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ARTICLE

Between Ethnic Democracy, Authoritarianism and Violence: Inter-War Experiences and Jewish Socio-Political Stances in Early Post-War Poland

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This article focuses on Jewish political stances in early post-war and post-Holocaust Poland and explores why so many Polish Jews supported the new communist-dominated regime after 1945, despite the fact that only a small minority held communist political views. While acknowledging the impact of Holocaust experiences, the weakness of the Polish Jewish community after the war and the widespread perception that the communist regime was the only possible bulwark against post-war anti-Jewish violence, this article offers a different perspective in foregrounding the inter-war experiences of Polish Jews. Drawing upon a wide variety of sources in Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew and English, this article argues that inter-war experiences shaped Polish Jews' understandings of the emerging post-war social and political system, as well as their political stances towards the new state.

Introduction

The last thirty years have seen a tremendous amount of research conducted on various issues related to Jewish life in early post-Holocaust Poland. A central issue discussed by scholars, especially Polish historians, relates to the attitudes of the Holocaust survivor community towards the new Polish state and its communist-dominated political system. These attitudes, usually positive or supportive towards the new regime, are most often explained by the weakness of what remained of Polish Jewry and, consequentially, its total dependence on the authoritarian communist state. Indeed, it was a crucial factor in the face of the brutal anti-Jewish violence that erupted in Poland after the country was liberated from German occupation. Various studies estimate that there were between 650 and 1,500 Polish Jews killed in Poland during the first two years following the Holocaust.[1] In this dangerous climate, only the communists were willing to protect Jews and had the means to do so. The Jewish experience of post-war violence, together with the experience of the Holocaust itself, has been vividly summarised by Jan Tomasz Gross as characterised by fear.[2] All these factors combined – fear, state-sponsored defence against violence, greater inclusiveness in the post-1945 political system and

[1] Andrzej Żbikowski, 'Morderstwa popełniane na Żydach w pierwszych latach po wojnie', in *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów: Polska 1944–2010*, ed. Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk Garbowska (Lublin: UMCS, ŻIH, 2012), 74, 87, 93; Joanna-Coren Michlic, 'Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1918–1939 and 1945–1947', in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry Volume 13: Focusing on the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 56–9; Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 114; Julian Kwiek, *Nie chcemy Żydów u siebie. Przejawy wrogości wobec Żydów w latach 1944–1947* (Warszawa: Nieoczywiste, 2021), 214–15; David Engel, 'Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1944–1946', *Yad Vashem Studies* 26 (1998): 43–85.

[2] Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

the experience of often negative Polish–Jewish relations during the Holocaust – serve as the main explanations for the generally positive Jewish response to the political reality in Poland from July 1944 (when a communist-dominated Polish government was first established in the city of Lublin) onward.[3]

While not denying the above factors, this article seeks to explain this rather unanimous political stance by giving it a deeper historical dimension. The explanations above are all based on a narrow and short political–historical perspective that has dominated historical writing on Jewish life in Poland after 1945. This article seeks to reach deeper, beyond the years 1945 and 1939, to historicise the post-war political stances of Polish Jewry and to better understand their reactions towards the post-Holocaust reality. Its main thesis is that, in addition to the Holocaust, scarcity and the psychological and physical weakness of the community of its survivors, the experience of life in inter-war Poland played a crucial role in defining the political stances of Polish Jews towards the post-war communist-dominated political regime. Discrimination and anti-Semitic violence were central elements of the Polish Jewish experience before the war. These experiences shaped how Polish Jews who had survived the Holocaust perceived the new post-1945 Polish state, anti-communist opposition and post-war anti-Jewish violence. Thus, in the following pages, this article will bring a *moyenne-durée* perspective of Polish and Polish Jewish history from 1945 onwards, bridging the history of the inter-war period with the Second World War and initial post-war years.[4] The inter-war period was not an abstract historical experience made obsolete by the Holocaust. Rather, it was a crucial period of socialisation for most representatives of the post-Holocaust Jewish community. As I will set out to show, this longer experience says something important about the peculiarities of modern Polish statehood, its ethnic model of democracy and the place that it granted to Polish Jews. It created a new rift between Jews and the Polish majority and, in 1945, led to differences in the understanding of how a real post-war democracy was meant to be.

To trace the ways in which post-Holocaust Polish Jews perceived the politics of early post-war Poland from the perspective of their inter-war experience, I have used an array of sources, so far rarely used in post-1945 Polish Jewish history. The Poland that emerged from the Second World War was ruled by an authoritarian regime. There were no free elections and no reliable surveys on the political views of its population, and public discourse was defined by strict censorship and self-censorship. This greatly affected the official sources that were published by Jewish institutions in post-1945 Poland, which are usually analysed in the historiography. In order to transcend this obstacle and look for sources that would be most representative of the political views of Polish Jews, I have used a diverse group of other sources in addition to official documents produced by institutions. First are articles and books of various Jewish and non-Jewish Western writers and journalists who visited post-1945 Poland. The former were usually Polish Jews who left the country before the Holocaust

[3]Various works put different degrees of emphasis on each of these factors; nevertheless, they agree that all factors were important. See for example Gross, *Fear*; Krystyna Kersten, *Polacy, Żydzi, komunizm: anatomia półprawd, 1939–68* (Warsaw: NOW, 1992); Hana Shlomi, *Osefet mechkarim le toldot shearit ha'plita ha'yehudit be Polin, 1944–1950* (Tel Aviv: The Center for History of Polish Jewry, 2001); Audrey Kichelewski, *Ocalali. Żydzi polscy po Zagładzie* (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2021), 23–108; Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence*; August Grabski, *Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce (1944–1950). Historia polityczna* (Warszawa: ŻIH, 2015), 15–65, 98–123. This literature rightfully rejects fringe scholarship that explains the post-1945 political stances of Jews because of their alleged special predilection to communism. Obviously, these kinds of explanations are closely related to the anti-Semitic stereotype of 'Judeo-Bolshevism'. See for example Marek J. Chodakiewicz, *Po Zagładzie. Stosunki polsko-żydowskie, 1944–1947* (Warszawa: IPN, 2008). For a study with a very different perspective than that of Chodakiewicz see Paweł Śpiewak, *Żydokomuna. Intepretacje historyczne* (Warszawa: Czerwone i Czarne, 2012). Śpiewak is sympathetic towards the Jewish community and analyses additional factors that brought Jews to communism; nevertheless, his work supports the 'communism predilection' thesis.

[4]For examples of this kind of perspective in the history of Poland, Eastern Europe and Jewish experiences in this region, see Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Jeffrey Koerber, *Borderland Generation: Soviet and Polish Jews under Hitler* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020).

and revisited after the war. During their visits, they spoke to thousands of Polish Jews, brought their voices to Western public opinion and served as spokesmen of their kin, helping them to express their views beyond the limitations of an authoritarian regime and its censorship. From sources produced in Poland, I used internal documents from non-communist political milieus, namely Zionist and Orthodox, which were not created for public use and thus sincerely reflect the views of their creators on the political situation in Poland. To further research the latter, I have also used minutes of meetings between Polish–Jewish leaders and activists and American and British diplomats. Another source that I drew upon was a report on the situation of Jews in Poland produced by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), an important sponsor of the reconstruction of Jewish life in Poland. This organisation cooperated with the state, Jewish communists and Zionist and Orthodox activists, and thus the source represents all Jewish political views in Poland and was independent of the state, in contrast to Polish Jewish institutions. Being aware that Polish Jews can express various political stances, emotions and connotations in different languages and in different contexts, I have used sources in Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew and English. Through this diverse composition of sources, I have tried to capture Polish Jewish political views as comprehensively as possible. As I read these sources, I was especially interested in the similarities among the people representing different political camps and socio-cultural perspectives and in the ways in which they justified their attitudes towards the political regime of early post-war Poland. The main similarity lies in their interpretation of the recent inter-war past.

In this article, I use the term 'Poles' to describe Christian, mainly Catholic citizens of Poland and distinguish them from 'Jews'. This usage stems from the strong East European ethnic nationalism that shaped the protagonists of this article. Even if Jews were Polish citizens before and after the Second World War, the term 'Pole' was usually reserved only for Christian citizens. In order to easily identify representatives of both groups, I follow the popular vocabulary of the period. At the same time, I want to stress that even as 'Jews' and 'Poles' were two different ethnic groups of citizens of Poland, there were some people of Jewish origin, ethnicity and faith who nationally defined themselves as Poles and aspired to membership in the Polish nation in both the inter-war and early post-war period.

