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# DRYING THE TINDER FOR THE HOLOCAUST: IDEOLOGICAL TENDENCIES WITHIN POLISH CATHOLICISM IN INTER-WAR POLAND

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## Introduction

It is probably no exaggeration to say that the wounds of the Holocaust, particularly in the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and worldwide Jewry, will not be healed until they are healed in Poland. Although Nazi Germany instigated and executed the Holocaust, imposing it upon the countries that the Nazis occupied, the behavior of the leaders and citizens in the occupied countries, especially those calling themselves Christian, remains a festering moral problem – and nowhere more than in Catholic Poland.

In many ways, Poland stands out as the most significant special case among the occupied countries. Jews had lived in Poland for 900 years and had established it as the center for Eastern European Hasidim, one of the most vibrant spiritual communities in Europe. Yet in spite of this long history in Poland, it only took four years to eradicate Polish Jewry and turn the country into a land of cemeteries. Six death camps within its borders claimed over 3 million Polish Jewish victims, half of the total count of the Holocaust. Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest killing center, was the only camp left intact after the war and emerged as a symbol for both the Holocaust itself and the successive interpretations of its meaning.

For much of the postwar period, particularly during the Soviet domination, Catholic Poles[1] have seen themselves as victims of the Holocaust and traditionally blamed the German occupation for the death camps on Polish territory. After the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the immediate cause of World War II, the Catholic Polish clergy, along with other Polish professional classes, were among the first targets of Hitler's determination to empty Poland to

[1] Identifying non-Jewish Poles as "Catholic Poles" is an over-simplication, depending on the period. In 1921, 75 percent of Poles were either Roman or Greek Catholic, 11 percent Orthodox and 11 percent Jewish. In 1945, virtually all non-Polish ethnic minorities had disappeared, and the 25 million of the remaining Poles were Catholic with 250,000 Jewish. See: Neal Pease *Rome's Most Faithful Daughter: The Catholic Church and Independent Poland, 1914-1939.* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2009.) pg. 21. Also James R. Thompson, review in Catholic Insight, October 2007, of Jan Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz*. (http://catholicinsight.com/online/reviews/books/article_750.shtml)

create living space for Germans. The destruction of Jews in the "Final Solution" came two years later, although on a much vaster scale. This presumption in Poland that the Holocaust[2] of the Jews was only a German import was shattered by two major anti-Semitic outbreaks after the Nazi occupation. In Kielce, 42 Jews were massacred by a Polish mob in 1946 and 15,000 Jews were expelled or left the country in 1968-1970 during the Communist dictatorship. In 2001, a fierce debate over the Polish role in the Holocaust broke out in Poland with the publication of Jan Gross' book, *Neighbors*, about gentile Polish involvement in the murder of the Jewish population of Jebwabne sixty years earlier.

However, any discussion of the role of Poles in the Holocaust must include an examination of the role and impact of Polish Catholicism among non-Jewish Poles. This particular form of Catholicism, shaped by the Counter-Reformation in the 16th century, has traditionally set the terms of public debate and national identity in non-Jewish Poland. It is, however, often overlooked by historians who focus mainly on politics disconnected from their intellectual and religious roots.[3] In 1965, the Roman Catholic Church made a landmark change in its stance toward Judaism and the Jewish people with its Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate,* that firmly forbids anti-Semitism. It rebutted the charges that the entire Jewish community can be held responsible for Jesus' death, then or now, and the charge that the "old covenant" between

[2] In this paper, the term "Holocaust" only applies to the effort to destroy Jews; the effort to destroy non-Jewish Poles is called a "genocide." The reason is that the intentions behind the two campaigns of murder were different. The Nazis wanted the land of the Poles and sought to destroy the nation that got in their way. They did not decree that all Poles, because they were Poles, should die. They did, however, believe all Jews should be killed simply because they were Jewish. Any terminology that does not preserve this crucial difference obscures the reality and is therefore inaccurate. For this reason, I believe historian Richard Lukas and poet Czeslaw Milosz are incorrect in referring to the genocide against Poles as a "forgotten Holocaust." See: Richard C. Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles under German Occupation, 1939-1944.* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1986.) p. ix.

[3] In the 50 pages on the interwar period of his two-volume history of Poland, Norman Davies devotes only one long paragraph to Catholic influence on Polish politics, one paragraph to developments in the Jewish community and one paragraph to interwar intellectual life in general. See: Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland in two volumes.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.) Vol. 2. Pgs. 419-20.

