

# Polish anti-Semitism: The last European closet, cultural code, or social problem?

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## Genealogy

The beginning of twentieth century, precisely having in mind the period between 1905 and 1914, involved a certain matrix of Polish-Jewish relations[1]. The spread of political anti-Semitism had led to a serious alteration in the Polish attitude to the Jews. No less important significant for Polish-Jewish relations was the powerful rise of Jews in the Polish lands. The period of Polish monoculture, sustained by both sides, was no longer possible[2]. The majority of the Polish political class, however, did not want to recognize this fundamental fact.

This new approach to the Jews and the Jewish question had many names. For the National Democracy, the main political movement of the right, it implied the exclusion of all the “non-Polish” groups from the national collectivity, sometimes including a wish to turn the fight against the “Jewish enemy” into the pivotal point of all its ideology. For other groups, those referring to the tradition of the Enlightenment like ‘the independent socialists’ (such as the Polish Socialist Party, *Polska Partia Socjalistyczna*, PPS) or liberals, it expressed an actual hegemony of Polish culture and a repeated demand for an absolute loyalty of the minorities.

Anti-Semitism, in various forms, thus became one of the permanent elements of the worldview held by the right-wing section of Polish society, while a negative attitude to the Jews constituted, for this part of society, the basic indicator of its national identity. In other words, patriotism meant for them a fight against the “Jewish influence”. No wonder then, that, from this time on, Jews (and not only in Poland) tended to view Polish society and Polish history as being in a perpetual process of growing anti-Semitism.

Before World War II, Poland remained a stronghold of traditional *shtetl*. In terms of demography and economics, the Jewish community in pre-war Poland was dissimilar to Jewish communities in Western or even Central Europe. On the one hand, Polish Jewry can be seen to have served as a laboratory for the various modern Jewish attitudes to the Jewish question. As some historians of East European Jewry, such as Ezra Mendelsohn, have claimed, such favorable conditions to conduct a national Jewish politics had never existed in the diaspora before [3]. On the other hand, this success of Jewish life was limited from the very beginning. The attitude of the Polish nation-state towards Jews and the Jewish question demonstrates a structural weakness of an autonomous modern Jewish life in the face of the emergence of new national states after WWI in Eastern Europe. The establishments of the new states seemed to believe that reborn national communities could survive only as homogenous entities.

Poland's Jews were, on one hand, the most politically and socially dynamic Jewish community in Europe. On the other hand, this community was an ethnic minority in a context of permanent and growing hostility from the so-called Christian environment, and it was subjected to intolerance, religious and ethnic hatred, street violence and even pogroms at the start of the 1930s. Nevertheless, the pre-war history of Jews in Poland was not very different from that of Jews in Eastern Europe.

Apart from the widespread popularity of anti-Semitism, inter-war Poland did not entirely resemble the case of Nazi Germany. The Polish political establishment, especially after the death of Józef Piłsudski in 1935, viewed the Jews not as an organic threat to the national community, but as a potentially disloyal and over-populous element of society and culture and one which might produce some serious obstacles to modernization of the Polish state.[4] On first sight, this different perspective on the Jewish question had little impact, but in fact it mattered a lot to the situation of the Polish Jewry. Paradoxically, Polish political anti-Semitism was not victorious in dampening the Jewish community in Poland, even despite being one of the most vicious in contemporaneous Europe and had made great inroads into all social strata of Polish society,.

The invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany in 1939 as well as the Holocaust resolved tragically the so-called Jewish Problem. While the vast majority of the Jewish community was murdered, the small part which survived the Holocaust and decided to remain in Poland were mostly of the assimilated and Polonized part of the pre-war Polish Jewry.

The aim here is not to give a balanced account of Polish attitudes towards Jews during WWII – that subject still requires a comprehensive study. From my own point of view, the war radicalized some processes on the Polish side rather than effecting a turn in popular Polish attitudes towards the Jews.

