

“THE FATAL FLAW”

With this special topic issue, *Nationalities Papers* explores a relatively untouched region of ethno-intellectual political history - the role of ethnicity in the formation of a national communist party, in this case, in Poland. Despite its obvious centrality, its equally obvious controversial character has led the topic into being sidelined or treated with kid gloves in order to bypass unavoidable divisive ramifications were it given a full scholarly airing (a sentiment also expressed by Mark Levene in his review of Anthony Polonsky's [ed.] *My Brother's Keeper? Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* in the recent issue of *The British Journal of Holocaust Education*).

Relations between Poles and Jews in the twentieth century need no rehearsing here. The historic strains and tensions between the host majority and the long-resident minority, between two distinct religio-cultural traditions, came to a head in the interwar decades of rising Polish rejectionist mono-ethnonationalism and Jewish adaptive minority ethnopolitics. As an option for polyethnic pre-1939 Poland, communism, in theory (though driven underground), offered a distinct universalist formula for harmonizing national ethnic groups, not only within its own ranks but for the entire national population. Yet, in the end, it failed to bring about such a reconciliation, even within the party itself. Instead, Polish ethnocentrism prevailed after World War II, thereby, preventing the formation of a *bona fide* Polish Communist party, one representative of all ethnic constituencies of a still, though diminished, multi-ethnic Poland, in contrast to the illegal communist party of Poland prior to World War II in which Poles and Jews functioned relatively well together as "Communists from Poland," a self-descriptive term explicitly de-emphasizing national identity and underscoring an international, supra-ethnic orientation.

Unfortunately, a century-old Polish animus for Jews erected a psychological, implacable barrier, preventing what might have become a genuine post-war, meta-ethnic Polish communist movement. Instead, a profound internal schism characterizes the history of the party since 1944-5, a fact cynically exploited by Soviet communists. For the most part, ethnic Polish communists increasingly strove for a purely ethno-Polish party as a vehicle to minimize the influence of Soviet communism, as well as a covert instrument of exclusivist Polish ethno-nationalism as a means to ward off Soviet hegemony (something Stalin had always suspected, hence his initial reliance on an overly zealous and, for the most part, arrogantly authoritarian, heavily Polish-Jewish vanguard of pro-Moscow communists).

In the eyes of these Polish crypto-nationalist communists (as well as in the perceptions of the Polish masses), their Jewish Party comrades

automatically represented an alien universalist (anti-ethno-Polish) trend, more in sympathy with the goals of their expansionist Russian mentors. In ethno-Polish minds, Jews posed a potential threat to the Polish nation, a long-held fear which questioned the Jewish capacity for harboring true Polish patriotism. Given the preponderance of high-ranking Polish communists of Jewish origin who brutally sought to impose a Stalinist order upon the country after World War II, one must at least extend a measure of cautious sympathy for the current of *ressentiment* among Poles in general and Polish (non-Jewish) communists in particular for these agents of sovietization, Russian-style, regardless of their Jewish ethnicity. Predictably, though, the Polish response was less disciplined and expressed itself (also predictably) in virulent ethnic (anti-Jewish) terms, the most common being the iniquitous concept of *zydokomuna*, of a Jewish conspiracy. Thus, the poison of antisemitism profoundly flawed the integrity of the Cold War Polish communist party till the dissolution of Soviet hegemonic rule from Moscow and the subsequent collapse of Communist Party dictatorship in Poland.

An ethno-centered party unable to open its ranks generously to all segments of society necessarily becomes isolated, narrowly bureaucratized, and, eventually, even more alienated from the masses it claims to speak for. A party that could only sustain an open, multi- or trans-ethnic membership as long as it is an extension of a foreign power - as was, initially, the case with the party until *c.* 1953-1958 - such a political organization inevitably becomes cut off from its grass roots. What the articles in this issue illustrate is how consistently a Polish brand of antisemitism, sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly, marred the very core of the party and, in retrospect, must be held accountable as one of the many factors of the ultimate failure of the Polish Communist state. An additional cause hampering the party's credibility came in 1968 with its egregious antisemitic campaign in the guise of anti-Zionism, an episode for which Poland came to be known ignominiously as an example of a society infected with "antisemitism without Jews."

The position observers are left with in this post-Cold War Communist era in Poland is to ask: "Whither Polish antisemitism after Communism?" Will it surface sufficiently to influence a self-defeating, parochial, xenophobic Polish politics, or will antisemitisms from both the right and left be contained, allowing a more tolerant society to emerge after three-quarters of a century of political independence and quasi-independence - each stage marked by an intellectually stultifying climate, due in large measure to a chronic antisemitism against which not even the Polish Communist Party could defend itself? Which raises a final question: As much as the party inherited a pervasive undercurrent of antisemitism, has the Polish Communist era left its own peculiar legacy of antisemitism to

its post-Cold War heirs? So far the signs are mixed, but by no means encouraging. Poland's *bona fide* entry into an expanded community of European nations literally hangs in the balance on this issue.

It might be appropriate to rest one's *caveat* on the timely warnings of other observers, past and present. A century ago, the German Social Democrat August Bebel observed, "Antisemitism is the socialism of fools." His admonition went unheeded and was, somewhat bitterly, paraphrased most recently by Ruth Wisse in 1992, who, rhetorically, asked, "Is socialism the antisemitism of intellectuals?" As not only Poland but all of post-Soviet Eastern Europe stumbles out of the communist cage into an era of national independence fraught with uncertainties, the ancient vice of antisemitism becomes a seductive temptress. We can do worse than recall a slogan that emanated out of Moldova in the late 1980's: "We shall drown the Communists in the blood of the Jews." The echoes of the Horst Wessel song have barely subsided and the old piper seems to be preparing for a come-back at the threshold of the new millennium. The problem is clearly not Poland's alone, but, as it always has been and once again is, that of all post-Cold War Europe.

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