The Re-formation of Elements of Polish Nationalism in Post-war Britain[1]

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Abstract

In 1947 the 'Polish Resettlement Act' made provision for the Polish armed forces to remain in Britain and return to civilian life. The orthodox view is that the Polish diaspora assimilated into British society along a smooth trajectory. Evidence suggests, however, that this was not the case, and while many assimilated, a distinct shard remained who were committed to remaining distinct from British life and from their integrated compatriots

Key Words

Nationalism, Religion, Identity

Introduction

Informed by a combination of nationalism and religion exiled Poles viewed themselves as embodying the 'Old' Poland, with the aim of – one day - returning to restore the 'New' Poland to its former glory. That they were able to preserve this view, I argue, was because Great Britain allowed them to act without political censure. The resulting generation of assimilated UK Poles, and a new generation of incoming migrant Poles from the 'new Poland' live alongside a community of ultra-Catholic, nationalist Poles with a unique construction of their identity, history and allegiance.

This paper explores some of the actors and influences that helped to form this diaspora and its community in exile. These include General Anders who was the driving force behind demands for a free Poland. Secondly, the Polish Roman Catholic Church who was instrumental in the formation of Polish communities in Britain and the Polish Association of Catholic Action who were the religious and ideological foot soldiers of the Polish Catholic Church.

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Anders' Last Stand

The Yalta conference (February 4th- 11th 1945) was the defining moment in the development of the Polish *émigré* community in Britain. It was clear that Stalin had no intention of returning Poland to a free and independent state in post-war Europe. Its allies who were relying on the Soviet war machine to destroy Nazi occupation in the East had abandoned the Polish Government-in-Exile. In fact, the American Government pointed out that the Red Army was physically in possession of Poland and that 'possession was often thought to be nine points of the law.'

In his Order of the Day, February 26th 1945 General Anders publically declared his appointment as C-in-C Polish Armed Forces in 'Poland's direst hour' by presidential decree. Anders had a reputation as a political soldier. It is very unlikely that Anders would have handed power over to civilian politicians as Polish soldiers tended not to and he was vague about which type of Polish government he was willing to serve.

Anders and his ilk's meddling did not help calls for the restoration of democracy in Poland as, even after the war, Narodowe Sily Zbrojne (National Armed Units) partisans carried on a campaign of political murder. In October 1945 the NSZ, a splinter group of the National Democratic Party, decided to scale down random attacks to concentrate on a long-term strategy of political consolidation and preparation for the anticipated conflict between the West and the Soviet Union. To this aim, the commander of the NSZ was trying to get to the West to meet General Anders who was still C-in-C Polish Armed Forces and secure funds.

On the 31st of October 1946, Anders and his Second Corp left Italy traveling via Verona to an uncertain future. An estimated 105,000 (47%) returned to Poland from England leaving 114,000 (53%) staying to join the Polish Resettlement Corp. Those returning were by definition those who posed less of a threat to the Soviet Polish regime, namely, the lower ranks of the Polish Army, who were drawn from the peasant population of pre-war Poland. Those remaining in Britain were Polish Government officials, Polish Army officers, Polish Air Force officers, their dependents, and those whose homes in the East of Poland were now annexed to the Soviet Union. This drastically altered the political complexion of the exiled Polish diaspora. 'Anders Army' formed the 'inflexible backbone' of the Polish community in Britain. (Marzec, 1988) points out that:

> The supporters of the old pre-war Sanacja regime were considerable in number, especially dominating the military and government bureaucracies … the Sanacja and the National Democrats occupied three-quarters of administrative posts in the Polish Government-in-Exile … But there were few (such) moderates in the exile community in England and fewer still among the members of the political and military bureaucracies.

Garapich (2007) explains that politicization of the migrant experience is a typical tool of nationalistic discourse since it constructs migration as a traumatic experience of loss, thus creating a myth of return.

