Between the Brown and the Red

Nationalism, Catholicism, and Communism in Twentieth-Century Poland—The Politics of Bolesław Piasecki

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In a climactic scene from Andrzej Munk’s 1960 film *Bad Luck* (*Zezowate szczęście*), the protagonist, Jan Piszczyk—a young, shy, clumsy man studying law at Warsaw University—finds himself at the forefront of a political demonstration. The year is 1938, and proregime students are urging Poland’s strongman, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły, to “march on Kaunas,” the capital of Lithuania. Suddenly, Piszczyk notices new faces in the crowd around him. “These new colleagues were very vocal,” he observes, “but their chants were somehow different.” From the shouts of the new arrivals—Jews to Madagascar! Down with Sanacja!—it becomes clear that fascist thugs have infiltrated the crowd. A born coward and an opportunist, Piszczyk chants alternately “On Kaunas!” and “Jews to Madagascar!” thereby gaining an enthusiastic response from both parts of the crowd. In the end, the fascists vandalize Jewish shops, while the police club all the demonstrators indiscriminately.

Warsaw in the late 1980s reminded me of the city from Munk’s film: It was a dangerous yet fascinating place. Communism’s fin de siècle was a season of intellectual debates, political demonstrations, street clashes, and anxiety mixed with hope. As party comrades from the Central Committee started looking for an exit strategy from historical determinism, we university students engaged in various journeys of political self-discovery. I was genuinely annoyed each time I saw a student wearing a miniature Chrobry Sword, the emblem of the nationalist Endek movement from before the war. I also disliked the gangs of skinheads roaming the streets, assaulting “odd” or defiant young people and shouting, “Poland for the Poles!” All such behavior smacked of a return to the 1930s, with its fascist thugs, nationalist
students, and chauvinist rhetoric. It was as if anti-Semitism, fascism, and nationalism had thawed from the deep freeze of a communist ice age. Fortunately for Poland, what seemed to be a return of old demons turned out to be only a small part of a brief and chaotic political transition: skinheads did not take over the streets, fascists did not rise to power, and neo-Endeks transformed themselves, however reluctantly, into democratic politicians.

Indeed, the metaphor of a communist ice age is somewhat misleading. The nasty parts of Polish nationalist mythology were not dormant during this period, and some even flourished under the party’s rule. They survived the communist interregnum and emerged in the late twentieth century in the form of a preoccupation with the ethnic backgrounds of public figures and with the notions of Żydokomuna (a Jewish-communist conspiracy) and of the “true Pole” (prawdziwy polak) and his antithesis, the Jew (żyd). Conspiracy theories purporting to unmask the enemies of the Polish nation also continued to attract new adherents.

Polish communism reinforced the ethnocentric self-definition of Polishness. World War II, the Nazi extermination of Polish Jews, and the postwar territorial settlement had cleansed Poland, in large part, of its ethnic minorities. By presiding over this process of ethnic homogenization, Polish communists fulfilled the dream of earlier Polish nationalists—the creation of “a Poland for the Poles,” as the old battle cry went. After the end of Stalinism, the communist regime used aggressive nationalism as a powerful tool to single out internal and external enemies. In parallel to this official nationalism, communist Poland also nurtured an organization that functioned as an incubator for the nationalist Right: Bolesław Piasecki’s Catholic PAX association, socialist in its commitment and nationalist in its worldview.

Only recently has the relationship between communism and nationalism in twentieth-century Eastern Europe and Poland begun to receive the attention that it deserves, and these studies reveal a number of common themes. First, they undermine the Cold War construct of totalitarianism as an approach to understanding twentieth-century Eastern Europe, especially during the period of communist rule. They portray nationalism as a living and diverse phenomenon subject to evolution through everyday life practices rather than as a rigid set of beliefs enforced by ideologues. They also break with the mainstream scholarship of nationalism by disputing the connection between the rise of nationalism and the creation of nation-states, on the one hand, and the secularization of society and the demise of religion,
on the other. Instead, some of these works argue that the birth of organic nationalism often has roots in religious renewal and fervor. Finally, these studies often tap historical sociology to present the Soviet bloc states as heterogeneous polities open to various forms of negotiation and dialogue between societies and party regimes on the political, intellectual, and social levels. To date, only a handful of Western scholars have attempted to produce book-length studies on the entanglement of religion, nationalism, and communism. Although this work is not a history of nationalism and Catholicism under Polish communism, it attempts to respond to this demand.

This study provides a comprehensive political biography of the Polish nationalist politician Bolesław Piasecki. Before World War II, as the leader of the National Radical Movement, a small fascist group, Piasecki envisioned Poland as a protototalitarian state integrated on the basis of ethnicity, Catholicism, and mass organization. The cornerstones of his doctrine were the notions that God was the highest destiny of man and that striving to increase the might of the nation was the path to God. During the war, Piasecki gained control of a right-wing combat organization, the Confederation of the Nation, which in 1943 merged with the Home Army. Arrested by the communists in November 1944, he was released within the year and soon founded a procommunist movement of progressive Catholics, later known as PAX (the Latin word for “peace”). He pledged to build a Catholic-Marxist alliance and to mobilize the nationalist Right in the establishment of a socialist Poland. Piasecki proposed the creation of a dual political system embodied by a communist-Catholic ruling coalition. He believed that under the ideological guidance of PAX, Catholics, communists, and nationalists would be united in the service of God, socialism, and nation. Piasecki’s concept was socialist in its form and nationalist in its content, since he always viewed Catholicism as central to Polish national identity. He remained the sole leader of PAX until his death in 1979.

