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## Article

# The Mystery of the Tanganyika Knife and the Rediscovery of the Polish Refugee Experience of Britain's Wartime Empire

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**Abstract:** My Polish grandmother was sixteen when she arrived in Bolton. By the time teenagers today sit their GCSE examinations, she had travelled the distance of almost three-quarters of the globe. From Drohobycz in Poland (now modern Ukraine) following the arrest and murder of her father by the USSR's NKVD aged 6, to a detention camp in Soviet Kyrgyzstan, to Iran, Tanganyika, and South Africa, before finally settling in England. Hers is a story of Stalin's crimes, but it is simultaneously a story of how refugees utilised the global connections and routes created by the British Empire. It is also a postwar story of how she made a home in the nation that facilitated her wartime life. She carried with her few possessions, bar a bone letter-opener knife with an elephant carved into the handle, which she passed down to me. Bringing scholarship around refugee experiences, family histories, and material culture into conversation, this journal article seeks to achieve three things. First, it brings the story of the Polish refugees who utilised the imperial routes, colonies, dominions, and nations of British 'interest' to greater attention. While there has been some research into this in Britain, it has been an under-explored aspect of wartime experience which shows us as much about the war in the East as it does the inherently global nature of the war. Second, it asks what role the memory of the Polish refugee experience serves, both for those who lived through it and for subsequent generations. And finally, it addresses how this memory, beyond the Polish diaspora, might be used to explore more the nuances of life during the Second World War.

**Keywords:** Second World War; cultural memory; British Empire; Polish refugees; marginalised histories



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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this journal article is to use material culture and family history as a means to 'rediscover' the Polish refugee experience of Britain's Empire during the Second World War. Crucially, these experiences are not *undiscovered*. They have not sat, gathering dust in an administrative drawer, until some plucky historian uncovered them.<sup>1</sup> And yet, these experiences—which took Poles to displaced persons camps right across the British Empire during the Second World War—have received relatively little academic scrutiny and even less public attention in Britain. As this article will argue, despite highlighting a great many unknowns, family histories and material culture can help to provide a language through which to explore this challenging, under-represented history of the Second World War.

The history of these Polish refugees is complex and, as a result, denies easy articulation. Deported from their homes in mainly the former eastern borderlands of Poland as a result of the depolonisation of the region from 1939 following the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, during the war they moved themselves from work camps under Soviet control to transit and displaced-persons camps under British administration. These camps were primarily located in the Middle East, British Raj, and parts of Africa including Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, South Rhodesia, and North Rhodesia (Lingelbach 2022, p. 18). The much-changed geopolitical context after the war and Soviet dominance over their homeland meant that many struggled to return to Poland, and as a result, settled in places like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

This extraordinary story of migration means that, as Jochen Lingelbach notes, it is either told by historians as an ‘exile story’, meaning it is told from the perspective of Polish national history, an ‘immigrant story’ which focuses on the lives of refugees after the war outside of Poland, or a ‘colonial story’, which explores the particular history of one colonial nation where Poles sought refuge (Lingelbach 2020, p. 3). It has also been used to explore childhood experiences of war, as well as forced migration (Stańczyk 2018).

This article focuses on the immigrant story of the Polish refugees by foregrounding their experiences in the British cultural memory of the war. While much has been written in Poland about this ‘Siberian odyssey’, an interesting gap exists in the telling of this story in Britain (see Lysakowski 1990). Despite Polish refugees living within various locations in and around Britain’s wartime empire, and with many of them settling in Britain afterwards, this is not a history that is particularly prominent in the British cultural memory of the Second World War. This is not because it was not significant to the people who experienced it, or that it affected an insignificant number of people—approximately nineteen thousand Polish refugees passed through Africa (Stańczyk 2018, p. 139). Nor is it because, as refugees, these Poles did not contribute to the war effort, as the stories of refugees of, for example, the Kindertransport children have become important in the British cultural memory of the war (see Williams and Niven 2023).

Instead, the dual intersecting histories of a non-British diaspora group within a British imperial history means that these experiences are open to multiple, ambiguous readings that have not easily been put to use historically in the making and sustaining of a British cultural Second World War memory. As Wendy Ugolini makes clear, in the postwar period Poles who settled in the UK after the war were often asked when they would ‘go back home’, and as a result were excluded from a national history of wartime contribution, despite settling in the UK (Ugolini 2014).

This is not to say that in the maelstrom and saturated field of cultural representations of the war the experiences of these Polish refugees do not exist. This is a history that, as Kathy Burrell shows, the Poles living in the UK who experienced it have taken a particularly keen interest in via cultural representations in films, books and internet forums (Burrell 2006). Most recently, for a wider public, the 2023 *Somewhere to Stay* exhibition at Wardlaw Museum in St Andrews explored the ‘long shadow of war’ via art installations of traditional cut Polish paper designs.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, a 2021 Al Jazeera film *Memory is our Homeland: European Refugees in Africa* explored these forced migrations that have ‘been forgotten by the history books but kept alive as family myth’.<sup>4</sup> As this illustrative description shows, the stories of these Polish refugees have historically often existed in family histories, rather than British public histories.

In highlighting multiple, contradictory experiences within the British Empire at war, the experiences of the Polish refugees are complex and so may struggle to be articulated on a public stage. It is precisely this complexity—which is often absent in, to borrow Patrick Finney’s evocative phrase, the ‘juggernaut’ of war representations and commemorations in the UK—which makes them so useful in understanding experiences of the war (Finney 2018a). Nevertheless, in being under-represented they can be challenging to articulate, something this article seeks to address via the pitfalls and potential opportunities afforded by looking at material culture and family history related to the refugee experience.

