

From the lunatic fringe to academia: **Holocaust denial in Poland**

by Rafal Pankowski

IN JUST five years “historical revisionism” in Poland has come a long way, from the lunatic fringe to the right-wing academic establishment. For some on the right antisemitism has proven stronger than Poland’s own history. In the country where a large part of the Holocaust took place a growing number of far-right propagandists question the Nazi genocide.

An extreme right political movement based primarily on antisemitic sentiments had resurfaced in Poland in the mid-1980s, but it was not until ten years later that it chose to include overt Holocaust denial in its standard propaganda, alongside evergreen antisemitic classics such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The first revisionist articles appeared in 1994 and 1995 on the pages of *Szczerbiec (The Sword)*, a publication of Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski (NOP – National Revival of Poland), an extreme-right political party led by Adam Gmurczyk, who graduated in history at the Warsaw Academy of Catholic Theology.

The NOP claims to be an incarnation of the prewar Oboz Narodowo-Radykalny (ONR – National-Radical Camp), a violent antisemitic youth group banned by the Polish government in 1934. The NOP is part of the International Third Position and *Szczerbiec* boasts the internationally notorious fascists Derek Holland and Roberto Fiore on its editorial board. The party’s membership is estimated at around 1,000, who are largely violent nazi-skinheads.

Among those first articles was David Irving’s “*I don’t believe in the Holocaust*”, accompanied by some introductory remarks by Gmurczyk (*Szczerbiec* 6-7/1995). Gmurczyk, who is also the editor-in-chief of *Szczerbiec* denied his party was nazi but announced his support for the revisionist agenda. Gmurczyk’s own interest in revisionism had been illustrated by another article based on material from CEDADE, the Spanish organisation of Hitler-worshippers (*Szczerbiec* 4/1995). The following issues of *Szczerbiec* brought more material denying the Holocaust (including a translation of the *Leuchter Report* in *Szczerbiec* 10/1995) and gradually this became the hallmark of the magazine.

From the very beginning historical revisionism in Poland was supported by the US-based Polish Historical Institute chaired by Miroslaw

Dragan. The *raison d'être* of this "institute" is the denial of the Kielce pogrom of 1946 but it seems eager to endorse any antisemitic cause, including denying the existence of the gas chambers. Because of this support, *Szczerbiec* received a series of much-needed hard-currency donations.

In 1997 the first negationist book was published by the Warsaw-based "National-Radical Institute", another label used by the NOP, under the title *Mit holocaustu (The myth of the Holocaust)*. It consisted of translated extracts from the works of Western Holocaust deniers, among them Robert Faurisson, Richard Harwood (real name Richard Verrall), Mark Weber and Fred Leuchter. There was also one "original" Polish contribution from Maciej Przebindowski, a regular contributor to *Szczerbiec*, who sought to disprove the authenticity of the Anne Frank diary. The book claimed that in July 1997 "a group of researchers from the National-Radical Institute" conducted field work at Auschwitz-Birkenau and decided it was impossible to kill people in the gas chamber at the camp. To support their thesis they produced a series of photographs.

The revisionist tendency became much stronger when Irving's books appeared in Polish translation and received praise not just from marginal extremist publications but from the mainstream press too. *Hitler's War* was published in Warsaw in 1996 by Prima, a private publishing house. The foreword to the very smart edition (hard-back, full-colour pictures, etc) was written by a Polish historian, Professor Czeslaw Madajczyk, who had a reputation as an authority on the history of the German occupation in Poland during the Second World War. Madajczyk mildly criticised Irving for his political sympathies, but nevertheless recommended him as an historian. Two years later Madajczyk wrote a somehow more cautious foreword to Irving's biography of Goebbels.

Madajczyk's own background is not on the extreme right: he was the chairman of the communist party organisation in the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Science for many years. Some have suggested he is simply politically naive, but there is no doubt that he is largely to blame for giving the revisionists a veneer of academic respectability.

Not surprisingly the appearance of Irving's books in Polish bookshops was received enthusiastically by far-right publications, but some mainstream papers (for example the respected centre-right daily *Rzeczpospolita*) also gave him positive reviews. Boguslaw Woloszanski, the star of a very popular television programme about modern history,

announced to his viewers that Irving was "perhaps controversial" but worth reading. Irving's new-found respectability was further illustrated when Stefan Niesiolowski, a leading pro-government right-wing MP, quoted him as an authority in an article defending General Franco, of Spain, on the pages of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's largest daily.

