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“Communists Stealing Fish from Poor Mauritians”: The Polish People’s Republic’s Fishing Policies in the “Third World” – The Case of Mauritania, 1960–1980**

Abstract

This article discusses the fishing activities of the Polish People’s Republic in relation to the north-west African state of Mauritania from 1960 to 1980. Poland tried to exploit fishing opportunities in decolonizing and decolonized spaces to expand the reach of its fleet, acquire resources, and provide domestic employment. From the beginning of the Polish fishing industry’s expansion into the waters of north-west Africa in the 1960s, it had a choice: either respect the maritime sovereignty of coastal states or disregard it in the search of higher yield. Using reports found in the Archive of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMSZ) and those contained in the Central Archive of Modern Records (AAN), this article seeks to reconstruct Polish fishing activities off the coast of Mauritania from 1960 to 1980. It argues that Poland, despite being part of the socialist camp, which in its public diplomacy emphasized its support for decolonizing and decolonized states, was primarily interested in its own economic interests – even if securing them involved illegal activities. In this way, the article adds to the growing body of literature that problematizes the Eastern Bloc’s interactions with the “Third World” as it decolonized.

Keywords: Poland, Mauritania, socialism, fishing, decolonization

Słowa kluczowe: Polska, Mauretania, socjalizm, dekolonizacja, rybołówstwo

Introduction

On July 19, 1970, the crew of the Polish fishing trawler the *Likodyn* decided to escape from arrest on charges of illegal fishing from the ship’s resting place in

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the harbor of the Mauritanian port of Nouadhibou. Before they did so, the ship’s captain and first mechanic¹ called a meeting with the rest of the crew to plan their getaway. One crewmember was to check the mainland to see if anyone could stop their flight, and other crewmembers were to use force on their captors. At around midnight on July 19, several crewmembers approached their guards and disarmed them. The sole machine gun the guards possessed was emptied, the guards were told to get into a lifeboat, their weapon was returned to them, and they were pushed towards shore. The Polish ship then set sail for Poland via the Canary Islands, finally reaching the Polish port of Szczecin several weeks later.²

The escape of the *Likodyn* caused a major diplomatic incident between the People’s Republic of Poland and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, which was only resolved in June 1971, when the Polish fishing company *Gryf* paid a fine of \$120,000. The case of the *Likodyn* was not an isolated incident however, but rather was part of larger tensions caused by the Polish fishing industry’s desire to access Mauritania’s abundant fishing grounds located on its oceanic shelf, and Mauritania’s desire to protect its right to permanent sovereignty over natural resources. Mauritania’s aim to harness its fishing resources, and new international maritime laws and customs which came into force in the 1970s, led to restrictions on foreign ships fishing in its waters.³ Its territorial waters increased from 6 nautical miles (NM) to 12 in 1967, 30 in 1972 and 200 in 1979.⁴ This article will illustrate how Polish attempts to fish off the coast of Mauritania clashed with Mauritania’s attempts to defend its maritime sovereignty between 1960 and 1980.

From the mid-1950s onward, the Polish fishing industry expanded to fishing grounds across the world, and by the mid-1970s it had the nineteenth largest catch of any national fishing fleet – and easily the second largest fishing fleet in the Eastern Bloc after that of the USSR.⁵ Poland’s expansion in this field was assisted by the decolonization processes in Africa and Asia, which meant easier access to fishing grounds but also the possibility of fishing agreements with newly independent states.⁶ Poland’s primary motivation in its fishing expansion was to provide protein for the domestic market, as it was considerably cheaper to do so via fish than poultry or livestock. Additional advantages to

¹ I have decided to use this term as it was used in the archival sources.

² M. Krzeptowski, *Pół wieku i trzy oceany*, Morski Instytut Rybacki w Gdyni, Gdynia 2006, pp. 135–6.

³ Y. Tanaka, *The International Law of the Sea*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 3rd. ed. 2019, pp. 149–51.

⁴ D. Gibbs, *The Politics of Economic Development: The Case of the Mauritanian Fishing Industry*, “African Studies Review” 1984, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 79–93.

⁵ S. Cios, *Dyplomacja Polska i sektor rybacki*, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, Warsaw 2022, p. 53; and V. Kaczynski, *The Economics of the Eastern Bloc Ocean Policy*, “American Economic Review” 1979, vol. 69, no. 2, pp. 261–265.

⁶ For the Soviet experience in this regard, see A. Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955–1968*, Cornell University Press, London 2022, pp. 157–8, 212–3.

Poland included providing employment for its fleet and in the domestic canning industry, and the ability to export surplus fish to capitalist countries for profit.⁷ Poland's fishing industry had much to offer newly independent African states, which they lacked: it had a modern industrial fishing fleet, could offer training both on ships and in its universities, and could provide specialists to assist in the establishment of a modern, domestic fishing industry.⁸ Indeed, this was part of a wider trend emphasized by recent literature, which views Poland's maritime industry as an important tool in facilitating economic and diplomatic relations with the countries of sub-Saharan Africa.⁹ This article will illustrate how Poland's fishing industry was severely threatened by the expansion of coastal countries' territorial waters, and will show how the industry attempted to adapt to these challenges.