This journal series aims to ‘provoke reflection and debate’ by specifically focusing on what roles ephemera and objects play in preserving lesser-known experiences of conflict.<sup>5</sup> It asks how family histories, too, can empower communities whose histories have been marginalised from popular understandings of war. This article, then, has three aims. First, it brings the story of the Polish refugees during the Second World War who utilised the imperial routes, colonies, dominions, and nations of British ‘interest’ to greater attention. While there has been some notable research into this, it has been an under-represented aspect of wartime experience which shows us as much about the war in the East as it does the inherently global nature of the war. Second, it asks what role the memory of the Polish refugee experience serves, both for those who lived through it and for subsequent

generations. It asks: why has this history been so rarely articulated on a public stage? And finally, this article addresses how the memory of war can be embedded within material culture, and how the material's mimetic function can help to provide some prompts regarding the thinking about and articulation of this history.

This article emerges from two synchronistic events: one articulated in the public field of history, and the other in the private family sphere. The first took place in early 2017, at a 'People's Forum' consultation event in the Imperial War Museum, London. Consisting of community members and stakeholders, the event was designed to obtain feedback about proposed ideas for the narrative and content of the upcoming 2021 permanent Second World War and Holocaust Galleries. Proceedings included group discussions, curatorial-led talks and, by way of summary, a spoken-word poetry recital. Amongst many evocative moments was the contribution of one woman who, unprompted, rose to speak to the room of approximately eighty participants:

"Africa had a huge contribution and one I, really must say, must say, must say, thank you, thank you to Africa. For hosting the refugee Polish children during the war. Twenty eight displaced people camps in East Africa. To this day the now old, elderly ladies and men are saying thank you, to you, thank you."<sup>6</sup>

This moment was the first time that I had heard or seen in a British institution a reference to the plight of the Polish refugees. The audience member's dedication of thanks had been a result of the guests discussing the concept of 'Total War', the idea that all sections of society were mobilised for the war effort, as an appropriate historiographical narrative within the new Second World War Galleries.<sup>7</sup> In an unprecedented move, the 'permanent' Galleries, which will last approximately twenty to twenty-five years, were to explore global stories of starvation, sexual violence, forced labour, and migration as integral experiences of the war. This marks a departure from a focus solely on well-known events in the British cultural imaginary such as D-Day or the Battle of Britain. Highlighting these experiences not just as casualties of war, but rather as experiences integral to it, demonstrates a broader historiographical shift that considers both military and personal histories of war.

While a discussion about historiography appeared significant to the historians in the room, what made it truly memorable was how impromptu this outpouring of gratitude was. The speaker did not necessarily have the linguistic tools, for example, in giving thanks to the world's second largest continent 'Africa', to articulate what the experiences of those seeking refuge during the war entailed. The details that were included were also marginally wrong, in that there were twenty two rather than twenty eight displaced person camps that Poles utilised in Africa during the Second World War (Starczyk 2018, p. 139). Appearing in her early to mid-sixties, the speaker also looked younger than the age of the war generation. A sign, perhaps, that she knew the history and its significance to the Poles who lived through it, but that she had never experienced the camps personally or could not greatly remember them.

Crucially, the speaker chose to articulate in the Imperial War Museum, London, not a gratitude of thanks to the British-run Empire, but to the host African nations of the former Empire. As Graham Dawson shows, the process of publicly articulating such experiences is dependent 'not only on the imagination of the storyteller', but is constructed in a way that resonates 'with the experiences of others, as shared, collective identities and realities' (Dawson 1994, p. 23). With the participant publicly *composing* her gratitude for the first time, we could see in real time the beginnings of an articulation of a shift in the cultural memory of the war in recent years, with the experiences of people from the former Empire moving from a marginal to a more central position in the public imagination of the war.<sup>8</sup> This participant's gratitude, then, was significant both in seeking the public acknowledgment of the contribution of the colonies of the former Empire and in the response of the audience—many of whom were visibly nodding in agreement—who reciprocated this sentiment.

Imperial histories have often been challenging to recognise and articulate as such. Ann Laura Stoler offers a useful metaphor in suggesting that in the postwar period a process

of 'colonial aphasia' took root, in which 'aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things' (Stoler 2011, p. 125). While the imperial dimension of the Second World War has always been, to varying degrees, a feature of the cultural memory of the war, this has often historically been a partial representation that has not easily been interpreted as colonial, and what that might entail.

Key theatres and events beyond a British or European theatre of war have been 'forgotten', meaning that they have played an ambiguous role in the historical development of the British cultural memory of the war (Connelly 2004). For Paul Gilroy, the Second World War narrative became a national obsession that masked a postcolonial melancholia and eclipsed the decline and memory of the Empire (Gilroy 2009). As Martin Francis has argued, however, representations in films during decolonisation often explored the intersections of empire and war (Francis 2014). More recently, Patrick Finney notes how imperial and colonial histories of the war have been 'rediscovered' (Finney 2018b). There was a strong sense in the room in the Imperial War Museum that although stories like those of the refugees, and the sentiments of thanks offered to former colonies reached a consensus, no one quite knew how to express them.

This public event coincided with, if not led to, a personal discovery in my private family life. These experiences of displacement happened to the woman I call *Babcia*, the Polish word for grandmother. I told her about the event and, to my surprise, at hearing her history being discussed on a public stage she recounted her own experiences of bereavement, forced migration, and seeking refuge in colonies within the British Empire, and later Britain. A series of conversations took place over the next few years which, as with so many impromptu recollections of family history, went unrecorded. She did, however, give me a carved bone knife from her time in East Africa which forms the research basis for this article.

