

Nationalism in Poland in the 20th and the 21st century

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Abstract:

The first Polish organizations of modern nationalism appeared in the 19th century. In the time after World War I there followed a quick development of such organizations which very often assumed a radical character. They attracted, primarily, young people who were active in squads attacking Jews and Germans. Moreover, this movement took interest in Fascism and its ideology. After World War II, nationalism got reborn anew. Communists resorted to taking advantage of nationalistic slogans in order to mobilize and unite the society. Nationalistic politicians who were active in the prewar period were even allowed to resume their political activity and organizations of the overtly nationalistic character have been free to be established since the 1980s. Consequently, at the beginning of the 1990s either new organizations were set up or those founded in the 1930s reactivated. In the 21st century, they are redefining their ideology and activity, targeting not only their traditional enemies, but also the European Union, migrants and all the “Alien”. Recently, they have been especially active on the Polish political stage.

Keywords: Independence, anti-Semitism, Catholic Church, patriotism, communism

1 Introduction

Edward Carr wrote in *The Economist* that “Poland has found itself embraced by a new nationalism.” (Polska w objęciach...) Is this nationalism new indeed? Or, perhaps, this is a movement which – begun several decades ago – has survived the most turbulent meanders of history – World War 2, then the time of Communism – to be reborn in the Third Republic? In order to settle this question, it is necessary to make a review of the best-known nationalistic movements and organizations which came into existence in the Interwar period, that is following the reconstruction of the Polish state in 1918. Next, the history of nationalism in Poland needs analyzing until the beginning of the 21st century. The preceding period does not offer a relevant subject of analysis, since the external factors that influenced the rise and development of nationalism, including its basic goals, differed from those which ensued in the independent Polish state.

The nationalistic organizations and programs of the Second Republic of Poland grew out of the 19th-century tradition. (Polscy faszyści...) From that time on they evolved, the example of which can be the attitude of the nationalists towards left-wing factions, primarily – socialists. As late as in the 1980s, Polish nationalists still cooperated with socialists, approving in their majority of the idea of regaining independence by means of a social revolution. However, under the influence of the Revolution of 1905, the both currents went their separate ways. The leftist movement was begun to be treated in the categories of “alien” to the Polish nation, aroused by Germans, Russians and Jews. (Grott 2013; Polscy faszyści...).

After regaining the independence in 1918, nationalism grew stronger and developed. The year 1922 saw the foundation in Warsaw of one of the most important nationalistic organizations of the Interwar period – *Młodzież Wszechpolska* [All-Polish Youth], in the ideological declaration of which one can read as follows: “The nation is the utmost good which we have. All the facts and questions in the fields of ethics and politics must be considered and judged exclusively from the national point of view.” Another very important political faction of this type was *Obóz Wielkiej Polski* [Camp of Great Poland], established in 1926. Its leader was Roman Dmowski. The aim of that formation was to have a state firmly based on solid foundations, able to occupy its due place in the world and secure conditions of – both spiritual and material – development to the nation. This organization, in particular – its youth department (The Movement of the Young of the Camp of Great Poland) – being active in universities and academic centers – greatly radicalized the Polish nationalism, setting a direction to it and a tone to be binding in successive years. First of all, a very strong emphasis was laid on nationalistic questions. The Jewish problem was accentuated to a much greater extent, while fight against the Jewish was put to the fore of the actions taken by the Movement of the Young. That fight was meant to be carried on on all fronts and with the use of all available means and methods. Until 1930, it had been primarily an economic fight. Later on raiding parties were introduced to attack both Jews and leftists who were regarded as an invented movement managed by the Jewish (Muszyński 2011: 38). Those squads were active chiefly in fairs and at universities, enjoying a strong support for the idea among students. There began to dominate racist elements and the major goal of the organization, as Professor Grott, a researcher of this organization, writes, was removing Jews from the positions they occupied in the country. Another line in the organization’s activity, although not so prominent as in the case of Jews, were acts of violence against the German minority, (Grott, 2013) which – in turn – occurred basically in Greater Poland and in Pomerania, where the percentage of this population was the highest. It should be mentioned here that the movement was very much interested in fascism and its ideology (Łętocha 2012: 5-6). In March 1933, it was dissolved under the charge of attempting a coup d’état in the country. Many former members of the Camp of Great Poland formed

organizations of overtly nationalist-socialist (the Nationalist-Socialist Workers' Party) or, indeed, fascist character. It needs stating here that several such creations had already existed in Poland before. Others established organizations not less radical, ones combining "action and a program".

