

# **Refugee Camps as Forgotten Portals of Globalization: Polish World War II Refugees in British Colonial East Africa**

**Jochen Lingelbach**

## **ABSTRACTS**

From 1942–1950, nearly 20,000 Polish refugees lived in over 20 camps in five British colonial territories. This article uses the concept of portals of globalization to analyze these camps in a frame that goes beyond national historiography. The interaction that took place between the Polish refugees and actors of the hosting colonial societies is regarded as a flow that local authorities tried to regulate. Colonial officials understood the poor, white refugees as a potential threat to the stability of the racially defined colonial hierarchy. The portals of globalization concept connects this local history with historical developments of global reach, which manifested in the refugee camps. This episode was, however, forgotten – i.e. did not become part of a collective memory – as it did not fit into any national narrative.

Von 1942–1950 lebten knapp 20.000 polnische Flüchtlinge in über zwanzig Lagern in fünf britischen Kolonien. Dieser Aufsatz nutzt das Konzept der „Portale der Globalisierung“, um diese Lager in einem Rahmen zu betrachten, der über nationale Geschichtsschreibung hinaus geht. Die Interaktionen, die zwischen den polnischen Flüchtlingen und Akteuren der gastgebenden kolonialen Gesellschaften stattfanden, werden dabei als *flow* betrachtet, den die lokalen Autoritäten zu regulieren versuchten. Kolonialbeamte sahen die armen weißen Flüchtlinge als eine potentielle Gefahr für die Stabilität der rassistisch definierten kolonialen Hierarchie. Das Konzept der „Portale der Globalisierung“ verbindet diese lokale Geschichte mit historischen Entwicklungen von globaler Reichweite, die sich in den Flüchtlingslagern manifestierten. Diese Episode wurde jedoch vergessen – d. h. kein Teil des kollektiven Gedächtnisses –, da sie in kein nationales Narrativ passte.

## 1. Introduction

This article investigates the history of around 20,000 Polish refugees, who lived from roughly 1942–1950 in the British colonies in East and Central Africa; most of them were deported from the eastern part of Poland to Soviet labour camps in 1939. In 1941, all Poles were released from the Soviet camps to form the Polish army, in order to fight alongside the Allies against the Germans. Those who were not regarded as capable of military service were eventually sent via Iran to the British colonies. They consisted largely of women and children, and were accommodated in 22 camps varying in size from 300 up to 5,000 inhabitants. The camps were established and governed by the British colonial administration and internally organized by a subordinate Polish administration. Following the war, by 1950, most of the Poles left the colonies for the United Kingdom, Poland, Canada, or Australia; only about 1,000 were allowed to settle locally.

The British administrators in the colonies accepted the Polish refugees rather reluctantly. Through their connection with the Polish armed forces and because military strategists wanted them away from the battlefields, they were brought to the colonies in East and Central Africa. The colonial authorities controlled them as much as possible, but the Polish refugees still interacted with locals around the camps. As the Poles were regarded as Allies and Europeans, they could not just be interned and completely isolated. Their interaction with locals and British colonists was regulated by local authorities, but it could not be stopped completely. The dialectic of flows and controls that emerged in the camps and their surroundings can be described in terms of portals of globalization. However, this story was largely forgotten for two reasons: First, refugee camps are generally set up as temporary structures that should dissolve when conflicts fade. Secondly, this particular story did not fit well with the overarching national narratives of the time. Emerging research approaches in global history that are not dominated by a national frame, such as portals of globalization, allow us to analyse transnational flows, and attempts to control them in places like these Polish refugee camps in British colonial Africa.

## 2. Polish Refugee Camps as Portals of Globalization

Common case studies on portals of globalization are urban centres, port cities, or imperial metropolises. For colonial British East Africa, these would include Nairobi, Mombasa, and Dar es Salaam. Instead, in this article, I describe refugee camps located in places like Tengeru, Koja, Masindi, Rongai, and Bwana Mkubwa as portals of globalization. These camps were set in the rural periphery of the British Empire, in places where no one would expect “global connectivity.”<sup>1</sup> Why does it nevertheless make sense to describe them as portals of globalization?

1 M. Middell and K. Naumann, *Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization*, in: *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010), 1, p. 162.

I understand portals of globalization as a concept that can frame our way of looking at transnational phenomena. The history of the Polish refugees in Africa can be told through different lenses. Others such as Krolikowski,<sup>2</sup> Piotrowski,<sup>3</sup> and Wróbel<sup>4</sup> have viewed them as part of Polish national history. This perspective frames the period in Africa as just one aspect of the suffering of the Poles, from oppression and deportation to forced displacement by Germany and the Soviet Union (USSR). From a British colonial perspective, the whole story is about an altruistic humanitarian action and the contribution of the colonies to the “commonwealth war effort.”<sup>5</sup> All these perspectives overlook the various interactions between the Polish refugees and the actors within the societies around them.

Looking at the Polish refugee camps and their surroundings as portals of globalization opens the history of Polish refugees to the entanglements and interactions that took place between these refugees and other actors in the host colonial societies. Such a transnational history approach breaks up the assumed isolation of the group of refugees from the surrounding society, and investigates the interplay between social categories like nationality and race.

In this perspective, portals of globalization are places where actors with different identitarian spatial references interact. In other words, the actors in these portals refer in their identity construction to different spatial entities and, in turn, are categorized by the colonial state in reference to different spatial entities.<sup>6</sup> These categorizations and self-identifications are not necessarily stable; they can vary according to the situation.