The Holocaust and Jewish Support for the Post-1945 New Polish State

Before the Second World War, the Jewish community in Poland was the second-largest Jewish community in the world and the largest in Europe, consisting of nearly 3.5 million people. The Holocaust decimated 90 per cent of this community. At the beginning of the war, in September and October 1939, Poland was divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. While the killing and persecution of Jews began almost immediately in the regions occupied by Germany, the situation was different in the territories incorporated into the Soviet Union, where hundreds of thousands of Jews faced persecution and deportations to the Soviet interior as potential enemies of the state. Between 1939 and 1941, around 400,000 Jews, along with one million other citizens of the former Second Polish Republic, primarily ethnic Poles, were deported. However, younger Jewish generations and individuals from the lower classes, as well as representatives of these groups among Poles, Ukrainians, Belarussians and Lithuanians, were given access to education, state and administration positions. Many Jews considered the situation on the Soviet side of the new border as a lesser evil compared to the conditions faced by Jews under German occupation.[5] Despite the fact that many Jews faced persecution from the Soviet state and had varied stances towards it, coupled with the fact that many non-Jews worked within the Soviet occupation regime, there was a strong stereotype

[5]Dov Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry under Soviet Rule, 1939–1941* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995); Jan Gross, 'The Jewish Community in the Soviet-Annexed Territories on the Eve of the Holocaust', in *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941–1945*, ed. Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 155–71; Koerber, *Borderland Generation*, 96–146.

of 'Judeo-Bolshevism' (already deeply rooted in Polish and European discourse since the inter-war period), which made many anti-communist gentiles see the Jewish community as wholly pro-Soviet and anti-Polish.[6] This accusation became one of the main justifications for neighbour-on-neighbour violence and anti-Jewish pogroms in the summer of 1941 when Germany attacked the Soviet Union and conquered the territories of former eastern Poland.[7]

The myth of unanimous Jewish support for the Soviets also strongly affected Polish–Jewish relations in the territories of Poland further to the west, which had been occupied by Germany since 1939.[8] From late 1941, when the Germans began the final phase of the Holocaust, the stereotype of 'Judeo-Bolshevism' influenced the views of many Polish anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet underground groups towards Jews in the following years. Recent scholarship has noted that many Polish resistance groups, representing a range of political views and allegiances, were involved in the killing of Jews. This includes not only far-right factions but also some members of the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*), the largest resistance group that remained loyal to the Polish government-in-exile in London. This occurred especially during the years 1942–5 after the Nazi German state and its supporters had killed most Polish Jews and hidden their remains in Polish cities, towns, villages and forests.[9] Recent scholarship highlights that many Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust under German occupation did so with the assistance of non-Jews. However, this research has also revealed that a significant portion of Polish society, including police officers, firefighters, local government officials and even their Polish neighbours, participated in the murder of Jews and the appropriation of their property.[10] When the Holocaust was over, the number of Polish Jews dropped from 3.5 million to around 350,000. It is estimated that only approximately 30,000–50,000 survived in territories occupied by Germany. The largest number of Jewish survivors, 230,000, survived in the Soviet interior.[11] As a result, the Soviet Army, which pushed the Germans out of Poland, was treated by Jews as saviours, regardless of their political views.

[6]Joanna Michlic, 'The Soviet Occupation of Poland, 1939–41, and the Stereotype of the Anti-Polish and Pro-Soviet Jew', *Jewish Social Studies* 13, no. 3 (2007): 135–76.

[7]Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Krzysztof Persak and Paweł Machcewiczm, eds., *Wokół Jedwabnego Studia. Dokumenty*, 2 vols., (Warsaw: IPN, 2002); Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116–36; Andrzej Żbikowski, 'Local Anti-Jewish Pogroms in the Occupied Territories of Eastern Poland, June-July 1941', in *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941–1945*, ed. Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 173–9.

[8]On the role of this myth and other reasons for the serious deterioration in Polish–Jewish relations in German-occupied Poland, see Havi Dreifuss (Ben-Sasson), *Relations Between Jews and Poles during the Holocaust: The Jewish Perspective* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2017).

[9]Joshua D. Zimmerman, *The Polish Underground and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 93–413; David Engel, *In the Shadow of Auschwitz: The Polish Government-in-Exile and the Jews, 1939–1942* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); David Engel, *Facing a Holocaust: The Polish Government-in-Exile and the Jews, 1943–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Dariusz Libionka 'ZWZ-AK I Delegatura Rządu RP wobec eksterminacji Żydów Polskich', in *Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939–1945. Studia i materiały*, ed. Andrzej Żbikowski (Warsaw: IPN, 2006), 15–207.

[10]Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking, eds., *Night without End. The Fate of Jews in German Occupied Poland* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2022); Barbara Engelking, *'Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień . . .'. Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej, 1942–1945* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań and Zagładą Żydów, 2012); Jan Grabowski, *On Duty: The Role of the Polish Blue and Criminal Police in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2024). See also Israel Gutman and Shmuel Krakowski, *Unequal Victims: Poles and Jews during World War Two* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1986).

[11]Lucjan Dobroszycki, *Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland: A Portrait Based on Jewish Community Records, 1944–1947* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 4–19; Albert Stankowski and Piotr Weiser 'Demograficzne skutki Holocaustu', in *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów: Polska 1944–2010*, ed. Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk Garbowska (Lublin: UMCS, ŻIH, 2012), 15–38; Kichelewski, *Ocalali*, 25–27.

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The new Poland that was created in the years 1944–5 under the Soviet protectorate had declared full equality of all citizens, including Jews. It also permitted the establishment of Jewish Committees that, with the support of the state and especially of Western Jewish philanthropic institutions, worked to reconstruct Jewish life in Poland. It also allowed for the re-establishment of most Jewish non-communist secular political parties and Jewish religious congregations that were functioning separately from Jewish Committees. The latter was governed by a coalition of Jewish communists, Zionists, Bundists and a few other social Jewish organisations.[12]

Even with these special post-war circumstances, the decisive majority of Polish Jews did not hold communist views. Zionism remained the most popular political movement and ideology among Polish Holocaust survivors. Most Polish Jews returning from the Soviet Union in 1944–6, who formed the bulk of the post-war community, did not come back as converted communists and, instead, often retained their pre-war political sympathies. Zionism, which was the dominant political outlook among them, usually did not have an overtly ideological character; rather, it was more a 'situational Zionism', stemming from despair and deep disappointment with life in Poland and East Central Europe. These were not people automatically or unconditionally ready to rebuild their lives in the new, communist-dominated Poland. Most of them were considering emigration to Palestine, the United States or other places far from Eastern Europe.[13]

The popularity of emigration and Zionism among Polish Jews is confirmed by the number of Jews who left Poland directly after the Holocaust in 1945–6. The estimates of the number of Jewish emigrants, illegal and legal, from Poland at the time range from 120,000 to 150,000.[14] The popularity of Zionism compared to communism is also reflected in the number of members of parties and youth organisations connected to one of these political movements. While in the autumn of 1946, the Jewish Faction of the communist Polish Workers Party had 4000 members, a number of members of various Zionist parties and youth movements exceeded 20,000.[15] Overall, communism was not a particularly popular ideology among Polish Jews or, indeed, among Poles in general.

Nevertheless, there was a major difference between these two parts of the population regarding general support for the new political system in Poland. Unlike Poles, most Jews, including all the important Jewish political parties and organisations, had openly supported it. This support for the new Polish political system also included various Zionists, even if at the same time they were working on the emigration of Jews from Poland and were highly suspicious of Jewish communists in particular. This support included official Zionist–communist cooperation and their formal coalition in the most important Polish Jewish institution from 1945 to 1950, the Central Jewish Committee (*Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce* – CKŻP), which had regional branches all over Poland.[16] Even

[12]David Engel, 'The Reconstruction of Jewish Communal Institutions in Postwar Poland: The Origins of the Central Committee of Polish Jews, 1944–1945', *East European Politics and Societies* 1 (1996): 85–107; Hanna Shlomi, 'Rashit ha Hitargenut shel Yehudei Polin be shlihei milchemet ha Olam ha Shniya', in *Osefet mechkarim le toldot shearit ha'plita ha'yehudit be Polin, 1944–1950* (Tel Aviv: The Center for History of Polish Jewry, 2001), 19–63 (Hebrew section of the book); Kichelewski *Ocalali*, 23–108; Grabski, *Centralny Komitet.*

[13]David Engel, *Bein shichrur lebricha: Nitzolei hashoah bepolin vehamaavak al hanhagtam, 1944–1946* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996); Natalia Aleksiun, *Dokąd dalej? Ruch syjonistyczny w Polsce (1944–1950)* (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2002).