The article views Poland's fishing activities in Mauritania against the backdrop of Poland and the Socialist bloc's engagements with the "Third World" from the mid-1950s onward. This period saw the development of ambitious development plans put forward by Khrushchev's Soviet Union (1956–1964) towards the Third World. These plans aimed to convince countries of various ideological persuasions in Asia and Africa to choose the "non-capitalist path of development" to modernity, rather than that proposed by the capitalist West. After Khrushchev's ouster, his ambitious development plans gave way to a more pragmatic position under Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982), who focused more on assisting third world countries committed to Marxist-Leninism.¹⁰

Within the Eastern Bloc itself, there was a variety of different postures towards the countries of the Third World. Although the Soviet Union generally wanted Warsaw Pact countries to not directly oppose their policies in the Global South, they allowed a considerable amount of autonomy to their satellite states.¹¹ At

⁷ Z. Sójka, Z. Kasprzyk, *Polska polityka morską*, Wydawnictwo Morskie, Gdańsk 1986, pp. 75, 113, 116.

⁸ M. Zięćlik, *Możliwość współpracy gospodarczej polskiego rybołówstwa z krajami zamorskimi*, "Zeszyty naukowe Politechniki Szczecińskiej" 1964, vol. 58, 1964, pp. 119–25.

⁹ See I. Macqueen, *Shaka Zulu in the Polish People's Republic (PRL): Exploring South African-Polish Links in the Late Cold War*, "Cold War History" 2022, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 265–286; P. Gasztold-Señ, *Polish relations with Angola, 1975–89: Transfer of knowledge and military assistance with limited economic outcome*, [in:] *Globalizing Independence Struggles of Lusophone Africa: Anticolonial and Postcolonial Politics*, eds. R. Lopes, N. Telepneva, Bloomsbury, London 2024, pp. 191–211; J. Kozdra, *Alternative Infrastructures: Poland and the Shaping of Early Post-Colonial Nigeria, 1958–1970*, "Cold War History" 2025, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 219–244; and C. Lash, "Fishing for Profit?" *Socialist Bloc Inroads in Decolonised Spaces: The Case of Polish Fishing Co-operation in Senegal, 1960–1985*, "The International History Review" 2025, pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2025.2471767> (access: 21.08.2025).

¹⁰ See A. Iandolo, *The Rise and Fall of the "Soviet Model of Development" in West Africa, 1957–1964*, "Cold War History" 2012, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 683–704; J. Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2015; and D. Engerman, *The Second World's Third World*, "Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History" 2011, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 183–211.

¹¹ P. Muehlenbeck, N. Telepneva, *Conclusion*, [in:] *Warsaw Pact Intervention in the Third World: Aid and Influence in the Cold War*, eds. P. Muehlenbeck and N. Telepneva, I. B. Tauris, London 2019, pp. 326–332.

different periods of time, certain Socialist Bloc countries took strong supportive positions towards the Third World – for example, Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and East Germany in the 1980s – but these attitudes fluctuated over time.¹² Poland was perhaps the least committed of all Eastern Bloc countries toward the Third World, preferring to give “aid via trade,” especially during the era of Władysław Gomułka (1956–1970).¹³ This attitude did change slightly during the era of Edward Gierek (1971–1980), but other members of the Bloc generally considered Poland to be letting the side down concerning the Third World. Finally, during the era of Wojciech Jaruzelski (1981–1990), Poland experienced a major economic crisis and, in the process, shut down many of its embassies on the African continent.¹⁴ It is important to note that while Poland offered less support to Third World liberation causes than its Warsaw Pact allies, sometimes this was not the case. A good example of this was Warsaw’s offer of treatment to fighters from Western Sahara’s Polisario Front from the late 1970s onward. Apart from Poland, the only other Eastern Bloc country to do so was the GDR.¹⁵

Within this context, this article examines Poland’s fishing activities related to the north-west African state of Mauritania. Mauritania, which gained independence in 1960 and had formerly been a part of the French colony of French West Africa, led quite an adventurous foreign policy during the presidency of Moktar Ould Daddah (1960–1978). Its geopolitical position, straddling the Sub-Saharan African and Arab worlds, meant the ability to maintain friendly relations with both regions. The country also had cordial relations with both the West and the Eastern Bloc and China, although it was more closely aligned with the West and its former colonizers France.¹⁶ However, unlike some of France’s former colonies that remained dependent on French support, Mauritania took important steps towards self-sufficiency, including the expulsion of French troops in 1966, the establishment of its own currency in 1973, and the nationalization of the extremely valuable

¹² P. Muehlenbeck, *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2016; *Navigating Socialist Encounters: Moorings and (Dis)Entanglements between Africa and East Germany during the Cold War*, ed. E. Burton et al., De Gruyter Oldenbourg, Berlin 2021.

¹³ For work on Poland’s post-war attitude towards Africa post World War Two, see P. Gasztold-Seń, 2019, *Lost Illusions: The Limits of Communist Poland’s Involvement in Cold War Africa*, [in:] P. Muehlenbeck and N. Telepneva, *Warsaw Pact Intervention...*, pp. 197–220; C. Lash, *Taking Third World Solidarity with a Pinch of Salt: Socialist Poland’s Policies Towards 1960s Mali*, “Cold War History” 2024, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 187–208; and P. Puchalski, *Directed by Moscow? Communist Poland’s Policies in Decolonial Africa, 1918/1945–1964*, “Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość” 2023, vol. 41, pp. 93–112.

¹⁴ P. Gasztold-Seń, *Lost Illusions...*, pp. 200–202 and 209–213.

¹⁵ P. Gasztold-Seń and P. Grudka, *PRL i konflikt w Saharze Zachodniej: dekolonizacja, ekonomia i ograniczenia socjalistycznej solidarności z ruchami wyzwoleniczymi w czasie zimnej wojny*, “Dzieje Najnowsze” 2024, vol. 56, no. 1, p. 169.

¹⁶ M. A. Ojo, *The Foreign Policy of Mauritania*, “A Current Bibliography of African Affairs” 1986, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 347–361; and A. G. Pazzanita, *Mauritania’s Foreign Policy: The Search for Protection*, “The Journal of Modern African Studies” 1992, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 281–304.