The different spatial referents of the three main groups of actors in this study are multiple and flexible.<sup>7</sup> The British officials refer to a British nation that is always closely linked to its empire. Stuart Hall describes this relation and points to the peculiarity that English identity is highly exclusive and places the colonized “other”, as well as everybody else, in contrast to it.<sup>8</sup> Identity construction thus not only refers to one’s “own” spatial entities but refers relationally to other spaces. The British nation can only be understood in the context of its empire. On the other hand, most of the Polish refugees referred in their identity construction to a Polish nation that did not exist as a nation state at that time. Some Polish refugees became naturalized British citizens, others became Australians. A small group of Polish refugees were not seen as Polish by others, for example when they

2 L. Krolikowski, *Stolen Childhood: A Saga of Polish War Children*, San Jose 2001.

3 T. Piotrowski, *The Polish Deportees of World War II: Recollections of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal Throughout the World*, Jefferson 2004.

4 J. Wróbel, *Uchodźcy polscy ze Związku Sowieckiego 1942–1950*, Łódź 2003.

5 A.L. Pennington, *Refugees in Tanganyika during the Second World War*, *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 32 (1952), p. 52.

6 Cooper and Brubaker point to the necessity of the analytical distinction between different aspects that are subsumed under the term “identity.” See F. Cooper and R. Brubaker, *Identity*, in: F. Cooper, ed., *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkeley, CA 2005, pp. 59–90.

7 This research is based on my dissertation: J. Lingelbach (2017) “Polish Refugees in British Colonial East and Central Africa during and after World War Two,” dissertation, University of Leipzig.

8 S. Hall, *The Local and the Global. Globalization and Ethnicity*, in: A.D. King (ed.) *Culture, Globalization, and the World-system: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, Minneapolis 1991, p. 21.

were pro-Soviet and were regarded as Russians. The refugees were in some situations regarded as Europeans (in contrast to Africans) and in other instances as Polish (in contrast to British). Finally, there are the different African actors, who may refer to other regional or local areas, or a not yet existing nation state, as anticolonial nationalism was only starting to gain momentum in this period. Within the colonial system of racial hierarchy, one could also refer to the categorization as Black/African or White/European. It is not a situation where identities were clear-cut and referenced a given set of nation states. This shows the complexity of the situation in which the Polish refugees had been placed; their arrival made this place even more complex in terms of the identitarian referents of the involved actors.

People are categorized according to spatial referents, and this categorization affects their abilities to move freely. While their categorization as Polish gave them the opportunity to be released from Soviet labour camps and cared for by the Polish exile government in London and the British colonial authorities, it also restricted their movement; they could not choose which camp they wanted to go to, and their movement within the colonies was heavily restricted. Conversely, a British citizen could quite easily move within the empire, while an African “native” was not allowed to enter a Polish refugee camp unless employed there. The colonial situation is thus signified by a whole range of different statuses, which are attached to people, and differs from a nation state where every citizen enjoys, at least theoretically, the same status and set of rights.

The issues faced in Polish refugee camps in Africa help us to problematize our understanding of portals of globalization as places where the “foreign enters our country.”<sup>9</sup> In a colonial context, this understanding is more than problematic because there is no “own country” (at least no nation state) and it is not clear what then should be the “foreign.” Arjun Appadurai points to the problematic of the “native” in anthropology as the one who is confined to the place, while his counterpart is the mobile explorer/researcher.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the hierarchical aspect that is connected to notions of mobility and immobility, the assumption that some people are confined to one place also hinders an inquiry into the mobility of the “natives.”

The case of the Polish refugee camp Masindi/Nyabyeya in Uganda highlights this problematic.<sup>11</sup> Nyabyeya was and is a diverse community where, according to one resident, people from “26 tribes” live.<sup>12</sup> The community grew before the Polish refugee camp was established because of an Indian-owned sawmill that attracted workers from many places. More African workers moved there to work in the Polish camp, and the place became even more multicultural. Until today, Kiswahili is the lingua franca in Nyabyeya because there is no dominating linguistic group. The question remains what exactly the

9 M. Geyer, *Portals of Globalization*, in: W. Eberhard/C.Lübke (eds.) *The Plurality of Europe: Identities and Spaces*, Leipzig 2010, p. 512.

10 A. Appadurai, *Putting Hierarchy in its Place*, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1988), 1, p. 37.

11 In British records, the camp is usually referred to as “Masindi,” the name of a nearby town, although it is located in the village of Nyabyeya.

12 Interview with Ochau Paito Ceasar, Nyabyeya, Uganda, 12 April 2013.

“foreign” is and what the “own country” means in such a context, where there is an overlap of different cultural and political units but no nation state. Nyabyeya at that time was part of the Kingdom of Bunyoro, the Protectorate of Uganda, and the British Empire. Its inhabitants shared even more diverse affiliations, and, consequently, there are many borders that could separate the “foreign” and the “own country”.<sup>13</sup>

I understand portals of globalization thus not as a category that can be measured with clear-cut criteria, which qualify one place and not the other as a “portal”, but rather as a perspective to look at a place and the dynamics evolving therein. Portals of globalization are described as “those places where flows and regulation come together.”<sup>14</sup> This points to an understanding of globalization as a dialectical process of de- and reterritorialization.<sup>15</sup> The increasing mobility of capital, goods and, in this case, human beings is accompanied by attempts to control these flows and fix them in space. Along with the increasing entanglements come attempts to control and regulate them.<sup>16</sup> This understanding helps to frame the research on what is happening on the ground, in the portal.

