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ABOUT ZWORD

Z Word is an online journal focusing on the contemporary debate over Zionism, anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism and related areas. Editorially independent, Z Word identifies and challenges anti-Zionist orthodoxies in mainstream political exchange.

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ESSAY

When ‘Zionist’ Meant ‘Jew’: Revisiting the 1968 Events in Poland

By Rafal Pankowski

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The 1968 May Day Parade in Warsaw: Participants march down Marszalkowska Street carrying anti-Zionist banners

Photo credit: Taran Photo

THE 1968 STATE SPONSORED ANTI-ZIONIST campaign in Poland demonstrates how easily anti-Zionist rhetoric slips into open antisemitism. It is also a striking example of how a supposedly internationalist anti-imperialist movement is prone to hateful manipulation that, in fact, has very little to do with the Middle East.

The language and imagery adopted at that time resurfaces regularly with that utilized by contemporary antisemites. The notion of “Zionism” loses almost all its original meaning, becoming a politically acceptable synonym for all things Jewish. According to this schema, which is strongly rooted in traditional antisemitism, the “Zionists” are accused of conspiring across borders for the benefit of Israel and its US imperial ally, to the detriment of the local population, most notably through their control of the international media. The actions of “Zionists” are frequently compared and equaled to those of the Nazis and, thus conceived, “Zionism” emerges as a purely evil phenomenon akin to historical Nazism.

Antisemitism and communist ideology

On the surface, communism was a thoroughly internationalist ideology and movement, opposed to all kinds of ethnic and religious discrimination, including antisemitism. Indeed, many original adherents of the Polish communist movement found it attractive precisely because they saw in it the most consistent and principled response to the antisemitism that was rampant in Polish society in the 1920s and 1930s, openly preached by the Catholic Church and the right-wing Nationalists. According to some estimates¹, in the 1920s and 1930s around 22-26 percent of the Polish Communist Party's membership was made up of Jews – Jews made up 9 per cent of the entire Polish population. At the same time, the Jewish communists were a marginal group within the wider Jewish community. The clandestine Communist Party remained relatively weak and was dissolved by order of Josef Stalin, the Soviet dictator, in 1937. Many of its leaders were subsequently called to Moscow, imprisoned and murdered by the Soviet political police during the mass purges.

When the communists re-emerged as the ruling Polish Workers Party after World War II, the stereotype of “Jewish communists” became even stronger as part of the popular psyche. Jan Gross remarks: “As to the persistence of the *zydokomuna* (Jewish communism) myth in popular memory, one may attribute it, among other reasons, to an attempt by complicitious Poles to deflect their own guilt over having contributed to the triumph of communism.”²

In fact, Jewish communists constituted a rather small part of the post-war leadership, and they usually hardly identified themselves as Jews at all. After the Holocaust, the Jewish community in Poland still numbered some 250-400,000. Many of them left the country in subsequent waves of emigration, for example after the Kielce pogrom in 1946 and in 1956, when the emigration regime was liberalized. By 1968 only 25-30,000 Jews lived in Poland.

Meanwhile, sinister currents of institutionalized antisemitism appeared across the communist bloc. Stalin ordered the execution of the leaders of the wartime Jewish Antifascist Committee in the late 1940s and his anti-Jewish obsession reached new heights with the alleged uncovering of a ‘Doctors’ Plot’ in 1952. Such tendencies were in turn reflected by the other communist regimes, most famously during the trial of Rudolf Slansky in Czechoslovakia in 1952.

