If “postcolonialism” is understood as a theoretical framework for analyzing the legacies of empires from peripheral perspectives, in the tradition of Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, then postcolonial

11 Piotr Puchalski, *Poland in a Colonial World Order: Adjustments and Aspirations, 1918–1939* (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 262. For Wallerstein on Eastern Europe as economic semiperiphery, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World, Vol II. Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World Economy, 1600–1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

discourse and postcoloniality can indeed be detected in Polish contexts.¹² While the postcolonial theory emerged only toward the end of the twentieth century,¹³ and debates about its relevance to Poland persist to this day, mostly among literary scholars,¹⁴ many Polish political and cultural leaders have, explicitly or implicitly, invoked a postcolonial status by drawing parallels between Eastern Europe and Africa. It is therefore important to address these claims critically and historically, as policy prescriptions and rhetorical stratagems intended, most generally speaking, to align the Polish nation with the “downtrodden” and to derive advantages from this association. While Poland may not have been a postcolonial state or nation in the strictest sense, it was historically represented as such, especially during and after World War II.

The postcolonial discourse that situated Poland among the downtrodden fulfilled state-building functions, especially in the realm of international relations. In the nineteenth century, many liberal leaders in the Polish lands employed colonial terminology to draw international attention to Poland’s suffering under Germans or Russians, to expand the nation’s membership by the inclusion of lower social strata, and to establish cooperation with Africans within broader imperial structures. For instance, Marta Cieslak has demonstrated how Warsaw liberals supported British imperialism, associating it with “progress” despite liberalism’s “aberrations,” such as the 1882 bombardment of Egypt.¹⁵ Jawad Daheur, on the other hand, has discussed the Polish indignation over alleged similarities between the German treatment of Polish and Cameroonian laborers at the turn of the century.¹⁶ Likewise, Ureña Valerio has demonstrated how Polish travellers

12 Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé* (Paris, 1957); Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Éditions Maspéro, 1961).

13 See Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

14 For example: Clare Cavanagh, “Postcolonial Poland,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (December 5, 2003): 82–92; Lucy Mayblin, Aneta Piekut, and Gill Valentine, “‘Other’ Posts in ‘Other’ Places: Poland through a Postcolonial Lens?,” *Sociology* 50, no. 1 (February 2016): 60–76.

15 Marta Cieslak, “Between State and Empire, Or How Western European Imperialism in Africa Redefined the Polish Nation,” *European History Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (July 2022): 440–460.

16 Jawad Daheur, “‘They Handle Negroes Just Like Us’: German Colonialism in Cameroon in the Eyes of Poles (1885–1914),” *European Review* 26, no. 3 (2018): 492–502.

such as Jan Czekanowski and Stefan Szolc-Rogoziński became entangled in European colonialism in Africa, establishing scientific and commercial networks, despite their own understanding of Poland as subjugated.¹⁷ In addition, among such Polish “compassionate colonizers,” to use Jerzy Stachowicz’s term,¹⁸ one could also count early-modern figures like Maurycy Beniowski and the Polish legionnaires in Haiti.¹⁹

By the interwar period (1918–1939), many Polish commentators viewed Africa and its inhabitants through the lens of colonialist tropes shaped during the nineteenth century, though Poland’s own struggle for independence continued to affect their perceptions. In *Poland in a Colonial World Order...*, I trace the positioning of the Polish interwar state in a shifting global landscape of empires, nation-states, dominions, colonies, and protectorates, arguing that Poland’s Piłsudskiite elites of the time interpreted politics and economics in colonial terms. Consequently, they pursued colonial projects outside Europe as a means of addressing various domestic and foreign issues, such as rural unemployment. These issues stemmed partly from Poland’s postimperial condition following the Great War, as the country had been reassembled from the fragments of dismantled empires, which resulted in countless endemic infrastructural and economic problems. I demonstrate that Polish colonial discourse and practices were continuously adapted in response to such local and global changes, especially during the Great Depression.²⁰ In the book, I, therefore, show an interdependence between local perceptions of backwardness in Poland, on the one hand, and international crises, on the other.