French-owned MIFERMA iron ore mining company.¹⁷ Mauritania's geopolitical openness created opportunities that Poland and other Eastern Bloc countries could exploit.

This article is primarily based on archival material found in the collections of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Archiwum Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych, AMSZ) and the Central Archive of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych – AAN). These sources paint a vivid picture of Polish fishing activities off the coast of Mauritania from 1960 to 1980. The article is organized chronologically according to a tripartite structure: first, it explores the initial expansion of Polish fishing off the coast of northwest Africa, Polish-Mauritanian diplomatic relations, Mauritania's international fishing policies, and the first case of a Polish ship caught illegally fishing in Nouakchott's waters. Second, it examines the case of the *Likodyn*; third, it focuses on the Polish-Mauritanian fishing agreement that operated between September 1975 and December 1978. The article ends with a set of conclusions. The article argues that Polish fishing off the coast of Mauritania was driven exclusively by economic – and not ideological – motivations, leading the Polish fishing industry to consistently violate the African state's maritime sovereignty.

Polish Fishing Expansion in West Africa, Polish Relations with Mauritania and Mauritanian International Fishing Policies, 1960–1980

The decolonization of Africa and Asia, which accelerated in the second half of the 1950s, presented Eastern Bloc countries with opportunities to expand both diplomatically and economically in the space left behind by the departure of European colonial powers. It was easier for Warsaw Pact countries to gain influence in countries that took a more radical anti-colonial path, like Guinea under Ahmed Sekou Touré,¹⁸ but opportunities also existed in more Western-aligned countries, such as Nigeria.¹⁹

The fishing sector was one area in which the Eastern Bloc could expand as countries decolonized. The largest player in this regard was the Soviet Union, which had the largest Eastern Bloc fishing fleet and possessed the greatest economic resources. As part of its attempt to direct newly independent countries along “the non-capitalist path of development,” the USSR also supported the improvement of local fishing infrastructure. The most ambitious project was in Ghana, where the Soviets promised to develop the port city of Tema. The Soviets initially agreed to provide a host of fishing-related modernization pro-

¹⁷ C. Evrard, *Transfer of Military Power in Mauritania: From Ecouvillon to Lamantin (1958–1978)*, [in:] *Francophone Africa at fifty*, eds. T. Chafer and A. Keese, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2013, pp. 87–99; and A. Choplin and J. Lombard, “Mauritanie offshore.” *Extraversion Économique, État et Sphères Dirigeantes*, “Politique Africaine” 2012, vol. 114, no. 2, pp. 87–104.

¹⁸ See A. Iandolo, *Arrested Development...*

¹⁹ M. Matusevich, *No Easy Row for a Russian to Hoe: Ideology and Pragmatism in Nigerian-Soviet Relations, 1960–1991*, Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ 2003.

jects for the Ghanaians, but in the end, they only provided financial and technical assistance and trained fishermen in the USSR.²⁰

Poland neither prioritized relations with decolonizing countries nor possessed the resources of the Soviet Union, but Warsaw also sought opportunities in the fishing sector from the mid-1950s onward. Poland primarily sought cheap protein for the domestic market, and this led the Polish fleet to previously unexplored fishing grounds across the world, a process that was only slowed by the introduction by coastal countries of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) from the early 1970s forwards. Polish expansion in northwest Africa started with a research ship exploring the oceanic shelf off the coast of Morocco in 1958, followed by the first trial explorations by Polish trawlers in the region’s waters in 1959.²¹

Apart from these first explorations of African waters, the Polish fishing industry also signed agreements with West African states and private companies, based on modern fishing infrastructure that newly independent countries lacked. It is important to emphasize that Poland’s expertise in fishing and the broader maritime sector provided Warsaw with opportunities to develop economic and diplomatic relations with newly decolonized countries – opportunities that most Warsaw Pact countries, with the exception of the Soviet Union, simply could not match. The ability to offer expertise allowed Poland to penetrate the Nigerian market from the late 1950s onward and establish fruitful links with Angola after the country gained independence in 1975.²² In terms of fishing, this included agreements with Nigeria and Ghana, but the most significant early endeavor was the creation of a joint fishing venture, Soguipol, with Guinea in May 1961. As part of Soguipol, Poland fished in Guinean territorial waters, trained Guinean fishermen, delegated experts to the company, and also offered stipends for Guinean students at the National Marine Fisheries Research Institute in Gdynia.²³ Most of these agreements, however, encountered difficulties; the Guinean joint venture lasted only two years before it was shut down due to significant economic losses.²⁴

By the early to mid-1960s, Polish ships began to spread out across the West African continental shelf from the then Spanish Sahara (now Western Sahara) along the coast to Liberia. This expansion included the coastline of Mauritania.²⁵ Polish fishing was principally conducted outside of the 12 NM of territorial waters allowed according to international law. Fishing in northwest Africa was very productive for Polish ships, not only because it meant

²⁰ A. Iandolo, *Arrested Development...*, pp. 157–158, 212–213.

²¹ A. Gruzewski, *Wyniki eksploatacyjne i organizacyjne Polskiego rybołówstwa na wodach Afrykańskich i na południowym Atlantyku*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Szczecińskiej” 1964, vol. 58, pp. 88–89.

²² See I. Macqueen, *Shaka Zulu...*; Gasztold-Señ, *Polish Relations with Angola...*; J. Kozdra, *Alternative infrastructures...*; and Lash, “Fishing for Profit?”...

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ P. Gasztold-Señ, *Lost Illusions...*, p. 204.