In her remarkable book on genealogy *Common People*, Allison Light makes the case that the radical potential of family history has often been overlooked by historians who regard it as 'comfort-zone history' and 'history lite' (Light 2014, p. xxvii). For her, the strength of family history is that it can take us 'by surprise into unknown worlds' (Light 2014, p. xxviii). Rather than being inward-gazing, she notes that family history 'worth its salt asks . . . big questions about economic forces, political decisions, local government, urban history, social policy, as well as the character of individuals and the fate of their families' (Light 2014, pp. xxvii–xxviii). As a result, not only are family historians 'resurrectionists, repopulating the past, trying to put flesh to bone and bring the past to light' for their own families, they can also illuminate experiences of class, war, or gender that have been overlooked by academic historians (Light 2014, p. xxvii).

In contrast with scholarly norms around what family history might constitute, it is important to flag here that, technically, *Babcia* is not my 'blood' grandmother, but the mother of my uncle by marriage. This seems barely a fact worth noting in my everyday life. Along with many from diasporic cultures, I have never called or seen her as anything but a family elder who should be regarded as 'grandmother'. This does not mean that distinctions of what constitutes family need be done away with, but that a more open interpretation of how families exist in the everyday—and especially as a result of migrations—is just as worthy of academic study as those that trace 'roots'. While such an exploration is less vertically linear through historical time, it is a more fluid, horizontal understanding of lineage. This horizontality means that *Babcia* will remain anonymous in the text, partially because she is still alive, as are our relatives.

Despite the academic assertion that family history can be self-obsessed, outlined by Light, the nature of translating family history into critical history inadvertently entails a flattening of good experiences and bad. As Annette Kuhn notes, family histories are as constructed by what they include as what they omit (Kuhn 2002, pp. 1–3). This may be the case particularly with war histories, which can be traumatic and involve the recounting of difficult experiences.<sup>9</sup> In the clamour to bring the voices of the individual experiences



of the war generation to the fore, it is often forgotten that these histories are not some sort of proverbial playground, but traumatic pasts that had real consequences. The desire to compose these personal memories into public memories entails a careful process of recognition and negotiation.

As we have moved temporally further from the Second World War, the memories of the war generation have become increasingly important, leading in the 1980s to a 'memory boom'.<sup>10</sup> In British culture, the media and political hysteria surrounding Captain Tom Moore, a war veteran who undertook laps of his garden during the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplifies the continued fascination with the war generation up to and beyond 2020.<sup>11</sup> The dying voice of this generation constitutes an increasingly rare part of the British cultural memory of war, and as a result, has arguably never been so valuable.

The ever-neering loss of the war generation has made not just their personal stories more collectively valuable, but also their material culture. According to historian Bozena Shallcross, a wartime artifact 'usually emerges at an intersection of traumatic events inherent in its biography as inextricably related to its human counterpart' (Shallcross 2022, p. 147). This means that, more so than transactive goods and commodities, these objects carry the emotional weight of memory, both on an individual level, as the embodiment of the owner's memories, but also playing a wider mimetic role for group family histories or with the increased musealization of objects connected to personal experience, on a collective level, if or when collected and displayed in museums (Auslander 2018). As with family history, studies in material culture have often been overlooked in war historiography, although much has been achieved in recent years to rectify this.<sup>12</sup>

In this article, given its marginal position within the British public cultural memory of the war, it is first important to outline the experience of the Polish refugees. I will then explore the potential of material culture to help us to explore the changing cultural memory of the Polish refugee experience. Finally, the article will highlight the great many unknowns of the knife, arguing that, despite appearing as pitfalls, these can further help us to articulate under-represented histories.

## 2. Tracing Family History in Context

Recounting the history of the Polish refugees involves many moving geopolitical, logistical, and social parts. Babcia's history then, is one marked by complex changes, which will be explored here, alongside the broader history of the refugees.

Babcia was born in Drohobycz, a part of the eastern region of the newly-formed Polish Republic. The Soviet USSR and Nazi Germany partitioned Poland in 1939 under the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact. As part of his efforts to dismantle resistance, Joseph Stalin, via the NKVD, embarked on a process of depolonisation of these eastern regions. While numbers are disputed, between 'hundreds of thousands' and 1.7 million Poles (although this latter figure is now thought to be exaggerated) were either murdered or displaced within the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941 (see Wróbel 2014). One of them was Babcia's father, who was most probably murdered for his semi-authoritative job as a policeman. Aged six, the recently bereaved Babcia, along with her mother and brothers, was one of the Poles who, in Lingelbach's words, were 'violently taken to camps and special settlements' inside the Soviet Union, and in her case, Kyrgyzstan (Lingelbach 2022, p. 18).

Earmarked to suffer the slow violence of neglect in camps that were ridden with hunger and disease, the Polish refugee life course changed significantly when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941. Desperate for troops, Britain brokered a deal between the Polish government-in-exile in London and their new allies the Soviet Union to create a Polish Army from the deportees under General Władysław Anders. As a result, the deportees—including Babcia and her family—travelled to Iran, where Britain had a significant presence and strategic military interest.

One of Babcia's brothers, who was of fighting age, joined the Polish Army. In Iran, however, those unable to serve were cause for some concern for British war strategists, who saw them as 'a potential nuisance' due to their proximity to the fighting (Lingelbach 2022,

p. 18). Babcia and her mother, along with the other women, children, and elderly, were sent to displaced persons camps, primarily within and around the British Empire.