God and the Jews had been overturned and the Jews rejected by God. Pope John Paul II, the only Polish pope in modern times, continued these efforts at reconciliation.

But the deep divisions and suspicions between Catholic Poles and formerly Polish Jews, many of whom now live in Israel and the United States, are far from healed. Since 3 million non-Jewish Poles also died in Hitler's attempt to destroy Poland, a so-called "competition of suffering" has emerged in post-war debates in which Poles accuse Jews of "anti-Polonism" and Jews accuse Poles of anti-Semitism for denying the specifically anti-Jewish nature of the Holocaust. In 1985, a debate over a proposed Carmelite convent at Auschwitz erupted into emotional demonstrations and accusations that revived old wounds over who had suffered the most, Poles or Jews, at Auschwitz.[4] Yitzhak Shamir's remark in 1989, to the effect that Poles drink anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk, still stands as a bitter comment on Polish-Jewish relations.

To understand these post-Holocaust wounds and the Holocaust in Poland itself, we must first examine the crucial interwar period when tensions were building. For Poland, this means focusing on the role of Catholicism and the position of the Vatican during this period. Some scholars have underplayed the importance of the interwar period and presumed that Catholic Church had a "normal" relationship with the Polish state during this period. For this reason, it has been said that the interwar period history "lacked both drama and the noble theme of the Church as the defender of Polish culture and national identity against foreign oppressors."[5] But this simplistic view ignores the importance of the development of the attitudes that exploded into

[4] Even the basic facts of Auschwitz were distorted for polemical purpose. Sister Teresa, head of the convent, believed that Jews were only 30 percent of the 4.5 million people who were killed at Auschwitz among the 28 nationalities of the victims. Rabbi Avraham Weiss claimed the figure was 3 million Jews. Historian Yehuda Baer said neither was correct: 1.35 million Jews were killed at Auschwitz. Of the 200,000 non-Jewish Poles brought to Auschwitz, 83,000 died there and some elsewhere. See: Carol Ritter and John K Roth, editors. *Memory Offended: The Auschwitz Convent Controversy.* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991.) pgs. 251-52, 255, 260.

[5] Pease, *Rome's Most Faithful Daughter*, pg. xv.

view during the war-time Holocaust. It was in interwar Poland, a fragile and new nation-state beset with internal divisions and external attacks on its borders, that the battle among competing religious and political ideologies was waged.

Historian Saul Friedlander has aptly noted that Christian anti-Semitism in Europe was not directly the cause of the Holocaust, but it provided the "dry tinder" for the arsonist, Hitler, to light the flame of catastrophe.[6] If we stretch Friedlander's metaphor, we might say the interwar period provided the heat that dried the tinder of public life for the spark of the arsonist Hitler to ignite into the murderous catastrophe of the Holocaust. Roman Catholic theologian Ronald Modras, who provides an indispensable guide into interwar Polish Catholicism, echoes Friedlander: "The Holocaust would have been inconceivable without the prior history of alienation and hostility which divided Christians and Jews. It was an alienation for which the church was not wholly but greatly responsible and a hostility for which church leaders have yet to acknowledge accountability." [7]

If we look closely at the Catholicism of interwar Poland, it is helpful to distinguish among three separate tendencies: nationalist Catholicism, militant anti-modern Catholicism and totalitarian Catholicism. Even though these tendencies can share a similar language, I will argue that they are distinctly different, that none are inherently anti-Semitic, but all turn anti-Semitic when they conflate Jews as a group with the target that they are opposing. The problem is that all have roots, even if highly distorted, in Catholic values of tradition and hierarchy, thereby entwining negative with positive aspects of Catholicism.

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[6] Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 2: The Years of Extermination. (*New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007) p. xix. "Without the arsonist the fire would not have started; without the underbrush it would not have spread as far as it did and destroyed an entire world."[6]

[7] Ronald Modras. *The Catholic Church and Antisemitism in Poland, 1933-1939.* (London: Routledge, 1994) pg. 405.

