

The Accusation of Zionism: Anti-Semitic Stereotypes in Polish and Czech Communist Propaganda

Joanna Królak

Uniwersytet Warszawski, Instytut Sławiastyki Zachodniej i Południowej
joanna.krolak@uw.edu.pl

SYNOPSIS

The article concerns the anti-Semitic rhetoric employed during the trial of Rudolf Slánský in 1952 and the Polish Political Crisis of March 1968. In both cases, the accusation of Zionism meant a propagandistic revival of the anti-Jewish stereotype. The ideological schizophrenia called for the condemnation of Zionism along with anti-Semitism, but in fact a xenophobic stereotype prevailed. In both cases, Polish and Czechoslovak anti-Semitism took the form of a coded message, hidden in various suggestions, allusions and unstated messages, which were clear and unambiguous for the recipient. This article is focused on their analysis.

KEYWORDS

Zionism; communist propaganda; anti-Semitic stereotype.

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In 1968 there was a popular joke in Poland, in which a son asks his father the correct spelling of the word 'Zionist'.¹ His father replies: 'I don't know, but in my day it was written with a "J"' (Fik 1995, p. 218). This joke reflects well the nature of accusations of Zionism in the Polish Political Crisis of March 1968. 'The formulation "we condemn Zionism and anti-Semitism", which appeared frequently in the Polish press in 1968, illustrates the aspiration of the agitators to harmonise two mutually exclusive conceptions: Marxist doctrine and xenophobic stereotypes,' states Piotr Osęka (1999, p. 75). This is also the reason why anti-Semitism veers towards an encoded form and employs insinuations, unfinished statements and allusions. However, for the recipient these messages are entirely legible, and their function is therefore to maintain the illusion (ibid.). This ideological schizophrenia, as the above phenomenon is termed by the aforementioned historian, is manifested in references to anti-Jewish prejudices, with the knowledge that it is prohibited to persecute anyone because of their nationality. In the political reality, the word Zionist was essentially a synonym for

1 The text contains quotations from Polish, which were first of all translated by Jana Rauevová into Czech, and subsequently translated into English.



enemy. And at the same time, as Michał Głowiński wrote: ‘Behind all the evil of this world, behind all kinds of enemies there emerges the face of the Jew, who is called a Zionist’ (Głowiński 1995, p. 63). The propaganda of the day was therefore of an unequivocally anti-Semitic character, though of course, due to the negative connotations from the time of the war and the restrictions placed by the Marxist ideology, the Jew was now referred to as a Zionist (Oseka 1999, p. 19).

A similar situation applied in the case of the media campaign in Czechoslovakia accompanying the trial of Rudolf Slánský in 1952. On 24 November 1952, the newspaper *Rudé právo* published an article entitled ‘Sionismus — nástroj amerických imperialistů’ (‘Zionism — a tool of the American imperialists’; *Rudé právo* 24. 11. 1952, p. 1), in which it explained to readers who the Zionists were and persuaded them that anti-Zionism had no connection with anti-Semitism. ‘Our party, as a thoroughly internationalist party, has always fought against anti-Semitism. We must similarly fight and crush Zionism’ (*Rudé právo* 24. 11. 1952, p. 1), reads the text. This equating of Zionism with anti-Semitism ensued from the fact that both phenomena were presented as racial chauvinism, unanimously opposed by the people and the party. Racial chauvinism in the form of anti-Semitism had unleashed a terrible war, and the activity of those accused, directed towards fomenting a new war, is presented as another manifestation of national and racial chauvinism, namely Zionism. ‘Indeed, the Zionist organisations with which Slánský collaborated were nothing other than fascist shock troops! It is clear that every bourgeois nationalism, including the Jewish variant, necessarily leads to fascism’ (*Rudé právo* 24. 11. 1952, p. 1). At the same time, the article placed emphasis on the difference between the Jewish bourgeoisie and the ‘honest Jewish workers’. Zionism was presented as an ideology exclusively of the former group. ‘This bestial ideology has become a weapon of the Jewish bourgeoisie, a weapon that is wielded by American imperialism’ (*Rudé právo* 24. 11. 1952, p. 1), the readers of *Rudé právo* were informed. Furthermore, the Zionists march side by side with the neo-Nazis from Bonn, since Ben Gurion, the foremost representative of the state of Israel, has made a pact with Adenauer. Those accused of Zionism are described in the Slánský trial as especially dangerous to the Jews themselves, for example ‘[...] the vile Zionist Fischl, who during the war helped the Nazis liquidate the Jews, in our country enabled capitalists of Jewish origin to steal billions from our state, while at the same time showing a cynical disregard for the poor and propertyless Jews who were moving to Israel’ (*Rudé právo* 24. 11. 1952, p. 1).