[14]Albert Stankowski, 'Nowe spojrzenie na statystyki dotyczące emigracji Żydów z Polski po 1944 roku', in *Studia z dziejów Żydów w Polsce po 1945 r.*, ed. G. Berendt, A. Grabski and A. Stankowski (Warsaw: ŻIH, 2010), 110; Kichelewski, *Ocalali*, 77–8, 82.

[15]David Shtokfish, 'Poalei Tziyon Smol be Polin be shanim 1944–1947: Homer le mehkar al ha peilut ha mehudeshet shel tnua aharei ha shoa', undated, Kibbutz Lohamei Getaot Archives (LGA), folder 25,010; Protocol of the meeting of Hanhaga ha Rashit Ha Shomer ha Tzair in Łódź, 22 June 1946, Ha Shomer Archives in Kibbutz Givat Haviva (HaShA), folder 49 (4), 1–2; Kichelewski, *Ocalali*, 83.

[16]Grabski, *Centralny Komitet*, 39–42, 66–86; Aleksiun, *Dokąd dalej*, 52–3, 57, 203; Hanna Shlomi, 'The Communist Caucus in the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, November 1944–February 1947', in *Osefet mechkarim le toldot shearit ha'plita ha'yehudit be Polin, 1944–1950* (Tel Aviv: The Center for History of Polish Jewry, 2001), 23–4 (English section of the book).

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the remnants of Polish Jewish Orthodoxy, basically having no illusions regarding its future within a secularist regime and engaged in emigration work no less than the Zionists, were fully dependent on the new Polish political system and cooperated with the regime and state institutions.[17] Why, then, did the decisive majority of Polish Jews, many of whom were clearly not communists, support a regime dominated by communists in post-war Poland? Was it only because of the war, the weakness of the post-Holocaust Polish Jewish community and the fact that only the new government could offer them protection? Was the Polish communist-dominated government simply treated as a lesser evil, similar to how the Soviet occupation of the Polish eastern borderlands was perceived between 1939 and 1941? The answer is much more complicated. The inter-war experiences of Polish Jews also shaped their interpretations of what had happened to them during the Holocaust and influenced the political stances that they adopted after the war ended.

The State, Ethnic Democracy and Anti-Jewish Violence

Peysach Novick, born a Polish Jew in 1891, emigrated to the United States in 1912. He visited Poland many times in the inter-war period and had intimate knowledge of Polish Jewish affairs. After the Holocaust, he returned to Poland for the first time in the early summer of 1946 as one of the most widely known and prominent American Jewish communists, an editor of the radical Yiddish journal *Morgen Freiheit*. Unlike on all his previous visits, he was now received on Krakowskie Przedmieście, a grand street in the centre of Warsaw, where he was granted an exclusive interview with Prime Minister Edward Osóbka-Morawski. As he wrote about the incident: 'the context of the interview, the kindness that the current Polish authorities manifest towards a representative of the Yiddish press and of Jewish organisations, was a revolution'. Novick vividly recalled his previous visit to Krakowskie Przedmieście in 1936, where, just a few paces from where he stood near Warsaw University, it was dangerous for any Jew simply to walk by.[18]

Indeed, in the inter-war years, especially in the 1930s, Warsaw University – both its main entrance gate and Krakowskie Przedmieście street – was the epicentre of anti-Jewish violence in the city. Violence was enacted by young activists inspired by Italian and sometimes by German fascism, and they comprised the most radical and most anti-Jewish activists of the Polish right. A crucial feature of this violence was its exclusionary aim. It was concentrated in and around the university in order to eliminate Jews from the student body and, ultimately, to prevent their ascension into any meaningful position in Polish society. Violence was accompanied by successful campaigns to introduce 'ghetto benches' for Jewish students in order to reduce and eventually bar their admission to the university. The violence was also indiscriminate and brutal.[19]

University students were the initial targets of anti-Jewish violence, but violence soon spread to Warsaw's streets and was then directed against all Jews, regardless of age, sex, class, social or cultural status. The goal of violent perpetrators was not only to physically harm Jews but also to marginalise them: to eliminate Jews from any important economic or societal positions and eventually to force them to leave the country.[20] Yet the violence and enmity of the far right, who had been in opposition

[17] August Grabski and Albert Stankowski, 'Życie religijne społeczności żydowskiej', in *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów: Polska 1944–2010*, ed. Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk Garbowska (Lublin: UMCS, ŻIH, 2012), 216–21.

[18] Pesach Novick, *Eyrope- tsvishn milchome un sholem: Rayze bilder, batrachtungen* (New York: Dos Poylishe Judentum, 1948), 100.

[19] Izabela Mrzygłód, *Uniwersytety w cieniu kryzysu. Nacjonalistyczna radykalizacja studentów Warszawy i Wiednia w okresie międzywojennym* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo UMK, 2025); Monika Natkowska, *Numerus clausus, getto ławkowe, numerus nullus, 'paragraf aryjski': antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931–1939* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1999). For a general history of the Jewish university experience in inter-war Poland and the centrality of anti-Semitism, see Natalia Aleksiun, 'Together but Apart: University Experience of Jewish Students in the Second Polish Republic', *Acta Poloniae Historica* 109 (2014): 109–37.

[20] Yaacov Leszczynski, *Erev Hurbn* (Buenos Aires: Dos Poylishe Judentum, 1951); Mrzygłód, *Uniwersytety*, 249–52, 254–65; Emanuel Melzer, *No Way Out: The Politics of Polish Jewry, 1935–1939* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1997), 71–80.

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to the so-called *Sanacja*[21] regime since 1926, was far from the only problem faced by Polish Jews. Throughout the inter-war period, Jews encountered varied, systemic discrimination from the state and local administrations. Jews were seldom employed in state institutions, factories and heavy industry. They were a national and religious minority that was heavily discriminated against, and they felt as such.[22] In 1946, the new reality encountered by Novick appeared completely different.[23]

Other prominent Polish Jews had similar experiences when visiting Poland as citizens of the United States and other Western countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Unlike Novick, they were not communists, but they also noted a radical change in the Polish ruling elite's attitude towards both Jews and Jews' place within Polish society. This was the case for Joseph Tenenbaum, the president of the World Federation for Polish Jews and the American Federation for Polish Jews, and Shmuel Leyb Shneiderman, a famous journalist in inter-war Poland who later wrote for the Yiddish-language newspaper *Der Morgen Zhurnal*, which was published in New York. For both Tenenbaum and Shneiderman, the new political system in post-war Poland represented a revolution for Polish Jews and marked an era within which they would achieve true equality for the first time in their history. Both these men perceived post-war anti-Jewish violence as having 'fascist' characteristics and stemming from the same motivations that underwrote the Holocaust and earlier attempts to reverse the emancipation of Jews in Poland.[24]

These attitudes were also shared by Yankev Pat, a Polish Bund leader in the inter-war period, who left Poland in 1937. In the United States, he became chairman and executive director of the Jewish Labour Committee (JLC), an influential organisation that provided crucial aid to Poland and its Jewish population during and after the war. Pat returned to Poland in late winter 1946, as both an envoy of the JLC and a journalist at *Forward* (*Forverts*), a Yiddish-language periodical published in New York. During his visit, he spoke with thousands of Polish Jews, many of whom he knew well as Bundist comrades, and corresponded with hundreds more before, during and after his visit. In addition, he brought back 4,000 letters from Polish Jews to the United States, with the intention of delivering them to their relatives and friends across the Atlantic. Pat's voice, like those of other envoys from Western Jewish organisations, represented a significant portion of Polish Jewry who operated free from communist censorship and other pressures that hampered Jewish discourse in Poland. Pat was a socialist and a staunch anti-communist and openly critical of many aspects of the new Polish

For a general overview of anti-Jewish violence in this period see Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 111–30; Melzer, *No Way Out*, 53–94; Jolanta Żyndul, *Zajścia antyżydowskie w Polsce w latach 1935–1937* (Warsaw: K. Kelles-Krauza, 1994).

[21] *Sanacja*, a political movement, meaning 'healing', was created by Józef Piłsudski after his overthrow of the democratically elected government. It governed Poland from 1926 to 1939.