Identifying and separating these tendencies sheds light on why the wounds of the Holocaust have been so difficult to heal in Poland. The Catholic Church needs to revise not just its anti-Jewish theological doctrines, as it did in *Nostra Aetate*, but also needs to review and re-interpret its basic history and traditions for their anti-Semitic impact. This review may be difficult, since it confronts core Catholic values of tradition and hierarchy, but it is imperative if the Catholic Church is to reject its anti-Jewish past and make sure anti-Jewish attitudes do not surface in the future.

## Poland's Historical Struggle for Identity

To understand the religious rhetoric of the ideological conflicts before the Holocaust, we must reflect first on the formation of Polish identity during the Catholic Counter-Reformation in the 16th and 17th century. The conventional story, recently called into question by some scholars, is that the Roman Catholic Church successfully "re-catholicized" Poland, largely by drawing the Polish nobles back to the Church, after the challenge of the Protestant Reformation that spread from Germany. However, a closer look shows that the sway of the Catholic Church in Poland remained much more tenuous than is traditionally supposed. Even at the height of the "triumph" of the Catholic Church in reclaiming Poland, one estimate is that Catholics were a minority in nearly 90 percent of the territory.[8] As historian Norman Davies has pointed out, demographic and political events in Plan were more responsible for "re-Catholicizing" Poland. The Polish nobles who led the re-conversion were motivated by a response to the wars with Protestant Sweden, and the northern provinces in Poland and Lithuania remained Lutheran, just as the

[8] Magda Teter. *Jews and Heretics in Catholic Poland: A Beleaguered Church in the Post-Reformation Era.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pg. 143.

eastern areas remained Orthodox[9] until they were absorbed into Czarist Russia during the partitions at the end of the 18th century. Davies attributed the success of the Counter-Reformation in Poland not to the efforts of Catholic, largely Jesuit, priests but "to arbitrary or external factors."[10]

Afterwards, during the time of supposed Catholic ascendency, the Catholic Church remained deeply insecure about its hold. The large and growing Jewish population was only one of the non-Catholic groups that resisted its religious hegemony. It faced the "schismatic" Orthodox Ukrainians on the east, the "heretic" Protestants to the north and west, and the "bad and cruel Catholics" who refused obedience to Roman doctrine, especially among the independent-minded nobles who had led the re-conversion only a century earlier. As historian Magda Teter summarizes: "The Church felt beset on all asides by 'malicious Jews,' blind heretics,' and disobedient Catholics themselves."[11] In this, Jews became a symbol of all the Church opponents. "Anti-Jewish rhetoric became an instrument in the Church's wider struggle for domination… References to Jews appeared, sometimes prominently in Catholic sermons and polemical literature, usually not as the actual focus but rather as a symbol of the hostile forces Catholic clergy relentlessly attacked."[12]

However, the efforts of the Counter-Reformation imprinted on Poland a particularly medieval, anti-modern, staunchly pro-Vatican brand of Catholicism that was, paradoxically enough, highly insecure in the face of the "heretics" who had "introduced 'different faiths and

[9] Orthodox with a capital 'O' refers to the Eastern Orthodox Church that split from western Latin-rite Roman Catholic Church during the schism of C.E. The Orthodox Church is organized as a federation of national churches and is identified according to nationality, such as Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox.

[10] Davies, *God's Playground*, Vol 1, pg. 197.

[11] Teter, *Jews and Heretics,* pg. 59.

[12] Ibid, pg. 5.

different teachings.'" [13] In the hindsight of history, it is clear that the Church was fighting to restore a religious hegemony that was fast disappearing with the advent of modernity. But this historical struggle left the imprint of the need in Poland "to define and enforce more closely the social and religious boundaries that separated it from Others."[14]

## Nationalist Catholicism

For these reasons, Catholicism became highly embedded in the national identity of Poland during the 19th century, when other Catholic European countries, notably France, were "laicizing" the state, that is, separating church from state. Some of this particularly nationalistic version of Catholicism arose during the 19th century occupation by the Orthodox Russians, Lutheran Germans and Austrians. Non-Jewish Poles turned to Catholicism to maintain Polish identity in the wake of foreign efforts to "russify" or "germanize" Poland. This identification only became stronger in modern times when the Catholic hierarchy became a key element in the resistance to Communist control of Poland after the war and ended up supported the democratic revolution of Solidarity.[15] In sharp contrast to the rejection of Catholicism as an integral part of French identity after the French Revolution, Polish Catholics embraced Catholicism as its national identity. "The Roman Catholic rejection of the modern secular state translated into Polish as a struggle for a Poland whose laws and culture represented Catholic norms and values, in short, a 'Catholic Poland.' "[16]

