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DYSKURS POLITYCZNY, ETYCZNY I EKONOMICZNY

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## The Anti-Nationalism of Young Communists in Poland after WW2

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to outline the anti-nationalist orientation of the young Polish communists who became so-called revisionists in the 1950s and the very important, probably crucial, role of this orientation in their so-called “accession to Marxism”, and later so-called “abandonment of Marxism” in the course of their ideological evolution as Polish “real socialism” was revealing its nationalist face. It is an aspect which seems underestimated in contemporary discourses on the evolution of Polish Marxists before the anti-Semitic ethnic cleansing of 1968. The very question of the relationship between nationalism and “real socialism” “only recently” has received “the attention that it deserves.” (Kunicki 2012: 2) However, in Poland it was Tadeusz Łepkowski (1927–1989), a historian of Poland, Latin America, and revolutionary movements, including the newest Polish revolutions (1944–1981), who in his analysis of nationalism had posed, as early as at the beginning of the 1980s, the question of progressive and reactionary dimensions of affinities between socialism or communism and nationalism.

It allows to pose a hypothesis that anti-nationalism was the crucial factor in the evolution of the young party intelligentsia, especially former members of the Łódź branch of the Academic Union of Youth Struggle “Life” (*Akademicki Związek Walki Młodych “Życie”* – AZWM “Życie”), including Leszek Kołakowski.

### Łepkowski’s conception of two revolutions in Poland and their collapse

The widespread simplistic view that in Eastern Europe communism was imposed by Soviet tanks has been contested by researches emphasizing the popular support for the left wing program (Abrams 2002; 2005: 9–36; Judt 2006), but Łepkowski formulated an original and inspiring idea of two revolutions in Poland.

According to Łepkowski, at the end of the second world war Poland was the arena of a clash of two revolutions. One revolution was pro-independence and democratic; its carrier was the mass anti-Nazi resistance movement, subordinated to

the Polish government in exile in London, with the Home Army (Armia Krajowa – AK) as its military organization. The culmination of this movement was the Warsaw Uprising in August and September 1944. The pro-independence revolution fell into “the revolutionary surge of popular masses and whole nations against fascism and totalitarian violence.” (Łepkowski 1983: 44)

Another revolution was the communist revolution, whose main carrier was the Polish Workers’ Party (*Polska Partia Robotnicza* – PPR), with its underground military organization, and later with the Polish Army formed in the Soviet Union, and post-war political allies (mainly the left-wing socialists). The communist revolution was not only imposed from above but “was partly a native movement, having its own popular roots, referring to some weak yet genuinely existing revolutionary traditions” and enjoying “limited yet genuine social support.” (Łepkowski 1983: 44–53)

Contrary to the dominant view and in spite of the real conflict between those two revolutions, they were quite close to each other in the class and ideological aspects. The anti-Nazi resistance movement was radicalizing socially and “moving to the left” together with the whole Europe, where the desire for “a deep reconstruction of social, economic, and political structures in a democratic and socialist, if not even communist, spirit” was expressed. (Łepkowski 1983: 44–45) However, in Poland, one of “the contact states with USSR, whose societies were repulsed from communism because of their tragic practical experience”, that radicalization to the left could be called “non-communist” or even “anti-communist.” (Łepkowski 1983: 45)

In the “London camp” social radicalization was reflected in the declaration *What The Polish Nation Is Fighting For* issued by the Council of National Unity (Rada Jedności Narodowej – RJN) on 15 March 1944; according to that document the liberated Poland would be a parliamentary republic in which the land reform would be conducted, the great industry would be nationalized and economic planning would be introduced. (Łepkowski 1983: 46) The commander of the AK, General Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski, reported to the government in London: “A big shift to the left. Strong radicalization especially of peasants and poor intelligentsia. Almost universal demand for social control over economic life, abolition of the concentration of wealth in private hands above a defined minimum and of privileges of individuals and social groups. A power attempting to impede this process would expose the country to grave upheavals.” (Kowalewski 2016: 311)