What stereotypical conceptions and clichés did the communist propaganda therefore employ in order to ensure that those following the trial in the press and on the radio would not doubt for a moment that behind the term ‘Zionist’ there lurked the negative image of the Jew?

JUDAS

Throughout the course of the entire trial, the name Slánský appeared several times accompanied by the epithet ‘Judas’. To this day, this anti-Jewish stereotype is integrally linked with the motif of betrayal. In Slánský’s case it concerns betrayal of the



party, which he attempted to destroy from within by appointing his own people to numerous important posts, people who were usually of Jewish origin, 'who had never been in unison with the people, who were not of the people — due to their origins in a bourgeois, industrialist and mercantile environment, those who from the beginning to the end had despised the working people' (*Rudé právo* 24. 11. 1952, p. 1).

Slánský is labelled a Judas also by a feature dated 22 November 1952, with a title of the same wording. The author of the article this time emphasised his ginger hair and cowardly, treacherous eyes that darted around in his wrinkled face. In the aforementioned text, Slánský's betrayal consisted also in his plot to kill President Klement Gottwald (*Rudé právo* 22. 11. 1952, p. 5). The motif of betrayal returns once again in connection with the figure of Bedřich Reicin, who was forced to confess that he had been a Gestapo informer who betrayed Julius Fučík to the Nazis.

THE JEWISH CONSPIRACY

The aim of the entire network of influences and ties created by Slánský was among other matters to concentrate all Jewish property in the hands of the Zionists: 'In this manner, the Zionists, with direct assistance from Slánský, aim to restore or more precisely expand their economic power, and thereby prepare the positions which shall be necessary for the overthrow of the people's democratic order in Czechoslovakia' (*Rudé právo* 20. 11. 1952, p. 3).

This aspiration of the Jews, who are presented as an agency of American imperialism, to seize power, is repeatedly referred to in the testimonies of the defendants. Their endeavour here is linked with the motif of deceit, since: 'The conspirators could conduct their criminal activity only by outwardly feigning agreement with the programme and policy of the Communist Party, and artfully masking themselves so as not to be revealed' (*Rudé právo* 20. 11. 1952, p. 3).

This deceit is unmasked by the dual names of the defendants: Salzmann — Slánský, Ludwig Freund — Ludvík Frejka, Otto Katz — André Simone, Friedrich Reizinger — Bedřich Reicin, Otto Schlesinger — Šling (Holý 2015, p. 6). As underlined by the prosecuting attorney in his concluding speech, Jews also manifest hypocritical tendencies. For example, they claim Czech nationality, but the very fact of their poor knowledge of Czech, as well as their superior knowledge of German, reveals their true origin. This applies in the case of Geminder. If their Zionist plans are jeopardised, they hide behind the spectre of anti-Semitism (*Rudé právo* 27. 11. 1952, p. 5). They are motivated primarily by their career, power and above all money. They are 'Zionist imposters without a homeland' (Olbracht 1952, p. 2).

At the same time, indeed, the defendants are questioned about their nationality, and their testimonies contain repeated admissions of their origins in a bourgeois Jewish family. Furthermore, this is a German Jewish family, and the defendant may also have attended a German-speaking school. It appears that in the given case this is not merely an accusation of cosmopolitanism, but rather a connection of Jewishness with German nationality. There is a constant emphasising that the defendants were ostracised from the Czech people, that they are hostile to Czech national interests, thus the clichés of the 19th century return to the fore (ensuing from the real



reason why some Czech intellectuals inclined towards anti-Semitism), in which, as Michal Frankl writes, 'Jews were attacked for their alliance with the Germans' (Frankl 2007, p. 9).