In the case of Polish refugee camps, I understand the influx of migrants coming into the colonial situation and especially their interaction with the surrounding actors as the flow that is challenging the established colonial order of society. The presence of these whites who were, on arrival, destitute refugees was a threat to the image of white superiority in colonial societies, and needed to be controlled by colonial authorities. An uncontrolled intermixing of Poles and Africans was a major challenge to the colonial dichotomy of white and black. Poor whites were seen as especially problematic in undermining the image of the white prestige in many colonial contexts.<sup>17</sup> To counter this threat, Polish refugees were placed in camps, restricted in their movement, and segregated from the colonized in their everyday lives. In the following section, I will exemplify this dialectic of flows and controls.

### 3. Flows and Controls in the Polish Refugee Camps

The establishment of the “segregation camp” Katambora in Northern Rhodesia is one of the more drastic examples of attempts to control Polish refugees. In 1944, the Northern Rhodesian Governor Waddington wrote a proposal in a confidential telegram to the

13 From a Eurocentric viewpoint, it is often implicitly assumed that the “global” starts when whites are interacting with non-whites, while the diversity of, in this case, Africans is overlooked; here the issue of race obviously becomes important.

14 M. Middell and K. Naumann, *Global History and the Spatial Turn* (fn. 1), p. 162.

15 N. Brenner, *Beyond State-centrism? Space, Territoriality, and Geographical Scale in Globalization Studies*, in: *Theory and Society* 28 (1999), pp. 1, 43.

16 M. Middell and K. Naumann, *Global History and the Spatial Turn* (fn. 1), p. 165.

17 See A.L. Stoler, *Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989), 1, pp. 149–153; and H. Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and “White Subalternity” in Colonial India*, New Delhi 2009, p. 183.

Colonial Office in London.<sup>18</sup> He described a series of incidents in the refugee camp Bwana Mkubwa that made it necessary to isolate some of the “unruly elements” among the Poles. He reports an “affray” in the camp in which several persons were stabbed. The heaviest criminals were arrested and four of the involved were sent to Kenya. However, according to Waddington, the camp faced more serious problems:

*One of the chief problems at the moment is the control of a number of prostitutes who were included among the evacuees. The suspicion that they were plying their trade among Africans has recently been confirmed. This is a very serious matter and might have most unpleasant repercussions.*<sup>19</sup>

The emphasis and dramatization of sexual contact with Africans shows that it was not only a problem of sexual morality, but a threat to the race-based colonial order of society. Waddington’s solution to the problem was the establishment of a segregation camp for around 50 “bad characters of both sexes.”<sup>20</sup> He suggested a site for the camp that was far enough from the other camps, as well as from Livingstone town. In order to control the inmates, there was also a unit of African police posted to Katambora. According to the Polish refugees’ Northern Rhodesian *Kronika*, the whole endeavour was not very successful, as the inmates used every possibility to cause trouble. In the end, it never became fully operational and the inmates went back to the normal camps.<sup>21</sup> As this segregation camp was an attempt for a quite direct form of spatialized control, it shows quite bluntly the dialectical process of flow and control.

In the “normal” refugee camps, the situation was more nuanced. The refugees were not as completely isolated from the public as in the segregation camp. As one official put it, the Poles were regarded as Allies in the war and not as internees,<sup>22</sup> but the life of the Polish refugees was still highly regulated and controlled: they were not allowed to live in places other than the designated camps, which were mostly located in remote areas of the colonies. Permission to work outside the camp was only granted in individual cases, and they needed permission from the British authorities, if they wanted to travel within the colony.

The hierarchical administrative structure of the camps was a reflection of the wider colonial order, with a British commandant, subordinate Polish leaders, and African workers. Before the arrival of the refugees, there was a plan to create self-governed refugee camps with Polish administrative staff only. British “reception officers” would help to settle the refugees but then cease their function. This plan was abandoned “due to a dearth of

18 Acting Governor Lusaka to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 28 February 1944, UK National Archives: Public Records Office (PRO) CO 795/132/4, p. 63.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 “Kronika – Afryka Rodezja Północna – Polskie osiedla uchodźcze”, no page, no date, Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, London, Kol 147/11.

22 F.A. Montague (Ag. Chief Secretary to the Government) to The Editor, East African Standard, 31 December 1943, Tanzania National Archives (TNA) W3/31798, p. 3.

English-speaking Polish Officers and for other reasons,” as one official from the central refugee administration in Dar es Salaam put it.<sup>23</sup> He did not explain the “other reasons,” but it all points to the question of control and regulation of the everyday life of the refugees. Eventually British camp commandants were living permanently in the camps, and were responsible to the director of refugees in the respective colonial capital. A Polish administrative structure evolved under the British camp commandant, from a Polish camp leader down to group leaders of smaller residential units.

