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## The Kielce Pogrom and the Post-War Period in Selected non-Polish Publications


The Kielce Pogrom has been and will continue to be one of the most controversial issues in Polish-Jewish relations. From the perspective of Polish researchers, the mass murder committed in 1946 in Kielce is a deplorable landmark in the country's history. Polish historians analyse the origins, course and effects of the pogrom as if it was an isolated event and look for an external cause that led to the massacre. On the other hand, in non-Polish academic work on the subject, the Kielce

Pogrom is only a component of Polish anti-Semitism, albeit marking its climax.

The non-Polish researchers are accused of not knowing the Polish publications, lack of knowledge and empathy, as well as the uncritical approach to the source materials in the communist-created archives. Polish historians expect them to be acquainted with very specialised Polish-language literature, even if these papers are unavailable in the electronic form. In turn, the Polish historians are criticised for ignoring the “mainstream” literature on the subject. Apparently, they do not take into account the non-Polish work because of their linguistic shortcomings and their insufficiently equipped libraries. Hence, many of their studies contain no reference to basic literature on the subject.

The current perception of the Polish-Jewish relations is based on the point of view presented in testimonials drawn up by Jewish émigrés, whose narratives tend to link their terrible experience of the war to Polish post-war anti-Semitism. Many of them left the country fearing for their lives, and in some of these stories, ethnic Poles appear worse than Nazi Germans. It must also be remembered that the communist services succeeded in influencing the attitude of individual émigrés. The image of Poland that the new authorities wanted to create in the West was that of a lawless, unstable country that needed communists to introduce order. The problem occurred also in the case of persons who came to Poland after the war, and who received appropriate “wardship” provided by secret service officers. A good example is Samuel Loeb Shneiderman, author of *Between Fear and Hope.* He

travelled to Poland in 1946 as a journalist and had the opportunity to visit Kielce the day after the pogrom. The piece contains many thoughts taken directly from the communist propaganda, which Shneiderman blindly repeated.

The Polish point of view could not be presented fully and objectively until the late 1980s. Before that, the problem had been analysed in two different ways, which had only limited contact with each other. The victims of the pogrom and other Jewish inhabitants of Kielce left Poland with either traumatic memories or painful, overheard testimonies. In Poland, the theme of the pogrom quickly fell silent. The communist authorities assumed that if there were no Jews, there was no problem. Therefore, the Polish point of view is struggling to join the ongoing debate on the subject. The Poles' contribution to the discussion does not tally with the current paradigm of the events. It is believed that the Polish perspective lacks a long-standing debate and examination of the subject, and as such is poorer and less critical of its own history. Polish researchers are accused of not being critical enough of their history and alleged to be always looking at their country through the optics of the nation's suffering. Moreover, the source database they use is for the most part available only in Poland and in the Polish language.

It must be remembered that Western Europe and the USA did not experience the war and Nazi German occupation in the form it took in Eastern Europe. There were no post-war instances of genocide or ethnic expulsions, either. The former Soviet Bloc countries aspiring to join the Western community via EU or NATO are expected to adopt its

system of values, which is predominantly anti-fascist and cosmopolitan. This mentality is the Western world's reaction to the Holocaust, and it resulted in placing the genocide as a reference point for the anti-fascist ideology after the war. An additional difficulty is a notion that since Communism defeated Nazism, it could not be as bad as the National Socialism. This, in turn, leads to playing down the post-war reality under the communist regime and emphasizing the Holocaust as an ultimate tragedy. For the post-communist countries, this was just one of several genocides.

In the Cold War period, the Eastern Bloc countries had to live under Stalin's dictatorship, which proclaimed a similar system of "democratic" values (Marxism). Ethnocentrism became a method of coping with the new reality, and it allowed the creation of an ideological basis for the struggle against the imposed totalitarian regime. For this reason, many people in Central and Eastern Europe do not treat nationalism as an embarrassing stain on the national character, but as the foundation of their identity. The conflict with Communism appoints the narrative of the battle between good and evil and turned the nation into the main carrier of history. The disparity between these worldviews has led to the emergence of contention – a debate on which evil was worse, Nazism or Communism, and who suffered more, the Jews or the non-Jews.

Some researchers are of the opinion that the Holocaust should not be treated as a unique event but as one of many genocides. World War II and the post-war period were a time of ethnic cleansing suffered and

perpetrated by many ethnic groups – a context which may dethrone the Holocaust. In that approach, individual incidents would be analysed against the background of the Polish-Jewish relations, and the hardships suffered by Jews would no longer constitute the core of the debate. According to historian Michael Fleming, the current discourse on the war and post-war violence has been dominated by experts specializing in particular ethnic minorities. From each expert's perspective, the experience of the group of interest is always absolutely unique.

Another problematic point in the survey of the Polish-Jewish relations is the participation of people of Jewish origin in the communist regime apparatus. Polish historians look at the issue through the prism of Poland's suffering during the communist era. On the other hand, from the Jewish perspective, the problem doesn't exist: a true communist cannot be considered a Jew due to the secular character of the Marxist ideology.

Many Polish historians feel a need to cleanse Poland's good name after the communist period and give the nation its history back through creating a dichotomy between "us" and "communists". According to some researchers, this phenomenon may be a reason why the Poles are looking for evidence of the communist provocation behind the Kielce pogrom. Polish historians are also accused of denying ethnic Poles' participation in the massacre, and of trying to place the blame on an external factor, such as a conspiracy. Many Polish researchers want to believe that if the pogrom was instigated, then the problem of

Polish involvement altogether disappears.

