

Recent Polish Antisemitism
as a Symptom of Modernization
(A Hypothesis)

Most current analyses of Polish antisemitism in the 1960's are either too general or too specific. They see the outburst either as the last incarnation of some "eternal" Polish hatred of Jews or as the product of a complex but still basically sui generis Polish political history, especially the history of the Polish community party since prewar days. Both explanations are plausible enough, especially to the unwary. The sui generis account, for instance, is the official version in Poland itself. Both ought perhaps to arouse suspicion on grounds of plausibility alone. Neither, to my mind, is adequate to explain the astounding phenomenon of political antisemitism in a country with relatively few Jews a generation after the massacre of European Jewry by Nazi Germany. The following analysis, based on a comparison with earlier forms of Polish antisemitism and with the Central and West European varieties as described by Hannah Arendt in the first part of The Origins of Totalitarianism, will not fully explain it either. Theoretical hypotheses such as this never do justice to the mysterious human events they are intended to clarify. But such comparisons at least permit more realistic approaches to what is general and what is truly specific in the Polish case.

A brief historical resumé is perhaps in order for non-specialists. Of the 3,000,000 Jews in prewar Poland, perhaps a quarter million remained at war's end, and the great majority of these left the country in two waves, in the immediate postwar period and after the political changes of 1956. By 1960 it was generally estimated that 25 to 30,000 persons of Jewish origin lived in Poland. Antisemitism had been very unimportant in Polish political life since the war. There were some anti-Jewish riots in some cities in the first postwar years, but they seem to have been "classic" pogroms: by all (the scanty) evidence they were provoked by various authorities, especially factions in the security police, in the course of political infighting, and they produced no ideology, had no wide political resonance, and no serious political consequences. Antisemitism in its "modern" form, as a political weapon for mass use, emerged only in the turmoil of 1956, when one Party faction introduced antisemitic slogans into the struggle for control of the Party. At the time, however, and in the next few years, antisemitic watchwords and policies did not bulk very large on the Polish scene. This changed only when the ambiguous groupings and cliques which are characteristic of all East European political systems crystallized at the beginning of the 1960's into self-conscious factions. One of these factions, gathered around then-Interior Minister and later Party Secretary Moczar, made antisemitism a major weapon in the struggle for power.

It did not achieve power, and has since dissolved, but at the height of the struggle, in the late 1960's, it forced its opponents to adopt numerous arrows from its quiver, including antisemitism, and the result was the expulsion of Jews from high and middle positions in the state and the academic world and from all levels of the Party, harassment and discrimination against Jewish citizens all over the country, and the departure from Poland of something over half the country's small remaining Jewish population.

This type of antisemitism was radically different from anything in previous Polish history, not just in force and success, but in character. There had been no love lost between Jew and Gentile in prewar Poland, but it had never been possible to transform the dislike of Jews which was general among the Gentile population into an effective political instrument.

Hannah Arendt gives part of the reason when she describes in passing the 19th-century situation in Poland and Rumania:

The Jews of these countries, strong in number and weak in every other respect, seemingly fulfilled some of the functions of the middle class, because they were mostly shopkeepers and traders and because as a group they stood between the big landowners and the propertyless classes. Small property holders, however, can exist as well in a feudal as in a capitalist economy. The Jews, here as elsewhere, were unable or unwilling to develop along industrial capitalist lines, so that the net result of their activities was a scattered, inefficient organization of consumption without an adequate system of production. The Jewish positions were an obstacle for a normal capitalist development because they looked as though they were the only ones from whom economic advancement might be expected without being capable of fulfilling this expectation. Because of their appearance, Jewish interests were felt to be in conflict with those sections of the population from which a middle class could normally have developed. The governments, on the other hand, tried halfheartedly to encourage a middle class without liquidating the nobility and big landowners. Their only serious attempt was economic liquidation of the Jews - partly as a concession to public opinion, and partly because the Jews were actually still a part of the old feudal order.

