

Preamble to Genocide: The Catholic Church, Antisemitism, and the National Party

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The northeastern Polish borderlands saw intense outbreaks of locally perpetrated genocidal violence during the Holocaust. Hardline nationalist politics in the region during the Second Republic, fueled by antisemitism, morphed into genocidal sentiment, and the occupation created a social environment on the ground that was conducive to the perpetration of local ethnic violence. This paper will explore the direct role of the Church in the development of ecologies of violence in the prewar county of Szczuczyn and its environs. More than just a disseminator of antisemitic narratives, church elders were actively involved in the National Democracy (Narodowa Demokracja) movement, produced and distributed nationalist newspapers during the interwar period, advised the local population on political matters, took part in (and often lead) economic boycotts against Jews, and participated in the destruction of Jewish property. The entanglement of the Church with local political structures in this region, combined with their function as religious and moral authority, acted as clearance for, and an example of, the perpetration of crimes against the Jewish residents of Szczuczyn.

Nationalist politics in the Bialystok Voivodeship (1919-1939)

During the Second Republic the main nationalist political parties were the People's National Union (ZLN) and, following the former's dissolution, the National Party (SN) – both of which represented the National Democracy (endecja) movement in the region. The ZLN developed in 1919 in an effort to consolidate all nationalist and right-wing movements in the

newly formed Second Republic. They advocated for “private ownership, the removal of national minorities from industry and commerce, and the preservation of the privileged position of the Catholic Church. According to the ZLN program, Poland should be a parliamentary republic; however, the civic rights of the minorities should be limited.”¹ In 1928 the ZLN transformed into the National Party (SN) and assumed an even greater nationalistic and antisemitic stance.² The National Party was split between older and younger generations, and in 1934 a subset of radical youths split from the party and created the fascist National Radical Camp (ONR), which “called for the construction of a "national state," based on the principles of hierarchy, one-person leadership, and elimination of national minorities from public life. The ONR organized its fighting squads, attacked Jews and leftist politicians, destroyed Jewish property, and provoked clashes with the police.”³ Shortly after its founding the ONR was declared illegal by the Polish government, but continued to operate underground.

These nationalist parties were widely popular in the Białystok Voivodeship. In the 1922 elections the ZLN received an absolute majority of votes in western electoral districts. The eastern part of the Voivodeship displayed a much larger percentage of political variation, with the nationalists receiving only 20-30% of votes.⁴ This is a reflection of the ethnic diversity of the province; with Poles making up only roughly 71% of the total population in 1939 – the two largest ethnic minority populations were Byelorussians and Jews, followed by Russians, Lithuanians, and Germans.⁵

¹ Jerzy J. Lerski, Piotr Wrobel, and Richard Kozicki, *Historical Dictionary of Poland, 966-1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 467.

² *Ibid*, p. 378.

³ *Ibid*, 379.

⁴ Henryk Majecki, “Narodowa Demokracja We Wschodniej Części Województwa Białostockiego w Latach 1919-1939,” *Studia Podlaskie*, no. 7 (1997), p. 70.

⁵ Daniel Boćkowski. *Na Zawsze Razem: Białostoczczyzna I Łomżyńskie W Polityce Radzieckiej W Czasie II Wojny Światowej (IX 1939-VIII 1944)*, Warszawa: Instytut Historii PAN, 2005, pp. 115 – 116.