The aftermath of WWII saw a Communist regime seizing power (in late 1940), the ethnic cleansing of Germans and Ukrainians, pogroms and a wave of violence against the Jews in late 1940. This, and the purging of the remnants of the Jewish community in 1968, gave rise to a mono-ethnic Poland, in which over 90 percent of the population were ethnic Poles. From the early 1950s, a process of formulating a so-called Polish historical memory began. Strikingly enough, but official, organized by the Stalinist state, regarding so called

Polish historical policy with regard to 'Jewish' dimension of WWII, did not so much differentiate itself from this propelled by independent and still influenced groups, like the Catholic Church for example[5]. While, in theory, the Polish Communists preached the ideology of international working class brotherhood, in practice ethnic nationalism came to constitute an essential feature of the Communist system[6].

Moreover, from the mid 1970s onwards, most of the population, including Communist party members, openly declared – or, at least, exercised at a personal level – a sense of belonging to the Catholic Church. This was one of the crucial attributes for the building of a civil society in Poland after the fall of Communism in 1989.

From the very beginning, two opposing processes accompanied the transition of Poland from a Communist to a democratic state. On one hand, the first post-Communist government, under Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, declared its intention to build a civil society based on the introduction and implementation of new laws to protect minorities and their linguistic, cultural, ethnic and religious differences. The intention was gradually, but systematically translated into constitutional regulations. Between 1997 (symbolic of the establishment of the new Constitution) and 2004 (symbolic of the accession to the EU), this civic and pluralistic vision of Poland established itself in the political and cultural life of the country. One would argue that today, this vision remains dominant amongst the Polish political establishment.

On the other hand, an outburst of intense xenophobic, chiefly anti-Jewish public feeling arose over the same period. In the early 1990s, various right-wing political parties and groups as well as a conservative part of the Catholic Church began to make references to Jews as a menace to Poles and to the Polish nation. These anti-Jewish attitudes reached their peak during the first free presidential campaign in late 1990, when Mazowiecki has been delegitimized as a political leader by stigmatizing him and his supporters' alleged "Jewishness". The campaign confirmed the persistence, into the post-1989 period, of the typically right-wing political tradition of discrediting political opponents by labeling them "not true Poles," or simply as "Jewish".

This sudden eruption of anti-Semitic sentiments in mainstream Polish politics and its wide acceptance in popular culture did not affect the political scene of the 1990s – though it astonished and sometimes shocked liberal elites[7]. On one hand, in the second part of 1990s, right-wing parties also curtailed expressions of overt anti-Semitic clichés. On the other hand, by the end of 1990s, a large number of active right-wing groupings were confined outside of mainstream Polish politics. Though Polish public opinion of the time had, sociological data reveal, a "lower internal tolerance" towards other religious and ethnic minorities, populist right-wing politics did not enter into Polish politics on national level. Though many citizens identified their Polishness with ethnic roots, and related these to Catholicism, so-called Polish moral and cultural traditions, and the Polish language – seen as the only acceptable one for public discourse, this symbolic community of "Pole-Catholics" did not find at this time its own representation. None of the political parties or groups which openly spread anti-Semitism in public sphere were then elected to

the national parliament and even got an open access to local politics. How can we explain this notable discrepancy between, on the one hand, the Polish political establishment and, on the other, the popular mentality?

## Entangled memories

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The reasons are, in fact, various, profoundly reached back to fragile history of Polish-Jewish relations, at least during the long twentieth century, and obviously not so easy to explain in a short paper.

To some extent it, is a question of two contrasting national memories. Jewish memory in this regard is built around Shoah. With a couple of notable exceptions, the dominant Polish version of Shoah assumes certain discontinuities between some aspects of these relations as well as certain continuities in other aspects. Generally speaking, “discontinuity” is associated with the Holocaust and its presence in Polish territories, with tragic experiences of the war and with the devastating effects of cruel Nazi and Soviet occupations – all of which would seem to cause caused a new chapter in Jewish-Polish relations. These factors combined to bring about a radical shift in the attitudes of Poles towards Jews. Władysław Bartoszewski, a historian and an eminent figure of post-1989 Poland, who is regarded as a hero, having saved many Jews in the Nazi period, write:

“Conditions of the occupation led to a considerable decrease of anti-Semitic sentiments in Poland as compared to the prewar period. A common date of the persecuted, the suffering, and the fighters contributed to a new sense of solidarity and a will to help those who were perishing”[8].