In 1934, there was set up a secret movement called *Ruch Narodowo-Radykalny* [Nationalist-Radical Movement] – colloquially referred to as *Falanga* [Phalanx]. Reactivated in the 1990s, it has functioned until today and will be discussed further in this study. The activity of "The Phalanx" was divided into two parts: groups responsible for carrying out active revolutionary action (the hand with a sword) and teams whose aim was to educate new members and develop propaganda. The movement made reference to the Italian fascism and surpassed other nationalistic groups as regards its radical attitude (Rudnicki 2018). The leader of "The Phalanx" was Bolesław Piasecki. Its members advocated "national egoism" and made themselves known for, among others, postulates of introducing the so-called "desk ghettos" into Polish colleges of higher education and the principle *numerus clausus* for the Jewish. They also postulated forming Polish Organization of Cultural Action, whose aims would be nationalizing – "de-Jewishing" – the Polish culture. That was meant primarily to protect Polish intelligentsia who were – supposedly – in danger of being denationalized.

2 The vision propagated by the nationalists

The vision propagated by the nationalists bearing the sign of "The Phalanx" fully materialized in the concept of the Catholic State of the Polish Nation, based on three seas: the Baltic, the Adriatic and the North Sea. That idea was put forward and accepted during the celebrative holy mass on *Jasna Góra* [Luminous Mount] in Częstochowa in May 1936. The major postulates of this conception of a state of the Church were brought down to proposing a totalitarian system founded on... the Catholic faith! It followed from the synthesis of Catholicism with nationalism characteristic of "The Phalanx". The chief ideologists of the movement underlined that the superior social lubricant had been, still was and would have to be the Catholic faith (Maj 1998). In this way, the national ethics was becoming in fact the Catholic ethics. As Roman Dmowski wrote in the pamphlet entitled *Kościół, naród i państwo* [The Church, the Nation and the State] in 1927, "The Polish state is a catholic one. It is not so because the large majority of its population are catholic [...] but because our state is a national state, and our nation is a catholic one." (Dmowski 1927).

Speaking of nationalism in Poland in the Interwar period, it needs stressing that it was not a dominant political trend in the Poland of the day, yet it did exist as a very visible and influential movement, not connected only with the camp of national democracy. Such tendencies manifested themselves also in other right-wing factions. Still they were not so radical or so clearly perceptible in the latter. Talking about the broadly-understood right-wing, it is necessary to remember that the Polish nationalism was both national, anti-German, anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic. The situation was not altered by the War. There were no revaluations or a crisis of the right-wing consciousness. The specific situation of Poland led to strengthening of two stereotypes: on the one hand – of a Pole-Catholic, and the other one – of Judeo-Commune. The former defended the homeland, its traditions, culture, religion against the communist governance imposed by the Soviets and exercised by the Jewish empowered by the Soviets (Smolar 1986:109). In some extreme situations, nationalistic groups could even resort to collaboration with the Germans during the Second World War. Let us note, however, that this did not occur on a mass scale and was limited solely to certain detachments of *Narodowe Siły Zbrojne* [National Armed Forces], like *Brygada Świętokrzyska* [Holy Cross Mountains Brigade] (Mańkowski 2008: 317).

The end of the War and coming to power of a new political force did not eliminate nationalism. In the postwar Poland there followed peculiar flirting of communism with nationalism. How could that be possible? After all, in the Interwar period, there existed severe animosity between them. It seems that the fact that there did not occur factors which would eradicate the pre-war nationalism was conducive to the preservation and survival of nationalistic sentiments after the War. There were no serious manifestations of collaboration on the part of the nationalistic groups, therefore there were no moral or political reasons to compromise it. At the same time, the communist system removed the possibility of serious intellectual dealing with the prewar nationalism. What is interesting, practically until today there have been relatively few scientific studies devoted to nationalism in the 20th-century Poland.

Communism took advantage of the war trauma to strengthen the anti-German and anti-Ukrainian sentiments, and later on – anti-Zionist thoughts, that is it legitimized the nationalistic inclinations of certain individuals – as Marcin Zaręba, one of the researchers of the period of the Second World War, claims (Zaremba 2001). The new authority realized very quickly the benefits coming from nationalistic catchwords. What was at stake was mobilization and unification of society or, indeed, winning it by means of simple references to Polishness, national identity and conservation of material and spiritual heritage. In practice, politicians of the Polish People's Republic were

ignorant of the ideology of the National Democracy or thoughts propagated by Roman Dmowski, which did not prevent them from using the most catchy slogans coined by the nationalists.

