



## ***Anti-Semitism in the Peculiar Context of Eastern Europe***

**David Ost**

*Hobart and William Smith Colleges*

---

ost@hws.edu

**Abstract:** Theorists of the “new anti-Semitism” argue that anti-Semitism expresses itself today not as hostility towards Jews but as hostility towards Israel. They argue that this new approach makes anti-Semitism more dangerous than ever before, since it renders it harder to spot, harder to denounce, and easier for proponents to deny. This essay takes issue with this approach, both by pointing to its logical inconsistencies and by bringing in the example of Eastern Europe, where anti-Semitism has often coincided not with anti-Zionism but with pro-Zionism. It then offers an interpretation of contemporary anti-Semitism as connected to economic insecurity, and proposes the applicability of this alternative approach to contemporary Poland; and argues that contemporary anti-Semitism in Poland is itself exacerbated by a pervasive “anti-Polonism” on the part of western Jews, which is attributed to a faulty generalization of “survivor” experiences.

In this essay I focus on anti-Semitism and Eastern Europe in order to make three broad points. First, I use Eastern Europe to criticize the popular claim of a “new anti-Semitism” sweeping the world. Second, I relate some experiences from contemporary Polish anti-Semitism in order to show how Jews are still often associated with capitalist modernity, rendering popular anti-Semitism more a symbol of non-elite disgruntlement than a real expression of animosity toward individuals or groups. Third, I discuss the pervasive belief in the reality of virulent Polish anti-Semitism, a belief deeply ingrained among western Jews with ancestors from Poland, and criti-

cize this as an example of an unfair anti-Polonism that it is itself partly, but only partly, responsible for perpetuating Polish anti-Semitism.

### **I. A “NEW” ANTI-SEMITISM?**

An argument has been making the rounds in recent years that a “new anti-Semitism” is haunting Europe. According to this view, “old” anti-Semitism entailed the open persecution, and often open hatred, of Jewish people. Jews, as Jews, were held responsible for the killing of Christ, or for the economic woes of society, and were to be collectively abjured, or collectively

---

David Ost is professor of political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, and frequent visiting professor at Warsaw University. He has written extensively on political economy, democratization, and labor in eastern Europe in publications such as *Politics and Society*, *European Journal of Social Theory*, *East European Politics and Society*, *The Nation*, *Telos*, and elsewhere. His books include *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics* (1990), *Workers After Workers' States* (2001), and *The Defeat of Solidarity* (2005), which received the Ed Hewett Prize for best book in the political economy of postsocialism, and was published in Polish translation in 2007.

punished, because of these sins.

According to the theorists of the “new anti-Semitism” (hereafter, NAS), that type of anti-Semitism went out of fashion after World War II. The Nazis, and more specifically the war against the Nazis, made this kind of anti-Semitism unacceptable, particularly in Europe. It resonated too explicitly with Nazi ideology, and there thus ensued a general taboo on its utterance. This presented a problem for anti-Semites. They had not given up their anti-Semitism, but they no longer had any socially acceptable ways to express it.

According to NAS theorists, this state of affairs continued until relatively recently. Seizing on the fact of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, and the intractable conflict in the Middle East, anti-Semites have finally found a new, acceptable way to express anti-Semitism: they no longer attack Jews, instead they attack Israel. In this view, the alleged wave of current anti-Semitism itself is not new. What is new is that anti-Semitism is taking a different form, one that need not even speak about Jews, which thus makes it more nefarious than traditional anti-Semitism, precisely because it is harder to identify, and easier for its proponents to deny.

As Phyllis Chesler, one of the most prominent of the NAS theorists writes, “Today’s new anti-Semite hides behind the smoke screen of anti-Zionism. He or she knows that it’s immoral, unfair, and inaccurate to hate and blame the Jews, but because they really do hate and blame the Jews, they have found that anti-Zionism is a popular and politically respectable way to do so.”<sup>1</sup>

NAS theorists like to acknowledge that not every criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic. They usually make some mild criticisms of Israel themselves in order to defend this point. But when it comes to citing other

<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Chesler, *The New Anti-Semitism* (New York: Jossey-Boss, 2003), p. 172.

people’s criticisms of Israel, particularly those in the European left, somehow all *those* criticisms are held to be anti-Semitic. “In the last fifty years,” writes Chesler, anti-Semitism has “metamorphosed into the most virulent anti-Zionism, which in turn has increasingly held Jewish people everywhere, not only in Israel, accountable for the military policies of the Israeli government.”<sup>2</sup> Abraham Foxman is even more blunt: “The harsh but undeniable truth is this: what some like to call anti-Zionism is, in reality, anti-Semitism—always, everywhere, and for all time.”<sup>3</sup>