In a symbolic rapprochement in Poland, a group of

activists of the pre-war fascist National Radical Camp (*Oboz Narodowo-Radykalny*, ONR) led by Boleslaw Piasecki was allowed to operate legally with their own representation in the Polish parliament in the 1950s. With assistance from the government, Piasecki created and led his new ‘patriotic’ organization, the PAX Association, which came to play an active role in 1968. Similar developments emerged in other communist states like Romania, where former members of the antisemitic Iron Guard were allowed to join the Romanian Communist Party. The Polish Nobel prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote of such alliances: “Let it be stated here clearly: the Party/Descends directly from the fascist Right.”³

State-sponsored communist antisemitism owed a great deal to Stalin’s personal paranoia, but it also reflected deeper dynamics. The communist regimes were increasingly seeking their legitimacy in nationalist rather than revolutionary rhetoric. Over the years, they were trying to reach out to non-communist sections of society and to find some acceptance among a wider public, which, in some cases, meant turning a blind eye to antisemitism or even actively sponsoring it. Moreover, as the Soviet Union sought allies in the Arab world, anti-Zionist language became widespread. This encapsulates what happened in Poland in the late 1960s, when a growing wing in the Party expressed nationalistic sentiments, combined with an anti-Jewish zeal. The eruption of anti-semitism in 1968 has to be understood in this context.

The Partisans

The so-called ‘partisan’ wing of the ruling Polish United Workers Party in the 1960s was led by the Interior Minister, General Mieczyslaw Moczar. Ironically for a self-styled Polish nationalist, his own ethnic background was actually Belarusian, but that was kept strictly secret.⁴ Moczar gathered around himself a significant group of war veterans (hence the group’s popular name), younger party cadres, military and security personnel and bureaucrats, as well as some writers and artists. They were unified by an eclectic ideology that combined socialism with patriotic pathos, praised the heroic aspects of national history and expressed hostility to all forms of alleged ‘cosmopolitanism’. The ‘partisans’ venom was directed against ‘revisionists’ - a code word for leftist dissidents and members of the liberal wing of the party who were regarded as an obstacle towards

building a more authoritarian nationalist regime. Jews, too, were an obvious target of the ‘partisans’ growing anger.

The ‘partisans’ believed the party could regain public support by publicly purging itself of Jews and by employing nationalist rhetoric. The aim of the ‘partisans’ was to construct a system of national communism, with a mixture of communist, nationalist and populist ideology. Jan Gross called it “a variation of National Socialism plain and simple.”⁵

The extent to which Wladyslaw Gomulka, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the party – and therefore the de facto leader of the country – personally shared the ‘partisans’ nationalist ideology is debatable. Gomulka had led the party in 1945–48, but was later dismissed and imprisoned for alleged “right-nationalist deviation” in the 1950s. In 1956 he was swept back to power on the wave of popular protest and subsequently introduced a more humane – in relative terms, at least—version of the communist regime in Poland. He was forced to resign in the wake of a massacre of shipyard workers by the military forces in Gdansk and Szczecin in 1970 in which around 40 people died.

According to most accounts, Gomulka remained a convinced communist internationalist till his death, and in this context it was often mentioned that his wife was Jewish. Nevertheless, he presided over the increasingly antisemitic policy, probably fearing the ‘partisans’ could turn against him as the old guard of the communist leaders were pressed to give way to the younger protégées of Moczar. Gomulka’s acceptance of antisemitic elements in the party policy and propaganda reached its peak in the late 1960s, when the tension in the Middle East was used to legitimize another wave of anti-Jewish purges pushed for by the ‘partisans’.

The beginning of the anti-Jewish Purges

In the early and mid-1960s, purges of Jewish officers began in the Ministry of the Interior as well as in the army. A special unit was set up in the Ministry of the Interior that compiled a secret list of Jews living in Poland deploying the same criteria behind Hitler’s infamous Nuremberg Laws. The list included all kinds of personal information to be used in the years to come.

In 1960 Marshal Biriuzov, a Soviet deputy minister of defense, reportedly remarked to his hosts while visiting Poland, “an army commanded by Jews and counterrevolutionaries cannot be used in the fight against imperialism.”

This comment sparked off the systematic removal of the remaining Jewish officers from the Polish army, supervised by a special commission. Although only a few hundred out of the total number of 40–45,000 officers in the Polish military at that time were actually Jewish, the number of those purged also included many officers who were considered sympathetic or friendly to their Jewish colleagues. This tendency reflected a changing power situation in the Middle East, where the Soviet bloc provided increasing military assistance to the Arab states in their conflict with Israel.

