

The Media Weapon: An Analysis of how the Rhodesian Government used the Media to Handle the Polish Refugee issue from 1940 to 1950

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Abstract

The Polish community became the worst victims of the Second World War. They found themselves hemmed between the Germans and the Russians. As a result of their desperate position, the Poles found themselves as refugees not only in Europe but also in African countries. Rhodesia was one such recipient of refugees from Poland who were fleeing from the wrath of Nazi Germany. Despite having supported the British in the war, Polish refugees found that they were discriminated against by the British in Rhodesia who feared being overwhelmed by whites who were not of British stock. There were massive attacks on the Polish community in the Rhodesian press but at the same time, care was taken to ensure that differences between members of the white community would remain unknown to the African community who were looked down upon as an inferior race. Rhodesian policies against fellow whites ensured that at the end of the war, the Polish were compelled to return to their country. Those who remained suffered one form of segregation or another. It was this very policy which prevented the creation of a big white community in Rhodesia. The paper relied on published academic works and the Rhodesian press covering the period up to 1950. Most of the sources consulted came from the National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Key words: Refugees, segregation, media, racism, British Rhodesians and camps

Introduction

The success of any government depends on its ability to influence public opinion in its favor and in this regard the media becomes a major tool for

governments to influence public opinion to advance their policies. In the 1940s when Rhodesia hosted Polish refugees the media was effectively used to direct public opinion. The Poles were hardly welcome in Rhodesia but the media played a big role in softening opinion against the Poles so that they were received as refugees during the Second World War but when it was time for them to leave it also influenced public opinion so that the Poles would not be allowed as permanent settlers.

This paper will investigate Rhodesian intergroup relations in order to reveal how the media was used by the authorities to play the politics of intergroup relations in the hosting of the Polish refugees in a society with a poor record of intergroup relations. It became imperative that the Africans were not to become aware that the white community had divisions and to achieve this objective the media was used to influence the whites especially those of British stock that the Poles were not so much of a low class as it had been widely perceived. This in effect ensured that hospitality was extended to the Poles only for the duration of the war before the media began another campaign for the expulsion of the Poles in line with racial policies of the colony.

Historical dimensions of intergroup relations in Rhodesia

Rhodesian policy and institutional framework on race and intergroup relations categorized the Africans as a distinct race but went further and categorized all whites falling out of British stock into differing racial categories based on nationality and ability to articulate the British cultural values. The British Rhodesians used a constructed definition of the concept of race one that was not necessarily logical in the field of science but simply ethnically defined.

Against the Africans, the policy was principally motivated by fear of the African, a factor that was aggravated by the fact that they had settled in a scattered fashion and thus feared surprise attacks from the subjugated Africans (B A Kosmin: 1977; 33-70). Visible steps towards racial categorization were first established through the 1898 constitution which established the footing for policies which entrenched that political and social power of the whites could be restrained only by imperial strings which were not always held taut (B A Kosmin: 1977). Another sensitive area of race relations between

Africans and Europeans was the subject of sex. Intimate relations across the races were forbidden and Africans caught on the wrong side of this regulation were ruthlessly dealt with whether they had willingly initiated or had been forced into the act.

The British settlers defined themselves as a race apart from all other European nationals. Race was thus defined according to ethnicity and also according to skin color as in the case of the Africans. Beginning from the earliest days of the colony the Rhodesian government took a radical approach by systematically limiting immigration of non-British whites. Immediately after the end of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, the Afrikaners became an immediate and genuine threat to the British authority in Rhodesia (P R Warhurst: 1981; 9). Rhodesian officials began a policy jealously guarding against any possible influx of Afrikaners from South Africa and also at the same time monitoring the immigration of other non-British whites. Under this policy any potential white settlers were to be of the ‘right stamp’, which meant not only those with the requisite capital, high social standing and the right ideological orientation but of British descent, as well.

While it had always been the stated policy of the colonial authorities that they wanted to ‘whiten’ Southern Rhodesia, strict immigration policies resulted in a very limited number of white immigrants being admitted annually up to the 1950s (A S Mlambo: 2002; 23). Until 1940 up to 90 per cent of immigrants came from British stock and only 10 per cent were classified as ‘aliens’. Within this 10 per cent, none of the ‘alien’ groups was to be allowed to surpass 10 per cent of the total quota (A S Mlambo: 2002; 23). This policy was a follow-up to the goal to make sure that no white ethnic group not British by origin would become too powerful to challenge British political domination. Mlambo (2002; 23) notes that between 1930 and 1950 almost 95 per cent of all immigrants into Southern Rhodesia were of British nationality. This is an indication of the unwavering commitment of maintaining British dominance in Rhodesia that would influence the discrimination of other white ethnic groups by the politically privileged British community.