Babcia was part of the roughly nineteen thousand refugees who passed through the British colonies in East and Central Africa between 1942 and 1950. She was sent to Tanganyika, modern day Tanzania, along with approximately 6250 refugees. Elsewhere, 6250 went to Uganda, 2850 to Northern Rhodesia, 1350 to Southern Rhodesia and 780 were in transit in Kenya. Outside of Africa, approximately 4000 went to India, and 7000 to the Middle East. In most cases, the British metropolitan government assumed the financial cost of these camps (Lingelbach 2022, p. 20).

Babcia spent the next six years of her life in a Tanganyikan displaced persons camp, the same amount of time that she had spent in Poland. What was life like for her in the camp? Along with many of the refugees, Babcia often described her time there as a 'paradise'.<sup>13</sup> As historian Ewa Stańczyk notes, refugee children, especially, were able to experience 'exilic childhoods' in East Africa, where they could explore new terrains, have relative freedoms, were part of a strong community, and had a relatively good quality of life (Stańczyk 2018). The contrast between the land they settled in, and the settlements in the Soviet Union, could not have been more stark. As they were also far from the fighting in war-torn Europe, they did not experience bombs overhead or the immediate threat of an advancing army on their doorstep, although their early war experiences were a cause for significant and longstanding trauma (see Królikowski 2001).

At the same time, as Lingelbach shows, their life there was both 'free and restricted' by colonial administrators who regarded them with some suspicion. British officials saw the mainly poor and peasant-class Polish women and children as a threat to the image of white superiority: 'their class, nationality, gender and age made them a dubious group, in need of care and control' (Lingelbach 2022, p. 28). For Lingelbach, as 'white peasant folk' they had the potential to disrupt the imperial order of things—demarcated social rules that prevented sympathetic relations between the predominantly White colonisers and the non-White, and in Africa, Black imperial subjects.

The extent to which this issue was explicitly addressed would have differed between colonial administrations and contexts but the 'poor white problem' was, as Lingelbach shows, broadly tackled in three ways (Lingelbach 2022, p. 20) First, isolation, in that the camps were isolated from other villages and, therefore, in theory, the Black population. This did not always work, however, as local residents brought the camp's food and helped with maintenance. The Poles were also not imprisoned and, therefore, could leave the camp, even if this might have logistical complications via a lack of transport. Babcia, for example, spoke some Swahili, partially because of the conversations that were struck up between those in the camps and local villages.

Second, refugees were provided with material support as a way of lifting them to a level of wealth that made the gulf between them and Black subjects appear greater. The camps, for example, were permanent buildings rather than temporary tents, and, with respect to the refugee's standard of living, although 'not up to a European settler standard... it was better than that of most Africans living nearby' (Lingelbach 2022, p. 21). While it is difficult to determine to what extent this might have had a material impact, this point might be some indication as to how Babcia ended up with the bone knife that we will explore in the next section.

Third, refugees were either kept out of colonial nations in the first place or there were measures in place to make sure that they left promptly after the war. Refugees were not allowed to settle in the communities they had built during the war, despite many being happy. In order to encourage the Poles to leave, the camps were often downsized or left to deteriorate. The question of where these refugees would go after the war, however, was difficult to answer. The majority of the Poles refused to return to Poland due to Soviet domination after 1945, the Soviet regime being the cause of their wartime hardships and traumas (Nowak 2019). Many instead travelled to the Dominions, such as Australia, New

Zealand, Canada, or, in Babcia's case, in 1948, her older brother who had settled in Britain sent for her and her mother.

Babcia's childhood war ended with her and her mother travelling from Tanzania to Cape Town, and from Cape Town to Southampton. From Drohobycz to Southampton she had travelled approximately seventeen thousand eight hundred miles, which is just over two thirds of the equatorial circumference of the Earth. She would never return to Tanzania. She brought with her few possessions, except for her bone knife. By the time she came to the UK, this was one of the only things she and her mother had—not to mark their six years in Africa—but Babcia's sixteen years on earth. It is to the knife that we now turn.

### 3. Knives and Grandmothers

Babcia's knife is 7 inches long. It is of a cream colour, with a hilt that has a carved elephant with two beady black eyes. Its flat ears are almost half of the length of its 2.5 centimetre body. Near to the hilt, a 'Z' pattern has been etched into the bone, or ivory, it is made from. The main body of the knife is smooth and curved. It has a blunt, chipped blade, making it perfect for opening letters and, in the practical rather than aesthetic or emotional sense, very little else. Some of its grooves appear darker in tone where dirt and grime has lodged and discoloured the material. Some gold glitter nail polish marks one side of the elephant's body, which would result in any museum conservator having a heart attack. It is lightweight, and pleasingly reverberates if you tap it on your teeth: the method of any budding antiques connoisseur.

This knife alone, surely, cannot be tasked with representing the under-explored experiences of the Polish refugees. And yet, in a decidedly complex history, material culture can perform a useful role in helping us to think through some of the challenges in interpretations of those histories. As Zuzanna Dziuban and Ewa Stańczyk note, 'personal objects that survive conflict invite artistic and commemorative refashioning. often anonymous and veiled in mystery, such objects excite the imagination and inspire storytelling' (Dziuban and Stańczyk 2020). It is in this way that material culture can help us to generate reflections that allow for complexity rather than a flattening and dilution of experience into a simple narrative.