No cohesive Polish colonial ideology emerged during the interwar period. Instead, Polish attitudes toward European empires and African leaders were constantly readjusted. For instance, in the late 1920s and early

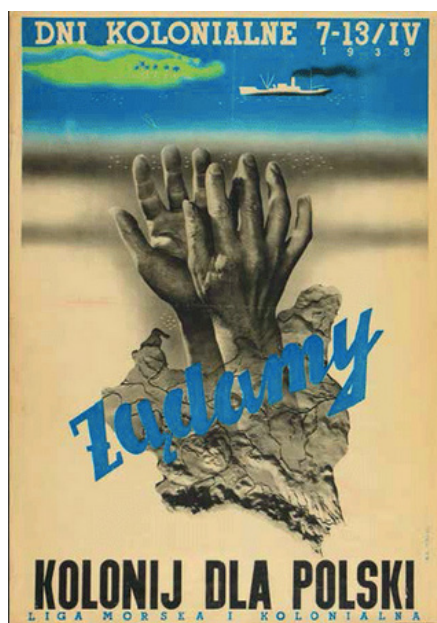
17 Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities*, 75–147.

18 See Jerzy Stachowicz, “Nowa Polska na pustyni i czuły kolonizator. Dwie literackie fantazje kolonialne jako plan (prawie) pacyfistyczny,” *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 66, no. 2 (January 16, 2023): 34–49.

19 See Piotr Puchalski, “Pionier nie tylko kolonialny. Działalność naukowo-popularyzacyjna mjr. Mieczysława Lepeckiego na przykładzie biografii Maurycy Beniowskiego,” *Analecta. Studia i materiały z Dziejów Nauki* 30, no. 1 (2021): 173–190; Jan Pachonński and Reuel K. Wilson, *Poland’s Caribbean Tragedy: A Study of Polish Legions in the Haitian War of Independence, 1802–1803* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

20 Puchalski, *Poland in a Colonial World Order*, 52–83.

1930s, the Polish settlement in Portuguese Angola was justified by the need for European colonial solidarity in Africa, a concept related to “Eurafrica” and Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi’s Pan-European ideas.²¹ However, after being rejected by the Portuguese in Angola, the Poles shifted their focus to Liberia, where they sought to position themselves as benign, anti-colonial protectors of the country in order to gain economic benefits.²² Colonial discourse also played a role in diplomacy, as Polish diplomats sought to draw Nazi Germany’s attention away from Eastern Europe amid British appeasement. In the late 1930s, Warsaw further promoted what one French sociologist called a “new imperialism,” arguing that colonies should belong to ascendant nations with fast-growing populations rather than to already industrialized ones. This position served as a way to signal to Nazi Germany that Poland was not a *Lebensraum* for the Germans (see Fig. 1).²³ Lastly, I argue that antisemitism alone was not responsible for the Polish-French Madagascar project; rather, Piłsudskiite elites considered Jews valuable as colonial intermediaries abroad, despite the discrimination they faced in Poland.²⁴



1. Colonial Days: We Demand Colonies for Poland, Poster, Maritime and Colonial League (1938)

*Kolonijinės dienos: Reikalaujame kolonijų
Lenkijai, 1938, plakatas, Jūrų ir kolonijinė lyga*

21 Ibid., 84–108.

22 Ibid., 109–147.

23 Ibid., 148–187.

24 Ibid., 188–226, 236–238, 241–246.

Description: This poster was commissioned by the Maritime and Colonial League of Poland for the occasion of "Colonial Days," a propaganda celebration of Polish colonial aspirations in April 1938. This period marked the first serious consideration of appeasement by Britain at the expense of Eastern Europe. Ironically, the poster reveals Poland's colonial insecurity and its fear of becoming a colonial space for the Germans. The giant hands reaching for the "colonies" are depicted in an imploring gesture, which demonstrates Poland's "demanding" from a position of weakness rather than strength. At the same time, this unsigned poster evokes contemporary works by artists such as Stefan Norblin, which combined modernist themes with folk and tropical imagery, the latter intended to elicit colonial fascination and longing. A presumably Polish ship is shown sailing toward a tropical island with palm trees, a future colony (Public domain).

I also suggest that despite the intensification of Polish colonial propaganda during the interwar period, the 1920s and 1930s were also a transitional time when Polish calls for colonies, based on a postimperial understanding of the Polish state, coexisted with anticolonial discourse. Reports by some Polish travellers were critical of both Western colonialism and the efforts to position Polish ambitions within it. For instance, Jerzy Giżycki, the husband of Krystyna Skarbek (Christine Granville) and a Polish consular agent in Africa before World War II, condemned French colonial decadence and moral decay, while also mocking famous Polish writer Ferdynand Ossendowski for his inflated ego in interactions with Africans.²⁵ Equally critical was Kazimierz Nowak, a cyclist who traversed Africa between 1931 and 1936, as reflected in his letters to Polish newspapers and to his wife and son. In the recently published volume of his correspondence, one finds statements highlighting his perception of the degrading effects of colonialism on whites and blacks alike. One of such statements reads: "This white rabble here! You have no idea what a collection of people this is—rotten to the bone, stupid, as dark as the native hordes."²⁶ Despite important

25 Jerzy Giżycki, *The Winding Trail*, n.d. (an unpublished manuscript accessible at the Polish Library in London, call no. 33/MW), 198–271. See also Giżycki, *Biali i Czarni. Fragmenty kolonialne* (Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff, 1934).