At the same time, Polish nationalism left its own imprint on the Catholic Church too. In his inaugural speech in 1978, Pope John Paul II emphasized the love of one's country can

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[13] Ibid, pg. 2.
[14] Ibid, pg. 4 and pg. 59.
[15] Pease, *Rome's Most Faithful Daughter,* pg. 7
[16] Modras, *The Catholic Church and Antisemitism in Poland,* pg. 243.

transcend "narrow nationalism and chauvinism." He spoke of the national heritage in the soul of Christian Poles. "As Christians, we live by this Polish heritage, this Polish Millennium, this Polish Christianity of ours."[17]

Catholicism also helped give identity to the turbulent Poland in its first difficult years of independence. It had only become independent in 1918, after almost 150 years of foreign control, and immediately was fighting six wars to maintain its borders. In 1920, the Soviet army was on the verge of capturing Warsaw but was repulsed by a daring Polish counterattack led by Marshall Josef Pilsudski. This event had a deep impression on Monsignor Achille Ratti, the papal nuncio to Poland, who stayed after most officials had left Poland and helped solidify Rome's reputation in Poland. Two years later, he became Pope Pius XI.

At independence, two distinct visions of the modern state of Poland emerged. One was the liberal secular democratic vision of Pilsudski and the Polish-centric, anti-Semitic vision of Roman Dmowski who had founded the *Endecja* (National Democratic Movement) in 1897. He appealed to the urban Polish middle class and branded Jews as their primary economic competitors. "Convinced that Polish and Jewish interests were irreconcilable, Dmowski viewed Poland's Jewish population as its primary social problem. Whereas Pilsudski saw the danger to Poland being the enemies without, Dmowski focused on Jews as the enemy within."[18] This economic resentment emerged as a political force during the depression in the mid-1930s.

Immediately, the Catholic Church was deeply involved in the political struggles to fight what it saw as dangerous forces secularizing the new state. In 1925, the Church concluded a concordat with the state that guaranteed the Catholic Church complete freedom and required

[17] Davies, *God's Playground,* Vol. 1, pg. xviii.
[18] Modras, p. 24.

religion be taught in all public schools.[19] It also worked at extending its political influence through lay lobbying groups and vast publishing enterprises. Although priests did not run for political office, Pope Pius XI organized "Catholic Action," an organization of lay people working for Church-backed political and social measures. A wave of Catholic publications swept through Poland, the largest monthly coming from *Rycerz Niepokalanej* (Knights of the Immaculata) that was founded by Fr. Maximilian Kolbe.[20] The groups were dedicated explicitly to defending and arguing for the Papacy's positions. "The very purpose of the Catholic press was to articulate and defend papal teaching on such matters as church-state relations, marriage, and Catholic education. And according to papal teaching, states as well as individuals owed homage to God and deference to the true church." [21]

The Vatican needed to launch such an information blitz, because it had good reasons for feeling insecure about its appeal to Poles. Throughout the 19th century, the Vatican had consistently supported the occupying powers of Czarist Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and chastised Poles for their unsuccessful efforts to rebel. This abandonment would become more painful during the first months of the Nazi occupation of Poland when Pope Pius XII failed to speak up against the atrocities of the Nazi genocide against Catholic Poles, lay and clergy alike. [22]

[19] A concordat is an agreement which defines the role of the Catholic Church in public life in a state. These agreements emerged as the Church became "disestablished," or separated from state power in the modern era.

[20] Modras, pg. 39.

[21] Ibid, pg. 43

[22] Michael Phayer. *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965. (*Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000.) pg. 20-21.