As applied to the whole of Polish history before the war, this certainly overstates the case. The 20th Century brought significant changes. In the 19th Century which Hannah Arendt is describing, three different governments ruled in Polish territory, and in the 20th, when a Polish state was created anew, it was no longer quite true that Jews were merely a part of the feudal order, that they were totally unable to

develop along capitalist lines, that their activities were limited to organization of consumption. Further, by this time there was substantial Jewish assimilation, primarily into the intelligentsia, and some temptation to make antisemitism a political issue. One major party, National Democracy, was sympathetic to racialist ideology and anti-semitic sloganeering, and openly antisemitic fascist grouplets began to spring up in the 1930's. Nevertheless, the great mass of Jews remained a "false class" of small traders; National Democracy never came to power; and the fascist groups of the last prewar decade were politically insignificant. Hannah Arendt's conclusion therefore holds: "...the ubiquitous hatred of Jews made it almost useless as a weapon for specific purposes."

This in turn was radically different from the situation in Central and Western Europe. Modern political antisemitism, the "weapon for specific purposes", was born here, rather than in Eastern Europe, in the 19th Century, and became an effective ideology and instrument of power here, rather than in Eastern Europe, in the early 20th Century. The conditions for this development were quite complex but also quite specific. Everywhere they included the existence of relatively small groups of Jews playing a particular role in societal development during a period which saw the rise and crisis first of the modern nation-state and then of the modern bourgeois society which had grown up under the state's aegis. Hannah Arendt, although she describes these processes with great clarity and subtlety, tends to telescope these two crises - of the state and of bourgeois society - into one. For our purposes it is important to keep them separate. Although signs of crisis could be seen in both spheres at the same time, beginning in the last quarter of the century, and although the crises were everywhere intimately interrelated, the dissolution of state authority preceded the dissolution of classic bourgeois society. Indeed it was the flowering of bourgeois industrial capitalism in the 1870's and 1880's which first made the nation-state seem vaguely inappropriate, somehow disreputable, enough so at least to permit fundamental opposition to arise and alternative forms of government to be seriously proposed.

There had also been some conflict, at least in the minds of many protagonists, between the feudal monarchy and the developing bourgeois society in early modern times. On the one hand, however, the state power had itself taken the lead in destroying potential rivals above and below the middle classes, and on the other hand the conflict never led to political antisemitism. Individual Jews grew rich financing the new absolute monarchies, but they did so without affecting the status of the Jewish communities from which they came. Their privileges remained strictly individual, and the communities continued to live side by side with other communities of the various realms and in greater isolation from them than at

any other time before or after in European history. It was only in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that the financial needs of the state grew to the point where only Jews could satisfy them, and where they could do so only at the cost of mobilizing Jewry to this end. It was at this point that the Jewish banker, exemplified by the House of Rothschild, became truly influential. Drawing on the resources of Jews everywhere, protected by the state in his function and securing state protection for other Jews as an extension of his own privileges, the Jewish banker operated in a no-man's-land between the exalted circles whom he served and the unassimilated Jewish masses with whom he was associated but no longer wished to associate. The ins and outs of Jewish emancipation need not concern us here, but two characteristics of the process are important. First, emancipation began as privilege - the banker's liberties granted to all Jews - and was motivated by the state's desire to make them useful to society. Most privileged Jews did not much welcome the prospect of sharing their privileges with the Jewish masses, and the extension of these privileges was resented by the rest of the population, which was not so favored, and especially by the traditionally-privileged aristocracy, whose special legal status was following its ancient social functions into oblivion. Thus antisemitic ideologies were first put forth by aristocrats, in the first decades of the century when they still had something to fight for. The second characteristic of the situation was that the loyalty of Jews as a group was regularly directed toward the local state authority, not because of its specific character (which varied from place to place), but because of its authority, which protected Jews.

This period of real influence and importance was quite short, and came to an end everywhere in the third quarter of the century. There were three causes. First, the needs of the state grew so great that Jewish bankers could no longer satisfy them alone, and the economies grew so productive that Jewish bankers were no longer indispensable: they became mere bankers, among many. Second, Jews were everywhere granted civic and legal equality, and accordingly ceased to exist as a separate group before the law, distinguished by special status, superior or inferior, from other subjects. Third, and as a result of the first two developments, they ceased to enjoy the protection of the state.

