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Polish Nationalism in Comparative Perspective
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This evening I would like to look closely at Polish nationalism on the background of Poland's historical context – that of East Central Europe – in order to shed light on problems, old and new, of the region, but also of Poland: What can we learn about Poland by investigating its past in comparative context? What might we learn about Poland's current dilemma, which, in popular media is often associated with irrational and extreme nationalism?

Claims are often made about the supposed intensity of nationalism in all of Eastern Europe. Just last week graduate students at Berkeley were discussing the problem of European nationalism, and asked if they could be more precise about where the problem lay, they said with no reflection at all: of course in the East. Where does Poland fit in this picture?

First a clarifying remark. Maybe two. For me nationalism is simply advocacy of the interests of a nation, usually by a group of self-described nationalists. I call the region East Central Europe, but sometimes also just "Eastern" as a shorthand. I mean the former Soviet Bloc, but contend that it is much more than a construct of the Cold War.

The question of what unites it calls to mind the anecdote from the war years when several Polish comrades urged Stalin to make Poland part of USSR. Stalin had studied history, and said that making Poland communist would be like trying to put a saddle on a cow.¹

But what Stalin said is true of East Europe as a whole: The countries between historic Germany and Russia are countries where people buckle and shake at the prospect of foreign rule. It is a place that hegemony have treated for centuries as their zone of interest, their own imperial space, and which has therefore become a place that tends to reject imperialism; east Europeans are anti-imperial peoples.²

But they have also been complicit in their fate because rather than stand together against their larger neighbors East Europeans have often quarreled among themselves: For example in 1849 the Habsburgs could never have put down the Hungarian revolution without the help of Croats, Serbs, Romanians and Saxon Germans. Hungarians did find an ally in Polish general Józef Bem who assembled two Polish brigades and commanded a Hungarian army. Yet predictably, that army operated in areas of Transylvania where they were seen not as liberators but oppressors: the population was Romanian and German. A united East Central Europe in the 1930s might have stood more firmly resisted Hitler.

¹ Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, Vol. 2 (Oxford, 2005), 429

² Theodor Schieder speaks of three European zones, the eastern one of nation states emerging from empires. *Nationalismus und Nationalstaat: Studien zum national Problem im modernen Europa*, Otto Dahn and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, eds., *Nationalismus und Nationalstaat* (Göttingen, 1991), 94. For the notion of Poland's global attitude as "decolonial" see Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and as Warning* (New York, 2015), 32.

In what follows: I want to take story of Polish nationalism from distant to proximate times through nine episodes.

1. Why has nationalism been such a problem in Eastern Europe? To respond to this question I want to take us deep into the pre-national age, to the years following decline of Roman Empire when chiefly Germanic, Slavic, and finally Magyar tribes entered East Central Europe and seized territory. They respected no national boundaries because none existed but more importantly they had no idea of national belonging, and so they intermingled: from the beginning and through the centuries.

They did not realize that roughly a millennium later German philosopher J.G. Herder would proclaim that a language made a nation; that a generation or two after that leading intellectuals would preach that to live under the rule of another nation was literal slavery; and that in 1918 an American President would pronounce an ideology of national self-determination, so that each national movement in East Central Europe could justify its claim that it required a national state. All that was far in the unimaginable future.

By the tenth century, after initial settlement was completed, chieftains emerged, who with the coming of Christianity were called kings; within what became the Polish lands, the tribe of Polany gained a preeminent position, and here as elsewhere a medieval state emerged, though its boundaries shifted according to the rapidly changing fortunes of the dynasty. From the tenth century there were Polish, Hungarian, Croat, Serb, Bulgarian entities.

I used the word settlement, but really nothing was settled. Poland might have looked quite different, and included Bohemia and Slovakia if only Bolesław Chrobry's descendants had been better able to hold this realm together: Prague might have been a provincial city in Western Poland and Czech a West Polish dialect.

As it was the Polish state tended to expand eastward over time. Over succeeding centuries the region became even more mixed as German and later Jewish settlers and townspeople moved eastward, into the cities and countryside of Silesia, Bohemia, Transylvania, into what would much later be called Pale of settlement. Further south and east other ethnic groups became increasingly entangled.

But then the region came to share the joint experience mentioned above: of becoming the possession of imperial states. This set it definitively apart from the west, and also from Russia: if in those places nation states grew and nationalized their populations over many centuries, in the east foreign imperial powers occupied the space; and much later, after the 1780s, it was national movements that made nations.

In the South East the region fell under Ottoman, in the Center Habsburg and to the East Muscovite rule. The imperial states quarreled over many centuries, and made the region even more complex by creating and leaving differing legal and political traditions. Many South Slavs converted to Islam; and in the seventeenth century tens of thousands of Serbs left Ottoman territory and settled in Habsburg border areas, where they received land in return for military service. And so Christian Bosnia became partly Muslim and Catholic Croatia became partly Serb Orthodox.