Another Polish intellectual, founder of Catholic left-liberal weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, similarly:

“The commonality of persecuted, suffering, and fighting people changed quite radically the Polish–Jewish relations in our country. In a very large part of Polish society the last vestiges of anti-Semitism disappeared to give way to a sense of solidarity, and there appeared the will, very often effective, to help the persecuted”[9].

“Continuity”, on the other hand, presumes a long-lasting tradition of tolerance in Poland, a tradition which was actually never broken down. The key idea here is a deep sense of the innocence of Polish community. As a result of Jan Tomasz Gross’ books and many other, less well known, case studies, statements of this innocence, are of course no longer sustainable[10].

From my own perspective, anti-Semitic resentments are an integral part of the popular mentality in Poland – a constant aspect of Polish social life, though it may change in intensity and scope. Mostly, however, they are latent remnants of a certain vision of Poland as a symbolic community of values. Based on the main subject, I would like to consider two methodological concepts which, I think, may help to explain this phenomenon.

## Anti-Semitism as a cultural code

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A definition of anti-Semitism as part of a cluster of ideas, sentiments, and public behavior patterns – or “the total inter-connected set of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting...which includes traditions that consciously and subconsciously affect such a collectivity, habits of mind, a variety of automatic reactions, and plethora of accepted norms” – was introduced by distinguished Israeli historian of German-Jewish relations, Shulamit Volkov[11].

Volkov suggests that this phenomenon can describe the milieu of those who felt most acutely threatened by modernity, “the milieu marked primarily by its members’ more or less explicit anti-Semitism”. The milieu has produced a certain culture, or better to say, subculture opposite to the Enlightenment tradition. In my adaptation of this definition, I would like to replace “modernity” with a more appropriate phrase for the present-day situation: globalization.

Undoubtedly, one cannot adapt definitions and values developed in the first part of twentieth century to predicaments of its second part without risking certain abuses. Thus, I instead use the definition as a Weberian ideal type.

United by opposition to liberal democracy, secularization, and civil rights for various minorities, members of this subculture want to establish a cohesive national community based on justice, national honor, and social harmony. Nonetheless, the variations on this general pattern were many. Many involved in this subculture held ambivalent views on economy and foreign politics, as well as some divisions on the past. Despite differences between, say, die-hard anti-Communists, right-wing libertarians, ultra-montanes, extreme pro-life activists, monarchists or radical nationalists, there is much in common – in the shared ideas and lifestyles, as well as a common ethos.

Of course, after WWII, political anti-Semitism was no longer a main hallmark of this subculture. In most European countries, especially those who had experienced Nazi occupation, anti-Semitism became part of notions of treason. In this respect, Poland seems to be unique. Resistance against the German invasion served to unite movements and peoples who, before the war, had nothing in common. Fascists and anti-fascists, democrats and totalitarians were all engaged in the same struggle against Nazi Germany[12]. Under these circumstances anti-Semitism was not tainted by any traces of collaboration with the Germans and it could therefore prosper freely, penetrating after the war once again across the Polish society. As a matter of fact, indeed, anti-Semitism was never morally discredited. In various forms and shapes, it survived the Communist regime and even achieved patriotic credentials in some corners of public opinion.

## World of values

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In social psychology, there exists an opposition between the world of value and the world of interest[13]. In this paper, the concepts of value and interest carry only a limited meaning. I refer to certain social entities, considered to constitute a supreme good. Values, in this sense, belong to the moral sphere; they are ideals, something better or higher. Interests, by contrast, belong to the material, or even materialistic, sphere: they are just earthly goods, and, therefore, lesser or lower. Someone who works or, better,

struggles on behalf of values belong to a superior world, whereas those who only realize interests remain in the lower realm. Moreover, defenders of ideal values inevitably find themselves in conflict with those who are defending interests. For many people, this separation and antagonism takes a very real and concrete form. In some historical contexts, people have very strong beliefs about the embodiment of this world of values, but still there are profound disagreements between them on these issues.