Franchise policy was also discriminatory to other ethnic white groups. In 1899 the first Rhodesian Legislative Council crafted a notorious regulation restricting the franchise only to British males (B A Kosmin; 1977). In a similar

fashion other Ordinances of the years 1903, 1904, 1912 and 1914, systematically prevented the Indians and also the Africans from entering the political playfield. This also shows that the British as a class that wielded political power in Rhodesia was determined to discriminate other racial groups in the colony through systematic institutionalization of segregation. In the economy the 1903 Licensing Ordinance provided a compulsory clause requiring that all business records be kept in the English language, another discriminatory legislation methodically designed to discourage non-English speaking white entrepreneurs in the colony (B A Kosmin: 1981; 72).

In addition, the Immigration Ordinance of 1904 enforced compulsory immigration literacy tests in a European language, another move calculated to bar non-European immigrants to enter the colony. After realizing that this legislation was allowing Europeans of non-British stock into the colony the 1912 amendment made immigration literacy tests to be in English only, another development cunningly crafted to bar non-British Europeans into the colony (A S Mlambo: 2002; 23). The immigration laws enacted before 1914 required those migrating to Southern Rhodesia to prove that they had a job waiting for them in the colony and that was also an effective way of shutting out non-British immigrants. As such it becomes clear that there was calculated discrimination within the white community.

Furthermore, the 1914 Immigration Law, was to be amended several times after promulgation in order to continue stifling any increased inflow of non-British immigrants. A significant amendment to the law was Government Notice No. 395 of 1931 which introduced sub-section (3) of 2, providing that immigrants could be admitted into the colony if they: (1) were in possession of a sum of money or tangible property in excess of £50 plus an amount in excess of £10 per every dependent accompanying them and (2) had secured a six months long employment contract in the colony (A S Mlambo, 2002). The above evidence shows clearly that Rhodesian legislations were systematically crafted to favor whites originating from Britain but at the same time could accept which who were potential investors even if they originated outside Britain. Therefore, immigration flows were effectively limited because of the firm efforts by the Rhodesian officials to admit only what they believed to be 'the right type' of immigrant. Many offers encouraging migration were openly targeting British subjects of European descent who had at a certain time served

in either the British army or navy during and after the World War 1. Rhodesian politicians maintained that the colony had no institutional and economic capacity to soak up bulky figures of immigrants who could potentially 'lower' the living standards and superior British culture of the colony. This argument made it all necessary to direct the inflow of non-British immigrants to maintain a population balance between non-British and British immigrants.

On the social scene there was also a kind of stratification among the white community that was partly influenced by the immigration laws and also partly by what Mlambo (2002; 28) has termed as ethnic chauvinism. From Mlambo's view ethnic chauvinism is whereby claims of ethnic belonging are used by two or more groups of people hailing from different cultural backgrounds to discriminate against each other. Jews and Greeks were placed at the lowest ranking in the white social strata and found themselves classified far down on the white Rhodesian social ladder. Giving reference to the Jews, Clements (1969; 70) notes that to the British Rhodesian, 'whatever else a man might be, if he were a Jew that was the most meaningful thing about him and the quality of which the British Rhodesians would be most aware.'

Coming of the Poles

Polish refugees received in Southern Rhodesia during and after the Second World War were a product of Britain's war with Germany and Italy. When Poland was struggling to withstand the first rush of invading Germany armies in September 1939 she was attacked by Russia without warning (C Skran: 1998, 277-296). The Polish armies were placed in a hopeless position and defeated because they were fighting Germany on one front and Russia on the other. The Russians deported forthwith to various parts of the USSR not only many prisoners of war but hundreds of thousands of the Polish civilian population who were considered to likely disagree with the regime which was at once set up ((Horpe-Simpson: 1939; 33).