Poland maintained independence longer than any place, save Montenegro, but by 1795 also succumbed to the regional pattern, when it was wiped from the map, partitioned by its neighbors. Thus by the end of the eighteenth century the political map

had become much simpler, belying the extraordinary linguistic, religious, ethnic complexity that lay underneath.

Within a generation a challenge emerged, the challenge of ethnic nationalism; propagated by national movements led by people like the brilliant Czech journalist Karel Havlíček Borovský, who wrote in April 1848, "wherever your speech, your nationality, does not dominate, you are oppressed, even in the freest of countries." He equated the lot of Czech speakers to that of black slaves in the United States. "Of what use to negroes," he asked, "is even the most liberal administration?"³

So what was and is different about EE is not strength of nationalist sentiment, but the clash between such ideas, and those of well-meaning liberal statesmen like Woodrow Wilson, with the history of intermixing I have just described.

2. Let us dwell in the eighteenth century for a moment to consider Poland. What is different and fascinating about its history is that the moment the idea of ethnic nationalism was growing among other peoples was the moment the Poland ceased to be a state. Thus Poland disappeared as an independent political entity many centuries later than was the case with all other E. European peoples,, for example Bulgaria or Hungary or Serbia, all of which were gone by the fifteenth century.

Poland remained a state until 1795, and after that state disappeared, the elite, the gentry was remarkable in two senses: it was much larger than counterparts elsewhere, comprising about 25 percent of the population of central Poland. This meant that far more people identified as nationals in Poland, even when the state disappeared than any other place in East Central Europe with the possible exception of Serbia. In the year 1800, it is estimated that about a million Polish speakers, people mostly of gentry status, thought of themselves as Polish nationals.

The number of Czechs, Slovaks, or Slovenes who thought of themselves in national terms at that point could have been counted in the thousands, if that many; in Hungary or Croatia, the gentries were much smaller than in Poland.

But now that situation was going to change in all those places, beginning with Hungary and Bohemia, and we know precisely who was responsible: it was Joseph II of Austria. In March 1784 the Habsburg ruler issued a mandate that German be used as the language of administration in his lands.

This set off a furious response in Hungary, but interestingly, not because of any challenge to the Hungarian language. Joseph did not care about Hungarian, at that point a dying language hardly used by the educated classes. Rather, the language Joseph wanted to do away with, and to which the Hungarian gentry felt an emotional loyalty as their own was Latin, a language that Joseph considered dead and an impediment to modern state formation. The elites in Hungary had grown attached to Latin because it permitted them to communicate in a hugely diverse region, where people spoke Hungarian but also Romanian, Slovak, Croatian, Serb and German. And it was theirs.

For his part Joseph was not a nationalist, for him German was a default option as the modern language spoken by most people in Hungary. Yet by mandating use of

³ Karel Havlíček-Borovský, ed., *Duch Národních novin* : spis obsahující úvodní články z *Národních novin* roků 1848, 1849, 1850 (Kutna hora, 1851), 2.

German, Joseph ignited fear among the Magyar elite that they would simply become another German-speaking group of nobles.

In 1790, shortly before dying, Joseph revoked this language ordinance, because the opposition it had provoked was endangering the safety of his realm.⁴ But by now the fire of modern nationalism was burning brightly. From the 1790s a small group of talented intellectuals led by philologist and translator Ferenc Kazinczy modernized the Hungarian language, and over the succeeding decades the Hungarian elite ensured that Hungarian displaced Latin as well as German in schools and administration -- in turn unleashing national movements among Romanians, Slovaks, Croats, and Serbs. As Magyars did not want to be Germans they did not want to be Magyars.

In a slightly different manner Joseph's reform also helped launch a national movement in Bohemia, where a small group of patriots brought the Czech language back from extinction at precisely the same time.

The ideological force everywhere was Johann Gottfried Herder, for Czechs, Slovaks and South Slavs by giving them sense of mission; language made a nation a Volk; and each nation had a destiny before God. Herder activated Hungarians for the opposite reason, by predicting that they would disappear, submerged in sea of Slavs, and lose any destiny they might have.

3. But Poland came to modern nationalism on a different path from rest of East Central Europe, with different timing, and a different combination of concerns and actions on the part of Polish patriots.

Polish patriots of this time were not as concerned about culture and language as the early patriots of Hungary or Bohemia. In the 1820s the poet Adam Mickiewicz even remarked that the Czechs seemed obsessed with language. Instead, Polish patriots were much more concerned about rights: unlike other East Europeans, they had just lost a state they considered their own, and that protected their rights as citizens and as Poles. As you may know, Alexander I of Russia promised to uphold the laws of a Polish kingdom that was created after the Congress of Vienna in 1815. He was to do so as the Polish king.