To the prosecuting attorney's questioning regarding their relationship to the working people of Czechoslovakia, the defendants answer: 'I was not at one with the interests of the Czechoslovak people. The national interests of this people remained foreign to me' (*Rudé právo* 22. 11. 1952, p. 2). And the prosecutor Urválek, in his concluding speech, emphasises that they were '[...] without any friendly relationship to the Czech and Slovak nation and its people [...]. We hear their appalling Czech, and in most of them we recognise that Czech is not their native language' (*Rudé právo* 28. 11. 1952, p. 2).

In the aforementioned article, entitled 'Sionismus — nástroj amerických imperialistů', the author asks the dramatic rhetorical question: 'Could all of this have been done by individuals who had grown up from the heart of our people, our homeland?' (*Rudé právo* 24. 11. 1952, p. 1). These individuals, of a foreign nation, are then held responsible for all the troubles and failures of the socialist economy. The prosecuting attorney Urválek summarises: '[...] it has become clear to us that many of the difficulties that were often considered an accompanying phenomenon of our rapid development, were intentionally caused by the treacherous actions of precisely these criminals' (*Rudé právo* 27. 11. 1952, p. 3).

As Dariusz Stola states, the Polish campaign of March 1968 is reminiscent of a campaign from the Stalinist era, since this also pointed the finger at enemies within the party, indeed even within the party elite (Stola 2018, p. 148).

The campaign itself was unleashed following the victory of the Israeli army over the armies of the Arab nations in the Six-Day War that took place from 5–10 June 1967. The launch of the campaign was contributed to also by Gomułka, in his emotive speech delivered to the 6th Trade Union Congress in the Congress Hall of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw on 19 June 1967. In this speech he labelled the Jews rejoicing at the victory of the Israeli army as a 'fifth column', and insinuated that they should be expelled from Poland. On 8 March 1968 a gathering took place of students at the University of Warsaw, who were reacting to the expulsion from the university of two dissidents from the democratic movement, Seweryn Blumsztajn and Adam Michnik. A number of those participating in the demonstration originated from Jewish families, which the official propaganda seized upon as evidence that the student protest was backed by the Jews (Tych 2011, p. 398). On 19 March, Gomułka met with the cadres of the Warsaw organisation of the Polish United Workers' Party, under the slogan 'The Party's Position is in Harmony with the Will of the People'. In his speech, he focused on the political crisis in the country. This time also anti-Zionist accents were in evidence, even if Gomułka attempted to differentiate between Jews and Jew-Zionists (*ibid.*, p. 399).

Polish historians are in agreement that with regard to the role of Moscow in the anti-Semitic flow of events of March 1968, it is possible to speak of a certain inspiration by the Soviet Union (Kersten 1992, p. 164), though at the same time there were also evident residues of the effect of the National Radical Camp, the pre-war extreme-right nationalist movement, and the influence of totalitarian communism (*ibid.*, p. 159).



Głowiński considers the most significant characteristic of the ‘March campaign’ to be the fact that it combined the style of the tabloid press, Stalinist orthodox rhetoric and the extreme right (Fik 1995, p. 213). These elements had previously been very remote from one another, but had now found a common language in this propaganda. They enthusiastically employed and foisted upon the public stereotypes from the past, while in the next breath emphasising their abhorrence. ‘[...] It is precisely in the space between “foisting” and “abhorring” that the entire propaganda is located,’ wrote Michał Głowiński (*ibid.*, p. 219).