Holocaust denial also found enthusiasts among editors of a hard-right "revolutionary-conservative" magazine *Stanczyk*, a mouthpiece of the small Stronnictwo Polityki Realnej (SPR – Real Politics Party), part of the ruling right-wing alliance, AWS. Tomasz Gabis, the editor of *Stanczyk*, wrote lengthy articles against "the religion of the Holocaust" quoting authors such as Irving and Faurisson. Gabis's views were in turn repeated by *Fronda*, a trendy right-wing "intellectual" magazine sponsored by the Ministry of Culture.

Revisionism found its way even to anarchist publications. Mac Pariadka, Poland's main anarchist forum, published an article under the title "Freedom of speech for fascists", in which the author, Jaroslaw Tomaszewicz, until recently a well known activist on the extreme right, quoted Madajczyk in order to prove that Irving must be taken seriously. Another anarchist paper *An Arche* regularly publishes material from the psychopathic antisemite Adrian Nikiel, who also denies the Holocaust in his own magazine *Rojalista Pro Patria*.

The Auschwitz Museum, however, did not go along with the growing public tolerance of "revisionism" and refused Irving access to its archives when he requested it in summer 1998 with the support of a BBC producer. The museum decided, quite rightly, that it should not be used for propaganda purposes by the pseudo-historian. Significantly, the far-right Catholic daily *Nasz Dziennik* strongly backed Irving's request and criticised the museum's decision.

Another breakthrough for radical historical revisionism in Poland came in autumn 1998, when Gmurczyk made a deal with a gutter press publisher, Leszek Bubel. Bubel is a shadowy businessman who was a leader of the infamous antisemitic "defenders of the cross" campaign at Auschwitz. *Mit holocaustu* was republished by Bubel as a pocket edition and appeared in large quantities in nearly every kiosk in the country. The booklet bore the symbol of a tiger, an old logo of a popular history series for teenagers. Bubel soon followed with other antisemitic books in the series crowned, of course, by *The Protocols*. The availability of Bubel's publications, which were distributed by the state-owned company, Ruch, was such that Holocaust denial reached a truly mass audi-

ence for the first time. It is estimated that 30,000 copies of *Mit holocaustu* were sold. Bubel also promoted Holocaust denial through his own high-circulation monthly, *Tylko Polska*.

At that time *Nigdy Wiecej* (*Never Again*) was the only publication regularly monitoring the development of Holocaust denial in Poland. Seeing cause for alarm it informally approached the Polish Historical Society for a clear and public condemnation of the revisionist arguments. Unfortunately, the historians did not react.

It was impossible for public opinion to ignore the problem any more when the first revisionist book by a Polish university historian, Dr Dariusz Ratajczak, appeared in March 1999. Ratajczak is a researcher at the newly founded University of Opole and until recently was an active member of the extreme-right National Party (Stronnictwo Narodowe – SN). His book, titled *Tematy niebezpieczne* (*Dangerous Topics*) was filled with antisemitic paranoia, for example a claim that the German Nazi elite consisted of Jews. It also included a chapter specifically devoted to denying the Holocaust.

The Auschwitz Museum obtained a copy of Ratajczak's book and informed the chairman of the Commission for Research on Crimes against the Polish Nation, Professor Witold Kulesza, who in turn informed the prosecutor's office. The law on the Institute of National Remembrance had been enacted in 1997, and it includes a provision against those who deny the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazis and Stalinist Communists on Polish territory. Professor Kulesza, who had been a leading proponent of this legal provision, admitted he had never actually expected that the law against Holocaust denial would need to be used against a Polish author. The law introduces a fine or up to three years in prison for spreading the denial of the Nazi or Communist crimes.

In December 1999 the court in Opole declared Ratajczak had broken the law against Holocaust denial but his crime was "socially harmless". The verdict caused an outcry. In a national poll conducted by the political weekly *Wprost*, 84 per cent said they did not agree with the decision of the court. In fact it was just another example of the general indulgence by the Polish judicial system towards all crimes committed by the extreme right, be it Holocaust denial, the incitement of racial hatred or street violence. Interestingly, two mainstream liberal newspapers, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*, said Ratajczak should not be persecuted in the name of "freedom of speech". Such abstract arguments

ignoring the very real threat from the extreme right are commonplace despite the visible growth of both fascist propaganda and fascist violence.

The triumphant Ratajczak was accompanied in court by the notorious antisemitic activist Kazimierz Switon and by Bubel. The latter had been quick to cash in on the publicity surrounding the case and issued a pocket edition of the book, again distributed widely by Ruch. Just days after the verdict Ratajczak was a guest star of a political meeting organised by the SN.

The Opole liar soon found other powerful allies. Professor Ryszard Bender repeatedly defended Ratajczak in a regular column published in *Głos*, a radical right-wing weekly edited by Antoni Macierewicz, a former Minister of Home Affairs and current member of the ruling conservative AWS. Bender is a professor of history at the Catholic University of Lublin. He had been an MP in the communist parliament in the 1980s but after 1989 switched his allegiance to the right. For some time he was a member of the Senate and the chairman of the State Council on Radio and Television.