“The Middle Eastern conflict served as a pretext for unleashing antisemitic smears and vendettas at home. An atmosphere of suspicion and denunciation swept the country”

On 9 June 1967, in the wake of the Six Day War, the Warsaw Pact states, with the exception of Romania, decided to break diplomatic relations with Israel. The Middle Eastern conflict served as a pretext for unleashing antisemitic smears and vendettas at home. An atmosphere of suspicion and denunciation swept the country. For example, Moczar was said to have prepared and passed to Gomulka a list of 94 young Jews who allegedly contacted the Israeli embassy as possible volunteers for the IDF.

The wife of Marian Spsychalski, the Polish commander-in-chief, was rumored to have been in Israel visiting family members. The issue was raised in a discussion among party activists at a military unit in Babice. Jewish members of the party leadership were attacked openly at the meeting, among them Eugeniusz Szyr, a deputy prime minister and a Spanish civil war veteran.

On the day of Israel’s victory a birthday party was held at the office of the popular women’s magazine *Przyjaciolka*, which was interpreted as a celebration of the Israeli military success. Moczar informed Gomulka that the wife of General Czeslaw Mankiewicz, a deputy commander of the Polish air defense, had attended the party. Mankiewicz was immediately dismissed from his post. Later it transpired that his wife in fact had not even been present in the city at all on the day of the party, but too late for the dismissal to be reversed.

On 19 June 1967 Gomulka made an important speech at

a Trade Union Congress, in which he declared that “every citizen of Poland must have only one fatherland—People’s Poland.” He shocked many by referring to Israel’s alleged sympathizers as the “fifth column”, a term strongly charged with memories of German-inspired sabotage during the Second World War. Years later, Gomulka was said to have regretted using such language to describe Polish Jews. Nevertheless, through the Trade Union Congress speech he provided an official justification to the mass antisemitic campaign already unleashed by Moczar’s supporters.

On 8 October 1967 Moczar made a speech on the anniversary of the establishment of People’s Militia in which he likened the Israeli military to the Nazis. This close similarity, according to him, was lost on “blinded Zionists, including our Zionists in Poland”. A campaign of intimidation against Polish Jews, including numerous anonymous letters and threatening phone calls was in full swing. In 1967, a group of about 500 Jews emigrated from Poland.

The Democratic Student Movement

Israel’s victory was actually viewed with sympathy in many sections of Polish society. Many Poles saw it as a setback for the despised Soviet bloc. They felt a connection with Israel, based on the history of the Jewish presence in Poland and the fact that many Israeli citizens had their roots in Poland.

Meanwhile, a democratic movement of students and young intellectuals emerged in Poland. It was assisted by older Marxist dissidents such as Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski and supported by a number of liberal-minded professors at Warsaw University, among them the renowned philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman and economist Włodzimierz Brus. The crushing of the movement was accompanied by aggressive ‘anti-Zionist’ propaganda.

On 30 January 1968 students staged a demonstration against banning of a theatre play based on Adam Mickiewicz’s 19th century Romantic text “Dziady” (“Forefathers’ Eve”) that was deemed anti-Russian by the authorities. The police arrested many of them and during interrogations asked “Why do you allow yourself to be manipulated by kikes?”

Anna Morawska, a daughter of Professor Stefan Morawski, a liberal philosopher, was among the detained. She was shocked by the policemen asking her if she knew she was Jewish. Her father’s

family had long been assimilated in Polish society and she did not know. Another interrogated student was shown a Nazi anthropological album and asked if she recognized Morawski’s facial features there.

The protest against antisemitism became part and parcel of the general democratic movement that emerged in the weeks that followed. In February 1968, Warsaw University students distributed a leaflet entitled “Against Fascist Provocation!” penned by Karol Modzelewski in response to the antisemitic leaflets distributed by security services.

On 29 February 1968, at a memorable meeting of the Polish Writers’ Union, the famous Polish historian, Paweł Jasienica, quoted an antisemitic leaflet distributed by security services in Warsaw and commented critically on the authorities’ acceptance of such propaganda. As a result Jasienica was put on a list of forbidden authors and was not able to publish any works until his death in 1970.