26 Kazimierz Nowak, *Kochana Maryś! Listy z Afryki. Francuska Afryka Równikowa, Francuska Afryka Zachodnia, Algieria*, ed. Dominik Szmajda, vol. IV (Poznań: Sorus, 2024), 136.

contributions from Natalia Grądzka and Nathaniel Wood,²⁷ the anticolonial (albeit often still racist) dimension of interwar Polish writing remains underexplored. An important catalyst for anticolonial discourse during this period was Italy's aggression against Ethiopia, which precipitated spontaneous acts of compassion for the attacked, such as in the city of Poznań, and sparked discussions about the parallels between the fate of Ethiopia and the partitions of Poland. For instance, the Polish socialist newspaper *Robotnik* attacked the right-wing National Democracy for supporting Italy in the conflict, likening Poland under the partitions to Ethiopia.²⁸

In brief, the scholarship on Polish interwar colonial entanglements to date has mostly concentrated on issues of racism—both against and by Eastern Europeans, the latter often framed as a sort of compensatory mechanism. As early as the Paris Peace Conference, important Western figures such as Jan Smuts used a racial slur to describe Poles. At the same time, Eastern Europeans applied racial categorizations to one another and their minorities in efforts to gain more territory from the Entente.²⁹ This was a sort of internal colonial practice that lasted for years, with “civilizing missions” carried out by Poles toward Ukrainians, Czechs toward Hutsuls, and so on.³⁰ At the same time, externally, Eastern Europeans also participated in the Western production and dissemination of colonial knowledge in Africa and Asia. Much like in the nineteenth century, these efforts often stemmed from a desire to become as Western as the Western Europeans, even though Poles or Hungarians sometimes adopted specific in-between positions, expressing ambivalence toward the colonial exploitation of Africans and Asians. As Katherine Lebow and Richard McMahon show, this

27 Natalia Grądzka, “Wokół Kazimierza Nowaka. Od podróży po koloniach do postkolonizowania Polski,” *Panoptikum*, no. 08 (2009): 221–234; Nathaniel D. Wood, “Vagabond Tourism and a Non-Colonial European Gaze: Kazimierz Nowak’s Bicycle Journey across Africa, 1931–1936,” *Journal of Tourism History* 14, no. 3 (2022): 291–314.

28 For example: “Jak endecy usprawiedliwiają rozbiory Polski,” *Robotnik*, no. 330, October 25, 1935, 3. The Polish attitudes toward the Second Italo-Ethiopian War are the topic of an upcoming PhD dissertation by Michał Maciejewski.

29 Andrzej Nowak, *Pierwsza zdrada Zachodu: 1920 – zapomniany appeasement* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2015), 14.

30 For example: Elżbieta Kwiecińska, “Poland’s ‘Civilizing Mission’ and Ukrainian Statehood at the Paris Peace Conference,” in *Making Ukraine: Negotiating, Contesting, and Drawing the Borders in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Olena Palko and Constantin Ardeleanu (Montreal/Ontario: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022), 86–108.

“in-betweenness” was also evident in the participation of Polish specialists in transnational intellectual networks. However, Eastern European anticolonial discourse remains largely unexplored.³¹

The outbreak of World War II and the transformation of Poland itself into a battleground for competing Nazi German and Soviet colonial agendas reformulated the Polish attitudes toward colonialism.³² Whereas in the 1920s and 1930s, Polish anticolonial discourse had occasionally surfaced, during the war, Poles began not only to draw direct comparisons between their fate and that of Africans but also to associate with the latter. In the 1940s, thousands of Poles, both soldiers and civilians, travelled to Africa, becoming supplicants to the colonial regimes. Between 1942 and 1943, for the first time in history, large numbers of Polish passport holders arrived in Africa as the Anders Army and deportees from eastern Poland left the USSR. The colonial self-perceptions of this Polish refugee population were explored tangentially in Jochen Lingelbach’s study of refugees in British East Africa, which primarily draws from English-language sources.³³ In my current research, however, I demonstrate that, while there was strong disapproval of British colonialism, some Polish refugees cautiously drew parallels between their own plight in Europe and the colonial situation in Africa or asserted a distinct status as “different Whites.”³⁴ While their allegiance to their British benefactors restrained their public expressions of anticolonial criticism and comparisons of suffering, these refugees occasionally exhibited moments of moral clarity by associating with Africans. As one

