

The Nationalist Right under Communism: Bolesław Piasecki and the Polish Communists, 1944-1979

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Abstract

Based on a doctoral research project, this article introduces to the readers Bolesław Piasecki (1915-1979), a prominent Polish nationalist politician. A fascist in the 1930s and a pro-communist Catholic activist in postwar Poland, Piasecki was the leading advocate of the reconciliation of nationalism with communism. By narrowing the scale of historical observation to an individual case, the article discusses the role of nationalism in twentieth-century Polish political culture, analyzes the entanglement of communism and fascism, and presents an example of the ideological affinity between communism and nationalism. It explores Piasecki's postwar career against the background of the nationalization of the Polish communist party culminating in the 1967-1968 anti-Semitic campaign. It argues that under certain conditions, not only did the communists utilize nationalism, but – as Piasecki's case proves – they also prolonged the existence of the nationalist right. In broader terms, Piasecki's story points to the fact that the adoption of nationalism by Eastern European communist leaders accelerated the ideological de-legitimization and erosion of the system in the region.

“Most of my friends in present-day Poland, both communist and non-communist, consider Piasecki a simple and straightforward rogue who is used by cynical men to do their dirty work for them. They believe that he betrayed everything for which he was supposed to stand in his past, and that he is a mere agent of forces which never show themselves in the light of day (Blit 1965, 14).”

Lucjan Blit

Introduction

The British journalist Lucjan Blit's observation, which opens my essay, illustrates the popular opinion about the politics of Bolesław Piasecki (1915-1979), a prominent Polish nationalist politician, who started his career as a fascist and ended it as a pro-Communist Catholic activist. This widely held belief identified him as a political chameleon – the arch-villain of Polish politics and a turncoat who used Machiavellian tactics to get to the top. Later, for anti-communist dissidents in the 1970s, Piasecki was a fascist turned Soviet agent, a perverse phenomenon (Michnik 1993, 40). I find

these allegations unconvincing – in fact, I did not find any evidence suggesting Piasecki’s recruitment by the Soviets. More importantly, I believe that these explanations grossly trivialize the nature of Piasecki’s cooperation with the communists, by ignoring motives on both sides as well as his ideological consistency. Piasecki was not a chameleon. Indeed, he was the man of the right and his Catholic PAX Association constituted the nationalist right under communism.

In this paper I introduce to the readers one of the most fascinating figures in the history of the twentieth-century Poland and the communist world, a broker between the brown and the red currents of totalitarianism, and the spiritual father of those Polish communists and non-communists alike who called for a system communist in its form and nationalist in its content. I will examine Piasecki’s relationship with the communist regime as an example of the ideological affinity between nationalism and communism. I will assess it through the prism of Piasecki’s ideology and actions against the background of the ideological metamorphosis of the Polish Communist Party. I argue that his postwar career should not be read as a radical departure from his fascist beginnings, but as their logical outgrowth. In broader terms, I propose that under certain conditions, not only did the communists utilize nationalism, but – as Piasecki’s case proves – they also prolonged the existence of the nationalist radical right. In an attempt to legitimize their rule, they gradually employed the nationalist canon. One of the outcomes of this process was the “Polonization” or “nationalization” of the communist party, which culminated in the 1967-1968 anti-Semitic campaign, in which Piasecki played a significant role.

This essay is based on my doctoral dissertation, for which I used formerly classified materials from Polish archives – including the files of the former security police, communist party and government files, and PAX collections – political pamphlets, memoirs, press sources, and oral interviews. Western scholarship on Piasecki is thin and poorly researched. In Poland, he always provoked vicious exchanges between his supporters and followers. There are but few historical studies and all these works suffer from a lack of access to archival materials. In addition, their authors demonstrated a lack of emotional distance to their subject (Dudek and Pytel 1990; Micewski 1978; Rudnicki 1985). Very little has been written about nationalist-communist affinities in Poland.¹ The reasons are several: first, the Poles’ self-ascribed

anti-communism was shared by many Polish historians; secondly, western scholars focused on those countries where – like in Hungary and Romania – the fascist right formed mass movements; finally, there has been an on-going shift from a political to social, cultural, and intellectual history among the young generation of American scholars working on Poland and Eastern Europe. There are two outstanding books examining the entanglement of nationalism and communism and Romania – Katherine Verdery’s *National Ideology under Communism* and Vladimir Tismaneanu’s *Stalinism for All Seasons*. However, a similar study on Poland is still to be written. Although my research project is not a history of nationalism under Polish communism, it attempts to respond to this demand.