“One of the participants recalled: ‘They beat first of all girls and first of all the brunettes. I was thinking, ‘why the brunettes?’ I understood it much later”

On 3 March 1968, Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer, student leaders, were expelled from the University. A few days later, Warsaw students gathered at a rally and a sit-in in defense of the expelled, and in support for human rights. Both the national anthem and “The Internationale” were sung. The student rally was brutally attacked by riot police and plain clothes “workers-activists”. One of the participants recalled: “They beat first of all girls and first of all the brunettes. I was thinking, ‘why the brunettes?’ I understood it much later.” The riots continued for several days and spread to other cities. A wave of arrests ensued and an ever stronger wave of anti-democratic and antisemitic propaganda followed in the media. Later that year leaders of the student movement were convicted to prison sentences ranging from one and a half years to three years in the case of Adam Michnik.

The official propaganda stressed the “cosmopolitan” outlook of the student activists, often emphasizing their alleged family connections with the Jewish communist ‘elite’ of the Stalinist period. The newspapers enjoyed

printing the Jewish-sounding names of the young dissidents, frequently commenting on their allegedly privileged background: Seweryn Blumsztajn, Henryk Szlajfer, Jozef Dajczgewand, and so forth. In the case of Aleksander Smolar, the official line emphasized the fact that his father had been the editor of *Folks-Sztyme*, a Yiddish language newspaper published in Poland.

The official press often linked the burgeoning democratic movement with organizations such as Klub Babel, the youth meeting club run by the Jewish Social-Cultural Association. According to Bogdan Hillebrandt, the club was “a propaganda forum for Jewish chauvinism and nationalism, aiming at infecting the youth with a Zionist attitude.”⁶

In particular, the Jewish-communist family background of the 18-year old student leader Adam Michnik was remorselessly exploited by official propaganda, which reminded readers ad nauseam that his father had been a censor, while his brother had served as a court martial judge during the early years of communist Poland. Such attacks on Michnik were continually repeated in the organs of communist propaganda over the

“A curious term—‘Zionist-Trotskyite’—was coined and it became a regular feature of the media campaign against the dissidents in 1968”

next several decades. Significantly, they persist today in the discourse of the Polish extreme right. Michnik is now the editor of the country’s main liberal newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and is considered to be a founding father of Polish liberal democracy, which makes him an eternal *bete noire* for the nationalist extremists.

Similar treatment has been meted out to one of Michnik’s closest collaborators in the student movement of Warsaw in the late 1960s, Jan Gross, who later became a political science professor in the United States. Gross is the author of ground-breaking books about antisemitism that are loathed by the contemporary Polish nationalists.⁷

Official propaganda always stressed the Trotskyist influence on the dissidents. And there was, indeed, a degree of ideological inspiration as well as organizational assistance provided to the 1960s student movement by

groups of Trotskyists in Poland and abroad. Nevertheless, according to historian Jerzy Eisler, the importance attached to it by the official propaganda could be interpreted as another means of highlighting the Jewish background of some of the opposition activists: “after all Trotsky’s name was Leib Bronstein and he was a Jew by origin.”⁸ A curious term – ‘Zionist-Trotskyite’ – was coined and it became a regular feature of the media campaign against the dissidents in 1968. This was reflected by propagandists such as Bogdan Hillebrandt, who spun conspiracy theories linking ‘Zionists, Trotskyites and revisionists’ with former members of *Hashomer Hatzair*, a left-Zionist youth organization.

The Meaning of ‘Zionism’

‘Zionism’ was a key charge in all the accusations. In most cases, there was rather little doubt it simply served as a shorthand for being Jewish or sympathizing with Jews. ‘Zionist’ Jews were presented as a rootless yet unified and homogenous trans-national group working for the benefit of Israel and the United States. They were accused of “cosmopolitanism” and “nationalism” simultaneously. Such apparent contradictions are in fact a typical feature of antisemitic discourse throughout the centuries.