- 31 Katherine Lebow, “The Polish Peasant on the Sugar Plantation: Bronisław Malinowski, Feliks Gross and Józef Obrębski in the New World,” *Contemporary European History* 28, no. 2 (2019): 188–204; Richard McMahon, *The Races of Europe: Construction of National Identities in the Social Sciences, 1839–1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 32 See Rachel O’Sullivan’s work on the Warthegau and Danzig-West Prussia: Rachel O’Sullivan, *Nazi Germany, Annexed Poland, and Colonial Rule: Resettlement, Germanization and Population Policies in Comparative Perspective* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).
- 33 Jochen Lingelbach, *On the Edges of Whiteness: Polish Refugees in British Colonial Africa during and after the Second World War* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020), 11, 17.
- 34 For example: Zdzisława Wójcik, *Afryka lat czterdziestych we wspomnieniach instruktorki harcerskiej* (Warszawa, 1997), 19: “They [Blacks] instinctively understood the difference between Polish refugees and English colonists. It is not impossible that our differences from English and German officials and farmers had some influence on the mentality of the indigenous people of East Africa. Maybe some people realized that skin color is not the most important difference between people.”

former refugee recalled: “[Africans] were very badly treated by the English. The Englishman felt to be the master of the situation. We had compassion for them precisely because they were badly treated because we ourselves had gone through so much disgrace of humiliation, so we had sympathy for them for working for us.”³⁵

Another group of Poles stationed in British Africa during the war were the nearly three hundred military officers with emergency commissions in the Royal West African Frontier Force between 1941 and 1943. Enduring discrimination from their senior British counterparts while training the indigenous troops in a relatively prosperous part of the continent, these Polish officers began to think of their own (mostly peasant) nation in post-colonial terms. One officer, Jerzy Rostworowski, compared Africans to European peasants: “Many things were in common, in many cases, the superstitions and state of culture did not differ at all between the two peoples.”³⁶ Perhaps most astonishingly, another officer, Lucjan Kneblewski, concurred with the Nazi German Gauleiter Albert Forster’s racist remark from October 6, 1940, uttered in Kalisz: “In our eyes, the Polish peasant is hardly a peasant, and his barn resembles the barn of Kaffirs-Zulus.”³⁷ Despite such statements and their friendliness towards Africans, the Polish officers nonetheless presented their particular status as white pariahs as a propagandistic asset to the British.

35 Hubert Chudzio, Agnieszka Chłosta-Sikorska, and Marek Buś, eds., *Pokolenia odchodzą: relacje źródłowe polskich sybiraków z Wielkiej Brytanii*. Leeds (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, 2015), 258.

36 Jerzy Rostworowski, *Słoneczny rytm* (J. Rolls Book Co., 1946), 110.

37 Lucjan M. Kneblewski, *Nie taki murzyn czarny* (Edinburgh: Składnica Księgarska, 1946), 221.



2. The Polish military officers, members of a nation oppressed in Nazi-dominated Europe, don the colonial uniforms of the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF)

Lenkijos karininkai, pavergtos tautos nariai nacių valdomoje Europoje, vilkintys Karališkųjų Vakarų Afrikos pasienio pajėgų (RWAFF) kolonijines uniformas

Description (by the Imperial War Museum): Lieutenant Wiesław Bulkowski (or Bułkowski), Mortar Platoon of the 1st Battalion, the Gambia Regiment (6th West African Infantry Brigade, 81st West African Division), instructing a native soldier on the use of a mortar during the Third Arakan Campaign, January 1945. He was a Polish cavalry officer seconded to the RWAFF.

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This photograph captures the harmonious cooperation between a European officer and his African subordinate, a narrative undoubtedly promoted by British wartime propaganda. However, the African soldier is shirtless, which underlines his inferiority not only in the military but also in social and racial hierarchy. As such, the photograph serves as a compelling illustration of the transitional phase between prewar colonialism and postwar decolonization in the British colonies.

