

The beatification of Maximilian Kolbe in 1971<sup>1</sup>, followed by his canonization in 1982<sup>2</sup> was particularly significant for establishing the tradition of Polish Catholic martyrdom<sup>3</sup> within the Holocaust. Holocaust remembrance in Poland has a contentious legacy. Under Soviet control, Holocaust remembrance was subject to Soviet narrative suppression<sup>4</sup> which targeted both the legacies of the Church and the realities of Jewish suffering<sup>5</sup>. The border realignments decided at Yalta and Potsdam<sup>6</sup> created an ethnically and religiously homogenous<sup>7</sup> Polish state. As ninety percent of the Polish population was now Catholic<sup>8</sup>, the Catholic Church represented a uniting force which relied on late nineteenth century nationalist thought which aligned Catholicism with Polish national identity<sup>9</sup>. Florian Lobont argues that the revival of 'ethnocentric symbols, myths and liturgical nationalisms' occurred post 1989<sup>10</sup>, which would seem logical following the demise of an oppressive and foreign communist state. However, I propose this revival occurred earlier and was created within a Catholic framework to separate the nation from the state and establish a Catholic identity in line with Polish tradition<sup>11</sup>. The canonization of Kolbe continued to shift Holocaust remembrance narratives away from the Jewish experience and coloured Auschwitz as a site of Polish Catholic martyrdom<sup>12</sup> instead of the location of Jewish genocide.

Discussions surrounding the Jewish experience during the Holocaust was pushed to the 'peripheries'<sup>13</sup> of remembrance. In standing with Stalinist antisemitism and the attempt to legitimise Soviet rule, the impetus behind state sanctioned remembrance lay with the recognition of Soviet martyrdom<sup>14</sup> and the liberation of Poland by the Red Army. In Polish memory, the Jewish experience during the Holocaust was understood to be a unique by product of German occupation and therefore not the responsibility of Poles to mourn. Poles also considered their own suffering to be equal to that of Jewish suffering. This however was not the reality, as anti-Jewish violence continued after the war most notably in the Kielce pogrom of 1946 where 40 Jews were killed<sup>15</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration 1945-1979* (Athens, 2003), p.189.

<sup>2</sup> CAN Staff, 'Relics of St. Maximilian Kolbe installed in Chapel of Polish Parliament', *Catholic News Agency*, December 28 2020, <Relics of St. Maximilian Kolbe installed in chapel of Polish parliament | Catholic News Agency> [accessed 24<sup>th</sup> March 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Thomas C Fox, 'The Holocaust Under Communism', in Dan Stone (ed.) *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York, 2005), p.425.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.421-424.

<sup>5</sup> Dieter Pohl, 'War, Occupation and the Holocaust in Poland', in Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York, 2005), pp.89-90.

<sup>6</sup> James E Will, 'The Church and Contemporary Social Dynamics in Poland', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 1:2 (April 1981), p.22.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Porter- Szücs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland* (New York, 2011), p.341.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>9</sup> Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics*, p.48-49.

<sup>10</sup> Florian Lobont, 'Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial in Post-Communist Eastern Europe', in Dan Stone (ed.) *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York, 2005), p.442.

<sup>11</sup> Annamaria Orla- Bukowska, 'New Threads on an Old Loom: National Memory and Social Identity in Post-war and Post-Communist Poland', in Richards Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu (Eds.), *The Politics of Memory in Post-war Europe* (Durham and London, 2006), p.189.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>13</sup> Huener *Ibid.*, pp.420-421.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Halik Kochanski, *Resistance the Underground War Against Hitler, 1939-1945*, (New York 2022), p.815.

the pogrom of 1968 where a further 20,000 Jews fled<sup>16</sup>. Arguably, the Jewish memory can never attain the same significance as that of Catholic martyrdom for Polish Holocaust remembrance, and that is partly to do with the fact that no agent has as much social power as the Catholic church did in deciding the memory framework. The Jew has become a silhouette figure, the injustice by which individual Catholic Poles could demonstrate their national and religious devotion. The idea of self-sacrifice connotes a death which is avoidable, and thereby making it more noble. The value of a life remembered was attached only to the martyr, and not to the nameless Jew.