In both revolutions the struggle for national and social liberation was accompanied by counterrevolutionary elements. In the course of the events they came to play the main role. When with the fall of the Warsaw Uprising, the pro-independence democratic revolution was defeated, it degenerated into a right-wing anti-communist armed underground: “the democratic elements were disappearing, while chauvinistic (...), anti-Semitic (...) and conservative elements were emerging.” (Łepkowski 1983: 49) On the other hand, as Timothy Snyder notes, “The summer of 1944 revealed (...) the willingness of Polish communists to accept a view of nationality long advanced by Polish nationalists. (...) As the war ended, they came to

power in the baggage of the Red Army to build something very much like ethnic communism.” (Snyder 2003: 180, 187)

### **Post-war nationalism and anti-Semitism in Poland**

The post-war territorial transfer of the Polish state was mythologized by the new state power as the return to the frontiers established under the Piast dynasty (10th-14th centuries). This mythology was derived directly from the ideology of pre-war right wing National Democracy (*Endecja*). (Zaremba 2001: 165) The base of this ideological construct was the fact that the new “socialist” state was materially founded on ethnic cleansing, including Germans and Ukrainians, and politically based on an alliance with the former *Endecja*, active under the cover of the Polish Western Union (*Polski Związek Zachodni – PZZ*), and the former far right *Falanga* with Bolesław Piasecki, founder of the PAX Association. (Snyder 2003: 179–201; Curp 2005; Curp 2006; Gross 2007: 222–225; Snyder 2010: 313–338; Kunicki 2012: 82–92; Kowalewski 2016: 309–324)

“Poland’s ethnic cleansing formed the bond that tied the Communist-dominated party-state politically, organizationally and ideologically to the extreme right. The party-state’s effort to re-forge alliances with integrally nationalist forces, particularly among the *Endecja*, was part of a long-term pattern of Polish Communism’s postwar dependence on radical nationalism to solve the key problem of legitimacy for the Soviet-dominated regime.” (Curp 2005: 406)

The newly established Polish communist party did not even include “communist” in its name: its official name was the Polish Workers’ Party. Programmatic documents of the PPR expressed “the desperate need of demonstrating that Polish communists were more papal than the pope, that their party was really national in content and they were true Polish patriots.” That is why those documents were overloaded “with national phraseology and symbolism.” (Zaremba: 2001: 125)

An integral part of modern Polish nationalism is anti-Semitism – they are intertwined tightly and intimately. Since the pre-war times anti-Semitism was a crucial problem for all progressives, from communists to liberal democratic intelligentsia, going along with the saying “people are divided into anti-Semites and democrats.” (Wionczek 2010: 35) During the Second World War many Poles not only passively welcomed the Holocaust, but actively participated in it and “helped Germans to kill Jews.” (Zgliczyński 2013) Jews were denounced to Nazi authorities, blackmailed and murdered. (Gross 2001; Engelking 2011; Gross 2012; Grabowski 2013; Zgliczyński 2013; Gross, Grudzińska-Gross 2016) An important aspect of that explosion of Polish wartime anti-Semitism was the takeover by Poles of Jewish property, leading to a substantial and massive change in the social structure. (Grabowski, Libionka 2014)

Right after the war another wave of anti-Semitism appeared – Holocaust survivors were threatened, verbally abused, physically assaulted, and murdered. (Gross 2007) Witold Kula (1916–1988), a historian and a representative of Polish school of social and economic history, observed in 1946 that it exceeded the boldest dreams

of pre-war far right. (2010: 145) Alina Cała estimates that in the years 1944-1946 Poles killed 800 Jews. (2012: 455) On 4 July 1946 during a six hours long pogrom in Kielce, “the biggest post-Hitlerite pogrom of Jews in the world” (Kula 2010: 142), more than 42 people were murdered and 40 were severely injured. (Cała 2012: 458; Gross 2007: 81–117) Post-war anti-Semitism was the reason for a huge wave of emigration of survivors from Poland. (Gross 2007)