Yet in the 1820s Poles increasingly complained of his contempt for Poland's rights. They saw that Russian officials arrested, beat, and deported Poles for simply recalling Polish independence. A group of students from Wilno for example was punished (some whipped, some sent to Siberia) when one of their number chalked on a wall: "long live the constitution of 1791."⁵

It was in defiance of evident injustice – of crushing free speech, refusing to permit limited self-rule – that Polish cadets launched an uprising against Russian rule in

⁴ "Anyone asking me to change decisions I have already made must make his arguments through incontrovertible evidence of reason. But I see in the objections of your nation nothing of the sort...The German language is the universal language of my empire. Why should I treat the laws and public business in a single province according to the national language of that province?" Alfred Jäger, Kaiser Joseph II. und Leopold II. (Vienna, 1867), 60.

⁵ Harro Harring, Poland under the Dominion of Russia (Boston, 1834), 46.

November 1830.⁶ The consequences were disastrous: whatever liberties Poles possessed were now reduced. Many of Poland's leading writers and scholars, including Adam Mickiewicz, and Frédéric Chopin, now left Poland and founded the Great Emigration in Paris; the total was about 10,000 people!⁷ Poland was as much in their ideas, poems, and music as it was on Polish soil, where after a second failed uprising in 1863 even the word Poland disappeared.

Still, throughout the nineteenth century, the cause of Polish nationalism remained simple: in the words of historian Stefan Kieniewicz, nationally conscious Poles were those who might make temporary peace with, but could not finally accept the loss of Polish sovereignty; they demonstrated their "nationalist attitude" simply by maintaining linguistic and cultural distinctiveness.

But in Poland as the century progressed, that became increasingly difficult, and again we see something unusual. Elsewhere, in Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and the Czech lands, as the century progressed, so did opportunities to build national schooling, culture, and administration; in most of Poland, by contrast such possibilities were reduced. In the late 19th C. in the German and Russian lands Poles were forced to conspire illegally in order simply to learn their language.

So we see a very odd combination. Poles had a large class, the gentry, with a very distinct idea of what Poland was, but at the same time, the partitioning powers devoted unparalleled energies against making it re-emerge. Why? Because more than any other force the idea of Poland, of Polish nationalism, disrupted the European order.

Perhaps there was one other equally disruptive force: Serbia and the greater Serbian idea. There are a number of interesting, perhaps unexpected similarities between Poland and Serbia. As in Poland the national movement attempted to form the nation not only through culture but through armed insurrection, and like the Polish cause the Serb was thought disruptive because Serbs lived in several states, all of which would lose if it won.

Another thing that was similar to Poland was that very many Serbs had a sense of their national identity, not because they belonged to a gentry: that was destroyed under the Ottomans centuries earlier. What Serbs had was a Serb church, but perhaps more importantly, they had epic folk poetry about the undying virtues of heroes from their past, poetry that was sung from generation to generation over hundreds of years, and made them believe that Ottoman rule was temporary. This is the so-called Kosovo cycle.

In the 19th C. very many Poles as well as Serbs considered foreign occupation to be unjust, this was their comparable idea. Russian or Ottoman rule seemed at odds with basic norms of decency and civilization; with the rule of God in the world. Among both peoples a belief persisted even in the worst times that one day foreign rule would end. By contrast, Hungarian, Croatian or Czech elites had become subjects of the Habsburgs legally and arguably, voluntarily.

Historians have said of both Serbs and Poles that they needed Herder less than other peoples to tell them first who they were, and second, what role they had to play in history. The difference between the Serb and Polish cases I have already stated: in the

⁶ Drawn up by Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, and promulgated by Alexander I of Russia. R.F. Leslie, *Polish Politics and the Revolution of 1830* (London, 1956), 45-46.

⁷ Artur Hutnikiewicz, *To co najważniejsze: trzy eseje o Polsce* (Torun, 1996).

former case insurrections achieved positive results; in the later, they made the ordeal of those fighting denationalization even worse.

4. But there was something even more distinct and important about the Polish case. A basic question had to be answered from 1795 onward: who was responsible for Poland's woes? Poles found explanations not so much in St. Petersburg or Vienna, the evils residing there was obvious, as in Poland itself – among Poles. Poland had disappeared because Poles had betrayed it.

Particularly infamous was the Targowica confederation, Polish magnates who rejected the constitution of 1791 and cooperated with Russia in dismembering Poland among other things by giving Russia plans of the movements of Polish troops. Several conspirators, including the bishop of Wilno were captured in 1794, and publically hanged. In a sense Poles always had each other to blame for their basic predicament.

But Poland's fortunes declined in the 19th C., the need for explanation, the search for the guilty in one's own camp, intensified. Were for example the uprisings of 1830 and 1863, though carried out for noble reasons, not foolhardy undertakings? In the eyes of critics those launching the uprisings were not simply failed revolutionaries, but traitors. By refusing all cooperation the insurrectionists had created a situation in which the Polish language faced extinction. If one wanted to serve Poland one had to do practical work on its behalf, in education and science and the economy, unavoidable in some form of cooperation with a partitioning power. This is sometimes called the organic work tradition.

When we look elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the blame for national calamity was placed squarely on the shoulders of some non-national. For Czechs or Hungarians that was the German; in South Slav areas, it was the Turk, or Austrian; for Slovaks, Croats and Transylvanian Romanians, it was the Hungarian.