Brian Klug has pointed out many of the problems with the theory of the “new” anti-Semitism.<sup>4</sup> The first is that it magnifies the problem: “Given that both Israel and Zionism are at the center of so much controversy around the world, the effect of this logic [equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism] is to produce, at a stroke, a quantum leap in the amount of anti-Semitism worldwide, if not a veritable ‘war against the Jews.’” The NAS claim is based on a conflation of the Jewish state with the Israeli people, a claim that Zionists have often made, but that many Jews around the world have always rejected. It may be true, argues Klug, that Israel *is* judged more harshly than other countries. If so, he says, this isn’t fair, “but is it necessarily anti-Semitic?” Of course, some criticism may be anti-Semitic. But it may also simply be fierce rejection of the policy of a state, the religious identity of which is a mere historical accident.

Klug offers a “thought experiment” to explore this possibility. “Imagine if Israel were the same in every essential respect as the state that exists today, including its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, except in its religious identity. Suppose it

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Foxman, *Never Again?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Quotes below from Brian Klug, “The Myth of the New Anti-Semitism,” in *The Nation*, February 2, 2004.

were Catholic, like the Crusader states that Europeans created in the Middle East in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. ... Would [this state] be accepted into the bosom of the region more readily than Israel has been? I doubt it." The Israeli occupation generates intense objections and fierce animosities, but it is not specifically anti-Semitic. To call anti-Zionism anti-Semitic is thus to downplay any real anti-Semitism that continues to exist.

I'd like to continue in this vain and discuss the paradox of anti-Semitism existing side-by-side with *pro-Zionism*. Though an impossible combination according to the NAS argument, it seems to accurately describe attitudes that existed in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, and that to some extent continue to exist today. I have spent a great deal of time in Poland, from the early 1980s to the present day. I still remember how, in 1982, citizens from the most diverse groups all expressed strong support of Israel in its invasion of Lebanon, because they saw that conflict within the prism of the Cold War. With the Arab world supported largely by the Soviet Union, and Israel by the United States, Polish citizens expressed their antipathy to the Soviet Union by rallying behind its enemy. But while virtually everyone expressed solidarity with Israel, far from everyone expressed solidarity with Jews. Indeed, the striking thing was the number of people in the region who saw it possible to support Israel while harboring traditional anti-Semitic views. They saw it possible, in other words, to separate Israel from Jews. Israel was simply the country fighting against the Soviet Union that so many in Poland, particularly during this period of martial law, wished they could do themselves. If Israel had been Hindu or Islamic, they would have supported it too. The fact that it was Jewish scarcely mattered.

Since its break from the Soviet bloc in 1989, Poland has remained a close ally of Israel, regardless of the party in power. This

continued even under the 2005-2007 coalition government led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski. Kaczynski's Law and Justice party entered into a coalition with the fascist-sympathizing League of Polish Families. Young members of the League were brought into leading positions in the state-owned media as well as the Ministry of Education, which was headed by Roman Giertych, loyal grandson of one of interwar Poland's premier fascist and anti-Semitic writers, Jędrzej Giertych. Even when photos, from a few years prior, of League members doing Sieg Heil! salutes surfaced in the Polish press, they retained their governmental positions. (Some of them explained that they were only ordering beers in a pub, leading to a popular joke of people raising their hands in the fascist salute and saying, "Five beers!")

Yet there was not a trace of anti-Zionist rhetoric from this government, and though such language occasionally appeared from some of the more eager LPR members, it was always quickly rebuked from Minister Giertych, who rushed to assure all that he was a close friend of Israel. Anti-Semitism in Poland, in other words, is not bound up with criticism of Israel.

Theorists of the "new anti-Semitism" cannot have it both ways. They cannot assert that anti-Zionism is today's currency of anti-Semitism, in the face of strong denials by most West European anti-Zionists, while ignoring the anti-Semitism of pro-Zionists in Eastern Europe. Even more, as Giertych and other anti-Semites in eastern regions of the EU have demonstrated, it is more than possible to use pro-Zionism as a *cover* for anti-Semitism. Indeed, the problem with the NAS paradigm is that it encourages precisely this sort of behavior. What better way for a European anti-Semitic party to legitimize its racism and anti-Semitism at home, far from the Middle East, than by loudly pronouncing its support for Israel? In fact, this is what America's "Christian Zionists" have done for years. They are