### Stanisław Ossowski against the nationalism of the PPR

The most important cultural left-wing weeklies established just after the war, *Kuźnica* and *Odrodzenie*, paid a great deal of attention to anti-Semitism, which was described as “the darkest symptom of reaction” (Jastrun 2010: 6) encompassing the “Polish nation in all its layers and at all intellectual levels: from the highest to the lowest.” (Andrzejewski 2010: 55) It was also there where “[t]he upper crust of the Polish intelligentsia expressed its despair” after the Kielce pogrom. (Gross 2007: 129)

One of the articles was titled ‘On the background to the Kielce events’ (*Na tle wydarzeń kieleckich*), and written by the left-wing but non-communist leading sociologist Stanisław Ossowski (1897–1963), later labeled as “bourgeois”, but held in a very high esteem by the young communist intelligentsia. In his detailed analysis Ossowski paid attention to the nationalist current present in the discourse and practice of the PPR and subjected it to strong criticism. (2010: 117–28) Ossowski criticized the idea of a national state, glorified “from the right to the left.” As a striking example he cited the call to create an uninational state “by all means necessary”, published in the philosophical journal *Mysł Współczesna*. Ossowski wrote:

“Numerous articles and statements, and, maybe even to a higher degree, commemorative speeches pronounced at different occasions, create the atmosphere favourable to the tendencies of old nationalism, the atmosphere in which the resistance to Kielce miasmas weakens.” (2010: 124) He warned:

“The patriotism of People’s Poland can refer to the old tradition of peoples’ brotherhood. But it can also degenerate into democratized nationalism, which, although lacking a class ground, will not be less dangerous to the development of culture and human relations than the pre-war bourgeois nationalism.” (2010: 126)

Ossowski stood against “communist nationalism”, with its concept of a unified nation, bonded by blood, often personified, and dressed in a mythological Piast clothing. That “communist nationalism” presented the WW2 as a clash between Slavs and “German hordes” and conducted a brutal anti-German campaign, whose aim was to expel from Poland not only Germans but also the “German spirit.” (Zaremba 2001: 121–173) Almost all state celebrations were accompanied by religious ceremonies, resembling more “a nationalist mystery” than “a ceremony in which representatives of a Marxist party take part”, as Marcin Zaremba writes on the ceremonies organized on the occasion of bringing Chopin’s heart to Poland. (2001: 170) On 1 May, 1947, Władysław Gomułka, First Secretary of the PPR, announced: “Marxism has

ceased to be a CLASS ideology (...) and has become a NATIONAL ideology" (emphasis original). (Zaremba 2001: 179)

### **The Łódź branch of the Academic Union of Youth Struggle "Life" and its "sectarianism"**

The nationalist current in the PPR was opposed not only by democratic intellectuals like Ossowski, but also by the young communist students who had been born mainly in the second half of 1920s and entered the political life during or just after the WW2. (Mikołajczyk 2013: 339–342) Many of them were active in the Academic Union of Youth Struggle "Life", especially in its Łódź branch.

In 1945, because of the destruction of Warsaw, Łódź became for a while the cultural centre of Poland. The University of Łódź was established on the basis of the pre-war private progressive university Wolna Wszechnica Polska (Free Polish University), and attracted many progressive scholars and intellectuals. (Baranowski 1993) The main cultural and intellectual periodicals, above all *Kuźnica*, were at that time published in Łódź.