I argue that this racial positioning of the Polish refugees and military officers reflects a postcolonial understanding of their nation's fate. In this sense, World War II marked a watershed moment for Polish colonial entanglements since, in a unique historical twist, thousands of Poles, having come from lands subjected to Nazi and Soviet genocide, found themselves

in colonial Africa, where they were compelled to reflect on their commonalities with Africans. Although, as mentioned earlier, Polish commentators had drawn similar analogies, especially between German colonialism in Cameroon and the Prussian policies in the Polish borderlands, those earlier comparisons were shaped by racial indignation rather than by a broader compassion that transcended race. This difference probably stemmed from the fact that, prior to 1939, few Poles had directly interacted with Africans, and the collective scale of Polish suffering had not become significant enough. More importantly, however, I suggest that tracing the emergence of “true” Polish postcolonial discourse to World War II invites a reassessment of Poland’s role in the Global South during the communist period—not merely as an ideological imperative imposed by Moscow.

Poland participated in “global socialism,” or the ideologically and geopolitically driven anticolonial undertakings of the Eastern Bloc in the Global South, including in Africa.³⁸ During the communist era (1944–1989), the Polish state supported anticolonial guerrillas (for instance, in Angola), built strategic infrastructure in many African countries, maintained friendly relations with them, and hosted a number of African students in Polish institutions of higher education.³⁹ However, as I demonstrate in a separate article, the Polish elites’ engagement with decolonial Africa was also driven by a continued prewar interest in fostering direct trade and establishing cultural relations with Africans.⁴⁰ Warsaw was, in fact, hesitant to fully commit to the costly economic projects dictated by Moscow and instead offered its assistance in propaganda by promoting Poland’s own postcolonial status, especially during the Congo crisis.⁴¹ Notwithstanding Adam Kola’s excellent book, the postcolonial discourse that (re)emerged

38 See James Mark and Paul Betts, eds., *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

39 See Przemysław Gasztold, “Lost Illusions: The Limits of Communist Poland’s Involvement in Cold War Africa,” in *Warsaw Pact Intervention in the Third World: Aid and Influence in the Cold War*, by Natalia Telepneva and Philip E. Muehlenbeck (London/New York: I.B.Tauris, 2018), 197–220.

40 Piotr Puchalski, “Directed by Moscow? Communist Poland’s Policies in Decolonial Africa, 1918/1945–1964,” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 41, no. 1 (2023): 93–112.

41 See Barbara Kratiuk, “Polskie zaangażowanie w Afryce. Ambasador Lewandowski w ONZ a sprawa Konga,” *Stosunki Międzynarodowe - International Relations* 52, no. 2 (2016): 367–382; Maria Pasztor, “Polsko-belgijska ‘wojna’ o Kongo (1960–1963),” *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały*, no. 17 (2019): 135–160.

during the communist period has thus far been examined primarily in the context of fiction literature and journalism, without the application of a historical toolkit.⁴² By contrast, the less discernible aspects of Polish postcolonialism also warrant study, particularly its role as a method for countering (West) German influence on the global stage.

Naturally, in recent years, discussions have unfolded about the complexities of communist internationalism and its relationship to anticolonial struggles, particularly in respect to the Portuguese Empire.⁴³ Scholarship has highlighted the tensions between the antiracist ideology driving the global expansion of the USSR and its satellite states into the Third World, on the one hand, and the Orientalist paternalism present in their actions toward postcolonial states, on the other.⁴⁴ However, the Polish perspective in these discussions remains limited, particularly with regard to the Polish emigrant communities as participants in the global decolonial discourse. For instance, it is not clear to what degree the (post)colonial attitudes of the Polish communities in former British possessions differed from the discourse emerging in communist Poland. To my knowledge, only Arkadiusz Żukowski has written a general history of Poles in southeastern Africa, but his work only briefly addresses the Polish presence in Rhodesia, among other territories.⁴⁵ South Africa, in particular, not only hosted Polish refugees, such as the “Oudtshoorn children,” but also attracted new economic migrants and maintained significant cultural ties to Poland.⁴⁶ Most Polish settlers in this region of Africa held anticommunist beliefs, with the most

42 Adam F. Kola, *Socjalistyczny postkolonializm: rekonsolidacja pamięci* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2018).

43 See Theodora Dragostinova, *The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021); Natalia Telepneva, *Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

44 See James Mark and Quinn Slobodian, “Eastern Europe in the Global History of Decolonization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, by James Mark and Quinn Slobodian, ed. Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson (Oxford University Press, 2018), 350–372.

45 Arkadiusz Żukowski, *W kraju złota i diamentów: Polacy w Afryce Południowej XVI–XX w.* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe WN, 1994).