This is important as, for all their role as mimetic prompts, this has not always been *my* relationship with Babcia and the knife. Although she gave it to me, and this marked the many conversations we had, she never relied on it as a prompt to encourage her own memories. In some ways, she had a set narrative of her experiences, as is common when memories are composed for oneself or an audience. Rather than something that for her generated memories of her own past, the knife stood as a symbol of them. In this section then, I will frame four aspects through which to explore Babcia's knife that might open up a space for further dialogue about the Polish refugee experience. I have termed these four closely related, but distinct, aspects that might serve as a methodological framing device for thinking about material culture as: origins, aesthetics, context and relevance.

First, is the origins, by which I mean how the material came to be formed, created, processed, or possessed by the owner. Provenance is often one of the first things we know about with respect to how the material quality of an object comes to be transformed by meaning into material culture. The knife's accepted origins are that it was owned by Babcia and came from Tanganyika. It does not carry a trademark or inscription. Such a mark might usually imply that it is either the result of an artisanal making process or that it is so mass-produced it bears no sign of copyright. Given the interrelation of the personal with the material biography of the knife, however, it is likely that the lack of trademark confirms its origins as a bespoke, handmade item created by an individual, either for fun, or for monetary or trade value.

It is hard to fathom exactly what the knife's material quality meant during that time. It was made of bone or ivory, in a world where plastic was not endemic, and the experiences of Total War meant that non-essential resources would have been put towards the war effort. As Shallcross notes 'the overarching material and materialistic concerns were caused



by a degraded system of war economy driven by human and material losses, expensive technological innovations of the war machine, and a greatly simplified everyday survival of civilians' (Shallcross 2022, p. 146). Shallcross is writing predominantly about war-torn Europe, and this is a reminder first of how different the material quality of life was in the 1940s, and second how different Babcia's life in Tangyanika was from her fellow Poles who remained in Europe during the war.

The very fact that the knife existed in the possession of Babcia is a symbol of the powerful conjunction between individual biography and material culture—and, specifically, of the uniqueness of her experiences. And yet, behind this lies a hidden meaning. Existing during the war, this object acts, in the innovative framing of Susan Shupupli, as a 'material witness' and as evidence of a traumatic past (Schuppli 2020). Interestingly, the knife did not come from the most traumatic aspect of her life, the murder of her father and the forced deportation to Soviet camps. Regardless, this is *exactly* the point. Despite not coming from her home in Drohobycz, but from later in her wartime experience, this knife is a reminder not of the specifics of her pre-war life, but of what was lost.

The knife acts as primary evidence that Poles like Babcia were violently deported from their homes, and that from then on, their life courses were often dependent on random factors, chance encounters, and a desperate mode of survival. This is not insignificant, given the relatively marginal position of this history in Britain and, crucially, the veil of official silence that surrounded this history during the communist years in Poland until 1989.

In Europe too, scholars such as Maria Mälksoo have highlighted the competitive memory frameworks within a 'Western' European memory of the Second World War and the relatively historically liminal position of Polish and Baltic memories within this (Mälksoo 2010). Discussing the place of the gulag in European memory, Lidia Zessin-Jurek builds on Mälksoo's research regarding the politics of 'becoming European' to show how EU institutions such as the European Parliament have, since EU expansion in 2004, acted 'as a catalyst for the Eastern European memory and identity' (Zessin-Jurek 2022, p. 142). As she explores, this foregrounding of memories of the gulag and the victims of communism have often been pitted against memories of the Holocaust. It should be noted that victims of the Soviet system were often Jewish, and, more recently, the under-explored experiences of Polish Jews in the East, Soviet Central Asia and colonial spaces as part of these Soviet deportations have received academic attention (Grossmann 2017).

Babcia's knife is a reminder that, for every one material witness of a moment within a continuing traumatic history, there are millions of lost stories by those who, like Babcia's father, were murdered in the grinding cogs of Stalin's authoritarian power. This means that despite originating from her time in Tangyanika, the knife is a temporally complex object that both represents the time in Africa and also acts as a memorial reminder of the lost time—and traumatic experiences—before.

A second aspect for thinking about the knife is its aesthetic qualities, by which I mean the visual features including design, texture, colour and shape, which create meaning. Given the origins of the knife, the carved elephant at the hilt instantly shows the object to be from a colonial context. In Britain, where the cultural memory of the war often revolves around white British experiences and those on the Home Front, such aesthetics can challenge and expand on the war story.<sup>14</sup> Postwar myths routed in Churchillian rhetoric and people's war narratives revised the memory of the war as a struggle over imperial dominance.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, therefore, the carved elephant brings the centrality of the British Empire during the war to the fore.

The world of the British Empire was built on violence via trade. Quoting Nicholas B. Dirks' assertion that colonialism was a 'cultural project of control', Carsten Stahn explores how this was inextricably linked with 'cultural colonial objects', which he defines in the broadest sense to include things like man-made materials or natural objects with spiritual significance (Stahn 2023, p. 5).<sup>16</sup> For him, these objects 'not only reflect cultural identity or value, but serve at the same time as carriers of different forms of violence and memory, and as agents of transformation which may facilitate new relations through their affective

qualities, locality, or mode of representation or display' (Stahn 2023, p. 8). As the ownership of such objects from the colonial period in museums shows, these debates are not only far from over, but still shape prevailing discourses on the afterlives of colonialism.

To the unknowing eye, the elephant as aesthetic shows the knife to be colonial in origin. The object, therefore, might be seen to reflect the imperial, racialised order in the colonies. And yet, it does not do so in an uncomplex way. The Polish refugee camps did exist, as Lingelbach shows, within the 'white, imperial order of things'.<sup>17</sup> The restrictions placed on refugees as a result of fears by colonial administrators that they would disrupt racialised order, however, shows this as a power relation that had the potential to be challenged. Using Stahn's definition of a cultural colonial object as facilitating new relations, we might see how an object such as Babcia's knife can speak to and complicate these histories.