[22] Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 11–84; Bina Garncarska-Kadary, *Żydowska ludność pracująca w Polsce, 1918–1939* (Warszawa: ŻIH, 2001); Jerzy Tomaszewski, 'Between the Social and the National – The Economic Situation of Polish Jewry, 1918–1939', *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook Volume 1* (2002): 55–70.

[23] Novick, *Eyrope*, 61–2, 100–5.

[24] Joseph Tenenbaum, *In Search of a Lost People* (New York 1948), 175–86, 187–90, 195–215; S. L. Shneiderman, *Between Fear and Hope* (New York: Arco, 1947), 129–31, 133–8; Gerald Keith's memo from his meeting with Shmuel Leyb Shnayderman, 14 July 1946, United States National Archives (NA), RG 59, box 4, entry 1173 C. These were of course rather crude and oversimplified framings of various, complicated problems related to Polish–Jewish relations before, during and after the war, as well as in the post-war communist-dominated political system. For inter-war anti-Semitism in Poland and the Polish government's attitudes towards the Jewish community, see Zofia Trębacz, *Nie tylko Palestyna: polskie plany emigracyjne wobec Żydów 1935–1939* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2018); Grzegorz Krzywiec, 'Czy państwo w Polsce pomajowej było czynnikiem antyżydowskim (1926–1939)? Stan badań i perspektywy badawcze', in *Metamorfozy społeczne 8. Państwo i społeczeństwo Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, ed. Janusz Żarnowski (Warsaw: Instytut Historii PAN, 2014), 369–88; for Polish government-in-exile and Home Army attitudes towards Jews during the Holocaust, see Engel, *In the Shadow of Auschwitz*; Engel, *Facing a Holocaust*; Zimmerman, *The Polish Underground and the Jews*; for more on the communist struggle and authoritarian power in post-war Poland see Krystyna Kersten, *The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland, 1943–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

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regime. Nevertheless, his account of the ideological and historical roots of the anti-Jewish violence taking place at the time aligned closely with what I have described and reflected the thoughts and feelings of the vast majority of Polish Jews.

After hundreds of meetings with secular, religious, communist, Zionist and Bundist Jews all over Poland, who represented all sectors of the Holocaust survivor community, Pat poignantly reported that the predominant emotion was fear. Polish Jews felt that most of their fellow citizens did not want them in the country, did not want them to return to their pre-war properties or jobs and did not want them to regain or ascend to prominent socio-economic positions within a new, politically transformed Poland. This powerful anti-Jewish resentment, which he believed had deep historical roots that long preceded the Holocaust, was the primary cause of anti-Jewish violence that occurred all over central, southern and eastern Poland: places that had significant Jewish populations before the war to which Holocaust survivors returned. The old inter-war slogan, 'Poland for the Poles', was repeated and loudly shouted in Polish streets in 1946. In this respect, Pat's account, like the accounts of Novick, Schneiderman and Tenenbaum, also described an ultimately binary scenario, in which the enemies of the Polish government and the new Polish order were also the enemies of the Jews.[25] The only disagreement between Pat, most Polish Jews and Polish communists related to the social context of anti-Semitism in Poland. The communists tried to attribute anti-Semitism to their enemies, refusing to admit that it had also deeply penetrated their own party, the military, their militia, the bureaucracy and working-class communities, the sector of society whose support they counted upon the most.[26] Pat, like most Polish Jews, was well aware of the fact that anti-Semitism had also deeply penetrated these social groups.[27]

This consensus between Pat's views, the views of most Polish Jews and those of the Polish communists regarding the connection between inter-war and post-war anti-Jewish attitudes is particularly striking, especially considering Pat's strong anti-communism. It is important to note that until his departure from Poland in 1937, Pat was part of a large circle of leaders of the Polish Bund, who often violently clashed with Jewish communists. As a leader of the wartime JLC's efforts to assist Jews throughout Europe, including those in Poland and the Soviet Union, Pat was aware of both Nazi and Soviet crimes. He was aware of the fact that the NKVD had arrested and killed two Polish Bund leaders, Wiktor Alter and Henryk Erlich. Throughout the articles he wrote for *Forverts* after the war, he did

[25]Jacob Pat, *Ashes and Fire* (New York, 1947), 32, 43, 55, 66–9, 78–81, 101, 109–10, 112–13, 117, 119, 136, 214–15, 247–8. Transcript of an interview by Yankev Pat with Edward Osóbka Morawski, undated, YIVO Archives [YA], RG 116 Poland 3, folder 50. This interview, with Pat's additional commentary, was published in *Forverts*. See clipping from *Forverts*, 7 June 1946, YA, RG 541 Jacob Pat Papers, folder 137. Exactly the same views – namely, that there was connection between anti-Jewish violence before and after the war and that it was connected to the 'fascism' of the anti-government opposition in both cases – were also held by another former Polish Jew visiting from the United States at the time; Chaim Shoshkes, *Poyln-1946: Eindruk fun a Rayze* (Buenos: Dos Poylishe Judentum Aires, 1946), 110–13. In late 1944, the same views were shared by Emil Sommerstein, President of the CKŻP (Central Committee of Polish Jews), who had just recently been released from a Soviet camp and was highly critical of the Communists; Transcript of an interview with David Kahane, undated, Lohamei HaGetaot Archives (LHA), folder 15,184.

[26]See the transcripts of Polish radio broadcasts in Yiddish from 31 Mar. 1945, 21 Apr. 1945 and 10 May 1945, of various Polish institutions' official declarations and of the speech of the Polish president Bolesław Bierut before the Polish parliament where anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish violence were solely attributed to 'AK' (Home Army), 'NSZ' (National Armed Forces), 'inspirations of Polish government in exile in London' and 'reactionary Poland'. See Transcripts from weekly Yiddish broadcasts of Polish radio, YA, RG 116 Poland 3, folder 6.

[27]Transcript of an interview by Yankev Pat with Witold Modzelewski, 7 Jan. 1946, Taminent Library Archives (TLA), Jewish Labour Committee Records (JLC), Part 1, WAG 25.001, box 35, folder 7. See also Pat's interviews with Stanisław Mikołajczyk, the leader of the legal anti-communist opposition and with Zbigniew Żuławski, the leader of Polish non-communist socialists, as well as his analysis of the social roots of the Kielce pogrom, Clippings from *Forverts*, 10 June 1946, 14 June 1946, 7 Nov. 1946 and 9 Jan. 1946, YA, RG 541 Jacob Pat's Bequest, folder 137. For the declaration regarding the Kielce pogrom that was issued by CKŻP, which ignored the fact that its main instigators were members of the state apparatus, soldiers, militiaman and factory workers, see the CKŻP declaration regarding the pogrom in Kielce, 8 Sept. 1946, YA, RG 116 Poland 3, folder 15.

not shy away from expressing his deep distrust, and sometimes even hatred, for communist regimes, Jewish communists and their policies regarding Holocaust survivors.[28] Nevertheless, for him, no less than for the communist Novick and the non-communist Shneiderman, Tenenbaum and other Jewish activists coming to Poland from the West, the current leaders of Poland had no alternative. They were unanimous in thinking that only the communists could form an effective bulwark against anti-Jewish violence. They also feared that the success of the Polish anti-communists would lead to a return of inter-war politics, which posed a direct threat to what remained of the Holocaust survivor community in Poland.

This opinion also united all secular Polish Jewish political movements, which resulted in the CKŻP, the most important Jewish institution in early post-war Poland. In May 1945, the CKŻP published a memorandum 'on anti-Jewish violence', which was an open call for action directed towards the communist-led coalition that formed the Polish government. In searching for an explanation for ongoing anti-Jewish violence, the document identified its roots in not only the German occupation but also the events leading up to 1939. According to the document, 'fascist reactionary groups … were using the venom of hatred, which was spread by the Nazis and, before them, by the pre-September [1939] nationalism [of pre-war Polish governments]. In Polish towns and cities anti-Jewish slogans have reappeared; soon the first innocent victims followed'.[29]

In 1945 and 1946, thousands of anti-Jewish leaflets were distributed across Poland. These leaflets accused Jews of various crimes and misdeeds, such as supporting communism, committing ritual murders of Christian children and economically exploiting the Polish nation. They often called for Jews to leave particular towns, cities or even the country altogether, threatening death if they refused to comply.[30] As we read in the CKŻP memorandum, the most notable aspect of these threats was the fact that they had 'reappeared'. For example, similar accusations can be found in leaflets from the 1930s, which were widely distributed throughout the country and similarly appealed to the public to rid Polish villages, towns and cities of their Jews.[31] The emotions that these leaflets evoked among Polish Jews were not new either, and in fact, they were intensified and compounded by their experiences of the Holocaust.