among the biggest supporters of right-wing Zionism in Israel—huge financial supporters, too—pushing for the elimination of Palestinians from Israeli-occupied lands because they see this as one of the preconditions for the Biblical “rapture,” in which Jews too would be eliminated.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, there is a long historical record of a strange alliance between anti-Semites and pro-Zionism in Central Europe, chiefly because, before World War II, both had the same goal: to get the Jews out, to deny that they were full European citizens. In 1933, the Nazi party sent Baron Von Mildenstein, one of the SS’s founding members, to Palestine on the invitation of the Zionist movement, in order, said an activist of the Zionist Organization of Berlin, to “advance the cause of Zionist settlements.” Mildenstein’s series of articles, titled “A Nazi Visits Palestine,” “exuded sympathy for Zionism.”<sup>6</sup>

It would be absurd, of course, to take such examples and reverse the NAS accusation, charging pro-Zionism with anti-Semitism. The point, however, is that it is equally absurd to claim that anti-Zionism is a codeword for anti-Semitism. The East European experience of the last century consistently demonstrates otherwise.

## II. ANTI-SEMITISM AS EXPRESSION OF ECONOMIC DISSATISFACTION

A different view, originating in the approach that distinguished a “modern” anti-Semitism of the early twentieth century from a “traditional” anti-Semitism of ear-

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Victoria Clark, *Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); or Zev Chafets, *A Match Made in Heaven* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). Chafets urges Jews to ignore the anti-Semitism of Christian Zionists precisely because they support Israel, but nowhere does he deny their basic eschatological anti-Semitism.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), p. 30.

lier times, links contemporary anti-Semitism to people’s economic experiences. The claim that anti-Semitism is an expression of the economic dissatisfaction of market “losers” is at the heart of this claim of a “modern” anti-Semitism. According to this view, whereas “traditional” anti-Semitism, common during the Middle Ages, was based on religious bias, on a particular Christian reading of the Bible, “modern” anti-Semitism, which took off in nineteenth-century Europe and had such cataclysmic consequences in the twentieth century, was based on economic envy. The argument is that Jews in Europe had indeed made significant economic advances, in part because the marginal occupations to which they had been consigned during the feudal era became central occupations during the modern era. As local peasants and workers experienced the pains of a modern market society, with land and labor commodified to an unprecedented and ever-increasing degree, they tended to identify this disruptive society with Jews, in large part because they were encouraged to do so by non-Jewish domestic elites anxious to divert popular anger away from themselves.<sup>7</sup>

There are few Jews in Poland today, and none of the institutions of Poland’s modern liberal-market society are dominated by Jews. Nevertheless, I was reminded of the pervasive power of this paradigm by a personal encounter with anti-Semites in Krakow, as well as by the 2000 political debate inspired by the publication of Jan Gross’s book *Neighbors*, about a war-time massacre of Jews by Poles.

The personal encounter took place in 1999, during a particularly bleak time in the Polish economy. The fall of the old regime in 1989 had triggered a major depression, that the country only began climbing out of in 1994. But after a few years of growth and

<sup>7</sup> One of the best accounts of this is Albert S. Lindemann, *The Jew Accused: Three Anti-Semitic Affairs 1894-1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

reduced unemployment, the late 1990s saw the onset of a major slump, with unemployment jumping nearly by half in a single year, from 10.6 percent in 1998 to 15.3 percent in 1999. Youth unemployment hovered at about 30 percent, and the option of escape to Western Europe did not yet exist in this period before accession to the European Union. Moreover, people *experienced* this recession worse than the post-1989 one. That one could be seen as the price to be paid for the collapse of communism, and held the promise that things would get better. This one seemed to signal that prior hopes were misplaced, and that the world was uncertain and insecure.

The relationship between anti-Semitism and insecurity seemed to become clear during a visit to Krakow in 1999.<sup>8</sup> In a building adjacent to the new hotel where I was staying, I noticed the existence of a new bookstore in a basement apartment nearby, its titles visible only through a small window hugging the sidewalk. Intrigued by the location in a residential building and the odd small-press pamphlets I saw displayed, I pressed the bell and was buzzed inside. Expecting a funky anarchist bookstore, I found instead a dour anti-Semitic one: two double-sided rows of books reviling Jews for alleged anti-Polish activities, corners filled with pamphlets from obscure nationalist organizations, walls covered with posters exhorting listeners to tune in to the Christian-nationalist "Radio Maria" radio station and to help free General Pinochet from house arrest, all watched over by three grim-faced middle-aged Poles. The anarchist look of the place was an indication of the store's marginalization, not the life-style of its proprietors. I looked around and felt such revulsion that I quickly left, only to return ten minutes later with the conviction that I had to talk

with these people and find out why they did what they did.