The context of the Polish refugee experience highlights the complexity of what the British Empire was and how it functioned in the 1940s. Much is made of the inherent 'good' or 'bad' nature of the Empire, and, as this history shows, the experiences of these refugees were very much more ambiguous than this dichotomous framing allows for. The Empire was a changeable form of governance that allowed for, on the one hand, the suspicion of refugees within a racially defined system and, on the other hand, granted them some modicum of security that, in contrast to their treatment in the USSR, seemed virtuous. Babcia's experiences were not those of colonial officials or their families, as the enmeshing of her biography with the biography of the knife goes to show, but that does not mean they were free of imperial conditions.

A third aspect for thinking through this history is in terms of context. By context, I mean how material culture accrues meaning through its life course. Objects are imbued with different meanings over their lifespans, but also in the context within which we understand them. This knife would have meant something very different to Babcia during her time in Tanganyika, and again something different in the postwar period. If she sometimes described her time in Tanganyika as a 'paradise', she often described her time in the UK in the immediate postwar period as 'hell'.

Britain, it was felt by many Poles, had betrayed them and their nation to the 'Soviet sphere of influence' (see Stachura 2004). Events such as the banning of Polish armed forces from the 1946 victory parade solidified the feeling that Poland had been 'sold down the river', something that, even as a child, I felt as a burning injustice. Anti-Polish rhetoric in the postwar era also marred many experiences in the UK. As this knife's incredible journey might have been an indication of, at that time, some Poles felt that they had no home of their own and instead could only be travellers to places of temporary sanctuary (See White and Goodwin 2019).

This knife, however, could also be read as a symbol of resilience which highlights the Polish contribution to the war effort. Babcia and her fellow refugee Poles were only in displaced person camps administered by the British because of the need to raise troops in 1941. In short, had the Poles not been seen as valuable or useful to the war effort, they might have been left in Soviet camps. Despite the anti-Polish postwar rhetoric, therefore, the knife solidifies the memory of Poles in British war history.

The influx of Polish people to the UK as a result of Poland entering the European Union in 2004 led to tensions over the appropriateness of Poles living in the UK. As this knife shows, Poland's war history was intertwined—in unexpected ways—with Britain's. While this has often been championed in popular representations via the contribution of Polish airmen, for example in the film *Battle of Britain* (1969), the history of the Polish refugees goes some way to show how significant this was.

Finally, the knife can be understood via a fourth aspect: relevance. By this, I mean how the knife can be used to make sense of the past in the present. A strength of the knife is that it can be used as a tool for discussing soon-to-be, on a popular level at least, incomprehensible histories that involve changing geopolitical alliances, and competing nation states, empires and political ideologies. The pre-war world Babcia was born into, and this knife was made in, has fundamentally changed almost beyond all contemporary

recognition. Babcia's home in the former east of Poland is now in Ukraine. Britain too, was part of a much larger British Empire until the mid-century era of decolonisation. The Eastern bloc fell in 1989, and with it decades of ideology and repression. As these histories ebb further into the past, contemporary societies struggle to understand the social, cultural and historical worlds they existed in.

A neat symbol of one such change is hidden in plain sight: the knife's purpose. While letter openers are not unrecognisable today, their function is largely redundant since the advent of digital communications like email over the past three decades. This knife encapsulates the complex ways that war memory works. The war, for some of the postwar generation, still feels close—and yet, as this knife's function shows, it is further than ever. The Second World War involved a mass of bureaucratic processes, a global mobilization of people via analogue means that are almost impossible to understand today. The ability of the knife to remind us of these changes, some geopolitical, some incremental, allows us to think about historical changes more fully and to ask what aspects of that past are most valuable to us as narratives today. It is to what the knife cannot show us that we now turn.

#### 4. Discussing the Many Unknowns

Sitting on the bookshelves in my bedroom, the importance of the knife is not immediately clear to the unknowing eye. In this setting, it looks like a tourist souvenir perhaps brought back from a trip to Africa or Asia, or found on websites like eBay or Amazon where all manner of mass-produced objects can be cheaply bought and sold. It is difficult to see, without context, the history of Babcia, specifically, or the Polish refugees, in general.

While much has been written about the voice and agency of objects over the past two decades, objects themselves cannot speak, and are dependent on the ventriloquisms of humans to give them narrative and meaning. In a museum, this is carried out through glass cases, interpretation labels and set designs like stylised backdrops. In a bedroom, which is free of organisational taxonomies, the object has no innate aura in the Benjaminian sense. As Shallcross reminds us, the 'complicated provenance and stories of war-marked artefacts require that they be looked at through a prism of a revised, nonbinary understanding of authenticity' (Shallcross 2022, p. 148). Wartime objects, therefore, push the definition of what constitutes an aura in highlighting a value derived from their biographies and those of their wartime and postwar owners.

While the knife can show us much about the past, it simultaneously highlights a great many unknowns. This has a specific impact on how we write histories that material culture makes physically visible. These unknowns—how do we know an object is what we believe it to be?—may be the reason why material culture studies remain 'negligible in the wider historiographies of Europe' (Dziuban and Stańczyk 2020, p. 382). This is so, even as there might be a 'material turn' in cultural heritage studies (see Miller 2010; De Cunzo and Roeber 2022). While having the answer to questions of material provenance and meaning would of course illuminate the object further and more fully, not having the answers, regardless, provides a springboard through which to think in a non-linear way about the role of objects in wartime lives. In order to group these unknowns, I will be using the four aspects outlined and defined in the previous section: origins, aesthetics, context, and relevance.

