

Abstract for the general public

Our project inspects the role of postcolonial concepts in the formation of the Polish state and its relations with Africa in the twentieth century. In our definition, Polish “postcolonial concepts” each reflected a belief that countries in both Eastern Europe and Africa suffered from political, economic, and cultural domination of empires. In other words, we trace the emergence and regular use of ideas that positioned the Polish lands and Poland as marked by a sort of colonialism that was similar to the one practiced in Africa.

The public has recently become more interested in Poland’s interactions with Africa and Africans. This is partly due to the increased role of the Polish state as an importer of energy from the continent, a growing technological power, and a middleman for Ukraine’s grain exports in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion. Historians and anthropologists, however, are only in the process of elucidating Poland’s attitudes toward colonialism as well as, in the more recent period, its bilateral relations with independent states in Africa. It is an important academic effort, as setting Poland’s record regarding Africa straight will partly determine whether Warsaw can counter Moscow’s nefarious influence across the continent that suffers from famines artificially induced by Russian trade blockades and from military coups staged by the Wagner group. At the same time, to study “postcolonial concepts” is not only to suggest Poland’s alleged historic understanding for the plight of Africa, but it is a project that elucidates the functions of these ideas in Poland, as Polish leaders attempted to draw benefits from the identification of the Polish nation with the “downtrodden.”

The depiction of the troubled Polish statehood (or lack thereof) as stemming from colonialism spanned the entire twentieth century. Different Polish political leaders pointed out that their homeland was dominated by the partitioning powers before World War I, Western capitalists during the interwar period, Nazi Germans during World War II, and Moscow-supported communists afterward. At the same time, many of them, including the communists accused of being Russian pawns, compared the fate of Eastern Europe to that of Africa and claimed to possess special solutions for the suffering of Africans. Thinkers of different political persuasions used postcolonial discourse to accomplish state-building aims, such as the acquisition of financial aid from more developed nations or the international recognition of the Oder-Neisse border. In other words, our hypothesis is the following: the role of postcolonial ideas was to consolidate the Polish nation-in-the-making upon moral grounds and to facilitate foreign policies, in Africa and beyond. We suggest that while a united anti-imperial front with Africans was not possible due to the question of race and political circumstance, postcolonial concepts still determined the shape of the Polish state and Polish-African relations.

Our research plan centers around a wide-ranging analysis of primary sources. In the first place, we are interested in the emergence of interest in Africa and European empires among Polish political pundits from the turn of the century, which can be diagnosed by a close reading of press titles from all three partitions of Poland. We also tackle political treatises, brochures, and popular literature from the beginning of the century to the outbreak of World War II, in addition to diaries, letters, and memoranda. Africa only grew in importance during the global conflict, as Polish soldiers and refugees flocked to the continent in unprecedented numbers. It is therefore necessary to study the primary sources left behind by these settlers and the Polish government-in-exile in London. Likewise, the communist Polish state also entertained postcolonial ideas in connection with its ambitious policies in Africa. In this regard, an analysis of not only political files but also propaganda, academic, and literary publications from the communist period is required. Finally, the postcolonial discourse uttered by members of the Polish communities in southern and eastern Africa will be subject to scrutiny. In this way, our approach is holistic, with our project tracing the implementation of Polish postcolonial concepts in state-building and international relations throughout the twentieth century.