"You saw something interesting here?" asked the manager when he saw me re-enter. "The exact opposite actually," I replied. "I don't like these books at all." Here I stammered, but continued. "I am a Jew, and I find it unbelievable you have a bookstore like this. So tell me, because this I can't figure out, what exactly have Jews done to you? Why do you hate Jews so much?" My interlocutor began to sweat almost at once, but he didn't lose a beat in replying: "But why do Jews hate us so much?" Here he stammered, but continued. "It's not we who hate them, but they who hate us! They plot against us, tried to take our land, and then sold us to the Russians." He ran to the shelf to grab a book listing the Jewish names of Stalinist secret policemen, and put it in my face with the simple command, "Look." But then he said, surprised and even hurt, "Why do they always say we're so anti-Semitic?"

"Looking at this, isn't it obvious why?"

"But whatever we say, you say this," and here he had a point. He went over an old litany of complaints, the kind that according to "new anti-Semitism" theorists are not verbalized much in Europe any more, about Jews pulling strings behind the scenes, being bankers and Bolsheviks but not nationalists. I protested that Jews were kept out of the gentry elite that used to dominate Poland, and so no wonder so many saw internationalism, whether liberal or socialist, as their only refuge. But though he didn't get the point, he also did: "So you agree, they weren't for the nation. So why do they hate us?"

What struck me most in this diatribe was not his rage but his panic. He said the nastiest things about Jews, but his anger flowed from a sense of having lost out and not knowing why. It was the theme of being tricked that kept reappearing in his words, and those of his mates who soon joined in. They spoke of bad things always happen-

<sup>8</sup> This account was first published in David Ost, "Poles, Jews, and Postcommunist Insecurities," in *Tikkun*, May-June, 2003.

ing to them, and to Poland, and of no one ever taking responsibility. They talked of the chaos and corruption around them, and said no one owned up to it. They talked of people losing their jobs, “and no one says why.” For people like this, everything is done “behind the scenes.” And things happening “behind the scenes” is a very good definition of capitalism, where everything can be blamed on the workings of an impersonal economy, in contrast to Soviet-type socialism where a very identifiable Party First Secretary was there to take, or bear, all responsibility for everything.

When they started methodically listing the names of the leading national figures and telling me they were all Jews, it became clear that in their world, “Jew” does not really mean a Jew—a person of Mosaic faith or Semitic origin. It simply *means* someone who runs things behind the scenes. When they oppose Jews, they think they’re only opposing people who run things behind the scenes. “So why do Jews hate us?”

I myself, however, quickly became a good Jew. Minutes into this animated discussion with me—their first encounter ever with a “real Jew”—they treated me as their best of friends. They wanted to take me to lunch, invite me for coffee, have me over to their flats. Why am I o.k. but not the others, I asked? “You came in here and said you were a Jew. With you we know who we’re dealing with!” I, in other words, was finally someone not doing anything behind the scenes. I was right there out in the open.

I have to admit that I couldn’t help liking them a bit either. They weren’t skinheads or violent folks. They were lost. Downsized socialist factory workers, they didn’t know how to make it in the new Poland. Like Dylan’s Mr. Jones, they knew something was happening here but didn’t know what it was. Some blamed criminals. They blamed Jews. But they feared me far more than they tried to frighten me. I was, after all, one of the omnipotent. This was their first contact with that enigmatic

power. Oddly, they seemed to feel validated by my spending the time there: a representative of what they believed to be the master race, standing in their crummy basement bookstore and taking them seriously.

### III. POLISH ANTI-SEMITISM, JEWISH ANTI-POLONISM

There is evidence, though, that Poland gets depicted as an “anti-Semitic” country to an inordinate extent, and that this belief is particularly pervasive among Jews outside of Poland who trace their ancestry to the country. On the face of it, the mere fact that so many Jews do trace their ancestry to Poland should be enough to limit the applicability of the accusation. After all, there is a reason why so many Jews lived in Poland, and it is that while other countries in Europe were kicking Jews out, Polish kings and aristocrats, from the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, were eagerly inviting them in. They needed Jews, and the financial services that Jews provided better than most others in this pre-capitalist world, in order to provide for the economic security of the crown and the gentry given the country’s low level of development and its unusually weak state. Is Poland anti-Semitic? That questions get posed like this shows the extent of the problem, the unwillingness of too many people to understand the power of historical context. It’s like asking, “Do Christian countries persecute Jews?”, or “Do Islamic countries?”, when we know that the former persecuted Jews far more than the latter for many centuries, but that since World War II—and because of World War II—they have been much more open to Jews while Islamic countries have become considerably more hostile. Amin Maalouf is a wonderful guide here, when he shows that neither Christianity nor Islam nor any other religious or ethnic identity is in itself conducive to intolerance and violence, but

that any identity can become murderous when faced with threats from without.<sup>9</sup>