Although Łódź was a relatively safe place for Jews, anti-Semitic crimes also took place there. On 24 January 1946, a university student and Jewish Labour Bund activist Feliks 'Fiszke' Najman was murdered. His funeral became a large demonstration against anti-Semitism, with the body remaining for public viewing for two days, and the coffin then carried across the whole city. The funeral was attended by thousands of people, among them representatives of state institutions and political organizations. (Redlich 2010: 81; Trębacz 2016: 212–213)

As its member, Tadeusz Drewnowski, a journalist and literary historian, writes, the Łódź branch of the AZWM "Życie" "was the most lively, most dynamic and most interesting student organization not only in Łódź but in whole Poland." (1982: 68) It was not only to the left of the party line but also to the left of the political line of its own national leadership. Therefore, the branch was accused of "leftism", "sectarianism", "demagogy", "detachment from reality", "abstractness" or "dogmatism." (Leśniewski 1963: 112–139) In the monograph of the Łódź branch of the AZWM "Życie", published in 1960s, that is in the times of censorship, Adam Leśniewski, also a former member of that organization, indicated indirectly but clearly enough that the bone of contention was nationalism of the PPR which was intolerable for the young communists:

"Members of the Łódź branch of the AZWM «Życie» were especially sensitive to symptoms of any social harm and any national discrimination. Driven by youthful impatience, they were eager for the principles of the revolution taking place in the country to be realized as soon as possible, and thus did not like to recognize the imperatives of the political tactics that, dictated by the objective situation and faced with reality, had to implement the program of the revolution step by step. However, they were members of an organization disciplined and conscious enough to understand the necessity of putting the Party's political line into action." (1963: 47) This

picture corresponds with the recollections of other members of the Łódź branch of the AZWM “*Życie*”, among whom there were future prominent intellectuals and so-called revisionists.

### Reminiscences of former members of the AZWM “*Życie*”

Wiktor Woroszyński, a poet and writer, reminisced of “fervent criticism of the party slogan of national unity”, “emphasizing intensely that the PPR was a communist party”, “glorifying traditions and figures of international communism, sometimes controversial” or condemning the participation of clergy in state celebrations. (1964: 148)

Drewnowski’s road to the AZWM “*Życie*” was especially interesting, as initially he intended to join a Catholic organization, but abandoned the plan, disgusted with its “pre-war chauvinistic syndrome (directed against the Judeo-Masonic Commune).” (Drewnowski 1982: 59) Years afterwards, he saw the AZWM “*Życie*” as an “insubordinate” and “sectarian” organization, trying to imitate Soviet communist organizations while at the same time adopting the tradition and spirit of the pre-war Polish communist movement. (1982: 74, 76–79) Pre-war members of the former Communist Party of Poland (*Komunistyczna Partia Polski* – KPP), dissolved by Stalin in 1938, conformed to the nationalist party line. (Zaremba 2001: 124–125) In this situation, the young militants of the AZWM “*Życie*” took up the torch of internationalism; later it was seen by Drewnowski in his recollections as “national nihilism.” (1982: 79)

Another member of the AZWM “*Życie*”, Maria Janion, a literary theoretician and historian, also pays attention to the meaning of anti-nationalism for the Łódź circle of young communist students and the impact that the constant struggle of Stefan Żółkiewski, the editor-in-chief of *Kuźnica*, against Endecja had on her. As regards *Kuźnica*’s harsh reaction to the Kielce pogrom, she writes: “It was of great importance for our milieu.” (Szczuka, Janion 2013: 72–74)

Leszek Kołakowski, one of the most prominent Polish so-called revisionists, admitted that from the very beginning he was seen as trouble in the party. Together with his comrades he was criticized for sectarianism, because of their attitude to what Kołakowski called “the false patriotic phraseology” of the PPR. Opposing the party nationalism, they wanted “the party ideology to be expressed openly and explicitly as a communist ideology, and not as a semi-patriotic, national, mendacious one.” (Chudoba 2014: 50)

According to a note made by the state security service in 1963, Kołakowski stated about that period: “In principle, we hated this nationalist Gomułka-style phraseology about democracy, nation, Maria Konopnicka, Kościuszko. All that was rubbish. We were communists and we wanted communism. The fact that Gomułka had been expelled pleased us very much.” (Chudoba 2014: 68)

