

Anti-Polonism

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Anti-Polish Stereotypes

Introduction

Although the term “anti-Polonism” is a neologism, the prejudice it describes is not a new one. The idea that Poles were an inferior people unfit to rule themselves appeared already in the 18th century, as the weakened Polish Commonwealth became the pawn and prey of its increasingly powerful neighbors. During the 19th century, it took clear and definitive form as the justification for the crime of the partitions which robbed Poland of its independence. Anti-Polish propaganda explained why the world was better off without a state run by Poles.

Malgorzata Warchał-Schlottmann in her article “How Germans Receive Poles – A Stereotypic Perspective” writes that since at least the late 18th century, “A majority of phrases in the German language with the adjective “Polish” had a pejorative connotation”. She goes on to note, “Positive personal experiences or empirical knowledge about Poland did not modify the stereotypical image.”¹ Images of Poland and Poles as inefficient, lazy and incompetent appeared widely during the Solidarity Period, even in West Germany, to condemn the strike movement as the actions of people who just didn’t want to work.

In the last part of the nineteenth century the ideas of scientific racism out of which modern anti-Semitism was spawned added a racial dimension to these earlier stereotypes and depicted Poles as congenitally inferior. They were described as mentally deficient, animalistic sub-humans who were incapable of creating a genuine human culture. During the Weimar period in a Germany smarting from the loss of its empire, these stereotypes in their most virulent form found their way into textbooks and popular media. The malevolent twist the Weimar period added to racialized anti-Polonism was that the Poles, who were supposedly the recipients of the best of German culture and benevolence, turned ungratefully and treacherously against the German Empire in its hour of need and seized a part of Germany’s patrimony-the Polish lands annexed by Prussia during the Partitions. There was almost nothing the Nazis needed to add either to complete their stereotype of Poles as *untermenschen* or to justify their September 1939 attack on Poland.²

These negative images also influenced the view of Poles held by other peoples in Europe, including Jews, and reinforced already existing stereotypes in those cultures. In the United States, the image of Polish immigrants held by their German immigrant predecessors bolstered the racist stereotype of Poles (“white men and Polacks”) born out of American nativism.

The rebirth of Poland in the wake of the First World War and bloody national, ethnic and ideological strife in the East Central European borderlands added a new dimension to anti-Polonism as Poles and Poland were tarred with the brush of extreme anti-Semitism. Despite the fact that most of the terrible atrocities against Jews in the contested borderland were the work of Red and White Russian Armies, sensational press reporting, political considerations, ideological sympathy for revolutionary Russia and antipathy to its Polish opponent labeled Poland irrevocably as the most anti-Semitic of nations. The great Jewish historian, Salo Baron testified to the depth of this conviction when he wrote in his reflections on Jewish history that:

“Denying, for example, that any large scale pogroms had taken place in the territories of ethnographic Poland before 1936 evoked an instantaneous storm of protest not against the alleged perpetrators of such massacres, but against him for venturing to deny them.”³

The two basic images of anti-Polonism came together in the United States during this period as the exaggerated reports of anti-Semitism and public denunciations of Polish anti-Semitism by prominent Americans such as John Dewey were combined with widespread ridicule by Jewish performers in popular venues such as vaudeville shows, of Poles as slow witted and incompetent. Polish immigrants and their children picketed theaters and responded to such attacks in the Polish American press, but their defense received almost no hearing beyond their own community.

The same potent combination of images – the Pole as moron and the Pole as anti-Semite – revived again as the intense focus on the Holocaust in Poland arose in the 1960’s after decades of neglect, at the very same time as the “Polack joke” became a major cultural phenomenon in the United States. An added ingredient was the charge that seemed to put the full cause of racism in urban America on the Poles as the epitome of “hard-hatted white ethnic racists”. It was a natural corollary to the stereotype of Poles as congenital anti-Semites in Europe, especially when Polish-Jewish relations were seen through the prism of the Holocaust. Popular novels of the period, such as Arthur Haley’s Wheels, made the charge of Polish racism in the United States clear and explicit.⁴ One well-known commentator Abigail McCarthy even suggested that immigrants from Eastern Europe brought with them an “active and virulent form of anti-Semitism to America”.⁵

Scholarship on the complex relations between African Americans and Polish immigrants does not at all bear out the claims that Polish Americans were particularly racist, no more than modern scholarship has validated the charge that anti-Semitism in Poland was irredeemable or different in kind. As Robert Blobaum has pointed out recently “there is nothing peculiarly “Polish” about anti-Semitism, and claims to the contrary have served only to encourage present day anti-Semitism.”.⁶ Such allegations, in fact, become part of the repertoire of negative Polish stereotypes that make up anti-Polonism.

Although the negative public and media images of Poles have attenuated in recent decades, they have not disappeared. In fact, their dogged persistence in western film and television depictions of the Holocaust in Poland, the repeated appearance, year after year, of references to “Polish Death Camps” in major metropolitan dailies including the Boston Herald and New York Times and the production of major films such as The Break Up whose main character is a crude, boorish, insensitive and clueless young man dressed in “Polish Pride” t-shirts show that they have a deep resonance in the culture. They have become an expression of an unconscious prejudice that has acquired certain respectability as a received truth for many.

The articles in this section admirably explore images of Poles in film, in classroom and in newspaper coverage of the Holocaust story. They also point to other avenues of research. Zvi Gitelman’s observation, quoted by Lawrence Baron, that Jews “regard Pole as incorrigibly anti-Semitic” because of what they have heard in survivor narratives suggests a

fertile topic for future study. These stories which appear widely in the popular press as well as in articles and books carry a special weight of authority because of the suffering of their narrators. They also carry the human temptation to generalize beyond personal experience to try to understand and explain the entire Holocaust. This tendency combined with often incomplete information and fallible memory of now aging survivors creates interpretations of Polish-Jewish interaction during the Holocaust, which have the capacity to deeply embitter Polish-Jewish relations and confirm already held anti-Polish and anti-Semitic stereotypes.⁷

It is clear that anti-Polonism and anti-Semitism, which shared common origins at several points and reached their most horrendous expression in Nazi German ideology, remained grotesquely twinned into our own time. We cannot combat the one without combating the other.

¹ Malgorzata Warchał-Schlottmann, "How Germans Perceive Poles: A Stereotypical Perspective". *Periphery* 6/7 (2001/01), 25.

² Alexander Rossini, *Hitler strikes Poland*. (Lawrence, Ks, University of Kansas Press, 2004) 220-226

³ Salo Baron, *History and Jewish Historians*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1964) 84

⁴ Arthur Haley, *Wheels*. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971. 269

⁵ Abigail McCarthy, "An Ugly Resurgence", *Commonweal*, December 17, 1982

⁶ Robert Blobaum (ed), *Anti-Semitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. vii. Dominic Capeci, *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943*. (Jackson, Ms: University Press of Mississippi, 1991) *passim*. Thaddeus c. Radzilowski "*Historia stosunkow pomiedzy Murzynami i Polska grupa etniczna w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki*. *Polonia Amerykanska*. (Krakow: Zaklad Narodowy im.. Ossolinski Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Krakow 1988) 673-704

⁷ See for example the Heller-Chotkowski exchange in *The Jewish Week* July 22, 2005, August 26, 2005. Fanya Heller, who had recorded in both a memoir and archival testimony her survival in a hostile Ukrainian village through the help of a Polish farmer and priest, remembered bitterly years later her oppressors as Poles in an op-ed piece in *The Jewish Week* attacking the notion that Poles should be also remembered as victims forwarded by Rabbi Lincoln.