How this administrative structure played out can be shown through the example of a conflict over the uncontrolled purchase of foodstuffs by Polish refugees in Tanganyika. Around the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944, Europeans living near the biggest Polish camp in Tengeru complained about the rising prices that were caused by the uncontrolled purchase of goods by Polish refugees. In reaction to these complaints, the director of refugees sent a letter to the British camp commandant in May 1944 to outlaw the purchase of certain foodstuffs.<sup>24</sup> Any refugee found with illegally-obtained products would be denied permission to leave the camp for six months. If the order was not followed, the director even threatened to refuse to authorize travel to the next town for all refugees. He advised the camp commandant to communicate this order through the Polish leaders,<sup>25</sup> and the commandant issued the order as described.<sup>26</sup> This example shows that the superior power lay with the central administration in the Tanganyikan government, and the camp commandant was executing the orders through the Polish leaders. As the camp commandant had the power to grant or refuse permission to leave the camp, the regulation of movement was an important means of control.

The control of movement of African workers into the camps was enforced much more strictly. After an initial phase where African workers could freely move into the camp, the governor of Tanganyika decided that this should be regulated. The camp commandants suggested the number of workers they needed to the respective district commissioners, and issued passes for them.<sup>27</sup> The workers had to leave the camp in the afternoon, and only the guards were allowed inside the camps at night.<sup>28</sup> The British authorities restricted the movement of Africans into the camp on the grounds that it was for the safety of the Polish refugees, and these restrictions were easier to justify, as the Africans were not regarded as Allies like the refugees.

Although the British authorities had legal means to control the movement of refugees, there was a considerable amount of uncontrolled interaction with people living near the camps. The power to control the refugees was constrained from two sides: on the one

23 Pennington (for Director for Aliens and Internees) to Camp Commandants Tengeru, Kondo, Ifunda, 11 June 1943, TNA 69 782/IV.

24 Pennington (Director of Refugees) to Camp Commandant Tengeru, 2 May 1944, TNA 5/28/1.

25 Ibid.

26 Camp Commandant: Polish Settlement Tengeru – Special Camp Order No. 28, 15 May 1944, TNA 5/28/1.

27 Pennington (Director of Refugees) to Camp Commandants Tengeru, Kondo, Ifunda, Kidugala, Kigoma, Morogoro, 11 September 1943, TNA 69/782/IV.

28 Interview with Edward Sinabulya, former African worker in the camp Kojja, Uganda, 15 April 2013.

hand, the refugees were part of the Allies, and could thus not just be interned, and on the other hand, the colonial state did not have the capacity to control everything. The Ugandan camp of Koja was, due to its location on a peninsula in the region of Lake Victoria, the most easily controlled camp. It was surrounded by water and steep hills, and the only entrance was guarded by Africans, who were brought there from the distant, northern part of Acholi. Nevertheless, both interviewees who worked in the camp as youths told me about intimate meetings between Polish women and African men in the hills at night.<sup>29</sup> In the rural periphery, the colonial state apparatus was not strong enough to enforce its rules. This can be seen in the instance when the director of refugees refused a request to post a European “resident married Police officer” to the Tengeru camp due to a shortage of staff.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from this, there were numerous individual interactions. Exchanges took place in the marketplaces and nearby shops, and especially the younger refugees in Tanganyika and Uganda learned Kiswahili in conversation with their African neighbours.<sup>31</sup> The last few Poles who stayed in the Tengeru camp were also reported to be engaged in the illegal distilling and selling of alcohol to Africans.<sup>32</sup> There were also refugees with communist leanings who more or less directly opposed the British Empire, and they were regarded as a serious threat when they worked with the colonized.<sup>33</sup> These examples show that there was a considerable amount of interaction that the colonial authorities did not and could not fully control.

When a new group of people enters a colonial situation, they need to be dealt with and “put in their place.” As Mlambo shows in the case of white immigration to Southern Rhodesia, it was not only whiteness that was important for the colonial officials but also “Britishness.”<sup>34</sup> For the British in the colony, it was of utmost importance to maintain the community’s “European standards” and, therefore, the distinction between white and black.<sup>35</sup> Afrikaners, Jews, and Europeans from Eastern and Southern Europe were seen as a threat to these standards and British predominance in the colony. They were all discriminated against, and only in the face of the threat of African domination were these

29 Interviews with Edward Sinabulya (fn. 28) and Mukeera Kasule, former African worker in the camp Koja, Uganda, 16 April 2013.

30 T.M. Skinner (for Director of Refugees) to Camp Commandant Tengeru, 8 October 1943, TNA 69/782/2/6.

31 Memories of Tadek Gruszka, Polish refugee in Ifunda, Tanganyika, in: M. Allbrook and H. Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story: Polish Refugees Recount Their Experiences of Exile, Dispersal, and Resettlement*, 1995, 15, [accessed 25 November 2011], <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/refugee/langfitt>; Autobiography of Barbara Porajska, Polish refugee in Masindi, Uganda: B. Porajska, *From the Steppes to the Savannah*, London 1990, 122; and Campbell to D.S. Troup (Deputy PC Arusha, Northern Province), 31 October 1951, TNA 69/782.

32 Campbell (Director of Refugees) to Provincial Commissioner Central Province, Dodoma, 20 June 1952, TNA 69/782; and Josef Kobak (individual summary), 9 November 1950, PRO CO 822/146/1.

33 Helena Luczyc (individual summary), 9 November 1950, PRO CO 822/146/1; and Officer i/c Police, Usa River to Director of Refugees, 3 November 1952, TNA 69/782.

34 A. Mlambo, “Some Are More White Than Others”: Racial Chauvinism as a Factor of Rhodesian Immigration Policy, 1890–1963, in: *Zambezia* 27 (2000), 2, pp. 139–160.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 141.



whites seen as part of the same group.<sup>36</sup> Different national categorizations were thus an important feature in the structuring of society.