An Overview of Piasecki’s Politics Prior to 1945

Before World War II, as a leader of a small fascist movement, the National-Radical Movement, Piasecki envisioned Poland as a proto-totalitarian state, integrated on the basis of ethnicity, Catholicism, and mass organization. The cornerstones of his doctrine were the notions that God was the highest destiny of man and that striving to increase the might of the nation was the path to God (Piasecki 1935, 36). This formula made religious salvation practically contingent on participation in the nationalist community. Like his Hungarian and Romanian fascist counterparts, Piasecki regarded the expulsion of Jews as a necessary precondition for the modernization of the country (Piasecki 1937; Ruch Narodowo-Radykalny, 1937). Yet Left and Right are elusive concepts in modern Poland and Eastern Europe, and Piasecki’s program is a perfect illustration of this point. His prewar ideology included ideological ingredients of the right, such as xenophobia, an exaltation of the ethnically homogenous community, religious fundamentalism, and a paramilitary movement led by a charismatic leader. On the other hand, he shared anti-capitalism with the extreme left– here overlapping with the rejection of the West – a glorification of a centralized state, a cultivation of collective identities, and historical determinism. More importantly, both Piasecki and the communists viewed their mission as constructing a new society.

Piasecki’s vehement radicalism along with his totalitarian designs for a one-party state differentiated him from the Polish nationalist mainstream National Democrats, who dubbed Piasecki a national communist (“Komentarz,” 1937). For the

¹ A significant exception here is Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm* (Warsaw, 2001).

center and the left, Piasecki's organization, with its uniformed storm troopers, the tactic of street violence, and savage anti-Semitism, represented an indigenous Nazism (AAN, Komisariat Rządu Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy, 297/I-1, "Akcja zbiorowa przeciwko kolporterom *Falangi* przez bojówki socjalistyczne w dniu 2.VIII. 1936."). His relationship with the *sanacja* authoritarian regime was more complex. Although Piasecki deplored Marshal Józef Piłsudski's camp for being a friend of Freemasonry and Jews (Piasecki 1932), in 1937, he entered a short-lived alliance with the very same regime he had opposed so far. The pact did not survive due to the opposition of some government officials to the flirting with the notorious nationalist radicals. Nevertheless, the whole venture demonstrated Piasecki's ability to make a bargain with a stronger opponent in the hope of dominating him in the future – a pattern he followed throughout his political career.

During the war, Piasecki joined the Polish resistance movement and gained the control of a right-wing combat group, the Confederation of the Nation, which in 1943, merged with the Home Army. Following the merger, Piasecki served as the commander of a partisan detachment operating in the eastern Poland, where Polish underground units battled with the Germans and the Soviets. Arrested by the communist authorities in November 1944, Piasecki faced execution charges for fighting the red partisans and participating in the underground after the liberation (IPN, Teczka osobowa Bolesław Piaseckiego, IPN 0259/6, "Postanowienie o pociągnięciu do odpowiedzialności karnej," Warsaw, May 19, 1945). However, he was released after less than a year and soon founded a pro-communist movement of progressive Catholics, later known as PAX (Latin word for "Peace").

Under the Cross and the Red Flag: Piasecki's Alliance with the Communists, 1945-1967

There was a certain logic in the seemingly paradoxical decision of the communists to exonerate and support the man whose credentials consisted of extreme nationalism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Communism. While it is true that Piasecki gambled everything on the powers of persuasion to convince his captors of his value, the communists were clearly prepared to experiment with nationalism and its right-wing

adepts.² As they faced a predominantly hostile country with a strong right and a powerful Roman Catholic Church, they needed allies from outside their ranks – people who, while not Marxists, would support their cause. Therefore Piasecki's value lay precisely in the fact that he was not a communist. Although the communists excluded the possibility of legalizing the National Democrats, they knew that the right still commanded considerable support in Polish society. In this respect, the activation of Piasecki's group could channel nationalist-Catholic clientele into the government's camp. In addition, they decided to test Piasecki's usefulness on the Catholic front.

For Piasecki, postwar Poland had much to offer. The old classes had vanished from the scene. There were almost no Jews left. Poland had become an ethnically homogeneous and predominantly Catholic country. Had not that been Piasecki's goal? Most importantly, for Piasecki the pact with the communists provided an opportunity to be at the center of power. He knew that the Soviets were there to stay. But he also believed in the gradual erosion of communism and the eventual bankruptcy of its ideology. Piasecki estimated that the Soviet Union would fall after 50 years. He was not so badly off! "We must elaborate a broad strategy" – he confessed to a friend – "which will undermine the Soviet ideology (Reiff 1993, 215-216)." Thus he allied himself with the communists in the hope of dominating them in the future. Asked by one of his collaborators, for what he hoped in this gamble, Piasecki replied, "I am counting on Providence and their (the communists') errors (Zabłocki 1989, 10)."

