

BOOK REVIEW

Jochen Lingelbach. *On the Edge of Whiteness: Polish Refugees in British Colonial Africa during and after the Second World War*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2023. xi + 306 pp. 15 Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$27.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-78920-444-5.

Jochen Lingelbach's *On the Edge of Whiteness: Polish Refugees in British Colonial Africa during and after the Second World War* explores a little known story of some 20,000 Polish citizens who were able to leave war-torn Poland to find a temporary haven in British colonies in East and Central Africa.

In the grand narrative of World War II and the displacement that it caused, the experiences of a relatively small group of Poles in places that were hardly the centers of Eastern European settlement might seem like a marginal chapter of history. However, Lingelbach weaves the fate of Polish refugees in Africa into the global story of colonization, whiteness, and what he refers to as “the postwar refugee regime.” While he “deliberately” takes a regional perspective (5), he also applies the broad lenses of the intersection of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. The result is a compelling volume that escapes easy categorizations and should be of interest to the students of African, Polish, British, and colonial history as well as whiteness studies and the current refugee system.

The first two chapters shed light on why and how a group of Polish citizens relocated from Iran to the British colonies in Africa in the early 1940s. War circumstances, and particularly the British need for the support of Polish soldiers, was the decisive factor. If the Polish soldiers were to serve as allies on the frontlines in North Africa and Iran, the least the British government believed it could do was to take care of the soldiers' families. Chapter Two examines what the resettlement process of Poles in Africa tells us about the evolution of “the postwar refugee regime.” Lingelbach argues that while the International Refugee Organization (IRO), tasked with the logistics of the resettlement, disagreed with the British colonial administration on some issues, its “officials took the imperial order for granted” (66). None of the decision makers considered Poles the preferred white settlers in African colonies. Nevertheless, whiteness offered Poles an opportunity to enter that order as its beneficiaries.

Chapter Three takes up the debate that positions Poland as a colony of two World War II powers, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Lingelbach places that scholarly narrative within global colonial history and rejects the notion of Poles as colonial victims. He also notes the counternarrative that redefines Poland as an empire, considering its centuries-long Polonization of Poland's eastern borderlands (*kresy*), and touches upon Poland's colonial aspirations in the 1930s.


Chapter Four focuses on what the presence of Polish refugees in Africa reveals about the intersection of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Because the refugees

were “dependents” of Polish soldiers, 89% of them were women and children. They arrived in Africa sick, hungry, and in need of material support. In short, the Polish refugees in Africa inhabited spaces reserved for “poor whites.” Consequently, British officials and settlers considered them “a threat to the colonial order” (133). While British women in colonies were to confirm the supposed superiority of white settlers, the public images of poor white women performing manual labor were, to quote one witness, a detriment to “the position of all European women” (154). Simultaneously, Lingelbach notes that even when the Polish women’s class, gender, or ethnicity placed them in a subordinate position, they still enjoyed “the privileges of whiteness” (157).

Chapter Five examines the place and perception of Polish refugees in the colonial society from the British, Polish, and African perspectives. Lingelbach’s decision to tell the story in a significantly longer chapter than the preceding four serves a purpose. As opposed to what could have been three separate chapters, he juxtaposes three pictures of Poles in Africa to highlight the imprecision of the category of identity. Unsurprisingly, the image of Poles emerging from the sources authored by British officials and settlers is quite different from how Poles saw themselves. African accounts offer yet another portrayal of what it meant to be Polish in colonial Africa during World War II and shortly after the war. The chapter presents a mosaic that says as much about Poles in the colonial society as it says about the hierarchies and complexities of the imperial and postcolonial order.

Interestingly, while Lingelbach demonstrates repeatedly that Poles in Africa and in “the refugee regime” benefited from their whiteness, he at times cannot let go of the idea of the gradation of whiteness popularized in the 1990s by the scholars of European immigration in the United States. While many scholars have since shown that Eastern and Southern Europeans in the USA were, in fact, “white on arrival” (Thomas Guglielmo), the argument that they “became white” over time (David Roediger) still lingers, including in the public discourse. Lingelbach’s book is an important transnational addition that undermines the “becoming white” narrative. Ironically, the author appears unable to reject it completely (e.g., 8, 90).

While the whiteness of Poles is the foundation of the story, *On the Edge of Whiteness* illustrates how adding the layers of class, gender, and ethnicity offer a more complete picture of the workings of race in the modern world. The result is neither the history of Africa, nor of Poles, nor of colonialism. Yet, it is each and all of them.

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