²⁵ S. Cios, *Dyplomacja polska...*, p. 43.

avoiding the off-season in the North Sea (between November and March), but also because these waters were among the most fish-abundant in the world. The Polish fishing industry quickly became dependent on African fishing grounds. In 1962, one of Poland's most important fishing companies, Odra, caught 6 percent of its fish in Africa; by 1964, this figure had increased to 32.2 percent.²⁶

The 1960s were thus a period of expansion in West Africa and in general for the Polish fishing industry. However, a significant issue loomed as, due to the gradual implementation of EEZs in the 1970s, Poland lost access to many fishing grounds. In 1972, Mauritania instituted an EEZ of 30 NM; Senegal introduced a 122-NM EEZ, and in 1973 Morocco's EEZ was extended to 70 NM. From that point onward, Poland attempted to re-enter West African waters by signing agreements with coastal states.²⁷

In terms of Polish-Mauritanian relations during the Cold War, Poland never considered Mauritania to be an important partner, either politically or economically. Politically, Mauritania was not socialistically inclined, although it did strive for self-sufficiency from its former colonizer France.²⁸ In the field of natural resources, Mauritania had two major commodities to offer: iron ore from the MIFERMA mine,²⁹ which started operating commercially in 1963 and the plentiful fishing resources of its continental shelf.³⁰ Poland was never really interested in the import of iron ore due to its own domestic resources, meaning that fishing was by far the highest priority in Warsaw's relations with Nouakchott.³¹

After Mauritania gained independence in 1960, however, Poland initially explored the potential opportunities that presented themselves in the African state. In November 1965, Witold Stasinowski, the chargé d'affaires of the Polish embassy in Senegal, traveled for a week to Mauritania. He found the Mauritanian government to be very open to trade and cooperation with Poland, including the purchase of Polish fishing vessels.³² This visit led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Poland and Mauritania in December 1965. Despite this, Poland went on to have minimal trade and economic interactions with Mauritania – apart from in the field of fishing – and never opened a diplomatic post in the country.³³

²⁶ K. Chłapkowski, *Matka Odra: Przedsiębiorstwo Połowów Dalekomorskich i Usług Rybackich "Odra" w Świnoujściu 1952–2003*, Wydawnictwo Zapol, Szczecin 2012, pp. 61–64.

²⁷ S. Cios, *Dyplomacja polska...*, p. 54; and C. Lash, "Fishing for Profit?"...

²⁸ See A.G. Pazzanita, *Mauritania's Foreign Policy...*

²⁹ J. Yackee, *Investor-State Dispute Settlement at the Dawn of International Investment Law: France, Mauritania and the Nationalization of the MIFERMA Iron Ore Operations*, "American Journal of Legal History" 2019, vol. 59, no. 1, pp. 71–110.

³⁰ D. Gibbs, *The Politics of Economic Development...*, p. 80.

³¹ September 11, 1975, Archiwum Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych [hereafter: AMSZ], Departament V [hereafter: DV], 23/85, W-6, 20-1-75.

³² November 23, 1965, Archiwum Akt Nowych [hereafter: AAN], Ministerstwo Handlu Zagranicznego [hereafter: MHZ], 2/351/0/40/41/48.

³³ "Mauretania: Notatka informacyjna," May 24, 1977, AMSZ, DV, 13/81, W-7, 10-1-77.

In the field of fishing policy, Mauritania experimented extensively in the first twenty years after gaining independence. In 1965, the government established a national fishing fleet and a fish processing industry. As part of this process, Nouakchott instituted a parastatal company, SOMAP (*Société Mauritanienne de l’Armement à la Pêche* – Mauritanian Fishing Equipment Company), purchased thirteen vessels, and established coastal fishing infrastructure, including several fish processing plants. This stage, however, did not last long, and in 1969, SOMAP went bankrupt. From 1969 until 1978, Mauritania decided to rely on foreign fishing fleets to provide fish for the domestic market. As part of deals signed with over a dozen different countries, including the USSR and Poland, fishing vessels were allowed to operate in Mauritania’s expanding territorial waters in exchange for paying access fees. In addition to these fees, foreign states agreed to unload a percentage of their catch in Mauritania’s main port of Nouadhibou and to employ and train local Mauritians. The policy of reliance on foreign vessels did not assist Mauritania’s fishing industry; 95 percent of fish caught was not unloaded in the country, and foreign countries avoided hiring local Mauritians. Many foreign vessels fished illegally off the Mauritanian coast; this was not surprising, given that in 1973 the country only had four ships to carry out surveillance on its 987-kilometre coastline.³⁴

From the end of 1978, the Mauritanian government decided to shift gear considerably and chose a major change in policy direction by instituting its New Fishing Policy. As a result of this, first, all foreign fishing companies were obliged to establish joint fishing ventures with at least 51 percent Mauritanian ownership. Second, all foreign vessels were to land their catch in Mauritania or have it inspected at sea. Third, foreign firms had to establish fishing-processing plants on the Mauritanian coast over a two-year period. Fourth, foreign fishing firms had to employ at least five Mauritians. Although the Mauritanian government was flexible at times regarding these requirements, it meant that many foreign firms either made concessions or left Mauritanian waters. In the Polish case, it meant the cessation of the fishing deal signed in September 1975 and the end of its fishing off the Mauritanian coast.³⁵

Poland’s fishing industry began to explore the Mauritanian coast in the autumn and winter of 1965–1966, initially via scientists carrying out a survey of Mauritanian waters. Poland was the only Eastern Bloc country to fish off the Mauritanian coast between 1965 and 1970.³⁶ By mid-December 1966, Poland had already fallen afoul of Mauritania’s fishing authorities after two of its ships, the *Granik* and the *Barwena*, were accused of illegally operating in Nouakchott’s territorial waters. As a result, the Mauritanian government demanded the payment of a \$20,000 fine. It turned out that the Ministry of Shipping (*Ministerstwo Żeglugi*, [MŻ]) did not possess accurate information about

³⁴ D. Gibbs, *The Politics of Economic Development...*, pp. 81–83; W. Folsom, D. Weidner, *Mauritania’s International Fishery Relations*, “Foreign Fisheries Leaflet” 1977, no. 76–74, pp. 1–7; N. Pease, *Fisheries of Mauritania*, “Foreign Fisheries Leaflet” 1971, No. 73–77, p. 8.