While still in jail, in 1945 memoranda addressed to Władysław Gomułka, Secretary General of the communist party, Piasecki pointed to social radicalism and revolutionary goals as the ideological features that he had always shared with the communists. He offered to mobilize the young generation – the former right radicals, for cooperation in the establishment of "truly democratic and free Poland (IPN, *Teczka osobowa Bolesława Piaseckiego*, IPN 0259/6, "Osobiste oświadczenie Bolesława Piaseckiego," May 22, 1945)." After his release, Piasecki pledged to work toward the creation of the common Catholic-Marxist front (*Archiwum Katolickiego Stowarzyszenia Civitas Christiana*, I/91, Piasecki's letter to Gomułka, August 18, 1946).

² Following his arrest, Piasecki was moved to the headquarters of General Ivan Serov, the chief of the NKVD units operating in Poland (IPN 0259/6, "Protokół dochodzenia," November 15, 1944. Serov asked Piasecki to elaborate on the following issues: the political situation in Poland in 1944, the arsenal of methods that should be used to increase the influence of the communist government, and Piasecki's ideas about his cooperation with the communists (IPN 0259/6, "Osobiste oświadczenia Bolesława Piaseckiego," May 22, 1945). In the spring of 1945, Piasecki was handed over to civilian authorities.

By pointing out to the common ideological ground between the communists and prewar fascists, Piasecki hit the nail on the head. Indeed, both movements adhered to socio-economic radicalism and contempt for traditional ruling classes, and they viewed their destiny as constructing a new man. They disdained the West as well as home-grown democrats. Finally, as a staunch ideologist fully committed to the realization of proto-totalitarian utopia, Piasecki recognized the communists as kindred spirits. He was not the only fascist who reinstated himself in Eastern European postwar politics. In Hungary, the communists permitted thousands of fascist “small-fry” to join the party. In Romania, the new regime adopted the “don’t tell, don’t ask policy” toward former low ranking members of the Iron Guard. But these men were small “Nazis,” whereas Piasecki had been a fascist leader. Moreover, while these former fascists joined the communist parties, Piasecki was allowed to create his own organization.

On the surface, PAX was a lay Catholic association. In reality, it aspired to become a fully-fledged political party, a junior coalition partner. As Piasecki exclaimed on one occasion, Pax had to become “a real movement, the party’s ally of authentic strength, not an ornamental institution (AAN, Biuro Prasy KC PZPR, 237/XIX-171, “Załącznik Nr.5. Z wypowiedzi Bolesława Piaseckiego,” February 27, 1960).” In 1977, two years before Piasecki’s death, PAX claimed 15,000 disciplined members (IPN, DSA 1656, “Informacja dot. aktualnej sytuacji w środowiskach katolików świeckich,” Warsaw, August 30, 1977). The association ran the Catholic publishing house and the “INCO” commercial company, one of the biggest private enterprises behind the Iron Curtain. It published five newspapers and periodicals. Five of its most prominent activists sat in the Polish parliament. Starting in 1971, Piasecki also served as a member of the Council of the State. He turned his organization into a safe haven for rightists and anti-communists admitting veteran nationalists and former non-communist resisters. Until Piasecki’s death, PAX remained under the command of the old national radical guard. With war veteran meetings, an economic empire, and occasional outbursts of chauvinism, when allowed, Piasecki successfully preserved the spirit of the radical right.

In his cooperation with the communist regime, Piasecki vowed to take the position of an ally from the outside. To quote his long-time associate Ryszard Reiff, Piasecki intended to modify or perhaps even to *civilize* the communist system by enriching its spiritual non-materialistic elements (Reiff, interview, June 18, 2001). In

his postwar doctrine, developed under the name of pluralism of worldviews (*wieloświatopoglądowość*), he proposed the creation of a dual political system embodied by a communist-Catholic ruling coalition. Piasecki expected the communists to moderate their approach toward the Catholics in order to strengthen their appeal to the largely Catholic Polish society. On the other hand, Catholics had to relinquish their resistance or indifference toward socialism if they wanted to participate in sharing power, of course, under the leadership of PAX. This *modus vivendi* would ideologically reinforce both sides. According to Piasecki, communism and Catholicism as Promethean doctrines worked for the transformation and the good of humanity. However, Piasecki's concept of the common Marxist-Catholic front did not eliminate nationalism because he always regarded Catholicism as the cornerstone of national identity. The ultimate logical step for Piasecki would be the conversion of the communists into "patriots," socialist nationalists. Under the ideological guidance of PAX, Catholics, communists, and nationalists would be united in the service of God, socialism, and nation (AAN, Urząd do spraw Wyznań, 129/10, "Referat wygłoszony przez Przewodniczącego Stowarzyszenia Pax na zebraniu Zarządu w dniu 3 maja 1968;" Piasecki 1954).