5. I said above that Polish national ideas in the early 19th C. tended to be political, aimed at the civic community of Polish nationals who had held and would hold rights in a Polish state. This was different from the Czech national movement, which focused on reviving language, and then creating a sense of nationhood, based in shared culture and history, among speakers of the Czech language.

But in the late 19th C. that changed. Poland caught up. In this politically nasty time, Polish elites attempted to build a modern nation in an absence of state institutions that was far more dramatic than in other places, with the exception perhaps of Slovakia, which however at that point was hardly even a geographical entity

Yet Polish patriots faced one more unusual challenge. Because many of them were landowners, desperately poor Polish-speaking peasants often viewed them as aliens, almost like an ethnically foreign group, so distant was the often refined world of the elite from the deep misery of the common people. Elsewhere the landowner or boss was often of a foreign nationality: For example in the Czech lands it was a German and the Czech movement built Czech identity as anti-German.⁸ In Bosnia the landowner was Muslim, in Slovenia German. In 1800 not only Prague and Brno, but also Budapest, Bratislava, and Zagreb were German-speaking cities. The German was an enemy against whom the self

⁸ Podiven, Češi v dějinách nové doby - pokus o zrcadlo (Prague, 1991)

was clearly defined, and who was then displaced, from public space, from culture, from business, from politics, from all traces in one's own language.

In central Poland, not only the countryside, but also the cities tended to be culturally Polish. So against whom would the modern ethnic Polish nation be formed? Who lived in the midst of Poles who might fulfill the function of convincing Polish peasants that they were the same nation as Polish townspeople and gentry? In my view, that other was the Jew.

Where Poland stands out against its neighbors was not in a growing antipathy toward Jews. That was universal in the late 19th C, though perhaps weakest in Hungary, where Jews were recruited to support the Hungarian national cause. What was unusual about Poland was not even the sense that the Jew was inassimilable in a way that no other people was thought to be. Here the Christian world was clear about the Jews' essential otherness. What was unusual in Poland was that all of these dimensions – the religious, economic, cultural, professional, and racial – could come together in a context where the number of Jews was huge and where they could be portrayed as an alien nation in one's midst.

6. Independence. Within East Central Europe the year 1918 is thought as a moment of birth and rebirth; and if Western Europe mourns the dead of WWI, east Europe celebrates the war as having enabled national freedom and sovereignty. H

Historians of Europe also register the fact that everywhere the independent republics of 1918 soon became authoritarian, and they ascribe this fact in part to problems of development – for example that western institutions were foisted upon states not ready for them – but in part to the fact that these new national states were mostly not entirely that: each was like a miniature Habsburg empire, with large proportions of ethnic minorities.

In Poland only about two-thirds of the population were ethnic Poles. In 1926 Marshall Piłsudski put an end to Polish democracy because he feared that Poland had become ungovernable, in part because of the multiplicity of parties in parliament, many of whom were ethnic.

Yet Czechoslovakia was even more ethnically complex but maintained itself as democracy until 1938. The difference lay not in stronger democratic traditions among Czechs, but in the fact that the Czech political elite was much more coherent and united than the Polish. Throughout the interwar years five Czech parties, from left to right, formed a coalition and always had a simple majority against German, Slovaks, Hungarians and Communists.

Had it not been for the deep divide between the camps of Józef Piłsudski and Roman Dmowski, Polish elites could also have easily dominated the parliament and thus their state. In the interwar period Croat, Serb and Hungarian elites were also much more cohesive.⁹

So what was that divide in Polish nationalism about? Piłsudski and Dmowski were ardent nationalists. We read that one was left the other right; one more civic, the

⁹ In the 1922 elections, National Democrats, Piast, Wyzwolenie, and PPS together had well over 50 percent.

This contests Lepkowski's explanation for the instability of inter war politics.

other ethnic; one more Jagiellonian the other more Piast. Neither was democratic, but it was the more moderate Piłsudski who staged a coup against parliamentary democracy in order to head off a possible dictatorship of the "right." Yet, having seized power, he did nothing to moderate those nationality problems. The rule of the supposed moderates of Sanacja appeared only degrees less unforgiving than National Democratic rule.¹⁰

Though the differences between their followers were clear but also not great, the two camps accused each other not simply of poor political choices or of being incompetent but of being bad Poles, of being traitors. They lived in a political culture where the demands upon a good Pole were impossible to fulfill. Note that a third hero of Polish independence, as Margaret MacMillan tells us, Ignacy Paderewski, never returned to Poland because he was considered a traitor for having even considered negotiating about contested territory with Germany.

Piłsudski broke off his last conversation with Dmowski in 1920 after the latter asked the simple question: how can we go to Paris and demand Eastern Galicia and at the same time support the desires of Ukrainians for an independent Ukraine that will contain those precise territories?¹¹ Perhaps what bothered Dmowski about Sanacja was its failure to describe in straightforward language what it was actually doing.