## The peculiarity of Stalinism in Poland

In 1948 the elimination of Gomułka from the party leadership for a “right-wing nationalist deviation” in the course of the Stalinist campaign against the “national communism” marked both the advent of Stalinism and the break of the party’s previous pact with nationalists. (Curp 2006: 116–118) During this period, the open nationalist discourse was suppressed in Poland. Moreover, the Stalinist anti-Semitic campaign waged at the same time in the Soviet Union had a relatively mild impact on Poland, affecting only some state institutions and that in a limited manner. (Checinski 1982: 89–102; Snyder 2010: 351–360) In one of his letters to Jerzy Giedroyc, Kołakowski wrote that “the Polish party tended not to adopt the anti-Semitic actions of the last years of Stalinism – that aspect of the doctors’ plot, the Slánský trial, and the «struggle against cosmopolitanism» was completely absent.” (Gieroyc, Kołakowski 2016: 78)

The relevance of anti-nationalism was manifested during the campaign against the so-called bourgeois philosophy, especially targeting representatives of the pre-war Lvov-Warsaw School. The “offensive on the ideological front” was proclaimed in 1951 by Adam Schaff at the First Congress of Polish Science. (Schaff 1951b: 16–49) The crucial role was played by the young communist students of the Institute for Training of Scientific Cadres (*Instytut Kształcenia Kadr Naukowych*), founded in 1950 in Warsaw with Schaff as its head. The first generation of its students included i.a. Bronisław Baczko, Henryk Holland and Leszek Kołakowski. Although this campaign against the pre-war intelligentsia bore all features of a typical Stalinist campaign of that period, it had noteworthy anti-nationalist aspects. While denouncing pre-war scholars for their “objectively reactionary” stand, young communists did not fail to emphasize the progressive role those scholars had played before the second world war in the struggle against anti-Semitism. For example, Baczko, attacking mercilessly the philosopher Tadeusz Kotarbiński for idealism, at the same time expressed “deep respect” for his pre-war stand against nationalism and anti-Semitism. (Baczko 1951: 263) Schaff in his paper on the philosopher Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz said that “he was one of the progressive intellectuals who were able to stand up against the increasing wave of hooliganism of the National Radical Camp [*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny* – ONR] at universities.” (Schaff 1951a: 253) The texts produced during this campaign, in spite of their Stalinist character, reveal that there was indeed a common ground shared by the young communist intellectuals and their elder adversaries, the “bourgeois philosophers”: it was the rationalist, Enlightenment and humanist horizon and resistance to clericalism, irrationalism and fascism with their main form in those times, that is anti-Semitism. (Bielińska-Kowalewska 2012, 2017)

## 1956: In the face of the rebirth of nationalism

1956 is traditionally perceived as the symbolic moment of the break with Stalinism. In Poland it was the year of the workers’ uprising in Poznań and the rise of

a democratic mass movement including a large-scale development of the movement of workers' councils. Gomułka returned to power, becoming First Secretary of the ruling Polish United Workers' Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza* – PZPR). However, it was also the year of the rebirth of nationalism and anti-Semitism both in the governing party, especially inside the so-called Natolin faction demanding “national regulation of cadres” and accusing Jews of Stalinist crimes, and within the society as a whole. (Machcewicz 1993: 216–233; Zaremba 2001: 223–262; Węgrzyn 2010: 137–140) Anti-Semitic impulses were also coming from Moscow. (Chęcinski 1982: 105–109, 131–132) The Natolin faction received the support of the PAX Association mentioned above. Jan Józef Lipski, an activist of the independent Crooked Circle Club and member of the editorial board of *Po Prostu*, observed then that there was a threat of “fascism including anti-Semitism” looming. (Lipski 2010: 73)

1956 was also the beginning of the “Gomułka Aliyah”, that is the migration of around 40 thousand Jews to Israel: “The large exodus from Poland followed the change of government there in 1956. The new regime unleashed a new torrent of anti-Semitism, but also opened the gates for Jewish emigration, which had been illegal for several years.” (Bar-Yitshak 2005: 57)