46 See Ian M. Macqueen, “Shaka Zulu in the Polish People’s Republic (PRL): Exploring South African-Polish Links in the Late Cold War,” *Cold War History* 22, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 265–286.

extreme example being Janusz Waluś. Yet, some individuals were able to transcend their national interests to oppose apartheid, as shown by Kim Christiaens and Idesbald Goddeeris.⁴⁷ In brief, postcolonialism opens a broad range of new topics and approaches in Polish history, provided the historical specificity of each episode under analysis is respected.

Conclusion

Despite numerous studies published on the topic, there is still a need to deepen our understanding of how aspects of the colonial world order and discourse permeated the semiperiphery of Eastern Europe. As both an object and a subject of colonial practices, the region has occupied an intermediary position in the historiography of colonialism. Its nations and peoples participated in colonial processes in the non-European world, which were often later translated and transposed to the marginal spaces of Eastern Europe. In fact, analyzing the interdependence between colonialism outside of Europe and its internal manifestations on the continent has been crucial for the development of Eastern European historiography. For instance, it is impossible to fully understand certain interwar Polish foreign and domestic policies without considering their colonial connections and inspirations.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, while the colonial framework has been instrumental in reframing the history of Eastern Europe, its more recent past, starting with the period of World War II, should also be considered in postcolonial terms. While the colonial perspective can elucidate racism in Eastern Europe as part of broader global phenomena, a postcolonial approach allows for a reassessment of the transient Polish-African solidarities as conditioned by historically specific factors, not only abstract socialist ideas imposed by Moscow. Consider, for instance, how Polish military officers and refugees hosted by the British in West and East Africa began to associate with

47 Kim Christiaens and Idesbald Goddeeris, "Solidarity or Anti-Apartheid? The Polish Opposition and South Africa, 1976–1989," in *A Global History of Anti-Apartheid: "Forward to Freedom" in South Africa*, ed. Anna Konieczna and Rob Skinner, St Antony's Series (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 291–315.

48 For example: Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization's Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Jerzy Łazor, "'A Colony of Alien Capital': French Investments, Polish Identity, and a Story of Murder in 1930s Warsaw," *Slavic Review* 81, no. 1 (2022): 122–41.

Africans and to reinterpret the history of Poland in postcolonial terms. If we define postcoloniality as a critique of the empire coming from the periphery, the ambivalence of the Polish actors toward colonial violence and order in the African continent suggests both a critical stance on Western empires and an awareness of the risks such critique posed to their own wellbeing and to Poland. This may help to explain why Polish voices have been rarely interpreted in the postcolonial framework. Therefore, while this may sound truistic, instead of relying on an analytical lens that is predominantly racial, we should examine Eastern European contacts with the Global South as historically contingent upon the specific time period, physical context, and local hierarchies of power. This approach enables us to restore agency to Eastern European actors, properly reincorporate the racial aspect, and de-center the Western interpretations of East-South dynamics.

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Santrauka

Apie postkolonializmą Lenkijos istorijoje: rasinis pozicionavimas ir istorinis specifiškumas

Piotr Puchalski

Reikšminiai žodžiai: istorija, Lenkija, postkolonializmas, rasė, Afrika.

Straipsnyje aptariami pastarojo meto Rytų Europos studijų (de)kolonijinio posūkio trūkumai ir siūloma postkolonijinė perspektyva, padedanti suprasti besikeičiančią Lenkijos padėtį pasaulyje. Pirmiausia, remiantis empiriniais duomenimis ir antriniais šaltiniais, straipsnyje apžvelgiamas istorinis Lenkijos bei lenkiškų žemių rasinis pozicionavimas. Autoriaus teigimu, maždaug Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais pačių lenkų rasinės pozicijos suvokimas pasikeitė iš kolonijinio į postkolonijinį. Toliau straipsnyje parodoma, kad Lenkijos, kaip postkolonijinės valstybės, ir tautos savivoka Šaltojo karo metu formavo įvairius požiūrius į Afriką, kurie neturėtų būti nagrinėjami išskirtinai per Maskvos primestų socialistinių idėjų prizmę. Galiausiai teigiama, kad, nepamirštant kritiškumo Rytų ir Pietų solidarumo naratyvų atžvilgiu, reikėtų giliau patyrinėti Rytų Europos kontaktus su Globaliais Pietumis, kaip istoriškai sąlygotus epochos, fizinės aplinkos ir vietos valdžios hierarchijų.