

Anti-Semitism in Poland: Each Pole *Is* a Jew (Too)

Tomasz Kamusella
University of St Andrews

Polish Nationalism and Modern anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism as a widely accepted political ideology of modern Europe swept the continent from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. From the Dreyfus Affair in France (1894-1906); the notoriously anti-Semitic Mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger (1897-1910); and from the slanderous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903) and pogroms in Imperial Russia (including Poland) to the anti-Semitic laws of exclusion and prohibition in Germany, Italy and elsewhere across the authoritarian Europe of the 1930s, and to the Holocaust. Not surprisingly nascent Polish nationalism closely emulated this then widely accepted anti-Semitic model. Formulated at the turn of the 20th century, the ideology postulated building a nation of Polish-speaking Catholics, who should be housed in their own nation-state. Such a national Poland was *not* to be shared with 'foreigners,' or any non-Polish-speakers or non-Catholics.

This novel definition of the ethnolinguistically and ethnoconfessionally delineated Polish nation deftly bridged the centuries-long sociopolitical cleavage between the freshly emancipated masses of Slavophone Catholic serfs-turned-peasantry, on the one hand, and the Polish-Lithuanian nobility-turned-Polish national intelligentsia and landowners, on the other. This Polish ethnolinguistic nationalism blurred the salient fact that the latter exploited the former as late as the 1860s. A noble would never marry a serf, but another noble, even if she or he did not speak any Polish or professed another religion. Among nobles the shared pan-European estate status and identity trumped any linguistic or confessional differences. Peasant parties in the former Polish-Lithuanian lands emerged first during the 1890s in Galicia, but did not adopt Polish nationalism as an element of their programs until the Great War. The continuing estate-based distrust between Polish-speaking and Catholic descendants of serfs and Poland-Lithuania's nobility continued in one guise or another until the fall of communism in 1989. That is how difficult it was to overcome the centuries-long exploitation of serfs by nobles, even if half-forgotten and five to seven generations removed from the present moment.

The construction of this linguistic-cum-confessional national commonality for all Polish-speaking Catholics, despite their social (estate) differences was based on the conscious *othering* and ideologized *exclusion* of non-Slavophones (Germans, Jews or Roma) and non-Catholics (Jews, Protestants, Greek Catholics and Orthodox Christians). In this discriminatory scheme of Polish nationalism, Jews were *doubly* excluded, due to their community language of Yiddish (and Hebrew) and their Judaist religion. In the Polish-nation state founded in 1918, German-speaking Protestants were lukewarmly accepted as members of the Polish nation, as long as they excelled in their loyalty to this new nation-state and mastered Polish to a high level. Interwar Poland's dictator, Józef Piłsudski, showed the way by converting from Catholicism to Lutheranism for the sake of his second marriage. Although distrustful of Slavophone Belarusians and Ukrainians, the country's authorities saw Greek Catholicism as a potential ideological bridge leading

from Orthodoxy to 'true Catholicism' that would eventually ensure the swift Polonization of both minorities. Furthermore, 'godless Soviet communism' functioned as quite a deterrence that by default pushed many Belarusians and Ukrainians toward Polishdom.

The Interbellum Polish Nation-State: anti-Semitism and the Grudging Acceptance of Jews

The vast majority of Polish (ethno)nationalists, led by Roman Dmowski, did not predict such concessions for Jews, even if they converted to Catholicism and spoke impeccable Polish. Poland's confessionally- and ethnically-neutral democracy was over in 1922, when after a single week in office the Polish nation-state's first-ever President, Gabriel Narutowicz, was assassinated by a Polish ethnonationalist. The President's perceived 'sin' was the fact that he won the election thanks to votes cast by Jews and other national minorities. In the eyes of Dmowski and Polish nationalists, still prior to the rise of the racialized ideology of national socialism in Germany, Jews were a 'biologically defined race apart.' In this racist view, Jewishness was posed to be a 'genetic makeup' or 'condition' of which one would never be able to divest oneself by the means of culture, that is, language and religion. For the sake of Polonizing interwar Poland's non-Polish-speakers and non-Catholics, who were not Jews, the authorities first bilingualized the minority education systems. By the turn of the 1930s, Polish had been introduced as another (increasingly leading) medium of education alongside the minority language. Subsequently, in the latter half of the 1930s, Polish became the sole medium of instruction in minority schools, the minority language reduced to one of the school subjects.