Case study: Szczuczyn county

Powiat Szczuczyn was situated in the northern part of the Białystok Voivodeship, directly bordering East Prussia. Poland's multiethnic eastern borderlands became especially volatile under Nazi occupation; pogrom violence was widespread and interethnic neighborhood violence was common – particularly in areas with large Ukrainian and Belarusian populations. Szczuczyn county was, though, predominantly Polish. According to the 1921 census, 58,178 people lived in Szczuczyn county; 86.9% identified as Roman Catholics, 12.5% as Jews, and 0.6% other.⁶ The county was, overall, very poor. Only the major traders and some artisans living in the county were able to maintain relative financial prosperity. The Jewish population was associated mainly with industry, trade, and services, and only marginally with agriculture. Even those living in the villages (as opposed to the larger towns) made a living almost exclusively from non-agricultural activities, such as engaging in craftsmanship. Very few Jews owned and/or worked farmland.⁷ The Polish population was much more heavily concentrated in rural villages, while the Jewish population was concentrated predominantly in the urban centers of the county. According to the 1931 census Jews constituted roughly one-third of the urban population in Szczuczyn county, making up only 10-12% of the county's total population. In Szczuczyn's rural villages, on the other hand, ethnic Poles made up 98% of the population, while Jews constituted just 2%.⁸ This stark division in the professions of Poles and Jews in Szczuczyn necessitated extensive interaction and reliance on one another in the interwar period. Education levels were low and

⁶ Those "others" comprised of Christian Orthodox, Protestants, Old Believers [staroobrzędowcami], and Greek Catholics.

⁷ Józef Kaja, "Skład i Struktura Społeczna Ludności Powiatu Szczuczyńskiego w Latach 1919 - 1939," in *Studia I Materiały Do Dziejów Powiatu Grajewskiego, Tom II*, ed. Michał Gnatowski and Henryk Majecki (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1974), p. 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

economic stagnation, overpopulation and chronic unemployment in urban centers allowed for little social advancement.

The Catholic Church functioned as a moral authority and a key identity marker for ethnic Poles throughout their history and permeated everyday life in Szczuczyn. Seen as a source of “national strength and cohesion,” the Church was a unifying force for members of the Szczuczyn community.⁹ The church in Szczuczyn was part of the Łomża diocese which, starting in 1924, began publishing a biweekly magazine titled *Życia i Praca* (Life and Work). The magazine boasted a wide readership in both cities and rural communes during its eleven-year run and was based on Christian nationalist values with an aim to illuminate local affairs and to connect readers spiritually to their community.¹⁰ As an organ of the Church and its commitment to nationalist ideals, the magazine makes clear who is a part of the national community, saying “anyone who does not read it, does not support it, or is not interested in it should not be included in the cultural part of the Great Polish Family in our lands.”¹¹ The magazine reiterated the importance of Poland as a Catholic country, fighting against perceived threats coming from the left to separate church and state, arguing that “there must be a mutual relationship between the two powers, which can rightly be compared to the connection which unites the soul with the body in man. The body is the state, and the soul is the Church. The Church is the moral force par excellence.”¹²

Prior to the 1928 elections to the *Sejm* [Polish Parliament], *Życia i Praca* began campaigning heavily for the National Party block stating, “The Polish Episcopate appeals to all Poles to vote only for such deputies who in the next Sejm and Senate will defend the rights and

⁹ *Życia i Praca*. 1928, no. 10, p. 1

¹⁰ *Życia i Praca*. 1924, no. 1, p. 1

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Życia i Praca*. 1929, no. 26, p. 3.

freedoms of the Church, the indissolubility of the marriage bond, the influence of religion on public education and the influence of the Gospel on the entire social system, and also take care to increase the prosperity of the State...providing for the worker and increasing the wealth of the peasant...Therefore, the choice for an honest Pole and a believing Christian is easy and clear: Vote only for the list of Polish National Parties.”¹³ Should the left win the majority in the election, argued the magazine, they would “destroy the old traditions of the Polish family and the moral foundations in the life of the nation, flowing from the principles of the Roman Catholic faith, would be undermined.”¹⁴ The publishers of *Życia i Praca* also saw the autonomy of national minorities as a threat to the nation, stating that if the left granted them this right Poland would no longer be a “host” to minority groups, and such a situation would be a grave threat to the homeland – leading to another partitioning.¹⁵