Perhaps what separated them was that Dmowski was willing to use straightforward language to describe the methods needed for establishing what both wanted: a strong Poland. But otherwise Poland is not so different from the rest of the region: everywhere democracy was abandoned in favor of authoritarian rule.

6. Was Poland fascist, and if not why not? At the time Piłsudski, military strongman, was often compared to Mussolini, yet historians now agree that his rule was not fascist. Sanacja produced no uniformed, mobilized mass movement of paramilitaries; it had no cohesive ideology, nor any systematic racism or chauvinism; nor did it espouse aggression or the idea of a total state. Poland did produce a tiny fascist movement, whose main constituency was students. Mikołaj Kunicki has written a fine book on the subject by tracing the fortunes of the movement's leader, Bolesław Piasecki, across the 20th Century.

Why was Polish fascism weak? Other countries of the region, especially Romania and Hungary, produced sizable fascist parties: uniformed, armed, effectively led, and violent. Piotr Wandycz wrote that fascism "went against the long tradition of Polish ideals of freedom, individualism, and toleration," and indeed if you read even Poland's right wing press of the time, you find a rejection to totalitarianism as incompatible

¹⁰ 401ff.

¹¹ <http://www.romandmowski.pl/default.php?id=7&dzial=ciekawostki>

Po zapytaniu Dmowskiego, „na jakiej podstawie bylibyśmy [w Paryżu] żądali dla siebie przyłączenia kresów wschodnich wraz z całą Galicją Wschodnią, gdybyśmy jednocześnie popierali pretensje Ukraińców do tych ziem i do wielkiej samoistnej Ukrainy” - rozmowa urwała się. Krzysztof Kaczmarek, *Studia i szkice z dziejów obozu narodowego* (Warsaw, 2010), 19.

with Polish political traditions.¹² Totalitarianism was associated with Poland's national enemies, above all Germany and the Soviet Union .

But Sanacja did little to stop the increasingly virulent anti-Semitism in its own ranks. It created a mass organization, the Camp of National Unity, and moved rightward in its rhetoric – recall that Marshall Piłsudski had been a socialist –and even recruited dissident members of Endecja, while losing support on center and left.¹³ Soon it was aping fascist models, for example of strict discipline within the Camp of National Unity; and calling the head of state the "leader of the nation."

Thus Poland settled into a muddle, with two political camps, center-right and center-left, "neither by any means homogeneous," and with the Marshall, very ill before he died in 1935, only imperfectly in control of his own Sanacja grouping.¹⁴ After Piłsudski's death the two camps seemed to move closer, reflecting resignation rather than commitment.

However, in 1939, Polish politics arose out of this muddle, more accurately Polish society rose, to become the first state to say no to Hitler. Poland may have seemed quasi-fascist but it was definitely anti-Nazi.

7. WWII. The typical sequence we have of events leading to World War II appears as follows: Hitler occupies Rhineland, and the West fails to protest; Hitler occupies Austria, and the West fails to protest; Hitler seizes the Sudetenland, and the West not only fails to protest but gives its blessings. Hitler attacks Poland, and the west finally responds.

The last act was in fact a bit more complicated. Poland had a choice whether to be a Nazi ally or a Nazi target of attack. Late in 1938, after finishing off Czechoslovakia, the Nazi regime courted Poland for an anti-Bolshevik alliance; the price required was Danzig – a city Poland did not even possess – as well as an extraterritorial highway through the so-called Polish Corridor. Note that every other East European state said yes to Nazi offer of alliance, even the Soviet Union. Why was Poland different?

I think its obstinacy had to do with the absolute value Poles attached to sovereignty, a value that – once again – goes back to that late loss of statehood in 1795. Even territory Poland did not fully control, in this case Danzig, was non-negotiable, and Poles refused an alliance with Nazi Germany because they knew that would compromise Polish sovereignty, forcing it into decisions not of its choosing.

There was one place that behaved in a very similar way to Poland, but it was not a state. I am thinking once more of Poland's unlikely twin, Serbia. Days after the Yugoslav regent Prince Paul concluded a Pact with the Third Reich in March 1941, a Pact the Nazis demanded but that was quite favorable for Belgrade, not requiring any Yugoslav participation in Germany's wars, Serb military officers staged a coup and ousted him. We have footage from those days of large crowds in Belgrade cheering this move. Some were chanting: "better the grave than a slave. " Here is that word slavery once more.

In Serbia too history had made compromises in questions sovereignty unacceptable. Poland and Serbia said no to Hitler in ways that were in keeping with their

¹² "Fascism in Poland: 1918-1939," Peter F. Sugar, ed., *Native Fascism in the Successor States, 1918-1945* (Santa Barbara, 1971), 97.

¹³ Brian Porter-Szucs, *Poland in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2000), 100.

¹⁴ Oskar Halecki, *History of Poland* (New York, 1992), 300; Wereszycki, 394

traditions; and brought upon themselves the fiercest Nazi reprisals seen anywhere. The difference in the two cases is the type of partisan army that emerged.