Fleecing the Flock

The Polish Roman Catholic Church played a major role in the formation of the exile Polish community in Britain. It gave spiritual and palliative care to a group of refugees traumatised by war, death and family tragedy. However, it had a more important role to play for the Polish elites. The Polish Roman Catholic Church was instrumental in the construction of ethnic boundaries by encouraging language loyalty, organizational adherence, the maintenance of customs and tradition and the maintenance of religious law concerning the family. Polish society had long measured its devotion to religion as a measure of its Polishness as (Davies, 1984) points out Roman Catholicism came to be blended together with a nationalistic fervour that can best be seen in the works of the exiled Polish Romantics such as Mickiewicz and Krasinski. As the old army camps filled, ex-military personnel and their dependents communities of *petite Polonia* emerged in isolated camps throughout rural Britain. Throughout its history in Poland Catholic priests were never paid by the mother church they had always relied on their congregation to pay for their upkeep and that of their church. The situation was no different in Britain, priests in the displaced person camps were given food and keep and five shillings' pocket money a week. They relied on the collection plate contributions of their flock to augment their income and improve their church. Polish priests had a vested interest in increasing the size of their flock.

Assimilated Poles would attend the local Anglo Catholic Church where they would meet other Poles afterwards for fellowship. These Poles did meet some resistance. A Pole commented that 'we were the first immigrants even before the blacks the English were afraid of us we were classed with the Irish.' There was, therefore, good reason why Poles who did not wish to mix or those living in camps created their own churches using old barrack blocks and any materials they found to hand. Those living in the town would attend a Polish mass in the afternoon at an Anglo Catholic Church presided over by the local Polish priest. Polish priests claimed that this was because their congregation felt happier hearing the mass in Polish. However, at that time the mass was always celebrated in Latin worldwide and so it could be assumed that the Polish priests were trying to keep the Polish community cohesive integratory intact.

Things became easier for Polish priests in the early fifties when in December 1951 the Papal edict *Exul Familia* was published. This meant the camps and hostels became Closed Parishes and Poles living in the community could organise themselves into Open or Ethnic Parishes. This unique arrangement meant that Poles no longer came under the jurisdiction of British bishops and had a Polish bishop as their direct link to Rome. In effect, the Polish priest could claim control

of his flock *ad suam personam*. Polish priests were accordingly in a position to define the norms of everyday behaviour of parishioners: not only in the sphere of religious ethics but also in the sphere of national consciousness.

This newfound autonomy enabled Polish Catholic priests to disseminate a particular Polish style of messianic religiosity within their closed and open parishes.

A Corner of a Foreign Field that is Forever Poland

On entering a new Camp, one of the first priorities was to make one of the huts into a Catholic church. As described above the relationship between the Catholic Church and Poles is complex consisting as it does of such diverse elements as Messianism, Romanticism, Patriotism and ethnic survival. In her work on Polish oral history (Kathy Burrell 2006) explains that (due to partition by Russia, Prussia and Austria-Hungary in 1772-1795 until 1918) Poles had been able to construct a non-territorial means of survival through culture, language and religion.

These ethnic communities of Poles lived in uncertain times and perhaps one of the only certainties was their religion and the Polish Catholic Church. Anthony Smith talks about *Continuity* (his italics) over the *longue duree,* he asserts that the continuities of cultural elements and forms are important for a true sense of community. He explains that these continuities are particularly apparent in the field of religion where change in ritual and dogma tend to be slow and gradual and which continue to exert a strong influence over various aspects of society and politics.

Zena, a first generation female refugee interviewed on 22 November 2000, told Kathy Burrell in an interview that "Church and Poland, they are a very similar thing, intertwined… I often think… where would we be without the church? I'm sure it helped people survive, because without it you have no roots. So it was a very good stabiliser."

With its religious ritual and festivals such as Easter, Christmas and Corpus Christi the Polish Catholic Church gave the camp community a sense of identity. Anna a first generation Pole interviewed on 16th February 2001 commented that, "With the Polish community the church keeps us together. Always if you are Polish, if you are genuine Polish, the church keeps you together".