In reassessing Piasecki’s political career, I narrow the scale of historical observation to an individual case, which can be useful in discussing the ideological affinity between nationalism and communism and posing questions about the nature of this relationship. Piasecki’s biography is important not only for its uniqueness—Piasecki was the only Eastern European fascist leader to continue his political career in a communist-dominated environment—but also because it overturns conventional wisdom about communism. I contextualize this story against the background of Poland’s
interwar politics and anti-Nazi resistance, the communist takeover and Stalinist period, the post-Stalinist period, and communism’s belle époque of the 1970s.

It is my hope that this political biography will prompt historians to reevaluate the way in which twentieth-century Polish history has been understood. I propose that under certain conditions, not only did the communists make use of nationalism, but—as Piasecki’s case proves—they also prolonged the existence of the nationalist Right. Indeed, I argue that PAX was the nationalist Right under communism. Piasecki’s story, therefore, calls into question the commonly accepted view that fascism in Eastern Europe was wiped out by the victory of the Red Army and by the subsequent communist takeover.

I explore Piasecki’s postwar career against the background of the nationalization of the Polish United Workers’ Party and argue that “Left” and “Right” are elusive concepts in modern Poland and in Eastern Europe as a whole. On the one hand, Piasecki’s prewar ideology included traditional elements of the Right, such as xenophobia, an exaltation of the ethnically homogenous community, religious fundamentalism, and a paramilitary movement led by a charismatic ideologue. On the other hand, Piasecki shared with the extreme Left an embrace of anticapitalism—here overlapping with the rejection of the West—glorification of a centralized state, cultivation of collective identities, and historical determinism. More important, both Piasecki and the communists believed that their destiny was to construct a new society.

For Polish communists, the recruitment of Catholic nationalists like Piasecki provided a chance to mobilize nationalism and Catholicism. Facing a predominantly hostile country with a strong Right and a powerful Roman Catholic Church, they needed allies from outside their ranks—people who, while not Marxists, would support their cause. Therefore, Piasecki’s value lay precisely in the fact that he was not a communist: Piasecki’s PAX could channel his nationalist-Catholic clientele into the regime’s camp. Later, while aiming to legitimize the party’s flagging rule in the aftermath of de-Stalinization, the regime of Władysław Gomułka gradually incorporated—even if selectively—elements of the Polish nationalist canon: namely, the glorification of the national past, Germanophobia, and anti-Semitism. The ultimate outcome of the process was the so-called Polonization of the Polish United Workers’ Party. This process culminated in the 1967–68 anti-Semitic
campaign, in which Piasecki played a vital role, contributing to the evolution of the Polish communist state into a nationalist-populist regime.

Here, I would also emphasize the similarity between Piasecki and Gomułka, his communist doppelganger: while the former attempted to reconcile his nationalism with socialism, the latter sought to reinforce communism with nationalism. Hence, their political relationship, which lasted for two decades, should come as no surprise. Both of them—sometimes jointly, but more often separately—tried to cross the boundary between two ideologies. And both of them ultimately failed. Their red-brown kinship, which fully manifested itself in 1968, backfired, contributing to the ideological demobilization of Polish communism during the following decade and the emergence of the advocates of civil society.

I also seek to capture the multifaceted nature of church-state relations in communist Poland, relations that oscillated between mutual confrontation, accommodation, and dialogue rather than stagnating in a state of constant struggle. Because of the ethnically homogenous makeup of postwar Poland, the lack of legitimacy of the communist regime as a national state, and the relatively soft form that religious persecution assumed in Poland—at least in comparison to other Soviet satellites—the Church gradually succeeded in monopolizing national identity and its symbolic projections. Nevertheless, what happened in Poland, especially after the end of Stalinism, went beyond the historical duel between the religious and the secular, the clerical and the atheist, the domestic and the alien. Under communism, the bond between religion and nation grew stronger, despite the regime’s attempt to play the nationalist card to present itself as Polish rather than communist—or perhaps because of it.

Piasecki’s PAX was one of several Catholic organizations that advocated a Marxist-Christian dialogue. Some of these groups, like PAX, were staunchly procommunist. Others were ready to recognize party rule without endorsing its ideological system and weakening the Church. Here, Piasecki’s biography addresses the dilemma of Catholic intellectuals who witnessed and often took part in a competition to define and own Polish national identity. His involvement in the government highlights various processes that characterized uneasy church-state cohabitation and eventually led to the victory of the Church.

In his superb novel *The Spell*, Hermann Broch wrote, “Fate is merely the subordination of the mind to a specific conceptual world.” The point I
would like to emphasize is that the fate of the politician—at least prior to
the technocratic age—was determined by the power of convictions, by per-
sonal charisma, and by the ability to respond to the fluctuations of mass
politics in an age of rival ideologies. Piasecki did subscribe to specific politi-
cal concepts, including the ethnocentric vision of nationalism and a peculiar
Polish raison d’état. His remarkable consistency may explain his ultimate
failure: while the politician always strives to win power, Piasecki never
achieved this goal, at least in part because he refused to reform his world-
view. Fate, in its classical Greek meaning, implies the inability of the indi-
vidual to control his own destiny against teleological forces defining the
universe. But unlike the unfortunate protagonist of Munk’s film, Piasecki
was not a pawn. During the forty-five years of his political career, not only
did he answer to history, but he also contributed to the course of twentieth-
century Poland.
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