Remarkable about the Polish home army was its ability to subdue the extraordinary deep division in Polish society. Everyone could be included, nationalists and socialists, and in some cases Jews. Remarkable in the case of the Partisans was their ability to unite ethnic groups from all Yugoslavia: in fact Tito's partisans are the one case of popular *anti-nationalist* mass mobilization ever seen in Eastern Europe.

But it's also true that Tito's anti-genocidal forces began to impose Stalinism in Yugoslavia as soon as they got the chance. And this is also the major difference. The Polish home army was anti-Communist while the partisans Communist.

8. Communism. Here too Poland played a very unusual role. Poland was perhaps the most anti-Communist place in East Central Europe because nowhere else did Soviet-style Communism seem more in contradiction of national traditions. From across the underground press in 1945 we read the warnings: Soviet power imperiled the "soul of the nation, the "essence of Polishness," and we also read a clear judgment: Those who supported a government set up by Poland's great enemy was not a good Pole, indeed he was not a Pole at all.¹⁵

Still, millions of people who were indisputably Polish supported and indeed built Poland under communism. Millions joined the Communist party. Yet even those Communists who cared not in the least about Poland as a nation, even those who had nothing but contempt for the heroic stories of the Polish national narrative, had no choice but to adapt, to imagine how to portray what they were doing to the population as in keeping with the interests of Poland, in order not to seem servants of Moscow and avoid occupying spaces in national memory associated with the executed conspirators of Targowica.

So at the height of Stalinism the regime printed classics of Polish literature in the hundreds of thousands, and encouraged indeed demanded the loving rebuilding of destroyed cities true to historical detail, including their Catholic churches. It supported archeological studies proving the supposedly ancient Polish ownership of western territories, and used a language more like that of Roman Dmowski than Rosa Luxemburg, while claiming that its membership in the Warsaw pact served the cause of Polish independence.

In the 1960s Polish communist nationalism even crossed the border to xenophobia and anti-Semitism, driving tens of thousands of Jews from Poland, and making an ethnically homogenous country that would be – indeed was – the envy of National Democrats.¹⁶ But of course by expelling virtually the last Jews, the government had also expelled the last supposed alien against whom Polish national identity could be contrasted, thus causing the narrative of national treason, for virtually any shortcoming to focus on ethnic Poles with an intensity that was unprecedented. For the time being it

¹⁵ This is a summary of the logic by Krystyna Kersten, *Miedzy wyzwoleniem a zniewoleniem: Polska 1944-1956* (London, 1993), 40-41.

¹⁶ Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymacja, nacjonalizm: Nacjonalistyczna legitymacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce* (Warsaw, 2001), 140-41.

focused on the Communist regime, "Them" in Teresa Torańska's famous interviews with Poland's Stalinists, who never seemed Polish enough.

Fewer Poles joined Communist organizations, and more Poles entered the opposition, than anywhere else. The crowning success it would seem, was the united front called Solidarity, which succeeded in bridging the divides within Polish society, and brought together virtually all strata.

But no sooner had it achieved victory in 1990, than Solidarity came apart in a so-called "battle at the top" splitting the movement into competing groups. Deep rifts were evident especially in interpreting what had just happened: how much damage had been done by Communism, who was responsible, and what should be done with them. On one side of the rift are adherents of what became Law and Justice (PiS), on the other side, their opponents.

Especially remarkable if one looks at other societies in Eastern Europe, was the idea that Poland was pervaded by networks of conspirators who controlled intellectual and cultural life in People's Poland, and whose networks extended into the church. In fact Polish intellectual life was more independent, and more connected to trends outside Poland, than was the case in other Soviet Bloc societies.

A first jolt of the power of such beliefs came in the spring of 1992. We were surprised to learn that the new government of Jan Olszewski was going to publish documents showing widespread collaboration, including of president Lech Wałęsa. The official in charge, a founding member of the dissident Committee for the Protection of Workers (KOR), was Antoni Macierewicz. Lech Wałęsa reacted by firing Olszewski, and forming a new government.

9. Which brings us to the present. Antoni Macierewicz is currently Poland's minister of defense. In the present nothing is as fundamental for choosing which side to take, for or against PiS, as one's attitude toward the Communist past, and the supposed enduring presence of a "deal" between members (*układ*), and of course more recently, of the crash of President Lech Kaczyński's airplane near Smolensk. For PiS it's an article of faith that this crash was caused by Russia. To disagree is to side with the destroyers of the nation, to be a traitor.

Ryszard Terlecki, Parliamentary Caucus Head of Law and Justice, historian from Krakow, published his first book *Dyktatura zdrady*, (Dictatorship of Treason) about the political upheavals of the year 1947. All of his subsequent works are about the secret police, which again, was not nearly as important in Poland as it was in neighboring state socialist countries.