Corpus Christi is a good example of the camp being used as a religious space. Zosia tells how "Every year Corpus Christi is a major team effort. Four altars were built and decorated at strategic points around the camp by various organisations within the camp such as; the Ex-Combatants (SPK), Catholic Action, Scouts and Catholic Youth Association (KSMP) each vying to outdo the others in the splendour of their altars". She goes on to describe how the whole camp was involved. A solemn Mass was heard at the church and then a procession of all the groups within the camp would slowly walk around the camp. As they walked, at

the front of the procession, small girls in white dresses would scatter rose petals on the pathway in front of them. Each of the four constructed altars was visited, prayers said and blessings given. The route of the procession was decorated with green branches and ribbons.

Noted lecturer, (Sophie Hodorowicz Knab, 1993) in her work on Polish customs, traditions and folklore give a similar account of *Boze Cialo* Corpus Christi. She writes that writings in the *Mazowsze* region of Poland in 1824 indicate the use of four altars decorated with birch branches. This suggests that the Camp Poles continuation of these religious rituals strengthened their contact with their rural past and reinforced their community identity. There are many such religious rituals throughout the liturgical year. Each was acted out in the Camps giving it a religious structure that would be familiar to any villager in Poland. Some notable examples are Lent, Easter, Advent, Christmas and *Wigilla*, names days, feast days, carnival (in the religious sense) and Saints' days. To this must also be added delivering of the Sacraments of marriage, communion, baptism, confession and death.

This is, however, only the primary layer of religiosity within the Camp. Below the Priest who was in charge of the spiritual and moral wellbeing of the community was a whole raft of secular groups who served the Church and the Camp community. Foremost of these was the Polish Association of Catholic Action, which in post-war Britain worked under the auspices of the Catholic Council for Polish Welfare. Under the Presidency of Count A. Balinski this Association contained the religious and ideological foot soldiers of the Polish Catholic Church. It was formed in every parish in Poland. Its Catholic Youth League had more members than any political party. Formed in 1934 it had its roots in the interwar years controlling many charitable, social, cultural and vocational organizations. It re-emerged under the same presidency in post-war Britain. It was an umbrella association for: The Man's Catholic Association, The Women's Catholic Association, The Young Men's Catholic Association and The Young Women's Catholic Association. It is this Association that formed the link between the Polish Catholic Church and the Polish elite groups.

In its 1948 report entitled '*Memorandum on the Religious and Moral Situation of Poles in Great Britain,'* Catholic Action suggests that it sees itself more as a religious rather than secular association. In the report's conclusions, it berates 'purely secular' organisations such as the Anglo-polish Society for showing far more interest in the problems of Hostel life. This Association was the driving force behind the religious life in the closed and open parishes.

Catholic Action was also the main source for the dissemination of ideological and anti-communist information. On 1st November 1944, Count Balinski-Jundzill sent Cardinal Griffin a comprehensive report on the military and resistance situation in Poland. He suggests that the British hear little of the Poles struggle and that this report may inform the Cardinal. Over the following months, further reports are sent concerning the Communist advance into Poland all signed Balinski. It is clear

that although (Zubrzycki 1956) lists them as a religious group as do the Association they are also political in their mission.

To comprehend the extent of the Polish Catholic Churches role in the camps religious participation it may be instrumental to look at just one camp more closely. In the opening statement of the Annual Report of the Association at Springhill Camp in Gloucester in 1952 it details the fact that 'This Branch was founded on the day of the Vigil of Immaculate Conception of the Lady (7th December) 1949. It goes on to mention that there are 96 active members and that the committee consisted of 5 laymen and Father P, Polish parish priest at Springhill. Father 'P' was in fact Fr Serafin Potoczny OFM. The report goes on to detail five activity groups active in the Camps.