Yet, at the same time, Poles profited from their colonial classification as whites. They were placed in a privileged situation and benefited from the assumption that white Europeans needed a certain standard that was higher than that of the surrounding colonized population.<sup>37</sup> They were given accommodation, food, and monthly allowances that were in many cases complemented by remittances from relatives, who were soldiers in the Polish army.<sup>38</sup> They were thus in a quite comfortable position, although restricted in their freedom of movement.

The refugees found themselves in an ambivalent position: they were hosted in the colonies, but the ruling elite was not very happy to have them there. Hosting the Poles was part of their contribution to the British war effort and thus part of a wider strategic picture. The Poles had to be put somewhere and cared for, in order to maintain Polish soldiers' morale. Local colonial authorities were eager to keep the influence Poles had in their societies to a minimum, and they also opposed the idea of a large-scale settlement in the colonies after the war. Integration into the larger society was not an issue on the colonizers' agenda, and this viewpoint seems to be one that is often found in the attitudes among national authorities towards other refugee camps as well.

#### 4. Connections to Global Historical Events

A global approach highlights the entanglements and relations between historical processes and events beyond national borders. The case of the Polish refugees in British colonial Africa can be interpreted in many national frames, but it definitely invites the researcher to think beyond simply picking one. The period of 1944–1961 can be described as a phase of increasing spatial reordering in many parts of the world.<sup>39</sup> Most important for this story is the end of the British Empire in Africa and the reordering of East-Central Europe in the immediate post-war period. The emerging bloc confrontation of the Cold War is another issue that played a role for the people in and around these refugee camps. There was a diverse range of global processes and events that materialized on the ground within these portals.<sup>40</sup>

36 Ibid., p. 160.

37 M. Kelly, *Finding Poland*. From Tavistock to Hruzdowa and Back Again, London 2011, p. 176.

38 F.A. Montague (Ag. Chief Secretary to the Government) to The Editor, *East African Standard*, 31 December 1943, TNA W3/31798 (fn. 22), p. 3.

39 U. Engel and M. Middell, *Bruchzonen der Globalisierung, globale Krisen und Territorialitätsregimes. Kategorien einer Globalgeschichtsschreibung*, *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und Vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 15 (2005) 5–6, p. 31.

40 Another issue is the establishment of the international refugee regime that is reflected in the shifting responsibilities for the camps from a binational British-Polish administration to more international forms of management. The emerging international refugee organizations and their internal dynamics were, in turn, closely linked to World War II, the emerging Cold War, and the end of colonialism. See P. Gatrell, *Putting Refugees in Their Place*, in: *New Global Studies* 7 (2013), pp. 1–24.

Apart from being the cause that brought the Poles to East Africa, World War II was also a framework for the everyday encounters in the colonies. British and Polish officials especially viewed interactions with citizens of European enemy nations as a problem. The application by a German farmer in Tanganyika for the employment of a Polish refugee on his estate was refused after consultation with Polish representatives because he was classified as an “enemy alien.”<sup>41</sup> Another “enemy alien” group was Italians, who were either interned or released on parole in Tanganyika, or as prisoners of war in Kenya. Intimate relations between Italian men and Polish women were, at least until 1945, seen as problematic by some British officials. There were some incidents of engagement between Polish female refugees and Italian prisoners of war in the Kenyan camp Rongai. The camp commandant condemned these, referring to the fact that the Italians were enemies and that Poles should stop fraternizing with them, although this incident occurred two weeks after Victory in Europe day.<sup>42</sup> In 1946, the district commissioner in Iringa, Tanganyika, had no problems with relations between Polish women and Italian men, but the commandant of the nearby Ifunda camp still saw it as problematic.<sup>43</sup> It seems that the “enemy” classification took time to vanish from the minds of some British officials.

The British Empire came under increasing pressure, both internally and externally, after World War II. The rise of the two post-war superpowers, the United States and the USSR, was also the rise of two states with ideologies that were both anticolonial. Imperialism became delegitimized in the international arena, and the anticolonial struggle that led to the independence of India in 1947, called the whole British Empire even more into question.<sup>44</sup> For the independence movements in the African colonies, the war was an “important watershed.”<sup>45</sup> The problem the British faced is best illustrated by a report on the possibility of the permanent settlement of displaced persons from Europe within the British Empire in the late 1940s.<sup>46</sup> The results of the report showed that in most parts of the empire, officials feared a large-scale settlement of European refugees. They expected that this resettlement would be strongly opposed by the colonized people and would lead to political trouble. The findings of the report show that British decision-making within the empire was increasingly constrained.

The fear among British officials in the colonies of the presence of communist agents among Polish refugees indicates the weakness of the empire, but it also points to bloc confrontation that started to dominate world politics after the end of the war. Already in

41 C. Winnington-Ingram (for Commissioner for Aliens and Refugees) to District Commissioner, Arusha, 3 May 1943, TNA 69/782/3, 13.

42 E.R.C. Williams (Camp Commandant, Rongai, Kenya) to Karol Sander (Polish leader, Rongai), 21 May 1945, PRO ED 128/107.

43 Walden (District Commissioner Iringa) to N. Stewart, Ag. Commissioner of Police, DSM, 18 February 1946, TNA 176/87, 12B.