³⁵ D. Gibbs, *The Politics of Economic Development...*, pp. 84–86.

³⁶ Folsom, Weidner, *Mauritania’s International Fishery Relations...*, p. 6.

Mauritania's territorial waters. In addition, the *Barwena* had docked in Dakar before heading to Mauritania and had not inquired of the applicable rules. Witold Stasinowski, Poland's chargé d'affaires in Dakar, attempted to resolve the incident. He traveled to Mauritania and was able to convince Nouakchott that the Polish fishing company operating the *Barwena* and *Granik* had been poorly informed about the regulations. As a result, he was able to negotiate the fine down to \$14,000. In his report on the episode, Stasinowski explained that Mauritania was ruthless at enforcing fines regarding its fishing zone, as this policy was used to supplement its budget.³⁷

The *Likodyn* incident – July 1970 to July 1971

On the morning of July 3, 1970, the *Likodyn* was fishing off the coast of Mauritania. At 8:15 a.m., an unmarked boat – which turned out to be a Mauritanian navy vessel – approached the trawler, accusing the *Likodyn* of fishing in Mauritanian territorial waters. *Likodyn's* captain, Włodzimierz Rogowski, contacted another Polish vessel nearby to verify the ship's position, receiving the confirmation that the *Likodyn* was 14 NM from the shore – thus outside Mauritania's 12 NM territorial waters. The Mauritanian navy insisted the ship had been fishing 10 NM from shore and ordered two crewmembers to accompany them to the port of Nouadhibou. The *Likodyn* itself moved closer to the shore and dropped anchor. Rogowski vehemently professed the ship's innocence based on the *Likodyn's* distance from the coast.³⁸

After the arrest, Polish diplomacy reacted to what it considered an illegal action by Mauritania. On July 4, Henryk Bojarski, the chargé d'affaires of the Polish embassy in Senegal, submitted a note verbale to the Mauritanian ambassador to Senegal, stating that the *Likodyn* had been arrested outside of Nouakchott's territorial waters and that he requested the ship to be released.³⁹ Bojarski then visited Nouadhibou between July 8 and 11, 1970, attempting to negotiate the vessel's return. Despite Bojarski's explanations, Mauritania insisted that the ship had been in its territorial waters and that a fine of \$110,000 would have to be paid.⁴⁰ Mauritania treated the incident seriously. On July 18, Stanisław Matosek, representing the Polish embassy in Algeria, visited the Algerian Foreign Ministry to request assistance in securing the release of the *Likodyn*. The director of the Algerian Political Department informed Matosek

³⁷ "Zatrzymanie polskich statków rybackich u wybrzeży Mauretanii," December 14, 1966, AMSZ, DV, 56/70, W-4, 36; "Dot.: trawlerów-zamrażalni 'Barwena' i 'Granik' – zatrzymanych 13.12.66 przez patrolowic mauretański," December 28, 1966, AMSZ, DV, 56/70, W-4, 36.

³⁸ "Protokół sporządzony 4 sierpnia 1970 r. na pokładzie statku bandery polskiej m/t 'Likodyn,' zacumowanego przy nabrzeżu bułgarskim w porcie Szczecin, w sprawie ustalenia przyczyny zatrzymania statku m/t 'Likodyn' u wybrzeży Mauretanii przez okręt wojenny bandery mauretańskiej," August 4, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

³⁹ "Note verbale," July 4, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

⁴⁰ "Notatka: dot. zatrzymania polskiego statku rybackiego 'Likodyn' przez władze Mauretanii," July 17, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

that Mauritania maintained such an intransigent position because many ships were fishing in its waters and the country was unable to defend its coast. As a result, it sought to ensure that incidents like this would not occur in the future.⁴¹

Mauritania also displayed an element of animosity to the countries of the Eastern Bloc. When captain Rogowski attempted to explain the situation to the governor of Nouadhibou and naval commander in mid-July, he stated that he heard the following accusations: “We will catch all of you communists, you are stealing fish from poor Mauritians,” and “You’re spying here for Kosygin, but you’ll have to pay a lot of dollars for that information.”⁴² Whatever the real reasons behind Mauritania’s treatment of the *Likodyn*, Polish diplomacy continued to pursue other avenues for the vessel’s release – that is, until it dramatically escaped on July 19, 1970. The crew explained that their decision to flee had been taken as several crewmembers had fallen ill, a situation which was exacerbated by a lack of freshwater and food provisions.⁴³

The escape of the *Likodyn* significantly aggravated the situation of the Polish fishing industry and Polish diplomacy with regards to Mauritania. In the immediate aftermath, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych*, MSZ) attempted to repair the damage that had been caused. The MSZ underlined that the escape had happened without the knowledge of the Polish fishing company and other Polish authorities, and that it sought to resolve the matter amicably so as not to damage Polish-Mauritanian relations. It also insisted that it would investigate the case and hold the guilty accountable.⁴⁴ Despite these efforts, a pattern soon became clear in the dialogue between Poland and Mauritania surrounding the incident. While Warsaw took responsibility for the ship’s escape, the Ministry of Shipping (MŻ) was still very hesitant to pay the fine related to fishing in Mauritania’s territorial waters, as it insisted the *Likodyn* was innocent of the initial alleged violation.⁴⁵ On the other hand, Mauritania treated the escape of the *Likodyn* as an affront to its honor and sought an official apology and the immediate payment of the \$110,000 fine.⁴⁶