Polish soldiers had fought alongside the British in the Great War in places like Syria, North Africa and Italy and Britain naturally felt compelled to come to the aid of the Poles by providing humanitarian assistance for the displaced Poles (N Angell, 1939; 54). In late 1942 a Polish General Wladyslaw Sikorski signed an agreement with Joseph Stalin agreeing that Polish armies were to

leave the Soviet for Britain (T Muguti: 2001; 35). The Soviet Union allowed at least 20 000 Polish civilians to leave their soil and these were taken first to Persia from where they were transported to East Africa and both Rhodesias (S887/18B/2; NAZ). It was from this group that Southern Rhodesia received her first batch in 1943. The towns of Marandellas and Rusape were chosen as the places for the hosting of the Poles as shown in a government communication of the 2nd October 1942 which proposed the evacuation of Africans from 40 huts in Marandellas as well as the need of building an additional 72 brick houses. For Rusape there was also to be built shelter to hold 500 refugees (H Zins, 2007; 69).

Though refugees of the 2nd World War were given refugee status through the Refugee Convention of 1938 where some fundamental rights crucial to refugee life were laid out, the experiences of these refugees glaringly reveal the immature and inadequacy of the international humanitarian system that has been perpetuated even to this day. Rhodesia ensured that the Poles' stay in the colony was a brief and painful experience through the use of draconian discriminatory laws meant to maintain so called cultural purity. The international instruments available lacked the required ammunition to curtail refugee abuse. It was only in 1948 when the United Nations General Assembly created the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) an arm of the UN mandated to ensure protection of refugees. Unfortunately it was also in the same year that the Rhodesian government successfully managed to expel almost all refugees from its territory despite that the majority was unwilling to leave. The case of Polish refugees reveals how hosting refugees and displaced people has always been problematic because in spite of the international instruments available to protect refugees hosting nations have failed to respect the rights of displaced people. The Rhodesian state through its institutionalized policy of discrimination and segregation violated the rights of the Polish nationals in their custody during and after the Second World War.

Stereotyping the Poles

British Rhodesians viewed different white ethnic groups in the colony on a scale based on their perceived knowledge and articulation of British cultural and political values. Polish people were anchored near the bottom of the

scale because local colonial officials viewed the Polish as an inferior type of white settler because they were considered too willing to take up any jobs on offer, were more liberal in their approach to race relations with Africans and were feared to have Jewish and communist ideas. In the words of A.S Mlambo (2002), "Rhodesian whites lived in suspicion of each other." Driven by the strong conviction that the Poles were an inferior European class by British standards, the Rhodesian government constructed the refugee settlements with cheap material, extended poor quality social services and paid a blind eye to their discrimination on the labor market.

There were claims that women from Eastern Europe were of loose sexual morals. Because of this stereotype British Rhodesians developed a genuine fear of seeing their population diluted as a result of the so-called unrestrained sexual behavior of Polish nationals. Senn (1942) of the ICRC claimed to have practical knowledge of the loose sexual morals of Eastern European women. He was worried about possible sexual relations between Polish women and African men and hence, advocated constant supervision of 'natives and non-Europeans in the vicinity of the camps.' The Director of Camps ordered the deployment of a limited number of African policemen to patrol the camps at night. At the end of January 1943, eight additional African constables, all married and certified to be 'morally upright' were posted to Marandellas refugee settlement.

The British Rhodesians also believed the Polish people were of dirty habits. Dr S. Taylor (S2014/1/11, NAZ), a British medical officer described the Poles as a healthy, dirty and pleasant crowd in one of his reports after touring the Diggleford settlement. However, evidence available on both Marandellas and Diggleford settlements show that, the refugees faced health and sanitary problems because of inadequate water supply (S887/9/18B; NAZ). As a result of water shortage and attitude of British Rhodesians, camp residents were only allowed to bath twice weekly and the watering gardens was banned. This evidence may give explanation to the British perception that the Poles were 'dirty in their habits', when in fact it was inadequate water supplies and unhygienic camp conditions. Additionally, government reports show that all the refugee camps in the colony experienced a shortage of accommodation in the whole period when they held refugees. At Marandellas up to six people lived and shared a hut intended to hold only four adults at a time (S8587/9).

Ironically the Director of Camps argued that this accommodation was adequate since the settlements were meant to be temporary hence it wouldn't make economic sense to construct permanent structures.

To add on to their woes, the refugees were provided with a basic ration that consisted of bread, vegetables, fruit, milk and a small quantity of beef as it was argued the Poles were naturally light meat eaters (Rupiah: 1995;150). The argument that the Poles were light meat eaters can also reveal the British settlers perceptions and stereotyping of the Polish people as people of a lowly class because this argument was not supported by any evidence. This also shows another stereotype towards the Poles that castigated them as people of "cheap lives."