Various antisemitic tropes appear in the magazine: Jews as communists, disloyal, hoarding wealth, and living in filth. In a May, 1925 issue, the article titled “Tares in the wheat” (a “tare,” in biblical terms is an injurious weed resembling wheat when young), under the heading of Social Affairs, discusses the perceived danger that Jews present to Polish society; “The issue of Jews...our beloved Moszek’s, Szmul’s, Lejb’s - with and without beards, with sidelocks and without sidelocks... always dirty, sloppy, and always spewing hatred towards what is Polish...Any honorable descendant of some Srul Hosendult or another - a son of Israel, who traded in garlic or onions, having obtained wealth through fraud, suddenly becomes a "civilized" pseudo-Pole, now a citizen of Poland without a sidelock, but no less her enemy...and the task of...the Polish Patriot is to defend the next generation against the Jewish influence, to clean the

¹³ *Życia i Praca*. 1928, no. 1, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

wheat from the tares.”¹⁶ Another article, from July, titled “On the Jewish Question in Poland,” describes Polish-Jews as “inhuman souls [who] crawl out of hats, out of stolen Polish robes, from the skins of lords and barons, in the shape of hissing and venomous reptiles... let us remember that today, when the whole nation has seen the abomination and the threat of the Jewish danger, it is time...to expel the Jews from our land - the only fight and the only weapon.”¹⁷ The February 1929 article titled “How do People Live in a Cultured Country,” defines cultured countries as those with advanced communication systems, extensive railways, well-maintained roads, electricity, plumbing, order and cleanliness, security and policing, and national and private prosperity – all in both urban and rural areas. Of utmost importance though, is the alienation of the Jewish population. In “cultured countries” the work of the nation and the citizen is not used to “fatten the Jewish parasite,” whereas in Poland “the same work must feed the peasants and thousands of Jewish leeches who, doing nothing, live off the work of others. In cultural countries, however, peasants say to themselves: Jews should not get rich for free...So they set up various business and credit companies, join unions, promise not to sell anything to Jews or buy anything from Jews, they take trade and industry into their own hands - and this is how they get the thousands of millions that in our poor country go into the pockets of Jewish merchants, a Jewish tavern keeper, a farmer, a factor and a usurer. Hence, Jews are removed from cultural areas just as cockroaches and other vermin are removed from a tidy house.”¹⁸

Beginning in 1934, we have reports on “socio-political and ethnic issues” for the entirety of the Białystok voivodeship, with sections on the activities of different political parties in individual counties – as well as summations on the political, social, and economic life of all

¹⁶ *Życia i Praca*. 1925, no. 36, p. 2

¹⁷ *Życia i Praca*. 1925, no. 60, p. 2

¹⁸ *Życia i Praca*. 1929, no. 6, p. 3

ethnic minority groups living in the region. These reports exist from the years 1934 to 1938 and were given monthly. These reports detail the popularity of the National Party in Szczuczyn county and its ties with religious life. In March 1934 alone five new National Party circles were organized in the county, and when talking about nationalist politics the reports on the whole have the most to say about Szczuczyn as compared to other counties in the voivodeship. At National Party meetings held in Szczuczyn county there were consistent calls for boycotts against Jewish businesses, and in April 1934 committee leaders called for a general boycott of Jews in Bełda. In addition, they called for fines to be imposed on Poles who did buy goods from Jews, and those goods would then be burned. In Radziłów similar actions were encouraged, however here committee leaders emphasized that there should not be violence against the Jewish population during the boycott.¹⁹ In June 1934 in Grajewo, at a meeting of the National Party, one Józef Przybyszewski “called for a ruthless and inexorable boycott of Jews and to speak out against them, arguing that Jews are the source of all rot.”²⁰ The September 1934 report describes antisemitism posters that were hung by the National Party in Rajgród on the inside of the village’s church gates, which had been made by hand and read 1) “Host, come to your senses, come out on top at last. Down with the Jews”. In the middle of this poster there is a drawing depicting a farmer, laid by a Jew on both shoulder blades and crushing his knees with a weapon suffocating him by the throat; 2) “Poles, we call to you, do not cast off your own brothers, do not buy from the Jews” and 3) “Poles, finally understand your duty and do not buy from the Jews.”²¹

In addition to these publications, we also have testimonial evidence that confirms the role of the Church and clergy in spreading nationalism and antisemitism in Szczuczyn county.