Given that Germans carried out the Holocaust, in personal, bloody detail, and that Poland was itself an occupied country, it is astonishing the way it is more common, particularly among Jews in America, to see Poland, not Germany, as the quintessential anti-Semitic country. We can perhaps best see the scope of this phenomenon by comparing the American reception of two recent books: Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* and Jan Gross's *Neighbors*, published in 1996 and 2001, respectively. Both books document the complicity of "average" citizens in carrying out the Holocaust, Goldhagen writing about the hundreds of thousands of Germans who tortured and murdered Jews, Gross writing about the several dozen Poles in Jedwabne who murdered the town's Jewish residents in 1941.

On the face of it, Gross's allegations should be far more shocking than Goldhagen's. Poland was an ally in the war against Hitler, its internal resistance so strong that it remained one of the few occupied countries not to produce, or be allowed, its own Quisling government. That people so anti-Nazi should themselves work with the Nazis against the Jews would appear to be more surprising than to learn that regular Germans hated Jews, which is Goldhagen's central point. In fact, though, while Goldhagen's book was a major event in the United States, with op-ed columnists weighing in about how the book opened their eyes, Gross was greeted with little more than a ho-hum sigh. A book arguing that Germans may have really hated Jews was treated as a watershed publication, a stunning and original contribution, while an account of how Poles killed Jews was received as scarcely worthy of

note, eliciting the equivalent of "ah, Polish anti-Semitism again, of course..." The juxtaposition speaks volumes about the reflexive anti-Polishness so common in the West, particularly among Jews. The fact is that too many Western Jews actually do believe that Poles were worse than the Germans, despite knowing that Germans carried out the Holocaust.

When my anti-Semitic bookstore "friend" rebuffed my anger about his hating Jews irrationally with his own about Jews hating Poles irrationally, I had to concede him the point. I find more anti-Polish sentiment among Jews I know than anti-Semitism among Poles I know (though of course Poles might hide such views in my company). This "anti-Polonism" too often includes an indictment of Poles for the Holocaust, as if Hitler could have chosen to wipe out European Jewry in some country other than Poland, which is where most Jews were.

The bizarre collective judgments on display no doubt come about because history is written by survivors. German Jews had the luxury of being urban in an urban country and relatively small in numbers, allowing them to fit in well in pre-Nazi Germany. And though even this couldn't save them, it did make survivors, most of whom fled early or even before the war, remember the old days as good ones. Thus, Goldhagen was so shocking. Polish Jews, however, were urban in a rural country, modern in a traditional society, and relatively large in numbers, particularly in cities and towns. In small towns like Jedwabne, they dominated the retail sector, and their economic power in cities like Warsaw, where they constituted about a third of the population, ended up posing problems for Polish Jews that German Jews did not have to face. As a new nation-state after 1918, Poland tried to build its "own" industry, as all new nation-states have done. And since the endangered Polish nation had kept its identity alive by latching onto religion as its

---

<sup>9</sup> Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

centerpiece, that meant promoting non-Jewish industry and pushing “affirmative action” policies for Catholics. Thus, pre-war Poland was marked by the kind of ethnic-national economic rivalries that were absent in Germany. And thus, Gross has not been shocking. For, since what we know of the Holocaust comes chiefly from survivors, it is no surprise that we’ve always heard a better story from German Jews than Polish ones. For, unlike German Jews, Polish Jews had no halcyon days to remember. (Except for those 200 and 300 years ago, but such is not the stuff of survivor memory.) And so even though more Jews were saved by Poles than by Germans, survivors remember Poland as a worse place than Germany.

It would surely be wildly wrong to say that this is what “causes” the Polish anti-Semitism that so animated those in the Krakow bookstore, not to mention the activists of the League of Polish Families. Still, attitudes like this make it harder to challenge anti-Semitism, just as the broad brush of the NAS theorists make it hard to challenge anti-Semitism. The task is to treat anti-Semitism not as something inherent to anyone, and not as something connected to one’s attitude toward a state—even a Jewish state—but as something that has causes that can be uncovered. Only then will it be possible to fight it.