The advent of Stalinism forced Piasecki to put a curb on nationalist rhetoric and focus his activities on the Catholic front. He vowed to act as a mediator between the bishops and the communists. Admittedly, he had some successes in bringing the government and the Polish Episcopate to the negotiating table.³ Although Piasecki favored a subservient church, he did not want to see it destroyed because with the elimination of the clergy from the political scene, his own position would dwindle. In addition, although loyal to the communists, Piasecki was also a devout Catholic. However, he did not have the power to moderate the regime's assault on the church that culminated in the arrest of the Polish Primate, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, in 1953. Furthermore, Piasecki's pluralism of worldviews was condemned by the Holy See, which placed his publications on the Vatican index of forbidden books in 1955 ("Dekretum" 1955). After the end of Stalinism in Poland, the Catholic hierarchy regained its powerful position in society, dashing Piasecki's hopes for being an arbiter between the weak church and the strong state. Wyszyński, who held a grudge against

³ Due to his negotiating skills, Piasecki was one of the architects of the 1950 Accord, the first agreement ever signed between a Roman Catholic Church and a communist regime (AKS CC, Piasecki's letter to Primate Stefan Wyszyński, January 13, 1950; Wyszyński's letter to Piasecki, January 21, 1950).

Piasecki since the time of his arrest, viewed the leader of PAX as a communist stooge.⁴ De-Stalinization also ended Piasecki's monopoly on the political representation of lay Catholics. Not only did the regime make concessions to the church, but it also provided outlets for the Catholic intelligentsia – the Catholic groups of ZNAK and Więź.⁵ Consequently, by the late 1950s Piasecki's role on the Catholic front was practically over.

During the political upheaval in 1956 which terminated Stalinism in Poland and brought Gomułka – previously purged from the party and jailed – back to power, Piasecki opposed democratization, which he believed could lead to the Soviet military intervention or a coup d'état staged by hardliners (Piasecki 1956). But contrary to the widely spread opinion, he did not oppose Gomułka's return. Showing considerable insight, he believed that Gomułka would stabilize the political situation and discipline society (IPN 0648/53, t.2, "Doniesienie agenturalne," October 17, 1956). While party reformers and other liberals sought to democratize socialism in Poland in accordance with Marxist doctrine, Piasecki argued that "in future Poland, Marxism would be replaced by national-radical socialism, based on the historical traditions of the Polish nation (IPN 0648/53, t.2, "Doniesienie agenturalne," May 3, 1956)." As for who represented this political option, that was a rhetorical question. For Piasecki it was his own PAX movement.

Here I would like to emphasize the similarity between Piasecki and Gomułka: while the former attempted to reconcile his nationalism with socialism, the latter tried to reinforce communism with nationalism. Hence their political cooperation should come as no surprise. Known for his opposition for the dogmatic thinking of many prewar communists, Gomułka was a pragmatist hoping to consolidate communist power on the basis of a "coalition" rather than on repression and ideological unanimity (Iazhborovskaia 1997). He might have scorned Piasecki's idea of enriching Marxism by Catholicism, but otherwise he sympathized with his other observations, namely the opposition to the omnipotence of Soviet advisors as well as the

⁴ During his visit to Vatican in 1966, Wyszyński described Piasecki as a "thief secretly opening the doors [of the church] to the communists" (Hoover Institution Archives [HIA], Peter Raina Collection, Box 3, Folder 1, "Notatka," November 3, 1966).

⁵ Although supportive of Catholic-Marxist dialogue, members of ZNAK (Sign) and Więź (Bound) groups were not tainted by Stalinism. They adopted less compromising stance than Piasecki on the issue of church-state relations and during the subsequent pitched battles between the church and the regime tended to side with the former.

“disproportionate number of Jews” in the communist apparatus (AKS CC I/90, “Memoriał przedstawiony Tow. Gomułce w lipcu 1945;” Gomułka 1995).

We also know that at the time of Gomułka’s downfall in 1948, Piasecki sympathized with the party leader (IPN 0648/155, “Relacja agenta,” December 11, 1949). As a result, despite the calls for the liquidation of PAX coming from the liberal intelligentsia and party reformers in 1956, Gomułka refused to sacrifice Piasecki.⁶ In exchange, Piasecki remained Gomułka’s staunch ally for a number of years. Shortly after the 1956 crisis he advised the First Secretary to crack down on the pro-reform movement, which in his view favored the social democratic model and intended to break away from the Soviet bloc. Gomułka could count on PAX, which would join him in the struggle for the victory of socialism in Poland (AKS CC, Piasecki’s memorandum to Gomułka, September 30, 1957).