Woroszyński noted that at that time, as an editor of the *Nowa Kultura* journal, he often received letters with a “new political program”, that is “the program of Black Hundreds”, a nationalist and racist one: “Some even refer to Hitler, others deny such affinities. But all long for strong, intolerant authorities who will clear the mess with a) Jews, atheists and communism, b) Jews, intelligentsia and reaction.” (Woroszyński 1979: 168; Famulska-Ciesielska 2009)

The former very young communists – not so young anymore – again stood decisively against nationalism and anti-Semitism. The vanguard so-called revisionist *Po Prostu* journal played an important role in this struggle. (Mikołajczyk 2013: 177–179) At the beginning of 1957, the daily *Życie Warszawy* published an article ‘Tendencies, perspectives and tasks’ (*Tendencje, perspektywy i zadania*) by Kołakowski. This article is sometimes called “a revisionist manifesto.” (Kołakowski, Mentzel 2007: 159) Diagnosing the failure of the existing socialist project, Kołakowski wrote there:

“For a few weeks now we have anxiously observed in Poland two phenomena closely tied with each other: the increase of influence of political reaction – reaction in the classic sense: philistine, anti-Semitic, clerical; reaction which has here no program, ideology or political ideas and is expressed in barbarian, thoughtless and unorganized forms. On the other hand, inside the party, we observe the increase of influence of political reaction which is conversely dangerous: anti-democratic, bureaucratic elements (by the way, equally anti-Semitic), whose expansion may pose a danger of restoration of Stalinism (...)

The main political problem now is not to admit the situation in which we would face the alternative between those two forms of political reaction (...).” (Kołakowski 1957: 3)

Gomułka’s speech at the 9th Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the PZPR was a strong attack on the revisionist tendencies in the party. Kołakowski’s



article 'Tendencies, perspectives and tasks' was addressed explicitly. Other revisionists named by Gomułka were Woroszyński and Roman Zimand, who in the 1940s had been also an activist of the AZWM "Życie", but in Wrocław. Gomułka's harsh attack on the revisionists was followed by a relatively mild approach to the party conservatives, without any mention of anti-Semitism and nationalism. (Gomułka 1957)

## Conclusions

With Gomułka coming back to power, the party pact with nationalists was reestablished. T. David Curp writes: "After 1956, he came back to power and successfully reidentified Polish Communism with the national revolution. (...) The authorities stabilized their rule at the cost of transforming Poland into a nationalist socialist polity, in which the party-state's socialism was increasingly suffused with the Endecja's xenophobic and anti-Semitic nationalist content." (Curp 2006: 11)

Therefore, in 1956 the circle had closed: the former young communists who had now gained the "revisionist" label, found themselves once again in the opposition to the party line because of growing nationalism. The more the party was nationalist, the deeper was the gap between the apparatus and the communists, who in the 1940s had perceived the regime, in the words of Kotarbiński, as "an exponent of the only organized current which sincerely and decisively opposed anti-Semitism." (Kotarbiński 2010: 308) It seems that the hypothesis of anti-nationalism being the main reason for their so-called "accession to Marxism" and then of their so-called "abandonment of Marxism", starting as early as in 1956, is reasonable and worth of further research as an act of rejection of the "red-brown alliance."

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## **The Anti-Nationalism of Very Young Communists in Poland after WW2**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to outline the anti-nationalist stance of the young Polish communist intellectuals, later known as “revisionists”, between 1945 and 1956. It is analyzed in the context of the alliance of the communist power with the nationalist right and far right, and especially in the context of anti-Semitism. It seems that anti-nationalism played a very important role in both the so-called “accession to Marxism” and the “abandonment of Marxism” by these “revisionists” in the course of their ideological evolution as Polish “real socialism” was revealing its nationalist face.

**Key words:** Marxism, nationalism, anti-nationalism, anti-Semitism, Stalinism, Poland, communism, revisionism