¹⁹ 4/47/0/3/77, p. 65

²⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

²¹ Ibid., p. 156

Henryk Przyborowski, a Polish man, says of the priest from Radziłów, “before the war, Rev. Choromański...told us in religion classes to keep bread in our mouths throughout the entire lesson. This was punishment for buying at the Jewish bakery near the school during recess and not at the Christian-owned bakery belonging to Skrodzki...Rev. Choromański became famous for shooting a double-barreled rifle at the windows of a Jew, Mońka, a tailor who lived with his family on Kościelna street, next to the Vicariate.”²² Jan Romanowski also talks about his religious education in Radziłów, saying “hatred toward the Jews was fueled in church and in school. During religion classes, children were reminded of who crucified Christ. Who is responsible for it and who is better off? Who is responsible for poverty in Polish households? Jews were to blame for everything. For all this, Jews were harassed in various ways.”²³ Romanowski goes on to discuss harassment of Jews on the Sabbath by Polish schoolchildren, who would do such things as throwing dead birds or excrement through the open windows of Jewish households. Furthermore, testimonies point to the active participation of clergy members in pogrom violence. Berek Wasersztejn, a Jewish survivor from Radziłów, contributed to this evidence, stating that one Rev. Dołęgowski promoted the hatred of Jews in his sermons and was a participant in the pogrom that would follow in 1941.²⁴ This testimony is corroborated by Antoni Olszewski, who was three years old at the time of the pogrom but was told about the events by his mother. Olszewski states that “on the morning of July 8, 1941, as my mother told me, we were at a holy mass in church. My sister was very small and stayed at home... My mother told me that some unknown men were present at this mass; my mother was not specific.

²² IPN Bi S 15/01/Zn, akta śledztwa w sprawie zabójstwa w dniu 7 lipca 1941 roku w Radziłowie 800 osób narodowości żydowskiej, z których część zastrzelono, a część spalono w stodole, z art. 1 pkt. 1 Dekretu z 31.08.1941 r., prowadząca prok. M. Redos-Ciszewska, pp. 1305-1314, as cited in Mirosław Tryczyk, *The Towns of Death: Pogroms Against Jews by Their Neighbors* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021); p. 143.

²³ Ibid., as cited in Mirosław Tryczyk, *The Towns of Death*, pp. 143-144.

²⁴ Ibid., as cited in Mirosław Tryczyk, *The Towns of Death*, p. 206.

After the end of the Mass, these strangers, and the parish priest—Aleksander Dołęgowski—formed a procession. The parish priest walked with a cross; there were also church flags, and this procession went to the market. There were a lot of people on the market, residents of Radziłów and neighboring towns. They were simply herded there from everywhere at the market...Father Dołęgowski also called for hatred toward Jews from the pulpit. When the parish priest arrived at the market with the procession...the Jews were then formed in rows of four...Parish priest Dołęgowski was in the front, holding a cross...The priest led them along Piękna Street to the barn at the end of the street.”²⁵

Conclusion

Nationalist party politics developed out of Catholic ideals regarding minority “issues,” and in the prewar powiat of Szczuczyn, nationalist ideology was particularly salient. The Church guided Nationalist propaganda and thought in this region and was a major priority for political programs – to maintain the importance and centrality of Catholicism, and the Church, in all aspects of Polish life. This sample of evidence proves the direct link between clergy members and nationalist politics, their efforts to spread antisemitism, and their participation in anti-Jewish violence. As the prime moral authority in Szczuczyn, the Church’s actions sent a very clear message to the community that antisemitism and violence against Jews would not only be tolerated, but celebrated, leaving little room for the humanization of their longtime neighbors.

²⁵ Ibid., as cited in Mirosław Tryczyk, *The Towns of Death*, pp. 181-184.