The period of influence had important legacies, however. Although Jews were no longer specially protected by the state, they continued to be loyal to constituted state authority, as it were by habit. And they continued to be associated by other groups in society with the states which had so long protected them. Just at this moment, the loyalty of these other groups to the state as the legitimate authority in society was becoming more detached. As groups, they were functionally better articulated with the emerging class societies than the

Jews, who were neither quite a class nor quite an estate. On the other hand they were also becoming international. Capitalism and socialism were internationalist in conception and even to an extent in practice (although the limits of this internationalism would become brilliantly clear in August 1914). It seemed, therefore, that the only national forces in the arena were the state and its erstwhile protégés the Jews. In fact, there was also the vast forgotten reservoir of the disinherited, the transitional people wrenched out of traditional roles by rapid social change and only imperfectly and uneasily integrated into the new class society. They had left the family farm or workshop, and the older ethos of peasant community or guild no longer fit, but they were unable to expand their outlooks to the vast horizons of world market or world working class, and adopted nationalism instead.

The question of modern antisemitism's relation to modern nationalism is vexed. Hannah Arendt points out that the first antisemites were self-consciously internationalist, that they immediately held international conferences, founded an international organization, and tried to develop an international ideology. The Nazis were also internationalist in their way: they attempted to foist racism on many unwilling conservatives throughout Europe, and they gave short shrift to many of Germany's dearest traditions. Hannah Arendt is quite correct when she emphasizes that unlike the Italian Fascists, the Nazis worshipped the party, the movement, rather than the state. She concludes, however, that anti-semitism is also anti-nationalist. I feel this is overdrawn. Central and West European antisemites were indeed enemies of the nation-state, but they were enemies of the state rather than of the nation. Their objection was that the state was an inadequate steward of the nation's "real" interests, at best a bumbler, at worst a sponsor and tool of traitors. In the 19th Century things rarely went so far. The nation-state was celebrating its most spectacular triumphs; it had been first in the field (or second, after the monarch) and was the incumbent steward; and it was hard for simple people to challenge the aura of authority which it enjoyed, hard enough for businessmen and workers, almost impossible for the disinherited. But if their anti-state feelings were inchoate in this earlier period, their nationalism was real and sincere. The "internationalism" of this new-born antisemitism was, in other words, the uncomfortable result of the nation's preemption by the nation-state, rather than a consequence of antisemitism's own internal logic.

Attacks on the Jews were of course as misdirected as this internationalism was false. They were a convenient target for men afraid to attack the state head-on. Politicians discovered that it was possible to attract a mass following among the uprooted by focussing their attention and discontent

on a group which, like the uprooted, had no very visible or stable social function but which, unlike them, appeared to enjoy a special association with the state. This was illusory, although it had ceased to be true only recently, but in consequence the Jews began to receive blows really intended for their recent protector at the moment in history when the protector ceased to protect and when they had begun to lose whatever influence and cohesion they had ever had. Like emancipation earlier, antisemitism had its ups and downs in pre-World War I Europe. Its fortunes waxed and waned with the economic situation, the capacities of its leaders, the strength of governments - that whole variety of specific circumstances which determines every political situation. (The only factor which no longer mattered was what the Jews themselves did or did not do.) It would require the disasters of the 20th Century - the war and the depression - to swell the ranks of the uprooted and humiliated with millions upon millions of normal men and women cast adrift from their familiar moorings and to prepare them to be convinced that only new forms of political organization, and not the state, could defend them and "their" national interest. By this time the Jews had practically ceased to exist as a group and as a group had practically no influence at all. It was at this point that they became demons.

It is in late 19th-century Central and Western Europe, surely, that the analogies to contemporary Poland are to be found, rather than in the prior history of Poland itself. It can be safely admitted at the outset that the analogies are rough and assume, somewhat improbably, that a century of development further west has been collapsed into a single generation of the Polish People's Republic. Nonetheless the only convincing parallels are here.