Until June 1967 the party propaganda had been free of anti-Semitism. ‘The Polish Jew had become a public taboo’ (Zaremba 2005, p. 327). As Marcin Zaremba emphasises, in the 1960s the system of legitimisation of power set out on the path of nationalism, though in doing so it did not reinforce civic but rather ethnic national ties, and fostered the growth of a ‘martyr complex of national megalomania and the viewing of the world through the prism of ethnic stereotypes and auto-stereotypes’ (*ibid.*, p. 332). According to Marcin Zaremba, it is precisely this fact that is of key importance for an understanding of the propaganda campaign of March and April 1968. ‘Its aggression, the type of arguments used, reflected the greatest complex of power from the patriotism and Polishness of the authorities’ (*ibid.*, p. 341). March 1968 was characterised by a conflict of legitimisation: the government attempted to declare its Polishness and at the same time to cast doubt upon the Polishness of its opponents. The Polish historian sees a further key to understanding the anti-Semitic campaign in fears that the protest of the students, following their gathering in the courtyard of the Warsaw University, would spread not only to other universities but also to other social groups, and especially among the working class, who in November 1967 had already made clear their resentment at the increase in food prices. The government therefore used the gathering of Jews as a safety valve, with the aid of which it vented some steam from the overheated pressure cooker of society, far from the real causes of its dissatisfaction. Furthermore, a number of Jews belonged to the working intelligentsia and held managerial functions, and this made stirring up anti-Semitic and anti-intellectual resentment on the part of the workers all the easier (*ibid.*, p. 342).

THE VISION OF A WORLD ATTRIBUTING THE BLAME FOR ALL EVIL TO THE JEWS

The events of March 1968 were presented as the consequence of a Jewish conspiracy, which furthermore related not only to Poland. It was written that ‘[...] it is no coincidence that the students in various places are protesting against the same things and in the same manner’ (Jeziorański — Zawieja 1968, p. 10). The vision of an international Jewish conspiracy reflected the conception of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The conclusions and analyses of the March propaganda attest to the fact that the writers were familiar with this book. Incidentally, at this time it was published in a new edition and was read at meetings of the party cadres (Osęka 2008, p. 235). The March propaganda thus demonstrated the endurance of certain mental clichés (*ibid.*, p. 239).



Dariusz Stola draws attention to the hybrid nature of accusations raised against Jews, in which old stereotypes were combined with new denunciations. The conviction regarding the alien and malicious character of the Jews and their interests, which are in conflict with our own Polish interests, the claim that their behaviour is the manifestation of a conspiracy, and the incitement of hatred by referring to their privileged status can all be considered clichés with their origin in the pre-war anti-Semitic literature (Stola 2018, p. 153). The old template of the Jew — usurer and unscrupulous merchant was now covered over with a new model — the image of the Jew — speculator embroiled in scandals.

Further accusations relate to revisionism, since revisionists are predominantly Jews, who are predominantly of bourgeois origin. Furthermore, Jews are suspect when viewed through the prism of the division of the world in the spirit of the Cold War: as a rule they have family and friends in the West (*ibid.*, p. 155). They also sympathise with Israel, 'and therefore also the American imperialists and West German revanchists — the greatest enemies of the Polish People's Republic'. As the Polish premier Cyrankiewicz proclaimed, 'it is not possible to be [...] loyal to socialist Poland and at the same time to imperialist Israel' (*Trybuna Ludu* 11. 4. 1968, p. 4).

Jewish nationalists could simultaneously be uprooted cosmopolitans, while Stalinists could be agents of American imperialism. During March 1968, articles appeared unmasking the hostile Jewish conspiracy directed against socialist Poland. They usually began with the question that is typical of all conspiracy theories: is it a mere coincidence? (Stola 2018, p. 162). Jews are not perceived as an ethnic group, but rather as an organisation; to be a Jew means to belong to a secret society (*ibid.*, p. 164):

Anti-Semitic slogans, variously masked and combined with a populist content, often directed against the intelligentsia, sunk into the [...] public consciousness all the better when accompanied also with a patriotic dimension, and sometimes also directly transparent anti-communist and anti-Soviet allusions (Kersten 1992, p. 167).

THE JEWISH COMMUNE

In post-war Poland, the ruling party struggled desperately with a deficiency of loyal cadres. These were lacking because in the 1930s Soviet Union had had the entire Polish communist elite shot. Nonetheless, within the USSR a certain section of the Polish communists survived, including comrades of Jewish origin who had fled to the Soviet Union before the German occupation. It was from these individuals that the first post-war cadres loyal to the party and the government were formed. As Feliks Tych noted:

In some places it led to a disproportionate representation of party members of Jewish origin. [...] it was precisely the Jews that Polish society viewed as being behind all the injustices of the communist government. In general the absurd conviction predominated that 'Poland is governed by Jews'. The hypersensitivity of society on this issue had its origin [...] especially in the fact that government posts had been inaccessible to Jews before the war. When, after the Second World War, Jews appeared in

the political class for the first time in Polish history, this was accompanied with a rise in anti-Semitism. For the majority of ethnic Poles, the Jew was 'alien' (Tych 2011, p. 387).