In these circumstances, deep convictions about the roots of violent Polish anti-Semitism from the inter-war period and earlier constituted a bridge that aligned Jews and non-Jews of various political backgrounds from Poland and abroad with positions taken by the Polish communists. The author of a June 1947 article in the *New Yorker* characterised Polish anti-Semitism as a decades-old rigid and powerful 'structure and myth'.[32] It was also understood as such by thousands of Jews who fled Poland in the second half of 1945. After reaching the American occupation zone in Germany, they were interviewed by the American Counterintelligence Service. The report that was written on the basis of these interviews confirmed not only that anti-Jewish violence was the main motivation for their

[28]Clipping from *Forverts*, 20 Apr. 1945, and Clipping from *Forverts*, 17 June 1945, YA, RG 541 Jacob Pat Papers, folder 135.

[29]CKŻP Memorandum on anti-Jewish violence in Poland, May 1945, HaShA, folder 49 (1), 1–2. See also the discussion of the pogrom in Cracow taking place in the praesidium of CKŻP. The pogrom was considered to be planned and organised by 'fascist elements'; Protocol of CKŻP presidium meeting on 14 Aug. 1945, Jewish Historical Institute Archives (AŻIH), 303/I Prezydium i Sekretariat CKŻP (PiS CKŻP), folder 9, k. 48.

[30]For examples of these kind of anti-Semitic leaflets, see various anti-Jewish leaflets, 1945, YA, RG 116 Poland 3, folder 3; Antisemitic leaflet interpreting the Kielce pogrom as a Jewish provocation, undated, LGA, folder 24,145. For more on anti-Semitic leaflets in early post-war Poland see Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Okrzyki pogromowe. Szkice z antropologii historycznej Polski lat 1939–1946* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2012), 126–33; Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod klątwą. Społeczny portret pogrom kieleckiego. Dokumenty* (Warsaw: Czarna Owca, 2018), vol. II, 109–11.

[31]For examples of leaflets calling for Christians to boycott and beat the Jews and demands that Jews move out of particular towns, villages or Poland altogether, see State Archives in Kielce (APK), RG 100 Urząd Wojewódzki Kielecki I (UWK I), folder 3534, k. 66, 84, 115 and folder 20,495, k. 133, 295, 364.

[32]Clipping, 'Letter from the Ghetto' (author unknown), *The New Yorker*, 21 June 1947, 46–8, Wiener Library Archives in London (WLA), Microfilm Collection, Reel 189 II.22A.

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decision to flee Poland but also that they saw the violence in Poland as rooted in a strong and historical culture of anti-Semitism.[33] Six months later, the same opinion was brought back from Poland by Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein, an adviser on Jewish affairs to Joseph T. McNarney, Commander-in-Chief of the US Forces of Occupation in Europe. Bernstein, as a representative of the US government, could not be controlled by the Polish communists. During his time in Poland, he met with thousands of Jews from all social, political and cultural milieus. As he reported, practically all these groups spoke about deep connections between pre- and post-war anti-Semitism within large portions of the Polish population and regarded the current Polish government as the only bulwark against it.[34]

This emotionally loaded thinking, which stemmed from a specific pre-war, wartime and post-war experience, was also typical of another non-communist and formerly Polish Jew who travelled across Poland in early 1946. Samuel (Shmuel) Margoshes returned to Poland as a correspondent for the American Yiddish press. On 12 February 1946, he met with members of the US diplomatic mission in Warsaw and provided them with his impressions of the circumstances faced by Jews in the country. He told the diplomatic mission that 'even the most progressive Poles' could not understand the extent of Jewish fear, which stemmed from not only outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence that occurred all over Poland but also the universal and everyday hostility shown by most Poles towards Jews. Again, he identified the roots of this situation in the pre-1939 period: 'It is this society, which, poisoned by successive Polish semi-fascist regimes between the two world wars and particularly during the six years of Hitlerite occupation, is so virulently antisemitic as to make a self-respecting life on Polish soil almost impossible'. Margoshes pointed to the fact that some anti-Jewish practices after 1945, such as boycotting shops and businesses still owned and run by Jews, were a direct continuation of inter-war attitudes.[35] All this led to thousands of Jews fleeing Poland, and those who had not yet fled were seriously considering doing so. Jews who decided to stay and fight for their culture in Poland had no other choice but to stand by their only ally, the communist-dominated government.[36]

The behaviour and attitude of Rabbi David Kahane from 1945 to 1947 shows how these views were typical of Polish Jews of all political persuasions. Kahane came from a learned, bourgeois Jewish milieu in Lviv. In addition to his rabbinical training, he had a degree in philosophy from Vienna University. Kahane had worked as a rabbi in a Lviv synagogue before the war. In the years 1939–41, as a Zionist and as a religious Jew, he faced persecution at the hands of the Soviets. During the Holocaust, he was a prisoner of the infamous Janowska concentration camp. After liberation, Kahane wanted to leave Poland immediately. However, he stayed to help aid the recovery of the Polish Jewish community after being convinced to do so by Emil Sommerstein, another victim of Soviet repression during the war and a Zionist who was the president of the CKŻP. To this end, he accepted the dual position of the chief rabbi of Poland and the chief rabbi of the Polish army. Thus, he had intimate knowledge of all post-war Polish Jewish affairs, including the deep-rooted anti-Semitism that was present in the country. At the same time, he distrusted Polish communists and feared that their agreement to officially acknowledge the presence of the Jewish religion in Poland, through reopening synagogues and recommencing legalised religious services, would only be a brief interval before Soviet-style secularisation and atheisation were made state policy.[37]

[33]Memorandum of US Counterintelligence Corps Berlin Region, 1 Jan. 1946, Münchner Stadtbibliothek, microfilm collection from the US National Archives (STABI, NA), RG 357 General Records of the American Embassy in Warsaw, 1945–1947, roll 12.

[34]'Report on Poland' – Memorandum from Philip S. Bernstein for General Joseph T. McNarney, 2 Aug. 1946, STABI, NA, RG 357 General Records of the American Embassy in Warsaw, 1945–1947, roll 12.

[35]Melzer, *No Way Out*, 39–52; Yisrael Gutman 'Polish Antisemitism Between the Wars: An Overview', in *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*, ed. Y. Gutman, E. Mendelsohn, J. Reinhartz and Ch. Schmeruk (Waltham, MA: University Press of New England, 1989), 102–3; Paweł Korzec, 'Antisemitism in Poland as an Intellectual, Social and Political Movement', in *Studies on Polish Jewry, 1919–1939*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1974), 76–7.

[36]Memorandum of Shmuel Margoshes, 'The Jews of Poland', 12 Feb. 1946, NA, RG 59, box 4, entry 1173 C.

[37]Transcript of an interview with David Kahane, undated, LHA, folder 15,184.

As a religious leader and Zionist with many connections amongst Western Jews and non-Jews, Kahane was under constant threat from the communists up until the day he left Poland in 1949. Nevertheless, speaking confidentially to members of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry regarding the future of Palestine and Jewish emigration to the Middle East in February 1946, he plainly stated that the small community of Polish Holocaust survivors owed its existence to the communist-dominated government, who not only supported them financially but, most importantly, also defended them against anti-Semitic attacks. Because of this, as he straightforwardly told members of the committee: 'The Orthodox Jewish communities of Poland would definitely not wish for a change of Government'. In Kahane's testimony to the committee, post-war anti-Jewish violence had deep historical roots: 'The *Sanacja* tradition of antisemitism had been reinforced by the deep and abiding effects of Nazi persecution'. According to him, this explained contemporary anti-Jewish terror and Christian merchants' negative reaction to any signs of a rebirth of Jewish life and Jewish commercial activity in post-war Poland. What is striking here is that in describing the anti-communist opposition and its anti-Jewish attacks, Kahane was using the jargon of the state, fully participating in the official communist discourse in marking anti-communists as representing the 'forces of reaction'.[38] He repeated exactly the same opinion on 13 November 1947 in his talk with the political affairs officer of the US Embassy in Warsaw.[39]

Violence, Ethnic Democracy and 'True Democracy'

The principal factor animating Jewish individual and communal responses to post-war political changes was not the ideological appeal of communism, but rather a long-standing fear of violence and discrimination. This fear was rooted in collective emotions that had become deeply ingrained in the Jewish experience in Poland over the past two decades. Despite their criticism and an awareness of the severity of the post-1945 reality, most Polish Jews, in Poland and abroad and regardless of their stance towards communism, understood the current revolutionary changes in Poland as a decisive break with a negative past. It is for this reason that they so unanimously accepted official communist discourse in post-war Poland, which branded any opposition toward state authorities as 'fascist'. This acceptance stemmed from anti-Jewish violence committed by the far right in Poland during the 1930s. As we have already seen, the anti-Jewish violence perpetrated by some Poles during the Holocaust was perceived as a continuation of inter-war violence.