Piasecki named this coalition “the patriotic-socialist formation.” It was to combine communism with a nationalist ethos, and it would not shy away from disciplining society should such demand occur. Piasecki had no doubts that Gomułka would adhere to nationalism: “As the ideological vitality of socialism declines we will witness the growth of nationalist tendencies [within the party].” At the same time, he regarded ideology as the Gomułka group’s Achilles heel: “Instinctively they feel that socialism and patriotism are one and the same, but they have difficulties in formulating this thesis.” But he claimed to know the remedy: PAX had both intellectual resources and enough political vision to provide the party leadership with a new ideological synthesis (AAN, Biuro Prasy KC PZPR, 237/XIX-171, “Wyjtki z materiałów pomocniczych na zebraniu PAX w marcu 1960,” March 1960).

The political system envisioned by Piasecki was an authoritarian national communist state loyal to the Soviets. At the heart of this program was the notion of the specifically Polish ideological experiment paving the way to Piasecki’s own access to power. Piasecki’s opposition to Marxist revisionism followed naturally from his doctrine of the pluralism of worldviews, which defined Catholicism and Marxism as the two pillars of national identity. As a result, an assault on Catholicism – and admittedly revisionists displayed a strong anti-church bias – constituted the attack on Polishness. In private, Piasecki equated party liberals with the “Jewish comrades (IPN

⁶ When Stanisław Staszewski, a party liberal, tried to convince Gomułka that the dissolution of PAX would win the church to the side of the regime, the first secretary snapped at him, “I know that, you would like to leave me alone with Wyszyński, but I am not going to do that: I am not going to make the rope to hang myself with (Torańska 1987, 183).

0648/49, t.1, "Informacja dotycząca Stowarzyszenia PAX ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem okresu 1956-1960," December 10, 1961)." One of his Catholic opponents from ZNAK, Jerzy Zawieyski, aptly concluded that Piasecki's self-confidence reflected the growing appeal of anti-Semitism in the party. Zawieyski's colleague, Julian Eska, believed that "PAX represented the political right," whereas Piasecki's Catholicism was a masquerade aiming at the co-rule of "two Soviet pro-consuls: a Communist and a Catholic (IPN 0648/63, t.3, "Notatka służbowa," November 11, 1961; IPN 0648/62, t.2, "Notatka służbowa," January 26, 1961)."

However, in the early 1960s, Piasecki's plans to pursue a nationalist-communist alternative were clearly premature call. During the congress of PAX in December 1960, he continuously persisted on the transformation of PAX into a political party and the implementation of his program. But Gomułka would have none of this. When he met Piasecki in January 1961, he snapped: "These are absurd demands. PAX intends to reform Marxism...but only Marxists can enrich Marxism and in this they do not need anybody's help." He went on mocking Piasecki. "PAX cares about the party's mistakes. The party will take care of its errors without...the help of revisionists because what you are doing is revisionism." When Piasecki tried to defend his views, Gomułka cut him off, "The problem with you is not your worldview but your aspirations to build a Catholic party and we would have to fight against such a party (AAN, Urząd do spraw Wyznań, 129/11, "Rozmowa Tow. Gomułki z przedstawicielami PAX-u," January 27, 1961)."

For Piasecki, it was a humiliating spectacle. Yet he was far from capitulating. He knew that the First Secretary's rule would not last forever; nor was the Polish party a monolith. By the mid 1960s, Gomułka's regime grew more authoritarian, nationalist, and anti-Semitic. The roots of anti-Semitism among Polish party leaders lay in the history of the Polish communist movement. Gomułka and his closest associates represented the second generation of the Polish communists. Unlike their predecessors they were largely plebeian and ethnically Polish.⁷ They made their way to the party elite during the war, which they spent in occupied Poland. Accused of "nationalist errors," they were purged in 1948. There is no doubt that Gomułka

⁷ The Jewish share in the membership of the prewar party was about 22 to 26 percent. However, the majority of the party leaders were of Jewish origin (de Weydenthal 1978, 25-27).

blamed the “Jewish comrades” for his past misery.⁸ By the time of his return to power in 1956, some of the men whom the First Secretary considered his tormentors, became revisionists. As the party struggled to present itself as truly “Polish” the purge of the Jews was only a question of time.

General Mieczysław Moczar’s party faction of “Partisans” represented an even more aggressive brand of communist nationalism. The Partisans were high-ranking security and military officials who during the war had served in the communist resistance movement, and afterwards had languished in second-rate government posts. By the 1960s, they were joined by power-hungry middle-age apparatchiks whose careers stagnated under the Gomulka regime. The Partisans’ ideological platform consisted of fanatical nationalism, anti-Semitism, military ethos, and the opposition to liberalism of all kinds. They contrasted themselves, the “home communists,” with the “Muscovites” and “Jews” who had entered the country with the Soviets (Lesiakowski 1998, 222-223). The Partisans’ position dramatically improved after Moczar’s promotion to the post of Minister of Interior in 1964.