In addition to this dominant group other groups who had a presents were the 'Marion Sodality' and also the Polish Group of 'the Sword of the Spirit' the Polish Catholic University group 'Veritas' plus choirs, altar boys, communion and catechism instruction along with religious education for children and adults. In addition, the Polish Catholic press, which published newspapers, books, pamphlets and leaflets on religious subjects. Springhill had its own correspondent for the *Gazeta Niedzielna Zycie* reporting on Camp life and also *Sodalis Marianus* both of which were sold on Sundays at the door of the church as parishioners left the church. The Springhill report gives details of the special functions sponsored by Catholic Action in the camp during 1951.

During the past year the Executive Committee was responsible for organizing special church functions connected with the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord, the Feast of Corpus Christ, the Feast of Christ the King, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. It goes on to say that at each of these events processions were held in the grounds of the Hostel (Camp) and that the route and the church were decorated in honour of the occasion. Father K a Polish Jesuit from London held a course of six mission conferences during Passion Week, which were attended by 90% of the adult population. Confession and Holy Communion followed the Mission on Palm Sunday. Events weren't restricted to the Camp. On the Sunday during the Octave of Corpus Christi a party of children went to Chipping Campden where, dressed in national costume, they took part in a procession to honour the Blessed Sacrament organised by the local Catholic Parish. It was rare for the two groups to mix like this and may explain why children took part and not adults.

It is clear that the Polish Catholic Church was instrumental in the day-to-day lives of Poles and as the Poles left the camps this structure followed them into the industrial towns and cities they moved to. In this way, they remained under the spheres of influence of the Elites, Ex-Combatants and the Polish Catholic Church in their community centres and churches within British society.

On the Inside Looking In: a Crisis of Identity

Polish churches paid for by the Poles from donations in turn developed Polish community centres. These centres held Saturday Schools for second generation Poles giving history lessons, Polish cultural lessons including folk dancing and most importantly Polish language lessons. This was not just a matter of education for these Poles but also a matter of survival for their culture, language and history.

However, this group of Poles only reflected one facet of a much more complex ethnographic pre-war Polish demographic. It was an identity that many in Poland would not recognise with its Christian, bureaucratic middle class elites, ex-combatants ready to re-live old battles and fight new ones holding onto a way of life that few in Poland shared. In time, these Poles looked inwardly to their church and community ignoring civic participation and the host *milieu*.

The Poles seemed to be experiencing some kind of Cognitive Dissonance within their communities. On arrival in Britain, they had seen themselves as political refugees, pure Poles untainted by the Communist invasion of their homeland. They were a genuine diaspora who did not see their journey ending in Britain but in a triumphant return to Poland where they would plant the pure unfettered seed of the old Poland. Now, over looked by almost all political institutions at home and abroad they clung to their traditions.

As (Erdmans 1992) explains: the collective character of nationalism ensures that in official Polish historical discourse, emigration is perceived in moral terms and political migration has higher moral status than economic migration. So, in Polish emigration ideology political exile is seen as a sacred act in the fight for freedom. By adopting this newly imagined identity, the British Poles who only integrated but never assimilated into British society were able to make sense of their past and future existence.

When in the eighties fresh waves of financial migrants arrived in Britain exiled Poles saw that they had little in common with their compatriots. Exiled Poles viewed themselves in the context of the fight for independence whereas economic migration was seen as highly suspicious since it involved a degree of individualism, market-orientated attitudes and self-fulfilment and a pragmatic approach – everything to which the era of romanticism and nationalism was opposed.

Conclusion

It could be said that life in the Displaced Person Camps and later in the Polish communities set up around their social centres and churches was hermetic. Those choosing to remain within that sealed community received a very specific telling of Polish national history. The pervasive myth that Poland was intrinsically Roman Catholic and the telling of that Catholic history was far more important when used as an ideologically loaded conceptual framework that gave specific meaning to

the past and determines what is remembered and forgotten. These Poles clung to the 'myth of return' and turned their backs on civil participation in the host country. They absorbed, instead, a specific amalgam of stories, rituals and symbols imbricated to form the dominant history. When, in time, these Poles came into contact with new waves of financially motivated Polish diaspora the distorted identity they had created acted as a barrier to the homogenisation of the groups and they existed in parallel societies.

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