On 13 January 2000 Ratajczak, Bender and a maverick Indian-born Polish Church historian, Peter Raina, who lives in Berlin, participated in a broadcast on *Radio Maryja*, a strongly xenophobic Catholic radio station with a mass audience. During the nearly three-hour programme they insisted that the arguments of historical revisionists were to be taken seriously and pledged to defend "the freedom of scientific discussion". They blamed "the Jewish lobby" for persecuting the Opole academic. Bender claimed Auschwitz was not a death camp but a work camp. This proved difficult to swallow even for the listeners of *Radio Maryja*, who are used to antisemitic propaganda: a large part of the station's audience are elderly people who lived through the Second World War. Unusually for *Radio Maryja*, many callers objected against the views expressed in the programme. But there were also many others who called to support the three propagandists.

After the broadcast the authorities of the Catholic University of Lublin started disciplinary proceedings against Bender. The Academic Council of the University issued a special statement distancing itself from Holocaust denial and at the same time warning against "racist youth groups" which are active among students. Jozef Zycinski, the archbishop of Lublin, publicly condemned the views expressed by *Radio Maryja*. Former prisoners' organisations, too, were particularly outspoken in

condemning the academic's shameless denial of their suffering.

Bender defended himself by saying that some of his relatives perished in Auschwitz. He presented himself as a fighter for academic freedom.

It can no longer be argued that Holocaust revisionism in Poland is merely a matter of a lunatic margin. Bender was supported by the right-wing weeklies, *Mysl Polska* and *Najwyzszy Czas*. The former published an open letter from a group of right-wing academics in defence of the "outstanding historian". Among the signatories to the letter was Andrzej Szczesniak, the author of numerous history school books, who had himself been criticised for feeding subtle antisemitism and xenophobia to the young. After months of deliberating the University of Opole finally sacked Ratajczak but he was almost immediately offered a new job by Professor Marek Grzelewski, head of the private Higher School of Journalism in Warsaw.

Just weeks after the *Radio Maryja* broadcast another scandal broke out. *Nigdy Wiecej* exposed the fact that Bellona, a state-owned publishing house of the Ministry of Defence, intended to publish a translation of Irving's biography of Göring. For the first time a respected publishing company was going to enter the revisionist arena: previously Irving had been published in Poland by small private publishers. The *Nigdy Wiecej* story was followed up by other journalists, most notably the young and energetic reporters Urszula Prussak of *Radio Stacja* and Jakub Rzekanowski of the daily *Trybuna*. Articles protesting against Bellona's involvement in promoting Holocaust revisionism also appeared in the Jewish magazine *Slowo Zydowskie* and in the left-wing weekly, *Przegląd*. The latter was written by the well known columnist Krzysztof Toeplitz. Both the Minister of Defence, Janusz Onyszkiewicz, and Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek were personally informed about the scandal. The public pressure forced Bellona to abandon its plans and cancel the intended promotional trip by Irving to Poland in spring 2000.

The middleman between Bellona and the fascist milieu was Bartłomiej Zborski, the first translator of Irving's books into Polish and a regular antisemitic contributor to *Szczerbiec*, the NOP magazine which is still the main forum for Holocaust negationists in Poland. Interestingly, before he entered the fascist scene, Zborski used to translate very different literary works, for example those of George Orwell. It remains to be seen whether the current owners of copyright for the late anti-fascist writer's books are going to continue their collaboration with the Polish translator turned neo-nazi propagandist. Among Zborski's

most recent "achievements" was the Polish edition of the infamous American handbook for Nazi terrorists, *The Turner Diaries* by William Pierce. This book was published by a private publisher, Rachocki (which some years ago used to publish very different material, namely the Trotsky memoirs). Rachocki became a business partner of Bellona, which was starting a new series of popular history books. Meanwhile Zborski was employed by the military publishing house as the editor of the series called, very aptly, *The Brown Series*. The standard layout of the books' covers was complete with the swastika and the Nazi eagle. Irving's *Göring* was among the first titles in the pipeline.

The publication of Irving's book by the state company was stopped by a joint effort of anti-fascists and the media, but, unfortunately, it does not follow that the development of Holocaust revisionism in Poland has been halted. The revisionists have jumped on the bandwagon of a very natural tendency to "revise" Polish history after decades of officially sanctioned disinformation. This "natural-revisionist" tendency in all East European countries is frequently abused by those who employ it to promote their own extremist political agenda. Together with the antisemitic prejudice that is still widespread, it occasionally turns into a truly explosive mixture.