Within the framework of the anti-Zionist campaign of 1968, society was persuaded that it was precisely the Jews who were responsible for all the ills afflicting the country, and that 'they' were the main culprits of the Stalinist crimes. The communist party presented its new face as a force that drives out aliens: the Jews and their sympathisers (ibid., p. 402).

The stereotype of the 'Jewish commune' had its roots in the image of Jews spreading disease (Stola 2018, p. 157). Another layer was formed by the line of thought in connection with current events, presenting the Jews as the carriers of the Stalinist infection, while the authors of the anti-Zionist campaign were presented as the continuers of the Polish October of 1956, rescuing Poland from re-Stalinisation: 'Those who inspired the events of March 1968 were also indisputably aspiring to regain control of the security apparatus, so that they could freely implement their policy of betraying the interests of the Polish nation,' declared the newspaper *Żołnierz Wolności*:

The cliché of Jewish communism thus washed away the blood that had stained the hands of the Stalinists; it used an anti-communist slogan in order to reinforce the regime; it updated the ancient myth, which was adapted in order to suit the current situation, and it indirectly donned the mask of the executioner from the secret police with regard to those malcontents demanding socialism with a human face (ibid.).

THE JEW-TRAITOR

The stereotype of the Jewish commune was also linked with another hybrid: the cliché of the Jew — traitor to socialist Poland. This was founded on the conviction which had predominated already during the time of the First and Second World Wars, and which gained popularity during the Polish-Soviet War, that the Jews liked to collaborate with the enemies of Poland, in this case the Bolsheviks or Soviets (ibid., p. 158).

In 1968 the anti-communist aspect of this stereotype became its very opposite. The Jew who wished to harm Poland in March 1968 now stood on the side of Israel and the West (Stola 2004, p. 114). In the March propaganda, the typical example of the Jew-traitor is primarily the Jew-Stalinist who has now transformed himself into an American agent. He has the features of Judas Iscariot (Stola 2018, p. 160) and a dual name: Józef Światło — Izaak Fleischfarb, thus revealing his Jewish origin. As Dariusz Stola states, a dual identity is a synonym for the duplicity of the traitor. The author of the article from 'Soldier of Freedom' writes: 'these repulsive figures are not and have never been traitors to our homeland, the Polish People's Republic. Poland has never been their homeland [...] Their homeland is the American dollar' (ibid., p. 70).

It appears that the three aforementioned hybrids should be supplemented by a fourth, which is mentioned by Michał Głowiński. He recalls that according to the traditional anti-Semitic propaganda, the Jews swindled a whole range of Poles out of their property. In the communist country this motif returns into play, this time as



an image of the Jew who robs the Poles of their spiritual values, especially those that decide our identity, and how we are seen by the world. Above all the Jew attempts to deprive us of our primacy in the realm of suffering (Głowiński 1995, p. 87):

This primacy and the foremost position in terms of suffering was considered a certain form of national treasure, and whoever attempted to steal it from us was our enemy. After all, this primacy is a source of a certain superiority, and anyone who competes with us casts doubt upon our history, our privileged status, casts into doubt our wealth and all the values to which we have remained faithful throughout the whole of our thousand year history (ibid., p. 88).

Neither in Czechoslovakia nor in Poland did the communist state bodies hesitate to make use of all the clichés characteristic of European anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in order to pursue their particularistic goals. In this comparison it is then possible to point to the fact that in practice they also utilised their knowledge of the local environment and drew upon resources from a specifically Polish or Czech repertoire. The perverted socialist system exploited the legitimacy that had been conferred upon it thanks to the defeat of Nazi Germany, while simultaneously veering dangerously close to this state in terms of its anti-Semitism.

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