The message from the right regarding the Polish past makes two basic points. First, the communist regime was not simply a regime imposed upon Poland, but rather like Targowica it reflects internal treason, Poles against Poles. As Terlecki argues in his book, there was no lack in Poland in 1947 of Polish "careerists, rascals, profiteers" willing to support the government that had been imported from abroad.¹⁷ Second, the obsession with files reveals an underlying attitude: things are never what they seem.

¹⁷ Ryszard Terlecki, *Dyktatura Zdrady* (Krakow, 1992), 18.

People may seem good Poles but they are not. In fact Jaruzelski was a Soviet general in Polish uniform.¹⁸

The word Targowica has appeared in current political disputes with a frequency not seen for a long time, if ever. Wojciech Polak, a prolific and serious historian from Toruń, had the following to say about Polish politicians who think the EU's concerns about the PiS government are justified:

Targowica was absolute treason, absolute evil. In reference to opposition politicians I would speak of a lack of national solidarity. Making appeals to bodies that are not favorably inclined toward us is inappropriate behavior. We have to remember that European structures are under significant influence of Germany, and as is well known, Germany has strictly defined interests when it comes to Poland, interests that are purely egotistical. ...The behavior of PO is not a second Targowica, but lack of national solidarity is a sin toward the state, and a mortal sin at that.¹⁹

Please note: for average mortals there is nothing worse than a mortal sin because there is no punishment worse than eternal torment in hell. It seems Prof. Polak had worked himself into a rage where nothing less than eternal suffering for the opposition seemed adequate punishment.

Even to speak *to* Germans is a sign of deep failing in national terms. Recently the editor of Polish *Newsweek*, Tomasz Lis, found himself confronted by a reporter [TV station Republika] with the question: why did you decide to defend our values in German media? Lis, with Polish flags flying around him, said that this hysteria about German media was a throwback to the days of Gomulka when everything coming out of Bonn was disqualified as anti-Polish and irredentist.²⁰ And so he disqualified his interlocutor as in essence a servant of the regime behind Gomulka, the USSR.

Others on the center and left of center have compared PiS to Targowica. Former President Komorowski for example compared its backward looking policies to the backward approach of the Targowica conspirators, calling both misguided patriots. Angela Merkel has been compared in the Polish media not only to Catherine the Great at the time of Targowica, but with Adolf Hitler and the Nazi occupation of Poland.

I knew an archivist in the mid -1990s in Krakow who was proud, it seemed to me, to exemplify traditional and conservative values. I am sure he now supports PiS. Unlike other archivists he always wore a tie, and it seemed to me the tie was tied very tight. We had a dispute about an interesting character in the Krakow milieu, the literary historian Kazimierz Wyka, for some a towering expert on modern Polish literature, for others a

¹⁸ <http://www.dziennikpolski24.pl/artykul/3813343,mroczny-czas-z-jasnymi-plamami,id,t.html>

¹⁹ <http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/279407-prof-wojciech-polak-o-dzialaniach-po-brak-solidaryzmu-narodowego-tez-jest-grzechem-wobec-panstwa-i-to-grzechem-smiertelnym-nasz-wywiad?strona=2>

²⁰ <http://natemat.pl/165891,tomasz-lis-odpowiada-dziennikarzowi-tv-republika-przez-moment-w-tym-kraju-rzadzicie-ten-moment-minie-szybciej-niz-wam-sie-wydaje>

traitor, who made a career by being too willing to compromise (*ustępliwy*), and not, as one should be, (*nieugięty*).

By the way: Where else is there a special word that makes it a virtue to be uncompromising?

The archivist made a point of telling me that his own mentor, in Polish the word is *mistrz*, literally master, was historian Waław Felczak, a man who supposedly never made a compromise, spent years in Stalinist prison, and was elevated to professorship only on his death bed. One day I happened to come across a document showing that when Wyka died in 1975, the funeral mass was celebrated by Krakow's Cardinal Karol Wojtyła. The archivist was speechless when I told him this, because this did not fit into the idea that was emerging about the period, of communism being about a struggle of the uncompromising good against the traitorous evil. A few days later he explained that the funeral mass meant nothing because Christian charity required a priest to say a funeral mass.

Really? Did the cardinal preside over the funeral of every professor? Wojtyła had attended Wyka's lectures in 1938 as a first year student, and during the Nazi occupation the two of them continued work in the underground university in Krakow. He had to know very well the difficult game someone like Wyka played to keep Krakow's philology at a high standard.

Adam Michnik had compared Wyka to a practitioner of "organic work," and said that in 1945, upon emerging from anti-Nazi underground conspiracy, Wyka never even had a moment to think about embracing or rejecting the new regime: he simply continued his work.²¹

I know more about the historians, who in Poland, just as is the case the world over, constantly have to write letters of recommendation. And during my research on a book on universities I read lots of them. I grew accustomed to reading letters of world-class scholars, take Stefan Kieniewicz, praising the work of scholars who were not world class: the former were not in the party, the latter were. Clearly this was done with a sense of the need to make a compromise.