Piasecki had been aware of Moczar’s growing prominence since the late 1950s. Soon he came to believe that the Partisans had been at the forefront of the struggle against the revisionists, and he very much hoped for their success. Yet, he also knew that the key figure to the resolution of the internal divisions within the party was Gomulka. Here Piasecki showed a considerable foresight believing that the First Secretary would ultimately side with Moczar’s Partisans (IPN 0648/46, t.3, “Doniesienie,” September 12, 1962). He also detected that the struggle against revisionists could evolve into an offensive against the Jewish communists. When his long-time friend and associate, Alfred Łaszowski, warned him that numerous people interpreted his opposition to party liberals as anti-Semitism, Piasecki did not show any sign of discomfort. “When people say ‘revisionists’ they mean ‘Jews,’” Łaszowski indicated. “But the whole Politburo speaks this way,” Piasecki replied. There is little doubt that some of Łaszowski’s arguments might please him too. Consider the following opinion: “You know that there is a group in the party, which is fed up with the Jews, a group that tries to recruit you saying: ‘You will crystalize

⁸ In 1948, Gomulka complained to Stalin about the large presence of Jews in the party and their hostility toward him. Anastas Mikoyan reminded Gomulka of this episode in October 1956 (HIA, ANEKS Collection, Box 7, Gomulka’s notes from the meeting with Khrushchev, October 19, 1956).

these ideas into a plan; you will lead the future revolution (IPN 0648/56, t.2, “Notatka służbowa,” January 22, 1962; Ibidem, “Notatka służbowa,” February 22, 1962).”

Although Piasecki supported Moczar, he never formed a close bond with the General.⁹ The plebeian roots and appeal of the Partisans stood in contrast to Piasecki’s elitist background and grand political aspirations. All in all, the affinity of goals and the identity of enemies, but not the alliance of minds, made the two men potential allies. Given his ideological pretensions, Piasecki stood closer to Gomułka’s chief ideologues, such as Zenon Kliszko and Andrzej Werblan, who by 1965-1966 ended a taboo against the use of nationalism in the Polish Marxist discourse (“Dyskusja na książkę Adama Schaffa 1965). The message was not lost to Piasecki. In 1966, he vehemently criticized in public the overrepresentation of Jews in the upper level of political elite, described the liberals’ warnings against anti-Semitism as exaggerated, and observed that nationalism and socialism were not in conflict. Furthermore, he insisted that the critique of Jewish over-presence in the party was a patriotic duty of all citizens (AAN, 237/XIX-353, Bolesław Piasecki, “Niektóre zagadnienia socjalistyczno-patriotycznego ruchu w Polsce,” transcript of Piasecki’s speech, October 28, 1966). In February 1967, Piasecki labeled the Jews and liberal intellectuals as the opposition, which succumbed to Zionism and the support for the Federal Republic of Germany. By being pro-Israeli and pro-German, they were quintessentially anti-Polish. He also called for the ideological campaign for the union of patriotism and socialism; the modification of the party system – a clear reference to PAX’s greater involvement; ideological tolerance other worldviews (another point promoting Piasecki’s organization); and the separation of the government from the party. Piasecki described his program as “the critical continuation of the system (IPN, MSW II 31145, Bolesław Piasecki, “O twórczą kontynuację Polski Ludowej,” February 1967).”

Critical perhaps, but hardly a continuation, Piasecki’s alternative constituted a communist-nationalist hybrid, authoritarian, and ideologically neutral but within the narrow choice between Marxism and nationalistic Catholicism. By advocating social discipline, strong rule, and anti-Semitic purges, Piasecki was setting up the rhetorical

⁹ Piasecki tried to establish contacts with Moczar’s entourage, but Moczar gently rebuked these advances. However, Piasecki succeeded in befriending Moczar’s deputy, General Franciszek Szlachcic (IPN 0648/56, t.1, “Stenogram z posiedzenia sekretariatu PAX,” September 28, 1961; IPN 0648/48, t.1, “Doniesienie,” June 29, 1962; Szlachcic 1990).

standards for the future witch-hunt. Within months, his message would suddenly acquire a new relevance to the political situation in Poland.

The Anti-Zionist Campaign, 1967-1968

The Six-Day War between Israel and the Arab states of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria began on June 5, 1967. By June 11, the Israeli forces won a stunning victory. The conflict in the Middle East had serious repercussions for the Soviet bloc as the Arab armies had been trained and equipped by the Soviets. On June 10, the Soviet Union broke diplomatic relations with Israel. Poland followed suit on June 12.