There have been two very basic structural differences, beyond differences ascribable to simple backwardness. They involve the degree of dependence on outside forces and the role of the state, and are related. As noted above, the Poles had no state of their own in the 19th Century. They were subjects of other states and, to the variable extent to which Prussia, Russia, and Austria were ruled by or in the interest of state-nations, by other nations. As one result, the Polish state which was established in 1918 and reestablished in 1944 has enjoyed practically unquestioned identification with the nation in the minds of its citizens. This has been true despite the fact that the nation itself was far from homogeneous and far from constituting a "bourgeois society" in any meaningful sense, despite the fact that the degree of Polish national consciousness varied considerably in intensity even within the ethnic Polish population as late as 1939, and despite the fact that compared to the more or less smooth-functioning products of long historical evolution further west, the Polish state has been a fairly rickety affair, has lacked the aura of

efficiency and dignity which surrounds older bureaucracies. Nevertheless, to the extent that Poles became nationalists (and they were all nationalists by 1944 at the latest), the Polish state has been and remains coterminous with the nation, and there has been no real place for an anti-state nationalist ideology.

But while the state is more firmly wedded to the nation in the minds of Poles than it had been in the minds of Frenchmen or Germans, after World War II it was superseded at the helm of the national destiny by the Polish communist Party. The sundering of state and nation which occurred from within in Germany was accomplished in Poland by an outside agency, the Soviet Union. And because of Poland's backwardness, this has meant that the Polish Party, rather than the Polish state, has been the sponsor and director of industrialization and its resulting societal transformations. It is as if Germany had been industrialized by Napoleon's brothers working through German Jacobins.

Jews, as it happened, played a prominent role in the Party which superseded the state (without replacing it in law) and which plunged Poland into the drama of modernization at the behest of an outside power. It could be said that they were prominent rather than influential, for in the first decade of the new regime when they were most visible only the Soviets were really influential in Poland, and prominence is after all in the eye of the beholder. As circumstances would have it, though, the tiny prewar Communist Party of Poland suppressed by the Comintern in 1938 was drawn from and appealed mainly to Poland's national minorities, Jews, Ukrainians, and White Russians, and what was left of it after the depredations of Stalin and Hitler and the incorporation of Poland's Ukrainian and White Russian areas into the Soviet Union had a Jewish component all out of proportion to Poland's Jewish population. This latter had now been reduced to something even smaller, relatively, than the Jewish populations of France, Austria, and Germany, where antisemitism was born. And there was the same gap between the "assimilated" and the Jewish "masses". Most of the quarter million Jews who survived the holocaust in Poland were neither pro-socialist nor pro-communist; most of them in any case left the country as soon as they could, and it is doubtful if even a majority of the remnant who remained were active supporters of the regime. Nor is it true to say that the Jews were the only pro-communists in Poland, for there were sympathetic and even active groups of working class supporters in many cities at the beginning, and millions of peasants who were at least grateful to the executors of the land reform. But it is perhaps fair to say that Jews were willing to give socialism a chance to a degree not found in any other identifiable group in Polish society, and that they were loyal to constituted authority - in this case the Party - as Jews habitually were anywhere, and far more than most of the

rest of the population. Many had spent the war in the Soviet Union and felt that both they and Poland owed their continued existence to Soviet power; many, though fewer, remembering prewar Poland, at least hoped that socialism could make Poland an equal, rational society and believed that nothing else could; some, but sometimes the same people, were simply Party members willing to do anything they were told.

Since all but a few of these few remaining Jews were thoroughly assimilated, the proper distinction is between conversion and non-conversion, rather than between assimilation and non-assimilation as it had been to the west. Similarly, since the state was now only a modest facade for Party rule, in place of the state-Jews of 19th-century Central and Western Europe, Poland had its Party-Jews. Like the bankers of an earlier era, they rather despised the "mass" of the unconverted and felt no very strong identification with them. And like the bankers, they provided the capital required by the Party power. This was not financial capital - which has been drawn from the rest of the population, and from the working class rather more than from the peasantry - but the kind of capital required in the early stages of socialist industrialization under communist direction: intellectual capital, managerial and ideological talent, "party skills", which were needed in combination and whose supply, in combination, was woefully short in the beginning. In return, they were protected, as privileged assimilants (or converts) by the Party which was itself a protégé. Along with other faithful servants, they were granted privileges no other citizens enjoyed, and this protection in turn spilled out to comprehend the "mass" (for they numbered only some thousands) of "unconverted" Jews as well: after the pogroms of the civil war period there was no more persecution of Jews in People's Poland.