These positions remained relatively static from the end of July 1970 until a breakthrough was achieved in March 1971, after a MŻ delegation visited Mauritania. Throughout this period, Mauritania repeatedly emphasized how offended it was by the escape of the *Likodyn*. During a meeting between Bojarski and the Mauritanian foreign minister on August 3, 1970, the minister

⁴¹ “Tow. Willmann,” July 18, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

⁴² “Oświadczenie,” August 3, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71: “My was wszystkich Komunistów wyłapiemy, wy kradniecie ryby biednym Mauretańczykom [...], wy tu szpiegujecie dla Kosygina, ale będziecie płacić dużo dolarów za te informacje.”

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ “Matosek – Algier,” July 21, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

⁴⁵ “Instrukcja dla Ob. Bojarskiego do rozmów ze stroną mauretańską,” July 25, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

⁴⁶ “Tow. Napieraj,” July 27, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

stated that the crew of the *Likodyn* had perpetrated a “common assault” on Mauritanian authorities while escaping. He explained that the crew had been treated well during their arrest, as befitted the representatives of a friendly country, and this trust had been taken advantage of.⁴⁷ On September 13, 1970, Edward Wychowaniec, the Polish ambassador to Algeria, traveled to Mauritania to discuss the *Likodyn* incident. While talking to the Mauritanian minister of fishing he was told that “the nation and the army were deeply offended and cannot forgive this without satisfaction.”⁴⁸ On November 17, 1970, the Mauritanian foreign minister informed Poland that they required the payment of the fine and that “they don’t recommend any Polish ships to approach their waters.”⁴⁹

It took Poland, and especially the Ministry of Shipping, a long time to understand that Mauritania was not willing to forgive and forget. The Polish fishing industry continued to deny that the *Likodyn* had committed a crime and was slow to realize that this was the key condition for resuming potential fishing cooperation with Mauritania. Instead, the industry sought to gain access to Mauritanian waters without initially resolving the *Likodyn* case, something Mauritania would not accept. On September 4, 1970, the MŻ considered a proposal offering a series of fishing-infrastructure-related benefits to Mauritania in exchange for the right to fish in its waters, without mentioning the *Likodyn* incident.⁵⁰ A month later, the MŻ further considered gaining access to Mauritanian waters, this time proposing the transfer of a ship to Mauritania as compensation for the *Likodyn* affair.⁵¹ By the end of November 1970, the MŻ was considering paying the fine to gain direct access to Mauritanian waters.⁵²

The situation finally came to a head when a Polish MŻ delegation traveled to the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, in early March 1971 to discuss fishing in Mauritanian waters and resolve the *Likodyn* incident. The Polish delegation presented its proposal to resolve the issue; it would provide Mauritania with four fishing vessels worth approximately \$120,000, student scholarships and work experience slots for six Mauritians in Poland, and a survey of Mauritanian fishing waters carried out by Polish marine researchers. All of this was offered to get access to Mauritania’s territorial waters. As a last resort, the MŻ

⁴⁷ “Notatka z rozmowy z Ministrem Spraw Zagranicznych Mauretanii w sprawie statku m/t *Likodyn*,” August 4, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71: “Zwykły rozbój.”

⁴⁸ “Tow. Wilski,” September 15, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71: “naród i armia zostały głęboko obrażone i bez satysfakcji nie mogą tego wybaczyć.”

⁴⁹ “Tow. Wilski,” November 18, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71: “nie radzą zbliżać się do ich wód żadnemu statkowi polskiemu.”

⁵⁰ “Algier – Wychowaniec,” September 4, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

⁵¹ “Algier – Wychowaniec,” October 15, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

⁵² “Minister Spraw Zagranicznych – Towarzysz dr Stefan Jędrzychowski w miejscu,” November 30, 1970, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

was prepared to pay a \$15,000 fine for the *Likodyn* incident, even though it believed the ship had not broken the law.⁵³

The Mauritanian negotiating party, which was made up of Ibrahima Kane, the secretary general of the Ministry of Shipping and Fishing, and Ibrahim Ba, the director of the Fishing Department of the same ministry, was happy with the proposals. Despite this, Kane informed the Polish delegation that Mauritania was proud enough to say it would only discuss the terms of access to its waters once the *Likodyn* issue had been resolved. He explained that there had even been a special cabinet meeting to discuss the *Likodyn* incident and that “It’s a case without precedent in international relations and our position is final.”⁵⁴ The meeting finally convinced the MŻ that the *Likodyn* fine had to be paid before there was any chance of gaining access to Mauritanian waters. The \$120,000 fine was eventually paid in the summer of 1971.⁵⁵

The Polish-Mauritanian fishing agreement – September 1975 to December 1978

As soon as Poland had resolved the *Likodyn* incident, it continued to seek access to Mauritania’s territorial waters. During the second half of 1971, a series of memorandums and notes were exchanged by the Polish Ministry of Shipping (MŻ), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MSZ), and Ministry of Foreign Trade (*Ministerstwo Handlu Zagranicznego*, [MHZ]) concerning the establishment of a fishing agreement with Mauritania. For example, at the end of July 1971, the MŻ repeated its offer from March 1971 regarding the transfer of ships, the training of Mauritanian fishing personnel, and the provision of a fishing survey of Mauritanian waters in exchange for the fishing rights.⁵⁶ Despite these efforts, no agreement was reached for several years.

