

Introductory Notes

Between 1968 and 1971 I served in the American Embassy in Warsaw, first as a Consular Officer and the last two years as a political reporting officer. My time there began in a political crisis that abated only slowly once party leader Władysław Gomułka joined the invasion of Czechoslovakia and got Soviet re-endorsement at that November's Party Congress; it ended on a brighter note, after Edward Gierek had replaced Gomułka following the December 1970 workers' revolt on the Baltic Coast and faced down an attempted power grab by the leader of the ethno-nationalist "Partisan" faction in the party, Mieczysław Moczar.

"Anti-Semitism without Jews" was a central feature of Polish politics through the whole period; it was mysterious to me then, and has remained a puzzle ever since. It is also a phenomenon that has been overloaded with essentialist or psychologistic interpretation, especially in our post-Cold War era, which has after all seen "identity," "memory," "guilt" and "image" supersede politics as privileged interpretive categories. Some of the work based on these categories is very fine. To name only a few recent examples:

Michael C. Steinlauf, Bondage to the Dead. Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust (Syracuse University Press, 1997);
Joanna Beata Michlic, Poland's Threatening Other. The Image of the New from 1880 to the Present (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2006); and of course
Jan Tomasz Gross, Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz (New York, Random House, 2006).

But except for rare allusions, recent work almost entirely avoids political explanations of this Polish anti-Semitism (almost) without Jews, and particularly explanation in terms of its relationship(s) to the respective roles of the Polish state and the Polish party which ran the Polish state for most of the postwar era.

I was therefore genuinely excited by David Engel's excellent REEJS seminar on competing Polish and Jewish messianisms last April, just because he so carefully researched and delineated the shifting political currents in prewar Polish history that had so much to do with producing them. And yet, as I thought through his argument, it seemed to me that having traced their origins, he then allowed the images Poles and Jews had of each other to reify, to float forward into and through the Communist era, more or less disembodied, obdurate but also simply given. And I was disappointed, first because a lifetime of observation has convinced me that concepts are always somehow connected to politics, second because Engel's analysis leads necessarily to the conclusion that Poles and Jews are just stuck with their impacted images, that there is nothing that can be done about it; and because this conclusion seems to me too pessimistic for reality.

As an antidote, I recalled a paper I wrote just after returning from Poland, in 1971, as a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow at the Hoover Institution. It was an effort to encompass and comprehend what I had been through and seen in Poland, and my method was basically to apply the explanatory framework Hannah Arendt

developed in The Origins of Totalitarianism for the previous century's anti-Semitism in Western and Central Europe. This framework does not invalidate the explanatory power of guilt, memory, identity or image, but fills in what I considered a crucial gap, then and since: the absence of the structural political dimension (in Engel's case since 1944).

Steve and Lis were kind enough to be receptive, the paper is attached, and I look forward to your comments and criticisms on Wednesday.