44 F. Cooper, *Reconstructing Empire in British and French Africa*, in: *Past & Present* 210, (2011) 6, pp.196–210.

45 A. Eckert, *African Nationalists and Human Rights, 1940s–1970s*, in: S.-L. Hoffmann (ed.) *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century – A Critical History*, Cambridge 2010, p. 290.

46 “The possibility of Foreign Settlement in the Colonial Empire,” summary of a 1946 and a 1947 enquiry, no date, PRO CO 822/145/5, p. 53.

1943, Churchill mentioned that the USSR would be the next enemy after the Germans.<sup>47</sup> Suspected communist agents among the refugees were seen as especially dangerous in their contact with Africans. One refugee in Tengeru was reported to be “a dangerous Communist known to have political influence over the native tribes in Arusha area.”<sup>48</sup> In 1952, an alleged communist was reported to have said before going to the Soviet Union that he would come back when his brothers rule the country and help them to win their fight.<sup>49</sup> This indicates that British rule, at least in Tanganyika, was clearly coming to an end. The British feared that Soviet agents might help their enemies in the colonies and that the newly emerging states would become part of the Soviet bloc. Given the situation, the few Polish refugees with communist leanings were regarded as a security risk. Therefore, what was happening in the Polish refugee camps in Africa was related to what was happening in other parts of the world. It might not have been the most important place to influence these historical processes of global relevance, but it was definitely influenced by them. The concept of portals of globalization offers us the opportunity to take a closer look at concrete places, where transnational connections were more intense than elsewhere.

## 5. “Forgotten” Portals of Globalization

In 2013, I looked for the former site of the biggest Polish camp and the remaining cemetery in the small town of Tengeru in northern Tanzania. I went to the centre by bus and asked a person at a stall where to find the Polish cemetery. He directed me up the road, and on my way, I asked quite a few people for directions until I finally reached a compound of a Christian school, where I found the graves of two German missionaries. A little disappointed, I continued searching and asked some more people in the street, who finally directed me to an old man at a carpenter’s workshop. He remembered the location of the Polish refugee camp and instructed a younger relative to take me there on a motorcycle, as it was on the opposite side of town. For the driver, it was the first time he visited the cemetery, which is nowadays well-maintained. It features a small, recently-built memorial hall, which receives several hundred visitors per year, mainly from Poland.

This anecdote illustrates three points about the remembrance of the Polish refugees: First, it is not part of the (in this case) Tanzanian collective memory, as nearly all Tanzanians I spoke to did not know about it. Secondly, it is, by contrast, remembered individually by older people, who were present at the time the refugees stayed in the area. Thirdly, there seems to be a new interest in this history coming mainly from former refugees and their

47 A. Defty, *British Anti-communist Propaganda and Cooperation with the United States, 1945–1951*, unpublished thesis, University of Salford 2002.

48 T.W.E. Roche to J.B. Howard, Undersecretary of State, Aliens Department, Home Office, 16 June 1950, PRO CO 822/145/5.

49 Officer i/c Police, Usa River to Director of Refugees DSM, 3 November 1952, TNA 69/782.

descendants, but aided in part by Polish authorities. After the nearly complete neglect of these memorial sites, some cemeteries were recently renovated, and there is growing interest in the topic.<sup>50</sup> In the following section, I will try to explain why this historical episode did not jump from individual memories into the official national memory.

The biggest difference from other portals of globalization in this journal issue is that these places still exist as such today, even though the last Polish refugee camp was closed down in December 1951.<sup>51</sup> Whereas port cities, former colonial capitals, or free trade zones are still places of transnational encounter, the interaction in and around these refugee camps was not repeated afterwards, though of course other refugee camps are temporarily utilized elsewhere. Other examples of portals of globalization are world exhibitions or global sporting events;<sup>52</sup> these events are by definition something that is temporary, but they are actively remembered by the wider public. They can be incorporated into national or city histories, especially through the landmark buildings they often leave behind.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, the history of the Polish refugee camps is largely forgotten. After the last Polish refugees left, the buildings were either taken over for other purposes or destroyed. Only the Polish cemeteries of the bigger camps and the Polish church in Nyabyeya remained as small sites of remembrance. As my initial anecdote illustrates, not even people living close to these sites seem to be aware of their history.

While distinguishing between different formats of memory, Aleida Assmann points to one commonality: “Selection and forgetting are as constitutive of individuals as they are of collective memory.”<sup>54</sup> Which part of history becomes part of the political memory of a social group is not incidental, but depends on its ability to fit in the framework of contemporary interests.<sup>55</sup> Forms of collective memories are, on the other hand, fundamentally different from individual memories, as larger social groups and institutions such as the nation state can “repress with psychological impunity.”<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, in contrast to individual memories, they have to actively construct a common memory through me-

50 The latest examples are a journalistic piece from Uganda, C. Abraham, *When Europeans Were Refugees in Africa*, *New African* (June 20, 2012), pp. 72–77, and a historical article from Zimbabwe: B. Tavuyanago, T. Muguti and J. Hlongwana, *Victims of the Rhodesian Immigration Policy: Polish Refugees from the Second World War*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38 (2012), 4, pp. 951–965. Canadian film-maker Jonathan Durand is currently producing a documentary about the story (see [www.memorysourhomeland.com](http://www.memorysourhomeland.com)), and British artist Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa had been working over the last few years on Poles in Uganda (an art piece about Kojwa was recently part of the exhibition “Everything is getting better. Unknown Knowns of Polish (Post-)Colonialism” at Savvy Contemporary, Berlin in 2017).