However, such measures were *not* levelled against minority Jewish schools in interwar Poland. No steps were taken to replace with the Polish language Yiddish, Hebrew, German or Russian that commonly served as media of education in Jewish minority schools. But on the other hand, no privileges were accorded to these Jewish schools which patriotically introduced Polish as their language of instruction. The goal was to separate 'Them-polluting-Jews' from 'Us-racially-healthy-Poles.' In line with interbellum Europe's anti-Semitism, increasingly steeped in the discriminatory rhetoric and practices of eugenics and 'racial hygiene,' the 'genuine Polonization' of Jews was deemed an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. Practitioners of the *Rassenkunde* ('science of race') 'proved' this impossibility on the basis of their meticulously conducted 'scientific research.' However, it was no surprise that during the 1930s the Polish army openly trained over 10,000 Zionist (Jewish nationalist) paramilitaries.¹ The aim was to get them ready for struggle against the British police and troops in Mandatory Palestine. The Polish government hoped that in this way Jews might win their own state, and then would leave Poland, which after all was 'not their' country.

Modern anti-Semitism's slogan is 'Go back home, Jew,' be it Palestine, Madagascar, Birobidzhan, Uganda or the United States. The tacit racist assumption is that Jews were not, are not and will never be Europeans. Despite the fact that Jews have lived in Europe

¹ Jakub Ostromecki. 2018. Betar, Hagana i Irgun w polskiej szkole. *Polska Zbrojna*. 25 Nov. www.polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/26945?t=Betar-Hagana-i-Irgun-w-polskiej-szkole#. Accessed: Aug 14, 2019.

and co-created the continent's culture and economy for over two millennia. Jews lived, worked and prayed in Europe centuries before such states as France, Germany, Hungary or Poland were ever founded. Racialized anti-Semitism seeks to make Jews into a colonial other that 'rightly belongs to' outside of Europe. Maybe somewhere in Europe's colonies among 'the natives,' but not *in* Europe. This attitude explains why, in the course of the Holocaust, Jews were the first to find themselves at the receiving end of such initially colonial instruments of ethnic cleansing and genocide as concentration and extermination camps, death by engineered starvation, death by work, or death by bullets.

The Holocaust: The *Judenfrei* Polish Nation

During World War II, in their vast majority, Polish Catholic co-nationals (or at least, co-citizens) – be them of noble or serf origin – did not feel any commonality with or responsibility for Poles of the Jewish religion or Poles of any religion, who in light of Nazi Germany's legislation were deemed to be Jews. Nine tenths of such Poles of Jewish religion or origin (however defined) perished in the Holocaust. The 300,000 survivors were unable to return to their towns and villages. Fellow Poles of the Catholic religion had already repossessed their movable property and real estate, all three million of Poles of Jewish religion or origin presumed 'safely' dead. It was not any fault of Catholic Poles, because it was the Germans exterminated 'Jews.' In no time the arrival of lonely Holocaust survivors falsified this self-exculpatory and mendacious narrative. Survivors might denounce Catholic Poles who had assisted the Germans in their hunt for Jewish Poles, and even might dare to demand back their property.

Catholic Poles in impoverished towns and villages 'had no choice' but to rough up or even slay survivors for the sake of preserving the narrative that it was only the Germans who had 'disappeared' Jews during the war. No one knew or wanted to know where to their neighbors of the Jewish religion or origin had been 'disappeared.' Survivors challenged Catholic Poles with this knowledge and faced them with their own guilt of passively or actively siding with the Germans, becoming accessories to the Holocaust. The mass theft ('Aryanization') of houses, workshops, land, cemeteries, machinery, furniture, money, jewelry and other household effects from Poles of the Jewish religion or origin also played a role. No one planned to part with this property, which had already got used to belong comfortably to their 'rightful' Catholic Polish owners. Many continued to visit surreptitiously the grounds of the former extermination camps established and run by wartime Germany. No, not to pay respect or to search for the earthly remains of their dear neighbors of the Jewish religion or origin so that to ensure decent burials for them. Not at all. But to dig, sift and pan through the dead's ashes in quest for gold and diamonds. To continue robbing their neighbors even after their untimely deaths.