In Warsaw, the public sympathized with the Israelis because the Arabs were supported by Moscow. “The prevailing mood in our society is satisfaction that ‘Our’ Jews were beating ‘Russian’ Arabs,” one observer commented (Rakowski 1999, 63). In his address to the congress of trade unions, furious Gomułka denounced “the Zionist circles among Polish citizens,” and compared them to “the Nazi fifth column.” He also articulated the following warning: “Let those people to whom I address my words...draw appropriate conclusions. It is our stance that each Polish citizen should only have one fatherland – People’s Poland (Stola 2000, 274).”

Gomułka’s speech divided the Polish public: while the liberal intelligentsia reacted with disbelief, numerous party and security officials as well as ordinary anti-Semites were in a state of euphoria. Behind the doors of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Moczar’s henchmen prepared the list of some 400 journalists, intellectuals, state officials, and managers suspected of pro-Israeli sympathies. The security police also began collecting files on the people of Jewish origin employed in the state and party institutions, academia, and mass media. Although Gomułka did not believe in the existence of the Zionist conspiracy, he authorized these actions. To see the anti-Zionist campaign only as the result of Moscow’s anti-Israeli line is too trivial. In all probability, the Polish leader decided to get rid off the people who had stabbed him in the back in 1948. He also might vow to win legitimacy for his party by cutting off Polish communism from its association with the Jewish comrades.¹⁰ Equally important was Gomułka’s distrust for the liberal intelligentsia. In the end, his mind

¹⁰ In June 1967, one of Gomułka’s close associates told his colleagues: “After the twenty three years of people’s power it is time to solve this delicate problem...At last the party will cleanse itself of an undesirable element (Zaremba 2001, 367). Gomułka’s ideological watchdog, Werblan argued that the Jewish-dominated prewar Communist Party of Poland had ignored the nationalist aspirations of the Poles. Thus the Jewish communists were anti-Polish (Andrzej Werblan, “Przyczynek do genezy konfliktu,” *Miesięcznik Literacki* 6 (June 1968), pp.61-71).

might generate a coherent image of the enemy, the hydra with three heads – a revisionist intellectual, more often than not, of Jewish origin.

The on-going purge of Jews from the party and army, a state of ferment among intellectuals and students, an aggressive mood in the party and security apparatus, and the impact of democratic reforms in Czechoslovakia – all these factors produced a situation in which a little spark could set off major political crisis. As it often happens in history, the final eruption was caused by a seemingly marginal event. In November 1967, the National Theater in Warsaw staged a production of *The Forefathers* by the great 19th-century Polish romantic, Adam Mickiewicz. The play contained anti-Russian undertones that provoked enthusiastic reactions among the audience. The regime decided to ban the production. After the last performance, on January 30, 1968, some 300 students marched to Mickiewicz's monument where they were assaulted by police units. The organizers of the demonstration were students and young faculty members from Warsaw University. Strongly influenced by revisionist intellectuals, they were leftist and hostile to nationalism. Some were the children of prominent communist officials of Jewish origin. Their protests gained the support of the writers' union, whose Warsaw chapter called for the democratization of cultural policy and the termination of anti-Jewish purges (Friszke 1994).¹¹ Following the expulsion of two student leaders, Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer, from the university, their followers organized a demonstration on March 8, 1968. The students came under the brutal attack of police and party thugs. A number of people were beaten and arrested. Although demonstrations spread to other academic centers across Poland, the regime broke the student protests in late March.

Yet police brutality was only one face of March 1968. The fact that many demonstrators were the children of Jewish communists enabled the government to portray the protests as the evidence of a Zionist plot. But the party had to be free from the odium of anti-Semitism. To make anti-Semitic attacks more credible and spontaneous, the regime decided to use old non-communist nationalists. Piasecki was the best candidate for this task. His anti-Semitism was well-known. He also enthusiastically supported the purges. Within hours of the outbreak of March demonstrations, Piasecki learned the names of leading protesters. He called the chief editor of his daily newspaper, ordered him to write an article about the

¹¹ Andrzej Friszke, *Opozycja demokratyczna w PRL, 1945-1980* (London: Aneks, 1994), pp.227-242.

demonstrations, and instructed him on the text's content (Jan Engelgard's letter to the author, December 14, 2003). The unsigned article "To the Students of Warsaw University" presented the student protests as the outcome of an Israeli-West German plot to overthrow socialism in Poland. The Polish agents of Tel Aviv and Bonn were former Jewish Stalinists, who, having adopted Zionism, had tried to derail the party's "patriotic-socialist" course. Through the use of their children they had infiltrated and incited intellectuals and youth against people's power. The article also listed student leaders' names followed by their family connections: daughters and sons of party and government dignitaries, all of them Jewish ("Do studentów Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego," 1968).