51 Quartermaster Polish refugee camp Tengeru to Director of Refugees, 5 December 1951, TNA 69/782. Some 20 Poles’ refugee status remained after the official closure of the camp.

52 M. Middell, *Erinnerung an die Globalisierung? Die Portale der Globalisierung als lieux de mémoire: Ein Versuch*, in: *Europäische Erinnerungsräume*, ed. K. Buchinger, C. Gantet, and J. Vogel, Frankfurt 2009, pp. 296–308.

53 The Eiffel Tower is maybe the most striking example, as it was built for the 1889 *Exposition Universelle* (Universal Exposition) in Paris.

54 A. Assmann, *Memory, Individual and Collective*, in: R.E. Goodin and C. Tilly (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford 2006, p. 217.

55 L. Weissberg, *Introduction*, in: D. Ben-Amos and L. Weissberg (ed.) *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, Detroit 1999, p. 15.

56 W. Kansteiner, *Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies*, *History and Theory* 41 (2002), 4, p. 186.

morial signs (symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, or memorials), thereby separating the useful and relevant from the aspects that are regarded as useless and irrelevant.<sup>57</sup> It is thus misleading to simply apply psychological insights to collective memories but better to focus on the political, social, and cultural factors that determine what is remembered and what is forgotten.<sup>58</sup> These factors can also lead to an integration of stored memory, if the circumstances change. The memory that is stored in archives can be integrated into actively-communicated memories, if it makes sense in the present situation.<sup>59</sup>

The main reason for forgetting the Polish refugee camps seems to be that there was no national narrative into which this story could fit. As Duara puts it, “History has had a special role in the national pedagogies.”<sup>60</sup> A common national narrative is a crucial factor for claiming the status of a nation and thus sovereignty.<sup>61</sup> Interpretation, as well as forgetting some aspects and remembering others, is part of every historical narrative.<sup>62</sup> National memories are open to glorious victories and bitter defeats alike, as long as they fit into the semantic of a heroic conception of history.<sup>63</sup> Hosting Polish refugees does not fit into this semantic. Furthermore, migration can be understood as a “counter-narrative to the nation,”<sup>64</sup> as migrants’ mobility challenges supposedly static and homogeneous national collectives. In the following, I will show why the story of the Polish refugees was forgotten by highlighting the possible national memories it could have been part of. Britain was severely weakened by World War II, and the colonial rulers were busy defending their colonies against growing anticolonial movements. The very concept of a colonial empire was increasingly under pressure from within, as well as from the outside.<sup>65</sup> The story of how the British altruistically helped European refugees had no use in this struggle. To legitimize colonial rule, it was more important to emphasize the help the British gave to the Africans in ruling and, allegedly, guiding them to development. The loss of the empire and the victory in World War II were the themes that dominated the political memory in the following decades.<sup>66</sup>

57 A. Assmann, *Memory, Individual and Collective* (fn. 54), p. 216.

58 W. Kansteiner, *Finding Meaning in Memory* (fn. 56), p. 186.

59 A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, München 2006, p. 57. Assmann understands both the stored and the actively remembered memory as parts of the cultural memory.

60 P. Duara, *Transnationalism and the Challenge to National Histories*, in: T. Bender (ed.) *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Berkeley, CA, 2002, p. 25.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

62 For the importance of memory and forgetting in national historiography, see B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 2006, pp. 187–207.

63 A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* (fn. 59), p. 65.

64 D. Hoerder, *Migration Research in Global Perspective: Recent Developments*, in: *Sozial.Geschichte Online* 9 (2012), p. 78.

65 See F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkeley, CA 2005, p. 54.

66 Maybe this could change as well due to the increasing immigration of Poles to the UK since the turn of the century. As one recent article argues, the ties connecting Polish and British history date at least as far back as the Second World War. See A. Pyzik, *Poles Are Here to Stay in Britain, but It'll Take Time to Make a Cultural Splash*, last modified 12 December 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/12/pires-britain-cultural-splash> (accessed 15 August 2013).

For the USSR, the whole story was quite inconvenient, as the refugees were for the most part anti-communist, especially after their experiences in Soviet labour camps. The same holds true for the communist Polish government, which was aligned with the USSR. Furthermore, most of the refugees refused to go to Poland after the communists took power. These were not the sort of people or history the new Polish elite could use to construct a national narrative. While World War II was the main point of reference for the Polish post-war national memory, its focus was almost entirely on the German atrocities and the joint Polish-Soviet resistance against it.<sup>67</sup> The remembrance of occupation and deportation by the USSR was not part of the official discourse but mainly confined to the private sphere.<sup>68</sup> As the story of the Polish refugees in Africa is closely connected to these deportations, it did not become part of the official historical narrative either.

For the vanguard African nationalists, hosting Polish refugees was not of interest either. The newly independent nations were mainly engaged with nation-building, and this means the construction of a common national history. In Tanganyika/Tanzania, this is best illustrated by the first, large-scale historical research project after independence: that of the 1905–1907 Maji-Maji War. It was interpreted as an anticolonial struggle that united the people against the European/German colonialists, and it became something of a founding national narrative.<sup>69</sup> In Kenya, the rejection of the colonialists' description of the Mau Mau as an atavistic, savage, and tribal cult, and the insistence on its modern and nationalist character was at the core of the creation of a national narrative.<sup>70</sup> The story of the Polish refugees was of no use in any of these national narratives, and it was therefore largely forgotten.