Why was it decided to make reference to the national thought and sometimes even to nationalistic views? For Polish communists the Marxist ideology was not sufficient legitimization of their power. In order to justify their governance, they showed themselves as heirs to the Polish tradition and representatives of the national interest. That is why, the post-war authority commenced talks with the environment of catholic-nationalist and conservative intelligentsia, whose origin was the tradition of the Second Republic of Poland. That flirting of communists with nationalists occurred at the time of the development of the conception of “winning through the winners” and Christianization of socialism. This conception which had been worked out by activists of the prewar National-Radical Movement “The Phalanx” became the foundation of cooperation with the communist authority. Among others, the group *Dziś i Jutro* [Today and Tomorrow] was established and then the association PAX, led by the prewar nationalist activist B. Piasecki (Bankowicz 1996:59). This organization overtly collaborated with the communist authority, despite the fact that in its ranks there were former soldiers of the Home Army and independence underground (Kuta 2015:68).

Why did the communists allow a nationalistic group including also their political adversaries to exist? Most probably there were a number of reasons behind it: they may have wanted to keep the appearances of maintaining political pluralism, which the Allied demanded in Yalta and Potsdam. The fact that Poland’s authority in the years 1945-1989 was not of a homogenous nature was not without significance, either. And lastly, such a situation provided a possibility of camouflaging the real intentions of the authority. Also the specific language of the governance, in which there was no mention of communism, was employed to serve the purpose. It emphasized the value of people and of the Polish nation, invoked the national authority and Poland’s national aspirations (Zaremba 2015). It proved definitely to stand closer to Roman Dmowski’s than Róża Luksemburg’s. Similarly, not much changed “optically”: the national colors, emblem and anthem had been retained. The same political language was applied, whose greatest manifestation was the idea of Poland’s returning to the “ancient land of the Piasts” or speaking of the “Chrobry’s line” – the state border on the Oder (Kupiecki 1993:45). Likewise the case looked as far as re-polonization actions in the Regained Lands were concerned, which were presented as a victory over Germanism. The national pathos was omnipresent in the propagandist press of the day (Świder 2002:166).

Those actions had to be known to and accepted by Moscow which itself was eager to make use of nationalist slogans. That attitude justifies the thesis that there was national communism reigning in the USSR, especially during the rule of Joseph Stalin. The process was developing in an evolutionary way: from the home of the world proletariat, where the USSR was the stronghold of socialism, through Great Patriotic War, into the blatant fight against cosmopolitanism in culture. In the 1950s, as K. Tyszka stressed, there followed a full development of national communism (Tyszka 2004). The class enemy disappeared, making room to the ethnic enemy. Even some representatives of the so-called white emigration looked at it with appreciation, acknowledging it to be an embodiment of the imperial Russia. What is interesting, even today it is possible to come across extreme nationalistic factions among the communists (Wyciszkievicz 2001).

In Poland, despite the officially rejected rightist-nationalist tendencies, the Polish Workers’ Party still used nationalistic ideology. The nation was identified with people, the principal enemy was cosmopolitanism. A “new Poland” was created, whose main principles must have been liked by prewar nationalists, basically responding to the following postulates voiced by the latter:

- a stable border, with a particular stress laid on its western and northern sections;
- a relatively nationally homogeneous society;
- closing society to external influences;
- existence of anti-Occidentalism;
- sustaining the sense of Slavic homogeneity (bonds of blood, tradition, historical commonwealth), with a simultaneous emphasis on Germanophobia;
- clear-cut anti-Semitic character;
- sustaining a traditional model of family, avoidance or branding of moral-social threats with the aid of censorship of artistic events, tracing pornography and wiping out loose morals (Kosiński 2008).

The second phase of the development of national communism in Poland, applying nationalist slogans, followed after 1956 which saw the appearance of the slogan “the Polish road to socialism”. As far as it was concerned, the reference was made to the old models and history which had been present in the public space since the end of the War. For instance, the propagandist poster of 1945 was recalled, one that featured crows, two helmets: a knight’s one and a Nazi’s one, and the inscription: *Grunwald 1410* and *Berlin 1945* (Zaremba 2001: 270). In the second half of the 1950s, references were readily made to the Battle of Grunwald (fought in the year 1410), which became

one of the elements of the historical politics of the Polish People's Republic. The peak of popularity of the Grunwald myth fell on the year 1960, when the 550th anniversary of the battle was celebrated. On that occasion, the film *Krzyżacy* [The Teutonic Knights] directed by Aleksander Ford was released and shown in Polish cinemas. It was seen by over 32 million viewers (Poland's population at that time amounted to 30 million), which until today has been the record audience in the history of the Polish film. That period was the time of rule of Władysław Gomułka's team, who slowly were drifting towards national communism, the culmination of which were the events of March 1968 (Zaremba: 273).