## Militant Anti-Modern Catholicism

Strictly speaking, there is no inherent reason why a nationalistic Catholicism needed to be also anti-modern – one can imagine a democratic, even revolutionary Catholicism as emerged in Central America under liberation theology in the 1980s – but in Poland, the inheritance from the Counter-Reformation produced a Catholicism that was deeply opposed to modernity. Since French destruction of the Catholic Church during the French Revolution, a succession of popes had waged an ideological battle against the emerging secular, democratic and egalitarian foundations of modern Europe. In 1864, Pope Pius IX marked the rising tide of Church conservatism with a "Syllabus of Errors," a long list of modernism's false ideas, including absolute rationalism, separation of Church and state, Protestantism and liberalism. Although widely forgotten today, the Church inveighed against "freemasonry" for its secrecy as well as its universalist and egalitarian values. At the extreme, one vocal opponent in Poland managed to identify the Masons with international Jewry, liberalism, and Russian dictatorship all at once.[23] As Modras has remarked: "The Polish Catholic attitude toward Jews between the wars cannot be understood apart from the Roman Catholic attitude toward Freemasonry, liberalism and the emergence of the modern secular state." [24]

In one writing, Catholic Action made this clear: "The anti-Christian attitude of Jews has always united this people to the spirit of the antichrist, wherever it appears. Masonry, godless communism, atheistic socialism, frivolous liberalism, consistently recruit Jewish members in significant measures; Jews are always their natural allies."[25]

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[23] Modras, pg. 70-71.
[24] Ibid, pg. 45
[25] Ibid, pg. 205.

In Poland, liberal groups were seen as among the main threats to the Church. *Polski Zwiqzek Wolnej Mysli* (Polish Free Thought Union) opposed Poland's concordat with Rome in 1925, supported the separation of church and state, the removal of religion from public schools, and civil marriage and divorce – positions that were all vehemently opposed by Rome. Catholic Action became one of the major forces in the battle against what it perceived as modern secularism. In 1932, Catholic Action successfully fought to prevent marriage and divorce from becoming civil procedures and lobbied to keep religion in public schools, as had been guaranteed in the 1925 concordat. This rejection of secular education on the grounds that inculcated materialist values put Catholics at odds with Jews who naturally supported secular education.[26]

One of the chief advocates of this anti-liberal, anti-Masonic, anti-secular and at times anti-Semitic version of Catholicism was Fr. Maximilian Kolbe. He founded the largest publishing operation to broadcast a militantly traditionalist Catholicism, including "some of the most vicious anti-Semitic material published in interwar Poland."[27] He established a Franciscan monastery that had 800 members in 1939.

It is difficult to find any sign of a modern or liberal Catholicism in Poland during this interwar period, at least by the standards of current liberal Catholicism. The most moderate Catholic voice came from the Catholic youth group *Odrodzenie* (Renaissance) that opposed anti-Semitism, racism and violence. The movement was established in 1919 among university students, and like other Catholic groups, saw its mission as "to base Polish life on the law of God as interpreted through the Catholic Church." It was led by Fr. Antoni Szymanski who became the rector at the Catholic University in Lublin. Szymanski denounced anti-Jewish rampages by students in 1932 and criticized the Polish political right for blaming all of Poland's problems on

[26] Ibid, pg. 39 and 127
[27] Modras, pg. 398.

Jews and Masons. He showed some knowledge of the diversity within the Jewish community and in his writings, recognized that the Christian value of mercy was an inheritance from Judaism. But he also opposed secular education as necessarily atheistic and civil marriage as anti-Catholic. He never raised the possibility of Polish-Jewish cooperation and like most non-Jewish Poles, operated on the assumption that Catholic Poles and Jewish Poles came from two separate cultures based on two different and presumably conflicting religious and ethical systems that led to "insurmountable difficulties."[28]

## Totalitarian Catholicism

Just as nationalistic Catholicism did not inherently need to be also anti-modern, an anti-modern Catholicism is not inherently totalitarian – unless it rejects Catholic values of recognizing the equal dignity of all people as created in the image of God. During the interwar years, such distinctions were easy to ignore. With a Communist Russia to the east and a Nazi Germany to the west, the Church's warnings that liberalism constituted a transition toward materialistic values and dictatorships such as fascism and Communism sounded more plausible.

In fact, interwar Polish politics reflected a deepening social crisis that seemed to confirm the skepticism that Poland could survive as a modern nation-state. At its independence, it was largely reviled throughout Europe. Economist John Maynard Keynes called Poland "an economic impossibility whose only industry is Jew-baiting" and British leader David Lloyd George said it was "drunk on the new wine of liberty supplied to her by the Allies" and called Poland "the restless mistress of Central Europe." Not surprisingly, Stalin and Hitler said worse.[29]

[28] Ibid., pg. 387-389 and 400.
[29] Davies, *God's Playground,* Vol. 2, pg. 393.