Meanwhile, the Party was positively driving forward the industrialization process, rather than merely sponsoring and protecting it as the Central and West European states had done in the 19th Century. The results, though analogous, therefore surfaced much more rapidly. Already by the mid-1950's the social disintegration which had resulted alike from the war, the postwar territorial settlement and population shifts, the onset of forced industrialization, and Stalinist rule by terror was giving way to a regrouping into a socialist version of the old bourgeois societies of Central Europe. Poland now had something like a working class, something like a farming population, something like a bourgeoisie (albeit with pronounced service-intelligentsia traits), and a vast floating population of people who belonged to none of these and who were even more alienated and disaffected than the rest. The second result was that the postwar Party, Poland's analogue to the old state, no longer seemed to fit the new society it had created.

This Polish Party was so obviously the creature of a foreign power that it had never commanded the respect and enthusiasm of practically anyone. But for almost a decade it had not faced any coherent opposition, since the old society had been destroyed. Now a new society was growing up under its auspices: its industrialization had created the new working class, skilled and unskilled; its educational system had created hundreds of thousands of new intelligentsia; and it had enrolled them both. And, at this very moment, the political situation "at home", in the Soviet Union, was also changing. The methodology of dominion was significantly transformed after Stalin's death; this process was helped along by revolts in East Germany and Hungary, by effervescence bordering on revolt in Poland itself, and by improvement of the international climate; and it was accompanied by the advent to high position of more domestically-oriented Russian leaders. The Polish Party was not, of course, left to its own devices, but in order to maintain itself Soviet control became less weighty and more indirect, and the Party in Poland was allowed to respond to domestic preoccupations by "political" as well as "administrative" methods.

The new "domestic orientation" of the Soviet leaders, which was very relative (for the Soviet Union remains a great power) included a measure of antisemitism, also very relative, but large enough to discourage any urge to meddle in the affairs of the fraternal Polish Party to protect Polish Party-Jews and perhaps large enough, if some Polish testimony is to be believed, to permit subordinate Soviet leaders to encourage their ouster. "Political" responses to domestic preoccupations in Poland presented more serious problems. Politics in a "normalized" society were much more complex and demanding than revolutionary takeover under Red Army auspices or Stalinist primitive accumulation using Soviet-type terror. A "revolutionary" Party like the Polish was dedicated ideologically to the abolition of politics - the administration of things rather than the government of men - and, more important, the practice of terror dictatorship had destroyed in it any lingering aptitude or inclination for "politics" defined as choice among a variety of legitimate goods or legitimate goals. And now the Party was to be forced to arbitrate among competing social and political groups rather than simply drive the splinters of prewar Poland along. It may be that a "classical" communist party is functionally inapt for this umpire role, which is traditionally that of a state. In any event, the Polish Party, like the 19th Century state to the west, began to disintegrate into factions competing for support and popularity within itself and outside itself, within and outside Poland.

This bore a superficial resemblance to the 19th-century Polish situation described by Hannah Arendt in the passage quoted above. Here too the "Jews" were felt to be an obstacle to "normal (socialist) development." Specifically, they held jobs coveted by "those sections of the population from which a

middle class could normally have developed," while in the 1950's the Party still "tried halfheartedly to encourage a middle class without liquidating the nobility (now the 'meritorious activists' of the takeover period) and the big landowners (now the managers of the initial industrialization drive)." But the resemblance is only superficial, for the Party in fact opted for a resolute continuation of socialist development and liquidation of the ideologues and managers who stood in the path of its middle-class products. This, however, involved finding a new role for the Party and even in some respects the creation of a "party of a new type". In the first instance it meant disintegration, and it was with the first signs of disintegration, in 1956, that the first antisemitic slogans were launched.