Communist Poland: anti-Semitism Without Jews

The silence, Omertà, sealed this unspeakable crime and underwrote the lasting national-cum-Catholic union between noble Poles and Poles of serf origin. The 'Others' conveniently 'vanished.' As a result, the unity of the Polish nation, as promised by Dmowski's nationalists, was at long last attained on the solid basis of the 'left over'

property of Poles of the Jewish religion or origin. In order to further conceal its origin, such property was dubbed as *niczyje* ('belonging to no one'), *porzucone* ('abandoned') or *poniemieckie* ('formerly belonging to a German'). After a string of postwar pogroms, most survivors, fearing for their lives, left for big cities and especially for Lower Silesia. This region was recently 'cleansed' of Germans and passed to Poland on the basis of the Potsdam Agreement. The founding of Israel in 1948 convinced numerous survivors to give up on Poland for good. They either joined the construction of this brand-new Jewish polity or emigrated to North America. Interwar Poland's army and administration finally achieved their cherished dream of emptying Poland of Poles of the Jewish religion or origin. Nothing doing, that this 'achievement' took place in freshly communist Poland. Communism was less of an obstacle to be a Pole than Jewishness.

When in 1956 the pretense of Poland's ethnically-blind international communism was over, most of the remaining Poles of the Jewish religion or origin left this country during the latter half of the 1950s. In addition, Poland's national communists deepened the national Omertà by largely ending the persecution of former noble and bourgeois Poles. Instead, they focused on urbanization and industrialization, which enabled the swift social advancement of Poles-peasants (descendants of serfs) rapidly turned into Poles-workers. In 1968, a challenge to the incumbent administration, stemming from the communist party's own ranks was met with the reunifying national fire of another anti-Semitic act of ethnic cleansing. The *very last* remaining Poles of the Jewish religion or origin were compelled to leave. The national Omertà 2.0 released more property and, especially, positions in the administration and academia for 'real Poles.' This development constituted a renewing boost to the noble-serf union of the Polish nation, previously somewhat undermined by the class war, which the communist party had waged against the 'bourgeois enemies of the toiling masses.'

After 1945, in postwar Poland there were no localities left with pluralities of inhabitants who would be Poles of the Jewish religion or origin. Until 1948, such pluralities had emerged in some towns and villages across 'post-German' Lower Silesia. They came to a rapid end after 1956, while the 1968 ethnic cleansing destroyed the last remaining social networks of Poles of the Jewish religion or origin. Dmowski's nationalists-turned-national communists completed the implementation of the idea of the homogenous Polish nation-state for the nation of Polish-speaking Catholics *only*.

Democratic Poland Without anti-Semitism?

Following the fall of communism in 1989, democratic Poland has been excruciatingly slow at acknowledging the historical role of Poles of the Jewish religion and origin in Polish history, culture or economy. Any return of robbed property to survivors or their descendants has 'progressed' at a glacial pace. Meanwhile, the concept of Polonia (or Polish ethnic diaspora) – originating in interwar Poland and fully developed in communist Poland – became an important instrument of democratic Poland's foreign policy. However, in the spirit of the national Omertà 3.0, the concept of Polonia specifically *excludes* Poles of the Jewish religion or origin and their descendants living in Israel, or פולנים *Polanim* in Ivrit.

During the quarter of a century of democratic Poland, anti-Semitic statements were widely available in rabid publications and anti-Semitic acts did occur (usually graffiti, alongside the defacement and destruction of gravestones and monuments). Fortunately, the mainstream politics stayed clear of any anti-Semitic temptations, and in most cases unequivocally and immediately condemned such anti-Semitic acts. No communities of Poles of the Jewish religion or origin are left in today's Poland to identify and pursue perpetrators of anti-Semitic acts on their own. Their resounding absence has not solved anything, but even more enrages anti-Semites. In Poland without Poles of the Jewish religion or origin, anti-Semitism seems to fare even better than before. No need to face a neighbor who is 'one of Them,' and then feel a pang of remorse.

After 2015, the shaky dam of democratic decency – buttressed by political correctness – burst. The incumbent pro-authoritarian government takes care *not* to have to condemn anti-Semites and their deplorable acts. It actually encourages radical nationalist parties, whose programs – more or less openly – appeal to anti-Semitic sentiments. This unprecedented permissiveness, which harks back to the 1968 ethnic cleansing, translates into votes and electoral success. But this is a shortsighted tactic, because at the same time it diminishes Poland's position in Europe and the world, and domestically prepares the ground for a full-fledged xenophobic dictatorship.