Fear of anti-Jewish violence and discrimination was a central element of a broader phenomenon – namely, the East European Jewish experience of inter-war democracy, which differed from that in the West. Rogers Brubaker aptly defined inter-war Poland as a 'nation-oriented' or 'nationalizing state'. Although it functioned as a formal democracy until 1926 and provided formal equality to all its citizens until 1939, the reality was quite different. Non-ethnic Poles made up one-third of the population, yet the state acted solely in the interests of an ethnically defined Polish nation.[40] Until 1926, Poland held free parliamentary elections and allowed national minorities to vote. This continued during the authoritarian periods of 1928, 1930 and 1935. Furthermore, all citizens of Poland could participate in elections for their local and municipal councils. However, the overriding principle of the Second Polish Republic was the supremacy of the Polish ethnic nation over national minorities. As a result, official public culture in the inter-war Polish state was defined almost solely by ethnic Polish symbols. Thus, even during its inter-war democratic period, Poland functioned as an 'ethnic democracy'.[41]

[38] Memo from 9 Feb. 1946 conversation between Rabbi David Kahane and members of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry regarding the problems of European Jewry and Palestine, made by J. W. Russell, 16 Feb. 1946, BNA, FO 688/34.

[39] Secret telegram from the US Embassy to the State Department on the conversation with David Kahane, 14 Nov. 1947, NA, RG 59, box 6553, 860C.4016.

[40] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10, 84–103.

[41] Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe*, 11–84; Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, '*Polskie uniwersum symboliczne w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*', in *Kultura i społeczeństwo w II Rzeczypospolitej*, ed. Włodzimierz Mędrzecki and Agata Zawiszewska

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Jews, like other national minorities living in a state that constantly subjugated their collective interests to those of the dominant Polish nation, faced various forms of individual discrimination at schools, at workplaces and in other spheres of life. However, the younger generation, who had been raised during the inter-war period, was also deeply immersed within Polish culture. Due to the introduction of universal education in 1919, many of them attended Polish state schools or followed Polish state curriculums in various Jewish private school systems. They were deeply immersed in Polish national culture through their daily cultural consumption, including in literature, cinema and theatre, as well as participation in the mass culture of the modern Polish state. This environment, combined with experiences of violence and discrimination, created complicated love and hate relationships between Jewish citizens and the inter-war Polish state, particularly for the generation who came of age in the 1930s. It also played a crucial role in the political radicalisation of young Polish Jews. Yet, contrary to the strong stereotype of 'Judeo-Bolshevism', communism was actually the least popular radical political option among them. Instead, Jewish youth more frequently gravitated towards radical left or right-wing Zionism or the socialist Bund.[42]

After the war, Tenenbaum vividly presented his understanding of the inter-war Jewish experience. In his post-Holocaust travelogue, he described the structural socio-economic discrimination against Jews in inter-war Poland as a deep, inherent feature of East European modernity. It was, he wrote, a long-standing form of 'cold pogrom'. Discriminatory practices and the impoverishment of the Jewish masses were implemented, or at least accepted, by all inter-war Polish governments. The same government turned a blind eye to physical attacks on Jews that took place in many parts of Poland in the mid-1930s. The economic emancipation of impoverished peasants and the reduction of unemployment in towns and cities was to be achieved at the expense of their Jewish inhabitants by pushing them out of commercial and labour markets. For Tenenbaum, this was not a typical anti-Semitism, characterised by mere intolerance or prejudice; rather, it was a systematic policy and structural process of ousting Jews from Poland and a method of emancipating the Polish working and lower middle classes by undermining Jewish social, economic and cultural existence.[43]

Just how deeply this understanding of the situation was internalised by Jews before 1939 was recently vividly shown by Kenneth B. Moss. In his *An Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland* (2021), he analyses the last decade of the Polish Jewish community before the Holocaust, which he claims was marked by a growing sense of 'futurelessness'. This was a moment of deepening despair for Polish Jews, which was accompanied by increasing doubts about their previously popular political programmes. By the 1930s, the Polish Jewish experience had already involved structural exclusion and uprooting and it had begun to be understood by many as an inevitable, repetitive process. Regardless of the direction that Polish modernisation took, for Jews it included spatial, social, cultural and economic segregation and discrimination. Polish Jews were made aware that most of their non-Jewish fellow citizens saw their socio-economic emancipation and achievement of a better future as something that could only happen at their expense. This was the reason why the anti-Semitic programme of the Polish far right gained so many supporters, especially following the devastating effect of the Great Depression on the Polish economy. The roots of the success of this programme were deeper than merely political and instead had social, cultural and economic

(Warsaw: Neriton and IH PAN, 2012), 25–38; Trębacz, *Nie tylko Palestyna*, 19–272; Joseph Marcus, *Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland, 1919–939* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1983), 349–436; Kathryn Cianca, *On Civilization's Edge: A Polish Borderland in Interwar World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[42]Kamil Kijek, 'Between a Love of Poland, Symbolic Violence, and Antisemitism: The Idiosyncratic Effects of the State Education System on Young Jews in Interwar Poland', in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry: Volume 30 Jewish Education in Eastern Europe*, ed. Eliyana Adler and Anthony Polonsky (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 237–65; Kamil Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu. Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Cracow: Austeria, 2020); Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, 'Who Voted Communist? Reconsidering the Social Bases of Radicalism in Interwar Poland', *Slavic Review* 63 (2003): 87–109; Jeff Schatz, *The Generation: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 22–145.

[43]Tenenbaum, *In Search of a Lost People*, 175–96.

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dimensions. This is how Polish Jews began to understand the inter-war experience of modernity and democracy in Poland and East Central Europe in general.[44]

Only with this understanding can we grasp the true meaning of Shneiderman's words of summer 1946: 'For the first time in the history of Poland, the government has made a genuine effort to enforce the equality of the Jewish citizens … Jews can work in these areas in factories and coal mines, in agriculture and in the offices of administration'.[45] The violent revolution initiated by the communists marked a reversal of the ongoing discrimination and exclusion faced by Jews in Poland. Many Polish Jews unanimously supported the communist violence directed at anti-communist opposition groups because they viewed the enemies of communism as part of a political camp who were attempting to revive the inter-war trajectory of Polish modernisation and, in doing so, attempting to bring back an 'ethnic democracy' and a 'nation-oriented' state.

Indeed, in post-war Poland many Jews experienced a significant improvement in their socio-economic standing. This was most vividly experienced in the new Polish territories, especially Lower Silesia (taken from Germany and given to Poland after 1945), where half of Polish Jews found new homes between 1945 and 1949.[46] Many Jews who decided to remain in Poland in these new territories rather than join the post-Holocaust flight found their inter-war dreams of Jewish life coming true. For many, including Jewish visitors from the West, it seemed that Jewish national existence might still be possible in post-Holocaust Poland.[47] In formerly German territories, Polish Jews encountered opportunities that had been unthinkable before 1939. They found employment in mining, newly state-owned heavy industry, the militia, the military and even within the state administration and civil service. They could now achieve these positions without having to change their surnames and while being able to speak Yiddish openly on the streets of Lower Silesian towns. The extent to which this was connected to the deep internalisation and Jewish experience of modernity in this part of Europe was vividly expressed in 1947 by Yaacov Egit, the communist leader of the Lower Silesian Jewish Committee: 'There was absolutely no possibility that Menachem Mendl, the *luftmentsh* [huckster] with the *luftparnose* [huckstering], would appear in this new land'.[48]

Here, Egit was expressing something more than mere communist propaganda. He was hinting at the pre-1939 Jewish experience, which was underwritten by a particular ethnicised class and occupational structure in this part of Europe wherein Jews, dominating the 'lower middle class', had difficulties securing employment in heavy industry or the civil service. Now, the situation was very different. Thousands of Jews were working in state factories alongside Polish workers, including the most prestigious enterprises that were of key importance to the industrial development of the new country. Jewish 'work leaders' were praised in state-run media for playing a crucial role in the Polish national effort, particularly for integrating the new territories into the economy and all other aspects

[44]Kenneth B. Moss, *An Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 41–6, 53–87, 154–92, 306–13, 318–26.