Religions are often seen as representative of supreme and sacred values, while the opposing world of mere everyday interests is usually identified with either materialistic liberalism or communism. From time to time, the symbolic communities of values may find representatives in political parties or movements. In this case, for the last three decades, the Solidarity movement in Poland has viewed itself, and has been viewed by many others, as an embodiment of true values. There were, indeed, some real grounds for that. In this regard, so called post-Communists in Poland and the members of pre-1989 establishment were seen and believed to represent “the world of interest”. But Solidarity was, from the very beginning, a community consisting of various, often contradictory interests and values and it was, eventually, forced to split.

Nevertheless yet another community of values exists in Poland: the so-called community of ‘Pole-Catholics’. The world of interest, in this regard, is left to foreigners – mostly to the Jews – to historic occupants, and sometimes to disloyal allies and to many others – usually those who discomfited by the definition and borders of this Pole-Catholic community of values (e.g feminists, gays, atheists, Roma minority, Muslims). Needless to say, these roles are filled with different social actors in various countries. From the late nineteenth century onwards and continuing today, Jews have been very high on this list of imaginary fears in Eastern Europe.

This symbolic community of values is, in the Polish context, associated with between 40 and 60 percent of active public opinion belong to from 40 to 60 per cent of active public opinion – according to various sociological surveys[14]. Whenever its interests – whether practical or political – collide with values, the former are just ignored. Moreover, the struggle to defend of sacred values – such as patriotism, national interest, national honor, Christian rights or order and so on – – legitimizes use of any available means. Thus, defenders of such a holy cause agree that their struggle may bring disastrous misfortunes –the so-called antagonists’ loss of rights or even their destruction – and that this may be inflicted not only onto enemies but onto their own people.

In the last decade, this community of values, associated with Nation and the so-called Christian order, eventually gained its political representation[15]. Anti-Semitism does not play a particular role within it. On the contrary. More disastrous and vicious to democratic values has, in fact, been a sort of anti-Communist paranoia. This has not only mobilize the masses against reported opponents, but also has to overcome the ideological differences linked to the social and political cleavages existing in contemporary Polish society. But anti-Semitic sentiments are a deep-rooted part of this agenda, one of a convenient and accessible venue for the expression of frustration of this community of values. It calls upon an image of the “enemy” which is easily and widely understandable.

## Final remarks

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In most Eastern European countries, poor relations between Jewish and non-Jewish populations have to come to an end. Jewish communities in Poland, like in most other countries in the region, have been dispersed or removed, never – one must presume – to return.<sup>[16]</sup> The main question which should be posed here is whether this “anti-Semitism without Jews”, to use the Paul Lendvai’s phrase – or, as some sarcastic critics described it, this “anti-Semitism without anti-Semites” – can exist without its social basis? I will argue affirmatively, for the simple reason that this so-called community of values, and its specific cultural code gives provide a protective canopy for metaphors such as Judeo Communism (*?ydokomuna*) – metaphors which have been so vital to anti-Semitic narratives. Jewishness remains here not a description of a certain ethnic or religious group, but as a term of political and social abuse and exclusion.

Another question arises from this however.. In contrast with the past, in the Poland of the 1990s another cultural code became visible, one which was not confined to either narrow segments of society, as it had been in the 1930s, nor to prominent intellectuals, as it had been under the Communist regime. This cultural code was the sense of an inclusive civic and pluralist Poland and was manifested in various initiatives put forward by members of the cultural elite and representatives of younger generation of Poles. This “camp of emancipations”, which followed the term in office of Shulamit Volkov, is much more modest in scale than Pole Catholic groups but it nevertheless exists as a force and is growing. It is more capable of integrating into the collective memory of other religious and ethnic groups and exercises a more balanced collective self-image of Polish society. The question of which cultural code will win out, however, remains open and nothing can be taken for granted.