In terms of the knife's origins, the exact material it is made from is one of the many unknowns of the knife. I have attempted D.I.Y tests, for example, heating a needle to see what mark it makes when pressed on to the knife's surface, to work out if the material is ivory or bone. Such tests involve risk, in that they can damage the object. The exact material is important to know, because its value would be different depending on if it is made from cheaper bone or more expensive ivory. It would be useful to know how much the knife would have been worth in the 1940s, because how much it cost Babcia, a relatively poor refugee, shows us much about the financial circumstances she and her fellow refugees experienced.

At the same time, it might further illuminate Polish relations with the local population. While this knife belonged to Babcia, she was not the knife's first owner. We know nothing of who made the object, or their motivations. Not knowing this, however, might open up debate on how locals and the Polish refugees interacted, and how these relationships were regarded by colonial administrations.

We also do not know—or cannot prove—how she bought the knife, or how it came to be in her possession. Our understanding has always been that she obtained the knife after coming from Tanzania to the UK. And yet, we know that carrying mementos was challenging, given that refugees had to carry their possessions themselves. This makes the existence of something like a letter opener, which although practical is also something decorative, even more significant. This further allows us to interrogate systems of trade and bartering for the buying or swapping of material goods during wartime, and to think further about how refugees related to those material goods.

In terms of the second aspect, aesthetics, the knife is pleasingly small. It is visually arresting and marks her history as one of great hardship, as well as adventure. As a child or young teenager, the knife would have fitted well into Babcia's hands, although we do not know at what age she bought or received the knife. Such information would prove useful because it would help to explain the different cultural and social expectations, and the likes and interests of girls and young women at that time.

Its carved material shows it to be more decorative than functional, which makes it seem a slightly odd object for a young woman to have owned. A decorative knife is not something that a young child would play with, but, also, a knife is not something you would necessarily imagine would be bought by or for a girl, given the gendered implications of what was, essentially, owning a rudimentary weapon. These questions help to reframe the mimetic function of the knife, and create a space for discussions of both childhood and gendered experiences of war. As Stańczyk shows, rarely has research explored the childhood experiences of the refugees.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, although Kathy Burrell notes how in Polish narratives 'the spaces of combat have been filled disproportionately by the bodies of Polish men', Katarzyna Williams suggests this means that 'the personal narratives of post-war migration have to be disproportionately authored by women'.<sup>19</sup> What such an object would have meant to a child and what it would have meant to a woman are two things that the knife cannot answer. The knife does, however, open up a discussion on the potential for continuity and difference within those experiences.

In terms of context, the knife gives little away about how Babcia's wartime experiences shaped her postwar life. Upon her arrival in Bolton, so chosen because it was a hub of cloth making, Babcia would have had little money. Her Polish and Swahili dialects would have been of limited value, so it is striking that she did not sell the knife for a fee. In the postwar period, many wartime objects were bought and sold cheaply, as new lives were created and the war years were distanced from. Perhaps in the wash of objects that materialised, perhaps contradictorily, in the post-colonial period in Britain it may not have appeared to be of much value.

Importantly, I do not know the monetary value of the knife as it stands now. This bears little importance, as it holds a symbolic significance that outweighs any economic value it might have. The knife's value does not derive from the material or aesthetic quality of the object, as in, how expensive the materials it is made from are, but from the inherent relationship between object and person. For subsequent generations in my family, these material remnants have made solid our inherited memories, and helped to preserve wartime experiences, both on a personal and family level.

This is even as the knife has a touch of gold nail polish on the body of the carved elephant. Family objects, while meticulously taken care of, do not exist in museum stores; they are still living objects, and so are susceptible to the wears and tears of everyday life. While we do not know whose fingernails this might have come from, it does, regardless, highlight how objects are passed down and become symbolic of intergenerational transmission of wartime memories.

Finally, in terms of the fourth aspect, relevance, we do not know how fully this knife can represent the multiple aspects of Babcia's life and journey, because these life details are complex, private, and subject to the whims of personal memory. The linking of personal biographies and the fallibility of memory with material culture creates some of its biggest mysteries.

As the 'Popular Memory Group' reminds us, personal memories are always constructed in conversation with prevailing cultural forces (Popular Memory Group 1997, p. 76). It is here that material culture in the form of the bone knife meets cultural memory. While the material culture might be thought of as a cultural talisman of this history, it is still framed and given context by wider cultural histories of war.

Memory is, even with a material presence, prone to misremembering. As Alistair Thompson found in his study of Anzac veterans who began to recount their wartime experiences through popular imagery from the film *Gallipoli* (1981), the intersection between cultural representations and personal memories of war can produce a powerful language through which to translate experiences, even if these are wrong (Thomson 2013). As we do not have proof of purchase, for obvious reasons that it was acquired almost eighty years ago during wartime, there is a chance, although small, that the knife could have been bought after the war, for example, at nearby Wembley market, as a symbol of the experience. Over time, this symbolism could have taken on a quality within memory that saw the knife as originating from, rather than symbolic of, her journey. This is not to cast doubt on the validity of the provenance of the knife, but to highlight how, as with other historical sources, the uses of material culture can make visible the fallibility of personal memory.