In the area of accommodation, official government memos of the year 1939 show that the initial plan was to accommodate the Poles in a number of hotels which had been closed down due to a shortage of fuel during the war years. These included the Half Way Hotel, Lydiate Hotel, Essex vale Hotel, BallaBalla Hotel and others (Rupiah; 1995). This arrangement was later abandoned because many British nationals saw it improper for a people of 'a low class' to be accommodated luxuriously. Thus a decision was made to construct shelter similar to that provided for the African laborers in mines in the form of Kimberley brick buildings. The choice of Rusape and Marandellas also bolstered the authorities' view that Polish refugees deserved conditions more or less like those of Africans, in areas that were earmarked for African accommodation after the war. This is testimony that there were strong beliefs of ethnic and cultural superiority in the white community that would go as bad as reducing conditions for the other group to conditions set for the African who was viewed as having no rights. This shows that in terms of racial attitudes, the British were not quite different from the German Aryan race which they were fighting in the war.

Additionally, other factors hinged upon the stereotyping of the Poles also necessitated the location of these camps. The intended sites were at some distance from Rhodesian white locations in line with the fear of possible 'cultural pollution' from the presumably lower class visitors. The spread of malaria was also put into consideration, and Marandellas, Rusape and

Digglesford were malaria free. There was a strong fear that the majority of refugees had been infected with malaria during their wanderings in Persia, and the authorities wanted curtail the spread of the disease.

The Rhodesian media and the refugee question

The main government mouthpiece during the war was the state controlled Rhodesian Herald which published extensive texts about the Poles. Rhodesian authorities were quoted in several detailed media publications denouncing the admission of Polish refugees in the colony arguing that the presence of a group of whites of a 'low class' would lower the status of the white race in the eyes of the African (H Zins: 2007;78). In the late 1930s, publications in the Rhodesian media mirrored the unwillingness of the Rhodesian government to admit European refugees. The Rhodesian government turned down many applicants from Europe in spite of the fact that some of them met their strict Rhodesian selection criteria of being professionals or artisans and persons with capital.

Explaining why Rhodesia was not admitting larger numbers of European refugees, Huggins the Rhodesian Prime Minister stated that Rhodesia was allowing in a certain number of foreigners provided they had sufficient capital, "but we are not increasing our normal ratio as we wish to preserve the character of the Colony." He added:

...there might be some excuse for relaxing this if we could do anything which was likely to help in the solution of the major problem, which of course we cannot. We can only allow in a few as a gesture of goodwill. (L H Gann: 1964; 82).

The Rhodesian government only allowed Polish refugees to enter after intense pressure from the Crown. Early media accounts of the first batches of the refugees who entered the colony show that some quarters were not supportive of the Crown's decision to have Rhodesia host the Poles. There were several publications in newspapers that suggested that the Poles carried infectious diseases. For example in an issue of the Rhodesian Herald dated 9th April 1943 it is mentioned that there had arrived six trains with Polish refugees totaling 2500. The correspondent of this paper reported that many of the Poles

were in a terrible state of health suffering from contagious diseases, tuberculosis, rheumatism and general exhaustion. Publications like these stirred debates on whether it was a good decision to have the Poles in the colony. Some hardliner Rhodesians began calling for the reversal of the decision to have the Poles in the colony.

After several months from the coming of the first group, authorities felt that following such a path would negatively upset the colonial race. Authorities feared that if public opinion was hardened too much the Africans would come to realize that the white community was divided and this would possibly inspire them to seek their own freedom. In a letter to the Herald editor dated 26 January 1943 The Federation of Women's Institute of Southern Rhodesia expressed their protest against placing the Polish people in an 'African village in Marandellas. In addition another organization the Marandellas Women's Institute was also quoted extensively expressing its disgust towards the conditions that the refugees were living citing that it was necessary for the corporate community to provide clothing for the Poles so that "we may maintain our white sacredness in the eyes of the kaffir" (S887/12/18B/2).

After this, there was a deliberate attempt to present the Poles not as a weary, hungry and disease ridden people but as 'gallant fighters' who had bravely allied with the British Crown to fight Nazi and Fascist forces in Europe. From late 1943 the Rhodesian press dedicated a lot of space to the Polish cause publishing in its commentaries about the involvement of the Polish people in the Second World War with a tone that was now discerning and sympathetic. In the same vein there were publications about the Poles sojourn in Southern Rhodesia in the years 1943-1948, about their national anniversaries, life and achievements. In May 1943 the Rhodesian Herald extensively published the celebrations of the Polish Constitution of 3rd of May. The paper published an extensive speech delivered at the occasion by Aleksander Zawisza the Polish consul general. At Marandellas there was a parade, a celebration as well as an exhibition of works by the Polish women staying in the settlement. The celebrations were attended by Rhodesian government officials who could not help but admire Polish craftwork and embroidery put up for exhibition.