By the mid-1970s, the pressure had increased considerably on the Polish fishing industry as a result of the world extension of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). This forced the industry to look for agreements wherever they could be found. Unfortunately, this desperation led to the signing of fishing agreements in a messy and uncoordinated manner with countries to which Poland had little to offer and which, in turn, were of limited benefit to Poland.⁵⁷ It was in this context that Poland eventually signed a fishing agreement with Mauritania. The prelude to this agreement was the delivery of Polish ambassador

⁵³ “Instrukcja dla delegacji polskiej do rozmów ze stroną mauretańską w sprawie incydentu statku ‘Likodyn’ i uzyskania koncesji dla polskich statków do połowów w mauretańskiej strefie rybołówczej,” February 4, 1971, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

⁵⁴ “Sprawozdanie delegacji polskiej z podróży służbowej do Mauretanii w sprawie uzyskania koncesji na połowy dla polskich statków rybackich w granicach mauretańskiego morza terytorialnego i ostatecznego załatwienia incydentu m/t ‘Likodyn,’” March 10, 1971, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71: “jest wypadkiem bez precedensu w stosunkach międzynarodowych i nasze stanowisko jest ostateczne.”

⁵⁵ “Tow. Wilski,” July 28, 1971, AMSZ, DV, 31/75, W-1, 36-1-71.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ S. Rymaszewski, *Rozbitek z “Arki” Gdynia: Wspomnienia*, Wydawnictwo Marpress, Gdańsk 2005, pp. 191–197, 217.

to Algeria Antoni Karaś's letter of credence in October 1974. Karaś spoke to the Mauritanian president, Ould Daddah; the foreign minister, Hamdi Ould Mouknass; and the minister of planning and industrial development, Sidi Mohamed Ould Sheik Abdallahi. The tone of the conversations was cordial, Ould Daddah expressed Mauritania's interest in employing fishing specialists from Poland, Ould Mouknass remarked that the *Likodyn* matter was closed, and Ould Shiek Abdallah said Nouakchott was happy to receive a Polish fishing delegation to sign a fishing agreement.⁵⁸

The fishing deal signed in September 1975 permitted Polish ships to have access to Mauritanian territorial waters starting six NM from the coast. The agreement was to last for a period of five years, and could have been extended for another two years, with each side permitted to withdraw from the deal a year before its completion. As part of the agreement Poland, promised to assist Mauritania in carrying out a survey of its fishing waters, to sell ships to Mauritania or establish a Polish-Mauritanian joint venture, and to support the development and application of new technology to process fish products. Poland also agreed to supply naval equipment and promised to employ some Mauritians on its fishing vessels.⁵⁹ This kind of agreement was typical of the fishing agreements Mauritania signed at the time.⁶⁰ As part of the agreement, the two sides were to create annual amendments setting out the terms of the contract. For the first twelve months, five ships with a total tonnage of 1,000 tones could fish in Mauritania's waters. In return, Poland agreed to grant ten stipends to Mauritanian students, and each Polish ship was to employ five Mauritians.⁶¹

Even though the Polish fishing industry had sought access to Mauritania's territorial waters for the preceding five years, the agreement was a failure and was never fully operational. The primary reason for this was that the Polish fishing industry did not agree to the Mauritanian demand to transfer a certain amount of its catch to a designated Mauritanian company. For Poland, this was time-consuming and not economically viable, and this angered Mauritania, as it needed the fish to supply its domestic fish-processing plants. A second, related reason was that the agreement stated that Poland would fish using small ships in Mauritania's waters, even though Poland knew at the time of signing that it did not have vessels of the required size. A third factor was the Polish fishing industry's belief that the Mauritanian navy was prone to provocative actions against Polish ships fishing off the Mauritanian coast.⁶² Another chal-

⁵⁸ "Sprawozdanie z podróży służbowej do Senegalu i Mauretanii w dniach 15.-16.X i 17-23.X.1974 r." March 20, 1975, AMSZ, DV, 8/81, W-2, 20-1-75.

⁵⁹ "Sprawa popisanego 17 IX. 1975 r. porozumienia o współpracy w dziedzinie rybołówstwa morskiego," September 17, 1975, AMSZ, DV, 23/85, W-6, 23-1-79.

⁶⁰ W. Folsom, D. Weidner, *Mauritania's International Fishery Relations...*, pp. 1-7.

⁶¹ "Proces-verbal: Portant application de l'accord de pêche Polono-Mauritanien du première année," September 17, 1975, AMSZ, DV, 23/85, W-6, 23-1-79.

⁶² "Aktualne zagadnienia współpracy w dziedzinie rybołówstwa Polska-Senegal-Mauretania-Gambia," March 20, 1978, AMSZ, DV, 38/83, W-7, 23-6-78.

lenge was the high cost of the licenses in Mauritania compared to those in other countries with which Poland cooperated in the region.⁶³ Finally, as Mauritania changed their fishing policy at the end of the 1970s, it pressured Poland to establish a fishing joint venture in the country. Poland was not prepared to do so, which led to the termination of the fishing agreement.⁶⁴

Although the fishing deal was never operational, the Polish fishing industry continued to send vessels into Mauritania’s territorial waters. In mid-July 1977, the Polish ship the *Konger* was fired upon by the Mauritanian navy as it attempted to escape after fishing illegally. Mauritania proceeded to seize the *Konger*, along with five other Polish ships caught in its waters. It turned out that the *Konger* and two additional ships had been illegally fishing, while the remaining three had been waiting to transport the catch back to Poland. As a result of the ships’ actions, Poland had to pay a fine of \$600,000.⁶⁵ The Polish ambassador to Mauritania, Marian Stradowski, reported in March 1978 that the Polish fishing industry was taking a calculated risk by trawling in Mauritanian waters, but he believed the risk was too great due to the fines accrued.⁶⁶