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### Notes

1. I would like to thank Timothy Snyder, who has read this paper and shared his critical remarks with me. They definitely helped me to clarify my own point.

2. Theodore A. Weeks, *From Assimilation to Antisemitism. The “Jewish Question” in Poland, 1850-1914*, (Illinois 2006), pp. 64-66. On the effect of the 1905 Revolution on the Jewish community see Stephen Hoffman and Ezra Mendelsohn (eds.), *The Revolution of 1905 and Russia’s Jews* (Philadelphia, 2008). See as well Helena Datner, *Ta i tamta strona. ?ydowska inteligencja Warszawy drugiej po?owy XIX wieku*, (Warszawa 2007), p.275.

3. See E. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe. Between the World Wars*, (Bloomington 1983), pp. 63-83

4. For best discussion on the pre-war Poland and Nazi Germany and as well Romania in comparative way see William W. Hagen, “Towards final Solution, Before the “Final Solution Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Antisemitism in Interwar Germany and Poland” , *Journal of Modern History* (July, 1996), pp. 1-31.

5. See Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana ?a?oba. Polskie spory wokó? pami?ci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zag?ady 1944–1950* (Warszawa 2009).
6. For a extensive discussion see Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja w?adzy komunistycznej w Polsce* (Warszawa 2005).
7. For detailed discussion see Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland’s Threatening Other. The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present*, (Lincoln and London 2006), pp. 262-270.
8. Quoted in Aleksander Smolar, ‘Jews a Polish Problem’, *Daedalus*, vol. 116, No.2, (Spring 1987), p.31.
9. Quoted in A. Smolar, *Jews as a Polish Problem*, p.32.
10. On Jedwabne see *Thou Shalt Not Kill. Poles on Jedwabne*, (Warszawa 2001). For more sophisticated readers, an instructive body of data can be found in the journal ‘*Zag?ada ?ydów. Studia i Materia?y*’.
11. Shulamit Volkov, *Germans, Jews and Antisemites..Trials in Emancipation*, (Cambridge 2006),p p.112-113.
12. In more comprehensive way see A. Smolar, *Jews as a Polish problem*, p.41.
13. See Janusz Reykowski, “On the Antagonism of Values and Interests”, “*Science and Society*’. *Scientific Center of Polish Academy of Sciences in Paris, European Academy of Sciences, Arts and Humanities*, (Warsaw Paris, 2002).
14. For more comprehensive sociological data see “Diagnoza spo?eczna 2009” <http://analizy.mpips.gov.pl/index.php/raporty-i-publicacje-topmenu-58/39-diagnoza-spoieczna/57-diagnoza-2009.html>.
15. See Peter Olivier Loew, Loew, „Zwilinge zwischen Endecja und Sanacja. Die neue polnische Regierung und Ihre historischen Wurzeln, „*Osteuropa*”, (no. 11/2005), pp.9-20; idem, „Feinde, überall Feinde. Psychogramm lines Problems in Polen, *Osteuropa*‘, (no.11-12/ 2006), pp. 33-51; Andrea Huterer, „Kampf der Rechten Und Gerechten. Die politische Rhetorik der Kaczy?ski“, pp. 53-67. See as well A. Smolar, „Polen, Die Radikalen an der Macht“ *Transit*, (31/ 2006), pp. 114-131. On the genesis of the Kaczy?ski movement from Marxist perspective see David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity. Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe*, (Ithaca and London 2005), esp. chapter. „Ignoring Anger, Producing a Political Labor”, pp.106-113.
16. Nowadays the Jewish community in Poland consist of 2000 regular members in about 38 millions Polish society. In various sociological surveys about 10-20 thousands of Poles declared some Jewish origins. From 1990.on, the number of Jews in Poland has not changed.

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