Another consideration raised by non-Polish historians is the centuries-long martyrdom tradition of the Polish society and the perception of the country as a permanent victim, never a perpetrator. Therefore, some scholars suggest that the pogrom was a specific form of “self-defence” on the part of the Poles, committed for the good of the nation, a result of a myth of the ever-present Jewish threat. Polish researchers, in turn, consider the frequent accusations of Polish involvement in the murder of Jews as a manifestation of anti-Polonism and an attempt to avoid the issue of Jewish participation in the communist regime authorities. They also maintain that the accusation of age-old and widespread Polish anti-Semitism is an overgeneralization.

The contemporary literature on the subject has been influenced by first-hand testimonies of people who did not understand the political game taking place in post-war Poland. During the first years after the war, visitors from other countries and people who wanted to move abroad came into the attention of the communist intelligence and Security Service, which fed them false information under the guise of guidance and assistance. The main reason for the officers’ help was to indoctrinate or misinform visitors or Jewish émigrés’ and to manipulate their perception of particular issues so that these people could spread the distorted facts abroad. Most Jews left Poland before the full takeover of power by the communists in 1947, and as a result, they could not recognise that “the Jewish question” was only a pawn in the

political game the communists were playing. The problem was intensified by the lack of access to sources of information by the Western intelligence, and only a few people understood at that time that “the rules of the game changed”. Over time, a mass number of Jewish émigrés and foreign visitors turned the implanted allegations into a widely-accepted version of events. Therefore, many thoughts and themes of the post-war communist propaganda still appear in the literature on Polish-Jewish relations.

Interestingly, books and articles published outside of Poland never tell their readers that the victims of the pogrom also included ethnic Poles, who are usually counted as Jewish fatalities. The problem of the critical approach and possible forgery of documents in communist-created archives is also rarely mentioned. Scholars generally overlook the possibility of “false flag” and “black propaganda” operations. Only Slovak historian Martin Šromovský points to special units of the NKVD and the Security Service [Urząd Bezpieczeństwa] which impersonated the Polish anti-communist Underground and infiltrated the “men of the forest” [*leśni*].

According to some scholars, anti-Semitism alone cannot cause anti-Jewish violence. During the war, some Poles rescued Jews, despite their sincere and overt resentment towards that minority. Others point out that traditional anti-Semitism in the national “cultural code” does not explain why ethnic tensions intensified at a particular moment and why they evolved into pogroms. Anti-Semitism among people of peasant origin is always looking for the third party to legitimize their actions.

Anti-Semitism cannot be the cause of events and their catalyst at the same time. Michael Fleming points out that the communist elites wanted to fuel this frustration and were greatly interested in channelling the society's anger in a way that was beneficial to them while disavowing and denouncing the idea itself. They created situations that led to Polish-Jewish tensions, and at the same time shouted the slogans of fighting anti-Semitism.

In the context of the Polish-Jewish relations, the role of the Catholic Church is also often discussed and analysed. The institution is accused of passivity, inadequate defence of Jews, and above all, failure to counter the blood libel myth. In the opinion of many scholars, the Church treated the Jewish question only as part of the political game. The Catholic Church is portrayed as an ally of the communist government of People's Poland, working hand in hand with it to integrate the areas generally referred to as the Recovered Territories with the rest of the country. Moreover, the Church's passive attitude to the Jewry supported anti-Semitic sentiments among Polish society. Historians often contrast the attitudes of Bishop Teodor Kubina and Cardinal August Hlond. However, they fail to mention the number of priests repressed and killed by the communist regime, nor do they analyse the limited capabilities of the Church or possible consequences of alternative decisions.

The attitude of the anti-communist Underground to the Jews is another context frequently brought up in the non-Polish literature on Polish-Jewish relations. Not every historian can tell individual organisations

apart, and even fewer of them understand the problem of some underground groups degenerating into criminal bands. When mentioned, the anti-communist underground resistance movement is usually presented in the context of its reputed anti-Semitism and nationalism. Poor emotional, the physical and economic condition of Jews in the wake of the Holocaust is often presented out of context as if the same problems did not affect all inhabitants of post-war Poland.

Some researchers emphasize the weakness of the communist authorities in the post-war period. In their opinion, the fragility of the new government was the reason why the communists were ineffective in response to anti-Semitic violence. This argument is also used to explain the attitude and behaviour of the law enforcement and military during the pogrom. Only a few scholars noticed the contrast between declarations and actions of the communist authorities and realized that it was not a weakness but a way to play the public opinion in the West, the Jewish minority and Polish society. On top of that, the records in the communist-created archives are either little-known abroad or blindly trusted by foreign researchers.

Although over 30 years have passed since the collapse of the communist system, the Polish point of view has not been effectively presented to a foreign reader. There are many reasons for this phenomenon – linguistic shortcomings, different source base, disparate experiences and value system. Without access to the communist-created archives, Western scholars have developed synthetic tools to understand the realities of the Polish post-war period, while historians

in Poland focused on a detailed analysis of documents. Consequently, the former makes the individual character of each event disappear, while the latter ignores the wider background of such events. The disparity between these views has provoked a debate on which evil was worse, Nazism or Communism, and who suffered more, the Jews or the non-Jews.

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