With the end of communist rule in Poland, a new interest in this history emerged. It could be incorporated into the Polish national narrative that described Poland as an oppressed nation suffering from atrocities of its powerful neighbours Russia and Germany. The remembrance of historical defeat can serve as a powerful principle of national memory, as it appeals to the national feeling of solidarity.<sup>71</sup> In the current post-communist phase, there is need for a renewal of the official national narrative and the incorporation of the years of Soviet-aligned communist rule into it. The story of the Polish refugees can thus be understood as an aside in the long history of deportations, mass murders, and oppression suffered by Poles. Furthermore, the history of Polish refugees can be used to establish Poland as a player in a globalizing world; it connects Poland to its vast diaspora around the globe. The involvement of the Polish embassy in Nairobi in a memorial event in Kojia, Uganda, in 2012 can be partly linked to the activities of a Polish oil-drilling

67 A. Orla-Bukowska, *New Threads on an Old Loom. National Memory and Social Identity in Postwar and Post-Communist Poland*, in: R. Ned Lebow, W. Kansteiner, and C. Fogu (eds.), *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, Durham NC 2006, pp. 177 and 184.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

69 E. Greenstein, *Making History: Historical Narratives of the Maji Maji*, in: *Penn History Review* 17 (2010), pp. 2, 64.

70 B. J. Berman, *Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The Paradox of Mau Mau*, in: *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 25 (1991), p. 2, pp. 182–184.

71 A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* (fn. 59), p. 65.

company in the developing oil industry in Uganda.<sup>72</sup> This story could partly move from the stored memory of the archives back to the actively remembered and communicated, but it remains articulated as a fleeting portal of globalization.

Nevertheless, there was considerable transnational interaction in the refugee camps and their surroundings. There was no repetition of such interactions in this particular place; experiences are not tied to space but to people and their memories. Some of the former refugees formed organizations and networks to keep in contact and commemorate their experiences. Noteworthy is that some of the younger Poles picked up Kiswahili and some Africans, who worked in the camps, learned Polish.<sup>73</sup> Some of the former refugees and their children visited the places of the former camps and still remembered the sites of their houses and where they used to hide as youngsters.<sup>74</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Understanding the Polish refugee camps and their surroundings as portals of globalization helps to frame the research in a way that goes beyond national historiography and connects it to wider processes of spatial reordering on a global scale. The insistence on the dialectical character of flows and controls can further the understanding of processes that happened in this portal. Polish refugees posed a challenge to the existing colonial order and its inherent racial hierarchies. Through the accommodation of the refugees in separate camps and restrictions on their movement, the colonial authorities tried to limit the interactions between them and the colonized population, yet numerous interactions still occurred. The maintenance and categorization of the refugees as whites helped to sustain the image of white superiority, but some of their behaviour and especially inter-racial relationships undermined such attempts.

Embedding this episode into larger processes of spatial reordering shows how global history manifested itself in everyday life, in a special part of the colonial periphery. The refugees themselves largely referred to a non-communist Polish nation that was not in existence. Through their connection with Polish soldiers, who fought alongside the Allies against Germany, they had privileges but also constraints. Overall, they were seen as a part of the white colonial community, but their status was lower than that of the British. The picture thus remains ambivalent.

This history was mainly forgotten as it could not easily be incorporated into any national political memory. Polish refugees were mostly opposed to the ruling power in their own country. For Britain, this episode was beyond the frame of reference, and the newly

72 See the report on the event on the home page of the Polish Embassy in Nairobi, [http://nairobi.msz.gov.pl/en/news/opening\\_of\\_the\\_polish\\_siberians\\_cemetery\\_in\\_kojaj?sessionid=FF80CD437081B43A403353B9EE5C48FB.cmsap2p](http://nairobi.msz.gov.pl/en/news/opening_of_the_polish_siberians_cemetery_in_kojaj?sessionid=FF80CD437081B43A403353B9EE5C48FB.cmsap2p) (accessed 25 May 2013).

73 The two former camp workers still knew some Polish words when I spoke to them in April 2013. See also C. Plawski, *Torn from the Homeland: Unforgettable Experiences during WWII*, Bloomington 2011, p. 144.

74 Personal communication with Edward Wakiku, Kojia, Uganda, 15 April 2013.

emerging African nations were too occupied with nation-building, which was dominated by the experience of colonial domination by Europeans. The newly awakened interest in incorporating these refugees' experiences into the Polish national narrative only followed after the end of communist rule.

The idea of "forgotten" portals of globalization cautions us not only to look at the portals that still exist but also at the "dead ends of historical processes."<sup>75</sup> This means that one should not limit oneself to looking back from today's places that are regarded as portals of globalization and follow their emergence in history. It also points to the temporality of portals, as refugee camps are established as a temporal solution. They are the answer to the need to house some people somewhere, and this "somewhere" is usually a remote place, where they are supposed to stay until the conflict they are escaping from has ended. As the case of Polish refugees shows, the arrival of refugees impacts the people living around the camps and the broader society. Flows of refugees are therefore controlled and incorporated into existing social orders. Framing the dialectic of flows and controls through the perspective of portals of globalization highlights the intricacies at play; it would be fruitful to expand this framework to other cases of refugee camps, as well as to other places that on the surface signify total national control – prisoner of war camps and concentration camps – but may have been host to numerous hidden and forgotten transnational encounters, too.

75 F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History* (fn. 65), p. 18.