Interwar Poland was what it had been for centuries, multi-national and multi-cultural, and was beset with increasing internal tensions. The 22 million ethnic non-Jewish Poles were 70 percent of the population while there were 5 million Ukrainians, 1.5 million Byelorussians, 2.7 million Jewish Poles as well as sizeable groups of Germans, Lithuanians and Czechs. In the countryside, sporadic guerilla wars broke out between peasants and police over labor issues. In the cities, politics became polarized, and leading figures were assassinated, including the first constitutional president in 1922 and the Soviet ambassador in 1927. The Polish parliament, the Sejm, had been created to have veto power over the executive and was widely considered overly powerful. By the mid-1920s, Poland had splintered into 26 political parties and "individualism" and "parliamentarism" seemed to be paralyzing political life. In 1926, Pilsudski staged a *coup d'état* and became the de facto dictator of Poland until his death in 1935. A crisis atmosphere began to take hold. "Interwar Warsaw possessed an unmistakable, bitter-sweet quality. It was characterized on the one hand by the pride and optimism generated by national independence, and on the other by the sad realization that the appalling problems of poverty, politics and prejudice could not be alleviated by existing resources."[30]

In this environment, some began to call for "a totalitarian Catholicism." A leading advocate sympathetic to Catholic totalitarianism was the right-wing monthly *Pro Christo – Wiara i Czyn* (For Christ – in Faith and Action), a publication aimed at university students and published by the Marianists in Warsaw. In 1937, one *Pro Christo* writer defended totalitarianism as a system and distinguished it from the police state which simply forced citizens to work for and worship the state to maintain the privileges of the elite. In comparison, a totalitarian state was "necessarily based on religion or ideology." The aim of Catholic totalitarianism, he claimed, was to be "based on the revealed and therefore true religion." There was no contradiction

[30] Ibid. pg. 422-28. National statistics on 404-06; quotation on pg. 428.

between Catholicism and the new spirit of the times. Such a totalitarian Catholic state would "eliminate harmful competition and unnecessary discord" and organize the entire life of the country based on "principles of morality" and "timeless principles of hierarchy." These principles required regulating cultural life, controlling the arts and public discussion, prohibiting attacks on nationalism, or any criticism of Christian morality, and prohibiting the advocacy of birth control or pacifism. [31]

The fascism latent within this anti-modern, anti-liberal fight became more apparent when Mussolini suppressed the Masons in Italy upon taking power, a measure that the Polish Catholic Church had long supported. In its crusade against liberalism, the Church seemed blind to the way the Church itself had begun to mirror the intolerant, repressive enemy that it decried.

## Anti-Semitism and Polish Catholicism

These tendencies within Polish Catholicism toward nationalism, militant anti-modernism and in the extreme, totalitarianism, targeted many groups but all ended up focusing on the Jews. It is difficult to know where nationalist Catholicism ended and anti-Semitism began, just as it is difficult to see what nationalist Catholicism might have been like without targeting and excluding Jews. The same is true in the way that the Church's anti-modernism blended into anti-Semitism. "For people who detested liberal secularity of the modern world, Jews had become the supreme incarnation of modernity and all that threatened their traditional values."[32]

However, anti-modern Catholicism overlooked one crucial reality: Jews had a very big stake in modern secularism. Only with the French Revolution and the secular, egalitarian values that it espoused did Jews become emancipated from European ghettos and centuries-long legal

[31] Modras, pg. 82, drawn from *Pro Christo* issue 13:11 (1937), pg. 15-32.
[32] Ibid, pg 89.

oppression in Europe, often sanctioned by Church authority. The tirades against the dangers of the materialistic values in modernism did not address the historical oppression of European Jews during that the pre-modern period. During the interwar period, even moderate Polish Catholics tried to make a distinction between the hateful "racist anti-Semitism" of Nazi Germany and a "legitimate Catholic concern for maintaining Christian civilization."[33]