[45]Shneiderman, *Between Fear and Hope*, 229. Exactly the same was expressed by Michael (Michał) Shuldenfrei, a member of the first Sejm (Polish parliament) after World War II, the leader of the post-war Polish Bund in May 1946 when he wrote: 'Today every Jew in Poland knows and feels, perhaps for the first time in history, that both politically and economically, he is considered a Polish citizen, entitled to full civic rights'; Clipping from *Poland of Today*, May 1946, YA, RG 116 Poland 3, folder 1, k. 16.

[46]For the early years of the Polish Jewish community in post-war Lower Silesia see Bożena Szaynok, *Ludność żydowska na Dolnym Śląsku 1945–1950* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2000); Cichopek, *Beyond Violence*, 181, 184–7, 190–7, 203, 206.

[47]Kamil Kijek '"A New Life?" The Pre-Holocaust Past and Post-Holocaust Present in the Life of Jewish Community of Dzierżoniów, Lower Silesia, 1945–50', in *Jewish Lives under Communism: New Perspectives*, ed. Katerina Capkova and Kamil Kijek (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 15–34; Kamil Kijek, 'Only Ashes? Jewish Visitors to the New Poland in 1946 and the Future of Polish Jewry', *Journal of Modern European History* 20, no. 1 (2022): 111–26.

[48]Jakow Egit, *Tsu a nay Leben (Tsey yorr yidisher yishev in Nidershlezye)* (Wrocław: Nidershlezye, 1947), 42.

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of life in the new Polish state.[49] In the official and unofficial Jewish discourse of the time, both communist and non-communist, this ideal of Jewish socio-economic integration was perhaps most strongly epitomised by a Jewish miner from the Wałbrzych coal mines in Lower Silesia – a figure that would have previously been as unthinkable as a Jew in a government office in Krakowskie Przedmieście.[50]

Thousands of Jews in Lower Silesia felt this shared sense of hope and positive change, which contrasted sharply with the difficult period before 1939. This sentiment is also evident within a very different collection of sources, namely articles in leading American and British dailies that were written by correspondents in Poland in 1947. These articles were published just months after the Kielce pogrom and the massive flight of Jews from the country. In February, Marguerite Higgins, a correspondent from the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Washington Post*, wrote: 'The controversy over how Jews fare in the new Poland seems to have a clear answer here. Most of the 50,000 Jews in Lower Silesia say the opportunities are so great they will remain permanently in Poland, giving up thoughts of emigrating to Palestine'. The Jews with whom she spoke emphasised two things that they believed to be closely connected: 'the new conditions created for Jews by the Polish government' and its defence against anti-Semitism.[51] An article published in the *Christian Science Monitor* in April 1947 was less optimistic about Jews' future in Poland, which was entitled 'Exodus of Jews from Poland Wanes under Greater Liberty'. While the anonymous correspondent of the newspaper underlined the depth and strength of anti-Semitism in Poland, they also had observed a genuine commitment on the part of the Polish authorities to fight against it, as well as a marked decrease in anti-Jewish violence. Within this context, many Polish Jews still considered leaving Poland, but many others believed that the situation would improve in the future and chose to remain.[52] A *Manchester Guardian* article from the same period noted that increased personal safety as well as economic and social opportunities, which included careers in the state institutions, were the main reasons why tens of thousands of Polish Jews had decided to remain in the country.[53]

These articles from the American and British press, not to mention the various statements from individual Polish Jews and Jewish institutions, almost universally ignored the high price paid for this increased sense of security, greater opportunities in professional life and the dismantling of the anti-Jewish nature of inter-war Polish 'ethnic democracy'. These sacrifices included the acceptance of the state's increased authoritarianism in its shift towards a communist dictatorship and silence regarding the brutal, undemocratic methods used to both establish it and destroy the anti-communist opposition. Additionally, the enforcement of communist discourse from above meant limitations on the freedom of speech for Jews. These restrictions can be seen in the declaration made by the Polish Bund on International Workers' Day in 1946, which referred to not only the supreme role of the Red Army in defeating Nazism, fascism, anti-Semitism and racial hatred but also the 'reactionary forces' of the Western world. In addition, besides fully adhering to anti-Western communist discourse, the Bund declaration drew attention to anti-Semitism within the anti-communist underground, contrasting the communists with the 'the rest of the Sanacja-ONR [*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*, the National Radical Camp, a Polish fascist-leaning political party excelling in anti-Jewish violence in the 1930s]', who 'as faithful heirs of Hitlerite racism murder Jewish survivors. They are part of the same reaction, which strives towards a Third World War and is interested in fascist Spain surviving. These people direct

[49] AŻIH, 303/XIII Wydział Kultury i Propagandy (WKiP), folder 12, k. 77–8 and folder 16, k. 10–11, 44–45.

[50] See the Yiddish documentary *Yidishe Yishev in Nidershlezye* (1947), directed by Nathan Gross: available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5q82LKt7Zi0 (last visited Jan. 2023); Novick, *Eyrope*, 109; Shneiderman, *Between Fear and Hope*, 236–42.

[51] *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 Feb. 1947, 8; *Washington Post*, 23 Feb. 1947, B2. See also her articles on Jewish life and Jewish-Christian relations in the towns of Wałbrzych and Dzierżoniów; *New York Herald Tribune*, 18 Feb. 1947, 17; *Washington Post*, 6 Apr. 1947, M12.

[52] *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 Apr. 1947, 7.

[53] *Manchester Guardian*, 11 Apr. 1947, 4. For similar conclusions, see also *New Statesman and Nation*, 21 June 1947, 451; *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 June 1947, 8; *New York Herald Tribune*, 23 June 1947, 6; *Washington Post*, 23 June 1947, 1; *Jewish Advocate*, 31 July 1947, 3; *Daily Boston Globe*, 2 Sept. 1947, 5.

the bands of the NSZ [*Narodowe Siły Zbrojne*, National Armed Forces, a right-wing organisation of the anti-communist underground]'.[54] This was a Manichaean vision of the post-Holocaust political situation for Polish Jews. The Bund's declaration is indicative of the broader political outlook of Polish Jews in this period. Rather than focusing on democracy, legitimisation of the government based on free, fair elections and freedom of speech, the Bund only discussed Jews' new equalities and their freedom from the violence that had characterised the inter-war period and the Holocaust.

This outlook was shaped by historically rooted emotional experiences and was also evident in the 'Three Times Yes' referendum of 30 June 1946. The communists organised this referendum instead of free democratic elections, which they believed they could neither win nor falsify at that time. Polish citizens could vote 'Yes' or 'No' on a programme of economic reforms that had already been implemented by the Polish state, as well as on issues such as the annexation of formerly German territories and the abolition of the Senate and the second chamber of the Sejm. These were largely non-controversial matters on which most anti-communists also agreed in principle. Through this undemocratic manoeuvre, the communists and their allies in the government aimed not only to avoid real elections but also to legitimise their programme. Additionally, they sought to rehearse different methods of voter coercion and learn how to falsify voting results before they held general elections.[55] All the legal Jewish political parties in Poland, including the Zionists and even representatives of the orthodox Agudat Israel, appealed to Jews to support the communists in the referendum.[56] The Yiddish declaration of the *Tsukunft* (Future, the youth movement of the Bund) committee in Łódź that was issued just before the referendum demonstrates how this call was rooted in inter-war experiences:

> The Jewish working-class youth sees the Polish democratic authorities as the only bulwark against the fascist murderers of the NSZ, the bandits, and the antisemitic nature of the Polish response, against the return of the 'indeed' policy [this is an allusion to a famous speech of prime minister Sławoj-Składkowski from 1936 in which he had criticised anti-Jewish violence but endorsed anti-Jewish economic boycott], Przytyk [the site of a notorious pogrom on 9 March 1936], Brześć [the town in which the Sanacja regime imprisoned representatives of its parliamentary opposition in 1930] and Bereza Kartuska [a prison for members of the radical left-wing, right-wing, and Ukrainian opposition that were active in Poland in 1934–1939]. Only the success of 'democratic Poland', which will be confirmed by support for the 'Three Times Yes' vote in the referendum, as stated in the declaration, can guarantee Jewish youth full access to equal educational and career opportunities in all possible jobs within Polish industry.[57]

Exactly the same understanding of the post-war order in relation to the pre-war past was present during the January 1947 parliamentary elections, which were falsified and accompanied by a campaign of brutal arrests of members of the legal opposition, on a scale much greater than during the referendum. Official Polish Jewish discourse kept to exactly the same line as six months earlier.[58] Fear of violence and a return to exclusionary inter-war political and social practices was used as the main tool for mobilising Jewish voters.