Indeed, the attitude of the Polish fishing industry seems to have been consistent across West Africa. The Polish ambassador to Senegal, Mirosław Żuławski, in November 1977 strongly criticized the reckless manner in which the Polish fishing industry was operating in the region. He stated that in Senegal, Mauritania, and Gambia, Polish vessels had attempted to escape when caught fishing illegally. Speaking specifically in the context of Senegal,⁶⁷ where Poland had a similar agreement to the one with Mauritania, Żuławski explained that the systematic infringement of Dakar’s territorial waters – while ostensibly due to ignorance of the local maritime laws but in fact a calculated risk to increase yield – had to stop if Poland was to continue to fish in Senegal’s waters.⁶⁸

Conclusion

After the end of the fishing agreement, Polish relations with Mauritania came to a complete standstill. Although Poland was still interested in regaining access to Mauritania’s territorial waters, this desire never amounted to anything.⁶⁹

⁶³ “Notatka w sprawie oceny współpracy z Senegalem w zakresie rybołówstwa morskiego,” December 1, 1980, AAN, U[rząd] G[ospodarki] M[orskiej], 3/59.

⁶⁴ “Obserwacje, refleksje i niektóre wnioski wynikające z okresu mojej pracy w Senegalu, Mali, Mauretanii i Gambii: Okres: 1.10.1977 do 31.8.1980 r.” October 31, 1980, AMSZ, DV, 25/86, W-3, 023-1-81.

⁶⁵ “Sprawozdanie z podróży służbowej do Mauretanii i Senegalu w dniach 21-30.7.1977 r.” August 2 1977, AMSZ, DV, 13/81, W-7, 0-36-1-77.

⁶⁶ “Aktualne zagadnienia współpracy w dziedzinie rybołówstwa Polska-Senegal-Mauretania-Gambia,” March 20, 1978, AMSZ, DV, 38/83, W-7, 23-6-78.

⁶⁷ See C. Lash, “Fishing for Profit?”...

⁶⁸ “Uwagi i doświadczenia dot. pracy na stanowisku Ambasadora PRL w Senegalu w okresie 12 stycznia 1974–30 sierpnia 1977,” November 2, 1977, AMSZ, DV, 13/81, W-9, 023-5-77.

⁶⁹ “Dot. sprawy konwencji rybołwczej z Senegalem,” January 6, 1986, AMSZ, DV, 35/89, W-6, 31-1-86.

This article has shown that Poland's relations with Mauritania in the first two decades of the north-west African state's independence were almost exclusively driven by the fertile fishing grounds laying off Nouakchott's coast. This was part of the broader expansion of the Polish fishing fleet in postcolonial regions from the end of the Second World War onward. This expansion was fueled by domestic exigencies, as it provided work for the Polish fishing fleet, jobs for the canning industry, and – most importantly – food for the domestic market. The Polish desire to exploit the fishing opportunities off the coast of Mauritania was met with a firm response from Nouakchott, which was determined to defend its maritime sovereignty. The clash between a Polish fishing industry seeking to extract marine resources and a Mauritania determined to protect its resources was a constant throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

The article has presented multiple examples of how Poland disregarded Mauritania's maritime sovereignty and demonstrated a lack of respect for the newly independent state. First, in 1966, several Polish ships were caught illegally fishing in Mauritania's territorial waters, resulting in a financial penalty. Second, during the *Likodyn* incident in 1970–1971, while the Polish vessel may have been treated harshly by Mauritania, both the brazen escape of the ship and the failure to grasp the indignity inflicted on Nouakchott were not well understood. Finally, although Poland did sign a fishing agreement with Mauritania in September 1975, it was neither willing nor able to meet the terms of the agreement. To add insult to injury, during the period of the fishing deal, the Polish fishing industry continued to send its ships illegally into Mauritanian waters in search of higher yields.

The article makes several main additions to the literature on Eastern Bloc states' encounters with "Third World" states as they decolonized. First, it shows, like other recent literature on Warsaw Pact states, that Poland had a good amount of autonomy with the countries of the Global South if they did not directly oppose Moscow's policies. Poland's decisions related to Mauritania were defined by its domestic priorities (access to protein resources) rather than by larger alliance responsibilities. Second, the article adds to the literature suggesting that economic concerns, rather than ideological ones, were more important to Eastern Bloc states in their relations with Third World states. In the Polish case concerning Mauritania, ideological concerns very rarely came into play. Indeed, the Polish fishing industry focused almost exclusively on boosting fishing yields, with minimal consideration of how these policies might adversely affect Poland's diplomatic relations with the countries of the Global South. Finally, it underlines that, despite Poland's overall treatment of Mauritania, Warsaw's fishing and maritime industries served as important tools for establishing relations with newly decolonizing states in sub-Saharan Africa.

As a concluding remark, it is important to consider whether Warsaw would have behaved in quite such an exploitative manner toward Mauritania if the country had pursued a socialist path, as other African countries did in the 1960s and 1970s. It is impossible to answer this question, but it is probable that Poland would have sought to achieve its aims in a less openly neocolonial

manner. In the case of Mauritania, there did not seem to be any major constraints on Poland's actions, whereas this may have occurred in interactions with a socialist-friendly state. Whatever the reasons Warsaw chose such a path toward Mauritania, the case study clearly underlines that the official Eastern Bloc rhetoric of anti-imperialism did not match Poland's actions in one newly decolonized country of sub-Saharan Africa. Polish policies in Mauritania were just as exploitative as the neocolonial practices that it and other members of the Bloc denounced at international forums.

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