## 5. Conclusions

To conclude, it is necessary to return to the two synchronic events that led to the conception of this article: the People's Forum IWM event and the gifting to me of Babcia's knife. Soon after these two happenings, I was invited to give a paper on the Polish refugee experience at the 2018 *New Directions in Research on the Second World War* conference at the University of Edinburgh. As a PhD student embedded in the Imperial War Museum, I was fascinated by how these stories appeared particularly pressing after the vote to leave the European Union in 2016, as museum professionals and academics clamoured to reconcile their pro-European stance as part of a reliance on a global museum network and the shifting narratives around European co-operation within the UK. I increasingly saw the experiences of the Polish refugees, because they married European wartime migration with British history, as a cohesive wartime narrative that could re-inscribe a complexity into how stories about the Second World War were told after Britain left the EU in 2016.

I suggested to the Second World War and Holocaust teams responsible for the transformation of the Museum that they could—because of their under-representation and ambiguity—feature the stories of Polish refugee migration in their forthcoming 2021 permanent Galleries. As part of my PhD, I had been participated in hours of design and planning meetings, academic advisory boards and community outreach events, which solidified the approach that the museum wanted to take in representing 'people stories' which made the war feel more emotionally engaging and relevant (Tomasiewicz 2020). In the attempts to represent individual stories, there was often a need to be vigilant over which narratives were told and how. Museums depend on their existing collections of objects, and these can, as with Babcia's knife, tell complex histories about war.

In the end though, Babcia's story, or a similar one, did not end up as a 'people story' in the Galleries. There was a suggestion that it might feature in the final gallery space, on immediate postwar life, but the period was full of historical events such as the Partition of India, the birth of the National Health Service and the experiences of the Windrush generation, which speak, in different ways, to the IWM's mission statement. Ultimately, within a limited-space, limited-word gallery every story fights for its place. This is not to say that these experiences are undeserving of representation, of course, but that there is



always a complex politics of representation that underpins which histories are displayed and which are not.

In this article I have reflected on some of the ways that material culture might come to embody family histories and individual biographies of under-represented histories. In doing so, I have explored the complex and contradictory wartime experiences of the woman I call Babcia, or grandmother, through forced deportation, starvation, seeking refuge in one of Britain's former colonies, and then settling in Britain and her postwar life.

Material culture must be carefully interpreted, and I have provided a broad set of methodological aspects for thinking about the knife. These are *origins*, meaning how the material came to be formed, created, processed, or possessed by the owner, *aesthetics*, meaning the visual features including design, texture, colour and shape that create meaning, *context*, as the ways material culture accrues meaning through its life course, and *relevance*, or how the knife can be used to make sense of the past in the present. While this article has aimed to be generative and reflective on the role of material culture and family histories in under-represented and lesser-known histories of the Second World War, it is hoped that this framework might provide a way of thinking about material culture in other contexts.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable as this is a family story about intergenerational memory with no quotes from participants.

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## Notes

- 1 My thanks to Bozena Marczyk and Anna Glowacka for research support, and to Lucy Kate Newby and Chris Kempshall for comment.
- 2 See the memoirs of the experiences in different national contexts in (Piotrowski 2008), as well as (Janowski 2012; Kwapisz Williams 2014).
- 3 See 'Exhibition's images of exile shed new light on the long shadow of war', University of St Andrews website, 23 May 2023 [last accessed 2 April 2024] <https://news.st-andrews.ac.uk/archive/exhibitions-images-of-exile-shed-new-light-on-the-long-shadow-of-war/>.
- 4 'Memory is Our Homeland: European refugees in Africa', Aljazeera website, 26 August 2021 [last accessed 2 April 2024] <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/witness/2021/8/26/memory-is-our-homeland-european-refugees-in-africa>. See also the film *A Forgotten Odyssey* (Wright and Naszynska 2000), as now found on YouTube or their website: <https://www.aforgottenodyssey.com/> [last accessed 2 April 2024].
- 5 Call for papers, *Genealogy Special Issue*, 'Wartime Ephemera and the Transmission of Diverse Family and Community Histories', 2023.
- 6 This quote is a direct transcription from the uncatalogued video of the event in the IWM archive; I also have a written transcription from participant observation.
- 7 This became the narrative for the Second World War Galleries; see (Clements et al. 2021).
- 8 Publications have emphasised the role of the people from the former Empire including for the First World War, (Olusoga 2014). For an academic exploration of the Second World War, see (Jackson et al. 2017).
- 9 On traumatic and war memories, see work by oral historians such as (Field 2012). On trauma and memory in general, see (Caruth 1995).
- 10 For more on the memory of war, see (Ashplant et al. 2000).
- 11 Though a popular account rather than academic, see Luke Turner's discussion of sexuality and the flattening and idolising of the war generation in (Turner 2023).
- 12 Many of the contributions by Nicholas J. Saunders and Paul Cornish have pioneered this; see (Saunders and Cornish 2014) and (Saunders and Cornish 2017).
- 13 See (Taylor 2009, p. 55). On the theme of 'Paradise' in Polish refugee experiences, see also Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa's art project *Paradise*, 2012.
- 14 For a good overview of the cultural memory, see (Noakes and Pattinson 2014).

- <sup>15</sup> For an exploration of these myths and the role of Empire in the war, see (Webster 2007) and (Jackson 2006).  
<sup>16</sup> (Dirks 2001, p.9), as discussed by (Stahn 2023, p. 5).  
<sup>17</sup> As discussed earlier, (Lingelbach 2022, p. 28).  
<sup>18</sup> As previously discussed (Stańczyk 2018).  
<sup>19</sup> (Burrell 2008, p. 74), as found in (Kwapisz Williams 2014, p. 442).

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