The text provided a blueprint for the escalation of the anti-Semitic campaign. Combining the old fascist constructs with the rhetoric of communist propaganda, it discredited Jewish communists and isolated the opposition from society by presenting it as Jews and Israeli-German agents. The classic opposition of "them" versus "us," the Jews versus the Poles, provided the regime with national legitimization. Attacks in the mass media were followed by rallies, further purges, and the exodus of Jews from Poland. Between 1967 and 1971 some 13,000 Polish Jews left the country (Stola 2000, 213). Although Gomułka did not manage the crisis, he ruled through the crisis, pursuing his goals. Having eliminated Jewish communists and other party reformers, he marginalized Moczar whose position in the apparatus had become too powerful. By the end of the summer of 1968, the First Secretary halted the anti-Semitic campaign.

The article in *Słowo Powszechne* was not Piasecki's only contribution to the state-sponsored pogrom. At his speeches given in parliament and PAX meetings in April and May, Piasecki even accused the government of tolerating the Zionist subversion for years. He pushed for more. In Piasecki's words, what was also needed was the thorough modification of Poland's political system. He proclaimed that the purge of the ruling elite should lead to the advancement of PAX, competent, disciplined, and unconditionally devoted to the alliance of patriotism and socialism. His organization had to be transformed into a political party and invited to the government. Equally striking was Piasecki's patronizing tone toward Gomułka whom he hailed for successes on some fronts but criticized for mistakes on others (Piasecki 1971; AAN, Ud/sW, 129/10, Piasecki's speech at the PAX meeting, May 3, 1968).

Indeed, Piasecki counted on major changes within the party leadership. Knowing that Moczar's star was fading, he saw Edward Gierek, the party boss of Silesia, as a new key player, perhaps even Gomułka's successor. But if he expected the replacement of Gomułka, he lost his bet. Although the Party congress of 1968 showed the influx of new faces to Politburo, Gomułka was still number one for another two years. The end result of Piasecki's involvement in the anti-Semitic campaign was not too impressive: politically he gained nothing, morally he only lost. However, there was small consolation to him. Poland was a Jew-free and ethnically homogeneous country. "This is an achievement which our society sees and fully accepts," he said in November 1969 (Piasecki 1971, 425).

Conclusions

As Leszek Kołakowski has observed, "in 1968, communism ceased to be an intellectual problem (Kołakowski 1981, 467)." The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia that buried the Prague Spring coupled with the anti-Zionist campaign in Poland discredited Eastern European communism in two ways. Firstly, the system was incapable of reforming itself from within. Secondly, having withdrawn themselves from the struggle for the realization of millenarian utopia, the regimes embraced aggressive nationalism and reduced their ambitions to retaining their monopoly on power. As the Italian socialist Ignazio Silone remarked on one occasion, "the first thing the communists nationalize is socialism (Kemp 1999, XI)." It was a dangerous game since they had to find a middle ground between their adherence to Moscow and obligations to nationalism at home. Only two Eastern European communist leaders, Tito and Enver Hoxha, could afford to bypass this dilemma. In the Soviet bloc, it was Nicolae Ceausescu, who came closest to the implementation of national communism, or as Vladimir Tismaneanu proposes, "national Stalinism," independent of Moscow (Tismaneanu 2003, 32-35). Elsewhere, all attempts to win popular support by using nationalism led to severe political crises: the revolution in Hungary in 1956, ideological bankruptcy and the birth of Solidarity in Poland, or Todor Zhivkov's loss of face in Bulgaria following his campaign against the Turkish minority in the 1980s.

Ironically, by participating in the March pogrom, the nationalist Piasecki contributed to the ideological decay of communism. Yet the fusion of nationalism and communism did take place on his terms. Indeed, his ideas largely anticipated Gomułka's shift to nationalism and harmonized well enough with the nationalist and

authoritarian rhetoric of the Partizans. Yet once the communists gave up ideological pretensions, Piasecki the ideologue, who could only thrive in the fire of political mobilization, was losing the reason of his own existence. Having welcomed the downfall of Gomułka in 1970 and his replacement by Edward Gierek, he soon discovered to his dismay that the new party leader sacrificed ideology to economic prosperity.¹² In Gierek's mindset, consumerism alone would guarantee social compliance and political legitimization. As a result, Piasecki's doctrinaire obsessions turned him into a political fossil, while his PAX movement lost any political relevance. But the ideological demobilization of communism was not the only development that sealed Piasecki's failure. Equally important was the birth of the democratic opposition and the rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the non-communist left (which formed the backbone of the dissident movement in the 1970s). Piasecki had launched his postwar career on the simple but brilliant premise that the church would never make peace with the left. This paradigm proved correct for almost thirty years, but in the 1970s it collapsed. Piasecki died a broken man in 1979.

Both Piasecki and veteran communists were ideology-driven revolutionaries who belonged to the prewar era, a battleground of ideologies. Their red-brown kinship, which fully manifested itself in 1968, backfired. At the end of the day, they were overtaken by the advocates of civil society.

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