In the key state media company, *Interpress*, six journalists were excluded from the party organization for being “Zionists”. Asked what he actually meant by “Zionist”, the director reportedly answered that he had no time to check it precisely in an encyclopedia but he believed a Zionist is a person whose parents were Jewish. Similar situations were commonplace.⁹

At a Warsaw party organization meeting on 26 June 1967, a female party member was criticized for her absence at a previous meeting which condemned Israel. A party official was reported as saying: “Your hair and skin tone show that you are of Jewish descent. You cannot deny it. Poles of Jewish descent do not participate in these meetings on purpose, you should explain your attitude.” The party member in question felt duly obliged to present documents proving that in fact she was not Jewish.¹⁰

The state-sponsored mobilization required mass participation. In March and April 1968 all over the country televised official rallies were organized in support of the government with slogans such as “Zionists Go to Zion”, “Antisemitism no! Anti-Zionism yes!”, and the most curious of all “Zionists to Siam!” (“*Syjonisci do Syjamu!*”).

The last slogan was indicative of the fact that the participants in the rallies couldn't care less about the real objectives of Zionism or about the Middle East as such, which seemed distant and irrelevant to the Polish situation. The same fact was illustrated by a popular joke:

- Daddy, how do you spell “Zionist”?
- I don't know but before the war you spelt it with a “J”!

In other words, ‘Zionist’ became an offensive term used against real or perceived Jews whatever their political persuasion. Communist rhetoric did not allow openly targeting people on the basis of racial criteria, while the targeting of alleged “Zionists” was perfectly acceptable.

The protagonists of the campaign preferred to talk about “Zionism” rather than about Jews per se so that, if needed, they could always point to a handful of “good Jews” who could be used to prove their point. According to Professor Michal Glowinski, who analyzed the discourse of 1968, “the good Jew” was a permanent feature of the propaganda.¹¹

Alleged double loyalty and treachery of the “Zionists” was a common theme. The regional party secretary in Lublin exclaimed at a 21 March 1968 rally: “Our youth must not be led astray by such educators as Brus, Bauman, Kolakowski and the like, by the trans-national writers such as the Slonimskis (Antoni Slominski was a Polish-Jewish poet) or the Kisielewskis (Stefan Kisielewski was a liberal writer and columnist) and must not be led astray by the young Zionist organizers and participants of the unrest in Warsaw and other academic centers ... We have the right to demand a clear self-declaration from those Jews, citizens of our state, who have not self-declared themselves yet.” On 19 March 1968 Gomulka himself spoke in a similar vein at a rally in Warsaw. In his view the chief problem was the necessity for a “self-declaration on the part of Jews – citizens of our state”.

On 11 April 1968 Boleslaw Piasecki condemned, in his parliamentary speech, “the anti-Polish - internal and external – action of Zionist nationalism”. This charge against “nationalism”, made by the historic leader of Polish extreme nationalists, demonstrated a curious yet characteristic inversion of meaning, according to which the liberal and Marxist dissidents were associated with “Jewish chauvinism” while the hard-line totalitarian antisemites

hid behind the label of “progressive anti-Zionism.”

Piasecki threw his lot with General Moczar and the PAX Association took an active part in the antisemitic campaign. Its publications, such as the daily newspaper *Slowo Powszechnie*, thundered against ‘Zionists’ and ‘cosmopolitans’. It claimed the Polish student movement was manipulated by “a political triangle formed by Washington, Bonn and Tel-Aviv, in unity with the global Zionist movement.”

A meeting of young party members with General Moczar on 8 April 1968 was characteristic of the dominant propaganda, too. The Minister of the Interior claimed that “all the Western press, as it is commonly known, is generally controlled by Jewish nationalists smearing the Polish nation and the Polish government”. Radio Free Europe, for example, was “dominated by Zionist elements.” He went on to attack Jews among the party ranks. According to Moczar, “it is a worrying phenomenon in our social-political life that many ex-policemen from the ghetto today occupy responsible positions in the party and in the state in socialist Poland.” The Nazification of Zionists and Jews was on display here.