Poland is פולין *Polin*

Each stage of the past, from the 10th century to this day, which is commonly presented in school textbooks as 'Polish history,' unfolded in the presence or with the participation of persons of the Jewish religion and their communities. In the medieval Kingdom of Poland and in the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the population was divided along estate and confessional lines into groups of unequal status. The vast majority of the inhabitants, as unfree serfs, were pushed to the very bottom of the sociopolitical pyramid. But all these unequal groups prayed to the same Abrahamic god of Christians, Jews and Muslims. To the god, whom Jews had originally invented, or to whom it had been revealed first.

Poland-Lithuania's first anthem *Bogurodzica* ('Mother of God') extolls Holy Virgin Mary, or the Jewish mother of Jesus. Her son, also a Jew, known as 'Christ' (meaning, 'Messiah') created a new Jewish sect. With time it grew into a worldwide religion, nowadays known as Christianity (literally, 'Messianism'). The founding of the medieval Kingdom of Poland was connected with the acceptance of this religion – from the Holy Roman Empire – as the ideology of statehood legitimization and maintenance. Epochs changed, while accepted forms of statehood altered time and again during the last Millennium. But Roman Catholicism – or a form of Christianity – remains a potent ideology that to this day continues to underlie the concept of the Polish nation and its Polish nation-state.

In spite of the Jewish origin, inspiration and character of Christianity, ideologues and practitioners of Polish nationalism are unable to find a place in their nation for Poles of the Jewish religion and origin. Nothing can convince them to make this proverbial 'leap of faith.' Neither the Gospel's admonition 'love thy neighbor like thyself,' nor the name

of their preferred creed, Catholicism, which is Latin for 'Universalism.' Polish national Catholicism ('Universalism') is pronouncedly *anti*-universal in its character, its 'universal' message limited to the nation of Polish-speaking Catholics, who account for a mere 0.5 percent of the world's population. Hence, the Polish national universalism is quite a weak universalism of half a percent.

In light of this deeply exclusionary and silently (or openly) anti-Semitic character of Polish nationalism, it may appear surprising and illogical, to say the least, that the present-day Poles might stick to the 17th-century Polish-Lithuanian noble tradition of referring to the Jewish Virgin Mary as 'Queen of Poland.' Three centuries later, in 2016, in the presumably secular age, in still democratic Poland, her equally Jewish son, Jesus Christ, was officially enthroned to the long vacant post of 'King of Poland.'² Ironically, or symbolically, the Polish President attended this enthronement with his mother. The First Lady, who is of Jewish origin, stayed away.

At present these two immortal Jews of over two Millennia ago, Mother and Son, are Poland's most important patron saints. Mary and Jesus Christ are the only royalty left in the Polish nation-state devoid of Poles of the Jewish religion and origin. The Omertà of this resounding absence is as profound as another renewal of the noble-serf national union of the Polish-speaking Catholics, epitomized by the recent enthronement of Jesus. The widely-perceived holiness and dignity of this latest act of Polish national Catholicism is such that even those who are critical of the Catholic Church and its unholy union with Polish nationalism would not dare to joke about the somewhat 'incestuous' character of Poland's new 'spiritual royal couple.'

From the rational perspective, it is a folly or even a blatant offence to one's intelligence. But myths and rituals, like flags or anthems, are necessary for making visible, and keeping together such imagined communities as nations and polities. One does not discuss with collective emotions, but follows them for the sake of broader public good. Worryingly, in this case, public good is steeped in the silent acceptance of willing forgetting about Poles of the Jewish religion or origin and their exclusion from the Polish nation. Nothing good ever comes out of a wrong. All gained by way of a lie becomes a curse. The Jewish royal couple spiritually reigns over the Polish nation of worshippers of a Jewish sect, but the national creed pronounces that no Jew would ever be accepted as a Pole. There is no place for *Them* in *Our* modern Poland. I wonder whether this unacknowledged Polish anti-Semitism might be a kind of self-hate. Self-hate the culturally Jewish Pole-Catholic feels for himself, when faced with how he wronged his brother, Pole of the Jewish religion. A biblical-like parable on Cain and Abel, indeed.

August 2019

² Intronizacja. JUBILEUSZOWY AKT PRZYJĘCIA JEZUSA CHRYSYUSA ZA KRÓLA I PANA. 2016.

www.intronizacja.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=468:materiay-zespou-ds-ruchow-intronizacyjnych-kep&catid=37. Accessed: Aug 14, 2019.