The references to the Grunwald tradition were meant to show Polish communists as standing on the guard of the national history, heritage and the reason of state. "Let them attack us as Polish communists," the words uttered by Władysław Gomułka in the period after the War, perfectly illustrate that way of thinking, which oftentimes led to grotesque situations. For example, the anthem of the T. Kościuszko Division, that is a military formation established upon Stalin's order, was "Rota" [The Oath] which the soldiers sang twice every day (Polska Armia...). The standard of the People's Army – the partisan formation operating in Poland – featured God's Mother and the eagle with a crown. On 15 August 1944, on the anniversary of victory over the Red Army, the grand celebration was organized, ending with a holy mass. As a matter of fact, the Church and religion have always been present at the meeting point of communism and nationalism (Dudek, Gryz: 2006). In the blackest days of Stalinism, in 1951, Bolesław Bierut quoted Dmowski many times in his speech at the plenum of the Polish United Workers' Party. Those actions would never have occurred if it had not been for a social acceptance and a need for them or if the party of the time had been free from nationalistic views (Zaremba 2001).

The proof of their existence were the operations of an informal group called "partisans" led by Mieczysław Moczar. The name derived from the fact that the squad was composed primarily of former soldiers of the People's Guard and the People's Army, who had been members of guerilla forces during the War. Regarding the ideological sphere, they represented the standpoint of national communism with very strong anti-German and anti-Semitic accents. Professor Eisler characterized the ideology of the "partisans" in the following way: "The peculiar ideology of that group, in the first place, consisted of nationalism inclined towards chauvinism, anti-Semitism, a strong authoritarian syndrome, anti-intelligentsia attitude and a peculiar cult of force." (Eisler 1992). He considered them to be nationalistic communists. That faction exerted a considerable influence on the Polish political life and in the first half of the 1960s won support of part of Polish society who adhered to slogans of prewar nationalist camp and even support of B. Piasecki and the PAX association, that is former members and sympathizers of "The Phalanx". The attack of the group followed in the years 1967-1968, together with the offensive of "patriotism" in the culture, which prepared the ground for anti-Semitic persecution. As a result of it, about 15 thousand Jews emigrated from Poland between 1968 and 1972.

An important example of the cooperation between nationalists and the communist regime was the activity of the Patriotic Union "Grunwald" which was established in 1981 in response to the activity of "Solidarity", prominent activists of which were upbraided for their real or alleged Jewish origins. The "Grunwald" Union was non-compromising to such an extent in its smear campaign against "Solidarity" that they, as a whole, acclaimed of the imposition of the martial law. That organization enjoyed the consent from the Polish United Workers' Party to publicly propagate nationalistic, xenophobic and anti-Semitic slogans. They attempted to use the schema of anti-Semitic persecution known from March 1968 during the Solidarity's carnival. In 1981 the founders of "Grunwald" warned against the "Zionist" forces operating in "Solidarity" (Gasztold-Seń 2012). Particularly ferocious attacks compliant with the "ethnic key" were made on Jacek Kuroń, Adam Michnik and Bronisław Geremek. Many of the activists of the Union were active in the nationalist environments (e.g., the association "No for the European Union"). The former "Grunwald" activist, Bohdan Poręba, who was one of the few voting against dissolution of the party at the last plenum of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, joined in the works of the re-activated National Movement after 1989.

The Patriotic Union "Grunwald" was tactically useful to General Wojciech Jaruzelski's team, availing themselves of nationalism and anti-Semitism in the political game with the opposition. "Grunwald" could always count on support but only of a part of the party activists – the influential liberal current within the Polish United Workers' Party posed the main threat to that organization. Mieczysław Rakowski, vice-Premier and the chief of liberal *Polityka* was one of the most hated representatives of the trend. What is interesting, the Martial Law of 13 December 1981 was actually supported by Jędrzej Giertych and Maciej Giertych – descendants of the prewar radical nationalistic movements (Urbański 1993). They even made their political careers at that time, enjoying support and trust also on the part of Church hierarchs, in particular the conservative wing being conciliatory towards the authority (Friszke 1993).