Such a distinction lost any meaning as the 1930s progressed. The discussion among Catholic Poles about the "Jewish question" revolved first around conversion to Catholicism, then around emigration, presumably to Palestine and finally devolved into an effort to "nationalize" the Polish culture, a euphemism for "de-judaizing" the Polish professions. Rising education among Polish Jews meant that by the 1930s, Jews were overrepresented in many professional classes: 55 percent of all lawyers, 35 percent of all doctors, 60 percent of all dentists, and 30 percent of all pharmacists. [34] University students complained about the "disproportionate" number of Jewish students, and the so-called "ghetto benches" were set up in classrooms for Jewish students, and some right-wing student groups provoked a series of violent outbreaks. While deploring violence, Catholic publications were sympathetic to the anti-Jewish measures. In 1937-38, the *Maly Dziennik*, the largest daily Catholic newspaper published by Kolbe's Franciscan monastery, editorialized: "Despite our entire sympathy for the anti-Jewish reaction of society, we must say that in the academic sector this movement is at times taking on unethical and unchivalrous forms. There is no right to lynch anyone. No one may be beaten for being a Jew."[35]

Considering the impending catastrophe, such thinking is clearly sophistry. But it was sophistry on a national scale. Cardinal August Hlond, the highest-ranking Church official in

[33] Modras pg. 147.
[34] Ibid, pg. 294-98.
[35] Ibid, pg. 308.

Poland, issued a pastoral letter in 1936 that identified Jews as waging a war against the Church and in "vanguard of atheism, the Bolshevik movement and revolutionary activity." He sought to distinguish between a "bad" anti-Semitism of violence and a "good" anti-Semitism of individual choice. He wrote: "One may not hate anyone. Not even Jews. It is good to prefer your own kind when shopping, to avoid Jewish stores… but it is forbidden to demolish a Jewish store, damage their merchandise, break windows or throw things at their homes."[36]

In hindsight, the rise of increasingly strident anti-modern and anti-Semitic propaganda now seems prophetic. Some Catholic leaders began to justify violence as a "necessary evil" to defense important values and spoke of launching a political-economic-cultural "war" against the "destructive influence" of Jews. Modras captures the process by which the tinder became dry, as Friedlander said:

> Catholic leaders in Poland criticized the anti-Semitic brutality in Germany and Austria as barbarous and primate. But self-interest prevented them from criticizing too loudly. When that brutality came to Poland in September of 1939, it was too late to inaugurate a massive change of public opinion. Mental habits and attitudes had become too ingrained. The characters were already well-defined, when the German death machines began to operate on occupied Polish soil. Catholic orthodoxy had helped define them: the Poles were the victims and the Jews, if not enemies, were aliens. Certainly the numbers changed the nature of the crime, but the precedents had already been set. Antisemitic violence was always unethical, but it could be explained.[37]

## The Tragedy of Poland: Holocaust and Aftermath

The terrible tragedy was that when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, it was the Catholic Poles who suffered first. Hitler focused his "murder regime" first on Poles to create living space, or "lebensraum," in western Poland which was annexed to the Third Reich. Hitler's command to his German army commanders was "relentlessly and without compassion to send into death as

[36] David I. Kertzer, *The Poles Against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism,* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.) p. 275.

[37] Modras, pg. 323.

many women and children of Polish origin and language. Only thus can we gain the living space that we need." Himmler recognized this meant one thing: "All Poles will disappear from the world."[38] Within a month of entering Poland, the German army, the SS and the police had destroyed over 500 villages and towns and murdered 16,700 Poles, mostly Christian.[39]

The destruction of Poland required the destruction of Catholicism, and the Catholic clergy were among the Nazis' first targets, along with Polish aristocrats, intellectuals and middle-class professionals. In the western annexed area of Poland, five out of six bishops were imprisoned, and 80 percent of the clergy deported. By 1941, 500 priests from this area were in concentration camps. [40] By the end of the war, Poland had lost 20 percent of its clergy, and most of its professional class. Overall, 6 million Poles had died during the war: 3 million non-Jewish Poles and 3 million Jewish Poles.

In spite of the horrors inflicted on Catholics, Pope Pius XII remained silent and did not publicly condemn the Nazi measures, leading to widespread despair and disillusionment among Polish Catholics. Bishop Radonski complained bitterly about the atrocities "and the pope keeps silent as if what happens to his flock doesn't concern him."[41]

Perhaps we might say that the Polish Catholic insecurities during the interwar period had correctly intuited a coming catastrophe, but it entirely misunderstood its nature and source. It did not come from Masons, schismatics, heretics and Jews, the common target of its complaints. It came from the very anti-liberal, anti-modern, totalitarian, racialist theories of the Germans that all too often Polish Catholicism had found itself in sympathy with. It's beyond the scope of this paper to trace how the various tendencies within Polish Catholicism that developed during the

[38] Phayer, pg. 20-21.
[39] Lukas, pg. 3-4
[40] Ibid, pg. 13.
[41] Quoted in Phayer, pg. 23.

interwar years continued during the war, the Holocaust and the Soviet Communist domination until the 1989 democratization under Solidarity.