“...an encyclopedia that had just been published, under the entry “Hitlerite concentration camps,” overemphasized Jewish suffering and neglected the issue of ethnic Polish victims”

In the first half of 1968, some forty people were sacked from the staff of the State Scientific Publishing House (PWN). The pretext was found in the fact that an encyclopedia that had just been published, under the entry “Hitlerite concentration camps”, overemphasized Jewish suffering and neglected the issue of ethnic Polish victims. The question became a major subject in the official press. A new entry was printed and sent to the encyclopedia subscribers with a request to remove and replace the relevant page. A stream of articles were published in the press that eulogized Polish assistance to Jews during World War II, while highlighting the cases of supposed Jewish collaboration with the Nazis.

Even the most crude antisemitic arguments were used in the “anti-Zionist” campaign. *The Protocols of*

the Elders of Zion and similar antisemitic materials were secretly printed in 1968 and distributed through party channels, in the military and security forces.¹²

The party committee in Lodz, one of Poland's industrial centers, published a special brochure titled "Zionism, its genesis, political outlook and anti-Polish position" in which *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was quoted as a supposedly reliable source. The same Lodz committee circulated a leaflet which turned out to be based directly on an article in the notorious Nazi newspaper *Der Sturmer*. Once alerted about it, Gomulka ordered an internal investigation which established that an officer in the Ministry of the Interior, Wladyslaw Ciaston, was responsible for the publication. He was subsequently dismissed but later reinstated to his position. He worked as the head of the Security Service and vice-minister of the interior in the 1980s before being nominated to the post of Polish Ambassador to Albania in 1988.

As Kenneth S. Stern wrote, it is "easy (...) for one form of antisemitism – anti-Zionism – to open the floodgates for expressions of the other strains, tar- rying Judaism as a religion and Jews as people."¹³

Repression and Emigration of 'Zionists'

As part of repressive measures that followed the student unrest, hundreds of students were expelled from universities. Professors who were seen as sym- pathizers of the student movement were sacked. In this way, Polish academia was deprived of its leading stars, especially in the field of humanities. Kolakowski, Bauman, Brus, Hirszowicz and many others were dismissed and emigrated to continue their careers as eminent academics in major universities in the West.

Shortly after his arrival in Israel, Zygmunt Bauman issued a statement in the *Ma'ariv* newspaper in which he asserted: "Polish workers are not antisemitic, and the intel- ligentsia is far from it either. The regime rests chiefly on the antisemitism of the new bourgeoisie, which is composed of army officers, governmental and party officials." Many members of this 'new bourgeoisie' were more than happy to occupy the positions as part of their upward social mobility.

The purge extended to family members of the demo- cratic activists, as well as those representatives of the communist establishment who expressed reservations about the antisemitic campaign, such as the widely respected Foreign Minister Adam Rapacki. A leading

old-guard communist, Stefan Jedrychowski, also spoke out, along with the nominal head of state Edward Ochab. Ochab resigned from all his official posts in protest against antisemitism. His letter to the party leader- ship stated: "As a Pole and a communist, I protest most strongly against the antisemitic campaign organized in Poland by various dark forces; yesterday's ONR mem- bers (a fascist party) and their prominent supporters today." At a party school of political cadres a resolution to condemn Israel and its Polish supporters met with some resistance. One discussant said that to divide the nation according to ethnic origin was "in contradiction not only to Marxism and to common sense but also meant sliding down towards racist, Hitlerite positions."¹⁴

"The Jews, he said, 'are prone to revisionism and Jewish nationalism, Zionism in particular.' ...he called for further "correction of an incorrect nationality structure in the central institutions."

Andrzej Werblan, a party ideologist, countered such arguments in an article on the pages of the monthly journal *Miesiecznik Literacki*, in which he complained of over-representation of Jews in academic jobs and other important positions ("much higher than would result from the proportion of the Jewish population in our society"). The Jews, he said, "are prone to revision- ism and Jewish nationalism, Zionism in particular." In conclusion, he called for further "correction of an incor- rect nationality structure in the central institutions."

The purge continued downwards, reaching lower levels of the administration and party organization as well as various professional bodies, media outlets, schools and many other institutions. Hundreds of real or perceived Jews or "Zionists" were sacked or forced to resign in humiliating circumstances.