On the 4th Anniversary of the Nazi attack on Poland, the Rhodesian Herald (3 September 1943) published the speech by the English King George VI who among other things stated the heroism of the Poles in their fight against a very powerful Germany nation. The paper reminded of the suffering and persecution of the Poles under the Nazi occupation and the Germans' aspirations to exterminate the Polish nation on the map of Europe. The King said that "it is a privilege and duty of Rhodesia to offer the Polish people sanctuary." The paper also appealed on this occasion to the people to give the Poles even more assistance. Apart from military and political issues the Polish customs were also of interest in the Rhodesian press. On 23 April 1943 a large article was placed in the Rhodesian Herald informing the reader about Polish customs and culinary specialties showing information about Polish baking, recipes, the custom of painting Easter eggs and different festive customs.

The above account of events clearly demonstrates how the Rhodesian media shifted from being unsympathetic to friendly for two reasons. Firstly, it was important so that even while the British population viewed the Polish as inferior the Africans would not see the divisions. Thus there was need to 'cool down feelings' so that the Europeans remained respectable in the eyes of the colonized. Secondly, for the sake of showing allegiance to the British Crown there was need to show the Poles some 'warmth' so as not to antagonize relations with the Crown. The Rhodesian government realized that the Crown would not tolerate open discrimination on the Polish for it would hurt English pride on the international scene as champions and providers of humanitarian service.

By 1946 the glamorous portrayal of the Poles had to be discarded in the media as the government announced its intentions to close down all refugee settlements and send the Poles back home. This came at time when there was increasing pressure from the British Crown that Rhodesia should allow a considerable number of the Poles to remain behind for permanent settlement if they so wished. In response to such calls the Herald (4 June 1946) published a piece that said:

...more should be known about the Poles, their political opinions, trades and professions. This is because there is a genuine fear that

too many aliens have been admitted already to an extent that will alter the British texture of the country.

This was just the beginning of the many attacks on the Poles in the media meant to convince every other British settler in the colony that the Polish nationals were an undesirable settler in many respects. By 1947 there were even more daring extracts of this matter put up in the press. For example an extract by C Olley (1946) in *The New Rhodesia* stated that:

Rhodesians have to face up to the fact that many of the Poles do not rise to the height of civilization and refinement as the British. The Poles are a bunch of peasants whose skill and efficiency is little above that of the native. There is further the unfortunate fact that many of them do not realize the need for a social color bar in this colony.

Publications by Polish sympathizers like Major F. J Bagshawe which also appeared in *The New Rhodesia* fell on deaf ears as they tried to persuade the Rhodesian government to allow some Poles to remain in the colony on the argument that the Poles had fought with the British in the Great War. Bagshawe (1946; 123) wrote that:

I who lived with the Poles without a break for over three years know that nearly all of them are descent, law abiding beings who want nothing but to be joined by their families and to be able to earn their own living outside the irksome conditions of settlement life.

The above extracts show that the media was used to serve the interests of the Rhodesian white British population. Initially the media was used to convince the rest of the white population that the Poles were not a desirable visitor in the colony. After it was discovered that the Poles would come and stay anyway, their portrayal in the media changed in a manner meant to convince the Africans that whites were a united entity. Furthermore, it was also important to show to the British Crown that the Rhodesian government was championing the British humanitarian cause. However, the media had to be used again to gather home support for the expulsion of the Poles.

Conclusion

The presence of Polish refugees in the colony from 1942 to 1950 was a test for British settlers' tolerance of other whites outside British descent. Ethnic loyalty and the cherished desire to maintain British cultural purity among the 'uncivilized Africans' were key to the discrimination and forceful repatriation of the Poles by 1950. The media was handy in this system for there was also the need to ensure the Crown that Rhodesians were champions of the Crown's humanitarian campaign. There were several reasons why the British Rhodesians felt uncomfortable in the company of whites of other nationalities. They vividly remembered how South Africa had been usurped from them by the Afrikaners and were not willing to experience the same in Rhodesia thus they had to maintain their numerical advantage against other whites. Another political reason was the fear of harboring Jews and communists in the colony who were mistrusted for their political ideas and beliefs. The paper has demonstrated that in as far as British Rhodesians discriminated against blacks, they also applied an equally high dose of the same segregation against whites from outside the Crown in order to preserve their perceived purity.

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