Conclusion

1. The attitudes one sees in the archivist I mentioned, and in PiS, about communism of course have a direct bearing on attitudes toward democracy. This man lived in a

²¹ Here is what Michnik said of the moment when Wyka emerged from underground work in 1945: "Wyka nie miał nawet okazji, by zastanawiać się nad przyjęciem bądź odrzuceniem nowego państwa. Był znakomitym redaktorem "Twórczości" i nauczycielem akademickim. Nie potrzebował dodatkowych uzasadnień dla swego politycznego wyboru. Był przykładem "ówczesnej praktycznej filozofii życia, nieco podobnej do filozofii pracy organicznej po powstaniu 1863 r.: zrobić, co można w danych warunkach." *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12 April 2010.
http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,7751758,Polski_rachunek_sumienia__czyli_czlowiek_prawd_ziwy.html

phantasy world of their being a completely clean space that was also a political space, a space where one engaged in politics yet never made any compromise whatsoever. He and others draw illiberal lessons from the history of communism: lessons that are incompatible with open society

2. But we owe much to this uncompromising mindset about the evils of compromise. If it were not for this fiction that Poles must be uncompromising, we would have had the fact of much more compromise, and probably a much less worthy cultural and intellectual life in the PRL. If it were not for the painful sense of injury registered by people like Waław Felczak, the *nieugięci*, and many others, like Artur Hutnikiewicz, or Antonina Kłossowska, the injury would have been far greater. Thus concerns about treason and compromise have an undoubted usefulness: to slightly alter title of one of TGA's books: one might speak of the uses of treason.

The logic of Polish anti-Communism was this: the sensitivities it produced assured that Communism would be weakly rooted in Polish society, and they also assured that, even the relatively limited involvement, let us say of Polish academia with Communism, is viewed in retrospect very harshly, much more harshly than in places where the involvement was much more widespread. This may be key to where Poland is now.

3. Still, the kinds of accusations leveled in Poland are beyond belief for an outsider: in the Czech lands and Hungary there may have been those who did not like Václav Havel and György Konrad, but who calls them and other leading dissidents traitors? In Poland this has been the fate of people like Adam Michnik, Lech Wałęsa, Czesław Miłosz, even Jan Nowak of Radio Free Europe. Is one of the issues separating right and left the desire to find guilt?

4. Every society has its divides but the Polish one seems especially deep. The unwillingness of the two sides to accord each other basic respect remind me of the politics of the 1930s, for example in Austria or France, where right and left lived aside each other as separate nations.

In an essay he wrote a few years after taking refuge at All Souls from the People's Republic of Berkeley, Leszek Kołakowski warned against expectations that any society could stand together unbroken.²² Even during Nazi occupation, he wrote Poles were far from fully unified.

I think his point was to encourage sobriety among those like him, who contemplated the sad state of the Polish nation in the early years of the Gierek regime, and who were interested in debating the age-old question of who was responsible for Poland's woes. Kołakowski was far from making a nation an end in itself and wrote that no nation needs to exist. Every one is a product of chance. But that was also true of every human being, and indeed of humanity too: they are products of chance.

²² "Sprawa polska," *Kultura* 4: 307 (1973), 3-13.

Therefore like human beings, nations have a value that is worth defending if needed, with one's life. The greatest threat to a nation is to lose a sense of responsibility for its own fate and to accept a mythology of unfreedom.

So who was responsible for Poland's sorry condition? To answer that he went back to the eighteenth century. He did not use the word Targowica. He might have said: Targowica was a gross simplification. If the nation is a collective that exists through time, it has – Poles have – no choice but to own its heritage. In this context Kołakowski spoke of sin. Unlike Prof. Polak he spoke not of mortal sin, but of original sin. The past has created debts that the present has to the future. He did not pursue the question of what Poland lost through its original sin, but I would say it was not simply independence.

5. The loss of a Polish state in 1795 was a catastrophe, also for Europe and the world, because with its May 1791 constitution that state was a democracy in the midst of autocracies and monarchies, and it was on the verge of producing representative government sixty years before western and central Europe rose up for democratic rule in 1848.

Yet that Poland it was also civic nation, with citizenship based in rights, decades before the spread of ethnic nationhood to the region; who knows what mischief might have been avoided in and outside Poland had this state survived;

One can risk stating that Poland would have merged and grown as a place where, unusually for the region, people's dignity would have been respected, in political and cultural sense. "To live in dignity" was the ideal L. Kołakowski enunciated in that 1973 essay.

6. You do not have to be Polish to feel sympathy for those students in Wilno in the 1820s who wanted the Polish constitution returned to them. Whatever one's views of Polish nationalism there is a pain and poignancy to the loss of Polish statehood in 1795 that can be felt by anyone. Historians have a certain responsibility not to overuse the word Targowica, not to suggest the problem then or now is simple treason. Or that Targowica can be repeated endlessly in order to banish all thought of compromise. If one can speak of treason then perhaps the treason of certain journalists and politicians. The central tragedy of 1795 was loss of representative rule, including rule by law and separation of powers, and all other lessons about the loss of that year follow from that.