The wave of repression raised concerns of interna- tional public opinion. Among others, on 6 April 1968, the philosopher Bertrand Russell protested in defense of the dismissed academics on the pages of *The Times*. In the face of reports in the international press, on 13 April 1968, the Polish Ambassador to France held a press conference in Paris where – in a familiar pattern to be repeated by Polish

diplomats until quite recently - he informed the international press that antisemitism in Poland did not exist.

About 15-20,000 Jews were forced to emigrate from Poland in an atmosphere of intimidation in 1968 and 1969, and some 25 per cent of them settled in Israel. As noted by Jan Jozef Lipski, a famous Polish Socialist author, the emigrants could hardly be described as Zionists: “People who felt ideologically connected with Zionism had left much earlier, before 1968.”¹⁵

All of the emigrants were forced to renounce their Polish citizenship. Among them were many prominent figures in intellectual and artistic circles, such as the writer Henryk Grynberg, film director Aleksander Ford and Ida Kaminska, the 1967 Oscar-winning actress and founder of the Jewish Theatre in Warsaw. Interestingly, despite almost all of the remaining Yiddish-speaking population fleeing the country, including the majority of the Theatre’s actors, the government continued to maintain the Jewish Theatre as well as other Jewish institutions as a smokescreen for external use, in order to prove that Jewish culture was protected in Poland.

The same respect was not extended to many other symbolic sites. After his daughter Barbara was arrested as a participant of the student movement, the grave of General Henryk Torunczyk, a communist activist and Spanish Civil War veteran who died in 1966, was threatened with removal from a Warsaw cemetery reserved for those who served the country with distinction.. The charge against Torunczyk, raised by a fellow Spanish Civil War veteran, was that “he had allowed his daughter to be brought up in a Zionist spirit.” The exhumation was stopped thanks to a higher level intervention.¹⁶

By May 1968 Gomulka himself became seriously alarmed by the antisemitic excesses and ordered the “anti-Zionist” campaign be halted. The damage to society and to Polish-Jewish relations, however, was not reversed.

Anti-Zionism and the end of communism

It can be argued that in the end the “anti-Zionist” campaign of 1968 contributed to the gradual undoing of the communist regime in Poland. By embracing antisemitic rhetoric, the regime lost whatever remained of its ideological credentials as a progressive force. A whole generation of students and young intellectuals subjected to harsh

repression emerged as experienced activists. Many of them played a leading role in the formation of Solidarity in the 1980s that eventually defeated the regime.

“The anti-Jewish and nationalist discourse employed by the Communist authorities... (is)...today echoed by the notorious antisemitic broadcaster, Radio Maryja”

The antisemitic campaign of 1968 left permanent scars upon Polish society. It resulted in a massive purge of alleged “Zionists” in universities and many other key professional fields. Together with a wave of forced mass emigration of Jews, it deprived Poland of a big part of its intellectual talent.

The anti-Jewish and nationalist discourse employed by the Communist authorities has become a permanent feature of political life in Poland, today echoed by the notorious antisemitic broadcaster, Radio Maryja, and its political allies. The language of national populism finds its place, among others, on the pages of ‘intellectual’ publications such as *Obywatel*, which serves as an ‘anti-globalist’ organizing center on the edges of the extreme right and the extreme left. Its contributors, besides a streak of Polish MPs, have included French Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy, Horst Mahler, the German left-wing terrorist turned neo-Nazi, and Alexander Dugin, leader of the National Bolshevik Party in Russia. On a more popular level, at least two nazi-skinhead rock bands have put “68” into their names to show their identification with the “anti-Zionist” national-communist spirit of that year in Poland (*Deportacja 68, Sztorm 68*).

On the other hand, the events of 1968 paved the way for the pro-democracy movement whose heritage is an important point of reference in contemporary public debates. Support for human rights and the rejection of antisemitism in all forms are part of that heritage. Perhaps the most striking lesson of the 1968 Polish events is simply this: they serve as an eternal warning against the manipulation of Israeli-Palestinian conflict by recasting an anti-Zionist agenda in antisemitic terms.



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