[54]Bund declaration, 1 May 1946, TLA, JLC, Part 1, WAG 25.001, box 35, folder 11.

[55]For a concise description and analysis of the referendum campaign and voting results, see Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 202–5. For a more thorough study, see Kersten, *The Establishment of Communist Rule*, 232–84.

[56]Grabski, *Centralny Komitet*, 127–32.

[57]Tsukunft Referendum Proclamation from Łódź, undated, YA, RG 116 Poland 3, folder 63.

[58]The CKŻP parliamentary elections declaration, Dec. 1946, YA, RG 116 Poland 3, folder 15. In this context, see also comments on the situation after the elections of the national board (*hanhaga ha rashit*) of HaShomer haTzair in Poland, which were sent to their superiors in Palestine. Even the Polish *shomrim*, at that time living under communist threat and aware that the whole apparatus of the autocratic state could be used against them, nevertheless praised the 'reorganisation of life in Poland' while simultaneously attacking 'Polish forces of reaction' that were allegedly trying to undermine this reorganisation, Letter of the national board of HaShomer haTzair in Poland to the board of the world organisation of the HaShomer haTzair at the Merhavia kibbutz in Palestine, 6 May 1947, HaShA, folder 55 (3), 1–2.

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Fear of violence and political/social exclusion intensified Polish Jews' unique post-war understanding of democracy and united them with communists. This occurred even though most Polish Jews had never held communist views and were critical of many of the policies and practices of the new Polish state, and some had even faced Soviet persecution during the war. This paradox is evident in Margoshes' report, written in February 1946. A non-communist US citizen, he met with representatives from across Jewish society during a visit to Poland. Speaking to US Embassy staff, he expressed his 'highest admiration for the heroic efforts made by the present government for the rebuilding of Poland', compared to the pre-war 'semi-fascist regime'. He continued his assessment of the current Polish government: 'To my mind, they represent the best in the liberal tradition of Poland, which, dating back to the days of Mickiewicz, meant freedom not only for ethnic Poles but for all inhabitants of Poland … including the Jewish citizens'. The greatest paradox of his statement was the fact that this 'democratic government', as he called it, had 'practically no roots at all in the Polish people' [sic] and would have collapsed without Soviet support and without non-democratic, coercive state power. What, then, made the government democratic? In Margoshes' opinion, it was first and foremost the government's effort to confront anti-Semitism and reverse the pre-1939 social and political order. However, Margoshes claimed that in February 1946, the government was not succeeding in its efforts because of the deep roots of anti-Semitism within Polish society. According to Margoshes, confronting anti-Semitism was quixotic, like 'fighting windmills', and he instead chose to provide assistance to Polish Jews seeking to emigrate.[59]

Finally, the phrase 'democratic Poland' was repeated many times in the reports of the JDC, an organisation that sponsored all aspects of Jewish life in post-Holocaust Poland, including Jewish Committees that were dominated by communists, in addition to the legal and illegal activities of their more popular rivals, Zionist and Orthodox groups. As such, JDC activists and leaders were in touch with all Jews of all political persuasions and represented a wide variety of Jewish political opinions. The JDC Polish office noted in their annual report for 1947:

> The persecution of the Jews in Poland dates back to the many years before the Nazi invasion. Jews were subject to official and other types of antisemitism for a number of years before the Second World War. The year 1947 was a turning point in this respect. For the first time in a decade, Jews were permitted to live a normal, human life in Poland. For the first time in many years, Jews could travel, work and pursue an occupation without the constant fear for his life. Although a deep-rooted antisemitism still exists among the population as a whole, nevertheless, thanks to the friendly attitude of the Government, the Jews were able to lift their heads again …[60]

Summary

Margoshes' conversation, the JDC report and all other voices of Polish Jews that have been quoted above reveal a particular, ethnonational understanding of democracy that was typical within East Central Europe. For these organisations and individuals, the Polish government was democratic because it strived to include Jews in Polish life, defended them against the violence of the ethnic majority and broke with the inter-war practice of excluding Jews from social and political life. Their perspective contrasted with Polish nationalist understandings of democracy. For Polish nationalists, Poland was 'for the Poles', meaning that its government could only be comprised of ethnic Poles and

[59]Memorandum of Shmuel Margoshes, 'The Jews in Poland', 12 Feb. 1946, STABI, NA, RG 357 General Records of the American Embassy in Warsaw, 1945–1947, roll 12.

[60]American Joint Distribution Committee Poland Annual Report, 1947, JDC Archives, folder: Poland, General, VII-XII.1947, NY AR194554/4/61/2/731, 1.

act solely in their interest at the expense of the interests of other ethnic groups, especially Jews.[61] This paradox revealed the truly divisive character of Polish inter-war 'ethnic democracy'. Paradoxically, what united many Poles and Jews during this period was a common understanding that a true democracy – one including freedom of speech, free elections, active opposition and the division of power, all while fully respecting the collective and individual rights of minorities – was not possible.

This understanding was more than just a result of the immediate post-war socio-political context, and instead, it was grounded in pre-1939 experiences. Moss neatly summarises this pre-war experience:

> The Polish Jews … felt compelled by circumstance and danger to shift the focus of their thought from which identity they wished to choose to what the majority society around them wanted and where it was bound. They were compelled to rethink their politics less in terms of long-held ideals and more in terms of the fact of vulnerability and relative powerlessness.[62]

In the 1930s, Polish Jews had finally lost their post-1918 hope for a fully democratic Poland that ensured full individual and collective minority rights.[63] Consequently, after the war, the far more vulnerable community of Holocaust survivors had no other choice than to place their bets on an authoritarian communist state power. At the same time, this decision was grounded in fear, an emotion that was spawned by previous decades of Polish–Jewish history. This longer historical experience was the foundation of their particular understanding of Polish post-war democracy and the place of Jews within the new Polish political system and society. Fear of 'neighbours' and their violence, grounded in not only the Holocaust but also the decades that preceded it, compelled Jews to support the authoritarian state that they believed would protect them against the enmity of the majority.

The price paid for this early post-war emancipation and protection was high. But in 1946 and 1947, nobody could have truly anticipated how high that price would be. What followed was a consequence of not only the inherent logic of the communist system but also political decisions that Polish Jews could not have foreseen. Thus, the plans made between 1945 and 1947 to rebuild Jewish life in Poland were no less realistic than the plans for the total evacuation of post-Holocaust survivors. These plans should not be described and judged only from the teleological perspective of events that happened later. Nevertheless, between 1949 and 1950, the authoritarian communist regime turned against Jewish political pluralism and all Jewish institutions that had any connection with the West. All non-communist institutions of Jewish life were shut down, nationalised or put under total communist control.[64] This was a major factor that led to the emigration of about 28,000 Polish Jews to Israel.[65] Subsequent waves of popular, state and communist party anti-Semitism and the dubious relationship between Polish communism and ethnic nationalism led to the next large waves of Jewish emigration in the years 1956–60 and again in 1968, which contributed to the further diminishing of Jewish life in communist Poland. The tragic alternative between authoritarian versions of ethnic and communist democracy was resolved only after the fall of communism in 1989 with the creation of a new, truly democratic Polish state. This transformation occurred only after the visible presence of national Jewish life in Poland had largely disappeared.

[61] For the emergence and development of this kind of thinking in inter-war Poland, see Paul Brykczynski, *Primed for Violence: Murder, Antisemitism, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Poland* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016).

[62] Moss, *An Unchosen People*, 7.

[63] On these hopes see Jonathan Frankel, 'The Paradoxical Politics of Marginality: Thoughts on the Jewish Situation During the Years 1914–21', in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry: Volume 4 The Jews and the European Crisis, 1914–1921*, ed. Jonathan Frankel, Peter Y. Medding and Ezra Mendelsohn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11, 18; David Engel, 'Perceptions of Power – Poland and World Jewry', *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 1 (2002): 17–28.

[64] Grabski, *Centralny Komitet*, 192–252; Bożena Szaynok, *Z historią i Moskwą w tle. Polska a Izrael 1944–1968* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2007), 165–77.

[65] Dariusz Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949–1989* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2010), 53–63.

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