Another organization, which was founded at the beginning of the 1980s was *Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski* [National Rebirth of Poland]. It was formed shortly before the imposition of the martial law (in November 1981) and in its program declared to be returning to the idea of the Catholic State of the Polish Nation, i.e., the conception put forward in the 1930s. That organization referred to the historical heritage of national radicalism, drawing on borrowings from foreign ideologies, which Professor Jarosław Tomasiewicz (2010:180) pointed out. However, in the first place, it exploited family models, emphasizing antecedence of the Polish nationalist movement in comparison with other European nationalisms, as well as its superiority over the latter, resulting from the democratic and Christian character of the Polish nationalism. This organization has existed until today.

It is interesting to note that the nationalist tendencies turned out, at a certain point, downright deciding. This means in the period of Poland being exposed to a threat of the Soviet military intervention. As it follows from archival materials, which is discussed in detail by Małgorzata Świder, the issue of expected reaction on the part of the Polish Army in case of such an intervention was repeatedly raised on the international arena. At that time, diplomats were of the opinion that both the commands and individual units could hesitate to use force against citizens-compatriots, since they were mostly regarded as covertly anti-Soviet. As a matter of fact, Chancellor Schmidt considered the Polish officer corps to be “nationalistic” and in their majority – “anti-Soviet”. A similar opinion was expressed by both Minister Genscher and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and also his deputy Frank Ch. Carlucci. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that it was one of the reasons why Moscow, unlike in the case of the mutinies in East Berlin in 1953, Hungary in 1956, or in Czechoslovakia in 1968, did not decide to launch a direct intervention in Poland (Świder 2015).

3 Conclusion

Following the breakthrough of 1989 and Poland’s embarking on the road of democratic development, the problem of nationalism has grown severer. In the same year, the All-Polish Youth was re-activated, recalling the tradition of the Second Republic of Poland. In 1993, Professor Andrzej Fryszke admitted that in the Polish public life nationalism was still present. One could realize that by eavesdropping on everyday conversations on politics, which passengers were carrying out on trams. The distrust of others, especially Germans and Russians, negative stereotypes of the neighbors, a sense of economic threat, particularly from Germany, went hand in hand with frequently organized search for “Jews” in the central authority of the Third Republic of Poland (Fryszke 1993). During the presidential election in 1990, nearly 50% of Wałęsa’s and 25% of Mazowiecki’s electorate were of the opinion that “the Jewish hold too much of an influence in Poland”. This was confirmed by sociological studies carried out by Tomasz Żukowski. (Datner, *Antysemityzm...*) At that time the National-Radical Camp was re-activated, too. Its members claimed to be heirs to the prewar national radicals. They prided themselves, and they still do, on their history. They recall their predecessors not only through ideology, suitably tweaked to match the reality of changing times, but also through their dress – plain uniforms of sandy color and the way they salute each other, the so-called Roman salute – the gesture resembling that used by the Nazi. Their program is a mixture of nationalistic and extreme conservative slogans. They are declared opponents of both mass immigration, abortion or legitimization of partner relationships. They are skeptical about the idea of the European Union and treat it as a degenerated creation based on anti-values. Nevertheless, as they themselves admit on their website, they do not object to cooperation with other European nations (in this case meant primarily as their extreme right-wing parts). Like other organizations of this type, they popularize the knowledge on soldiers of the National Armed Forces, promoting them as Poland’s new heroes (Świder, 2018). They organize commemorative marches and pilgrimages, and the nationalist press include tens of articles; there are fairly many musical pieces in the popular circulation as well. Recently, they have been particularly active on the Polish political stage. Their activity is especially evident on 11 November (Poland’s Independence Day) and it has also had dramatic consequences lately on the anniversary of liberation of KL Auschwitz, which reverberated widely at home and outside Poland.

Pondering over the question whether we have come to deal with a new nationalism in Poland or with a movement which, commenced in the 19th century, has revived in the Third Republic of Poland, one has to pay attention to the stability of Polish elements of tradition and views, which exist in society and which can be considered nationalistic. Obviously, contemporary nationalism derives from the 19th-century tradition, that is patriotic traditions and those of fighting for independence. Many of the then necessary and meaningful catchwords have been made modern to sound contemporary. However, the situation in the country has changed. Thus, what is patriotism? Is it perchance as much as nationalism at present? How to differentiate between the two attitudes, since – as it was mentioned earlier – elements of nationalism have always been present in our culture and politics? (Co jest patriotyzmem....) Or maybe we ought to accept Edward Carr’s view that nationalism is like religion and like religion it can liberate both the best and the worst in human beings. “It can inspire people to freely join strengths in looking for common good. But it can also fill them with terrifying certainty as to their own beliefs, giving rise – at the same time – to conflicts and injustices.” (Polska w objęciach....).

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