These slogans were designed to appeal to the Party membership and the population at large (which was new) and to the Soviet Union (which was not). Their appeal everywhere was limited. But they proved that disintegration had begun and that the Jews were becoming fair game. Although the Party's needs for intellectual capital, managerial and ideological talent in combination, was greater than ever, it was able to draw on a much greater reservoir of talent to satisfy them, in the form of the expanded intelligentsia which its own educational system had produced. At the same time whatever cohesion the Party-Jews had ever had was melting in the sun of crisis and liberalization. They remained sincere Communists, loyal to the Party, but they became liberals, conservatives, or conformists like everyone else, and their number and influence in Party councils began a nosedive. By the early 1960's, when their role in Party and national life was diminishing with every passing year, a faction within the Party made them the target for the disaffection of almost every group in Polish society. As in the early years farther west, it was still impossible for either the leaders or the followers among the antisemites to disavow and openly attack the institutions which directed the nation's destinies, in the Polish case the Party and, beyond it, the Soviet Union. But the Jews could be made to serve.

Within the Party, the expulsion of the Jews had multiple justifications. One was de-Stalinization - as if the only Stalinists had been Jews. Another was anti-revisionism - as if the only liberals were Jewish ex-Stalinists. Still another was efficiency - as if the only Party hacks holding down managerial jobs the young technocrats wanted were Jews. Mainly, though, it was the "nationalization" of the Party which excused the ousters - as if the only creatures of the Soviet Union had been and still were Jews. For the public at large, there were additional elements: social egalitarianism ("Who has the cars? Who got the education?"); group interests (the United Peasant Party was reminded of Roman Zambrowski's

theory that it would die out, and of his efforts to help history along); and plain old-fashioned Jew-baiting. But everywhere "anti-Zionism" was justified in terms of Polish raison d'Etat, on the grounds that no Jew could really guarantee his loyalty to the Polish state if it came to a crunch. The successor to the discredited German state as steward of the nation's destinies had been the Nazi Party. Given the reversal of the Polish situation, the successor to the inapt and discredited communist Party could only be the Polish state. The disintegration of the Party of which political antisemitism was one sign has been accompanied throughout by a reaffirmation of the authority and dignity of the state apparatus, varying in intensity over time but everywhere visible.

It can be stated with confidence that the state will not replace the Party as the nation's steward in Poland without radical and unforeseeable changes in the Soviet Union. Likewise, political antisemitism never went so far in Poland as in the West: the campaign never approached the brutality and ferocity of the anti-Dreyfusard mobs in civilized France, not to speak of barbarized Germany under Hitler. The resemblance is indeed rather to the French than to the Nazi variety, to the disturbed bourgeois 1890's rather than the apocalyptic 1920's and 1930's in Central Europe. But the modern Polish variety has never been so virulent as either. Perhaps this is because the prospects for radical change are so poor, perhaps because the collapse of "socialist bourgeois" society has not yet really set in on the heels of the Party's disintegration, after the earlier precedent. If it does, there will be no Jews to blame.

Historically, most Poles have not been more susceptible to political antisemitism than most Germans or most Frenchmen, if this is any comfort. The outcry for the heads of Jews was no more spontaneous in Poland in the 1960's than in France or Germany in earlier decades. But that is not the point. The point is that like Frenchmen and Germans in those decades, most Poles in the 1960's could be had by antisemitic slogans, could be mobilized against the Jews, by politicians. In many cases these politicians were themselves perfectly indifferent or perfectly tolerant, even, in private life. This only goes to show - again - that political antisemitism requires neither very many Jews nor very many leaders who hate Jews. What it does require is a certain historical situation, where Jews have been but are no longer protégés of a political ruling institution no longer quite able to govern a society which is uprooting vast numbers of people, and where politicians direct the discontent of these people toward the unprotected Jews, rather than the faltering (and in Poland's case protected) authorities. In Poland, hatred of the regime, hatred of the Party, hatred of the Soviet Union, hatred of social inequality, hatred of national and personal humiliation: all found their object in the dwindling number of citizens of Jewish origin

in positions of any visibility in public life, and this spilled over onto any Jew at all. In the upshot, the Jews are gone, but the regime, the Party, the Soviet Union, inequality, and humiliation are still there.

It may be objected that this would have been the result in any case, regardless of antisemitism. This is so. But the purpose of this essay has not been to demonstrate the futility of antisemitism. Hopefully at this late date it requires no further demonstration. I have sought merely to help explain how modern antisemitism could arise in Poland, now, to suggest the Poland, for good or ill, is still part of Europe, and that it is catching up. Soviet antisemitism might require a different mode of analysis.