However, we can glimpse complexity of Polish anti-Jewish attitudes in the subsequent war-time careers of two interwar figures who either condoned or failed to confront interwar anti-Semitism as part of their defense of Polish culture and Catholicism. Zofia Kossak, a historical writer and journalist for Catholic newspapers, had written a well-known article that framed the "Jewish question" not as a religious issue but as a racial one. "Jews are so terribly foreign to us, foreign and unpleasant because they are of another race." [42] Yet during the war, she helped form a unit of the Polish underground devoted solely to rescuing Jews from death. In the underground press, she wrote appeals to Poles to help Jews, even if they risked their own death. Her reason: so that Jews could leave Poland unharmed. She was captured, imprisoned in Auschwitz and survived to live until 1968. After the war, she became honored as a "righteous gentile" by the Yad VaShem memorial in Jerusalem for saving 4,000 Jewish children and adults.[43]

Equally complex is the figure of Kolbe, the militantly traditionalist Catholic priest who flooded Poland with anti-modern publications, and then volunteered to die in Auschwitz in place of a non-Jewish Polish army sergeant who had been captured for helping the Jewish resistance. Kolbe stepped forward when the sergeant cried out for his wife and child and underwent an excruciating death by starvation with nine other prisoners as a collective retribution for the escape of a prisoner. Kolbe is also honored as "righteous gentile" at Yad VaShem, and in 1982, Pope John Paul II canonized him.

These individual actions were unquestionably heroic, but one might argue that they do not reverse the damage of creating, or at least not forcefully opposing, the intellectual climate

[42] Modras, quoting Kossak in *Kultura*, Sept. 27, 1936.
[43] Ibid, pg. 397.

that marginalized and denigrated Jews before the catastrophe unfolded. Perhaps they could have left a much greater legacy for post-war reconciliation between Catholics and Jews if they refuted the various versions of the "teaching of contempt" for Jews that became the "dry tinder" that made the Holocaust possible. To some extent, they suffered from the conflagration that they had contributed to preparing.

## Concluding Reflection

This analysis of the inter-war period reveals some reasons why it has been so difficult for the Catholic Church, especially in Poland, to make a full and complete *teshuvah* for its covert – and at times overt – role in the Holocaust. During the volatile period of Polish independence, its struggle against the secularizing forces of modernity and for a traditionalist society looked more and more like the anti-Semitic, nationalistic totalitarianism that engulfed them in the Nazi invasion. In its fight against "anti-Christian" beliefs and values elsewhere in Poland, leading Catholics, both lay and clergy, failed to foresee that they were destined to share the same fate with the Jews they had attempted to "nationalize" out of Polish life.

For the Catholic Church to fully recognize its role in "drying the tinder" for the Holocaust, it is going to have to re-interpret its anti-modern traditions and history without surrendering core Catholic values of religious spirituality, tradition and hierarchy – no easy task. It is not enough for the Church to admit theological errors as it did in *Nostra Aetate*. It must re-interpret its history and traditions in the light of the Christian Gospels and the values which it professes and recognize the way in which the Church misused Catholicism itself in an anti-Christian manner in its fight against secularism and modernism, a fight that helped dry the tinder for the conflagration that destroyed the centuries-old Jewish civilization in Poland.

APPENDIX: Chronology of Roman Catholic Popes since 19th Century

252. Pius VII (1800-23)

253. Leo XII (1823-29)

254. Pius VIII (1829-30)

255. Gregory XVI (1831-46)

256. Blessed Pius IX (1846-78)

257. Leo XIII (1878-1903):

258. St. Pius X (1903-14):

259. Benedict XV (1914-22)

260. Pius XI (1922-39)

261. Pius XII (1939-58)

262. Blessed John XXIII (1958-63):

263. Paul VI (1963-78)

264. John Paul I (1978)

265. John Paul II (1978-2005)

266. Benedict XVI (2005—)

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