In order to understand what is meant by 'Catholic nationalism', one must appreciate the history of the Catholic church in Poland and its ties to national identity, in line with what Mayer describes as an extensionist<sup>17</sup> approach. Many of the nineteenth century stereotypes and metaphors<sup>18</sup> which attempted to define what it meant to be Polish reappeared with increased agency in the post war period, disseminated by the Catholic press. Upon his return to Poland in 1978, Pope John Paul II made a statement which aligned Catholicism and nationalism by stating,

'Without Christ, it is impossible to understand the history of Poland.'<sup>19</sup>

The direct connection to the historic legacy of Catholic identity for Poles indicates the reliance on pre-war narratives to establish national identity within a Catholic framework. Religion in the nineteenth century provided a sense of national bearing for a divided landscape<sup>20</sup> in the post partition era. The historic suffering the Polish nation became associated with the sufferings of Christ in the collective Catholic mind<sup>21</sup>. Motifs of the passions of Christ became a way to contextualise the suffering of the Polish people, awaiting their opportunity for a national resurrection. Chrostowski emphasises the idea of Polish 'chosenness' an Old Testament idea that there is meaning in their suffering as it serves a greater religious and later, a national purpose<sup>22</sup>. At the end of the nineteenth century, Hoene-Wronski wrote of Polish messianism<sup>23</sup> for the first time which became a popular motif for romantic poetry, seen in the writings of Adam Mickiewicz,

'For the Polish nation did not die, its body lieth in the grave... the soul shall return again to the body and the nation shall rise'<sup>24</sup>,

This image was reiterated by Pope John Paul II upon his visit to Auschwitz in 1979 upon his visit to Auschwitz where he described the Holocaust as the,

'Golgotha of our century'<sup>25</sup>

Directly asserting the site as the location of Poland's national demise and the opportunity of the post-war period to redefine Polish national identity within a Catholic framework in the wake of such suffering. Due to the changed demographics of the Polish population, there was little emphasis on

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<sup>16</sup> Fox, 'Holocaust under Communism', p.427.

<sup>17</sup>Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* (New York, 1990), p.454.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Modras, 'The Catholic Press in Interwar Poland on the Jewish Question: Metaphor and the Developing Rhetoric of Exclusion', *East European Jewish Affairs*, 24:1 (1994), pp.49-51.

<sup>19</sup> Porter- Szücs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism*, p.3.

<sup>20</sup> Orła- Bukowska, 'New Threads on an Old Loom', pp.179-180.

<sup>21</sup> Waldemar Chrostowski, 'The Suffering, Chosenness and Mission of The Polish Nation', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 11:4 (August 1991), p.2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>24</sup> Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics*, p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

Jewish suffering in the memories of the Holocaust, and instead remembrance focused on the experience of non-Jewish ethnic Poles, of which made up one third of Poland's wartime losses<sup>26</sup>. The Catholic press were the most distinct proponents of the association between Catholicism and nationalism. Catholic publications accounted for 23% of interwar Polish press<sup>27</sup>. The idea of the 'Polak-Katolik'<sup>28</sup> was distinguished against both ethnic and religious minorities but became the primary source of antisemitism as Jews were seen as the greatest threat to the stability of the Polish nation. This is evidence in the publication *Przewodnik Katolicki* declaring the Jewish Question as the greatest national task as late as April 1939<sup>29</sup>. The institutional strength of the Polish Catholic church increased in the 1970s, arguably due to the election of a Polish Pope and the national unifying effect of his visit to Poland. From 1973-79 there was a 43% increase in the number of those admitted into Diocesan seminaries<sup>30</sup>. In 1980, the government agreed to allow Sunday Mass to be broadcasted over the radio, the first access of the Church to public media since communism rule began<sup>31</sup> and in 1981, 93% of Poles were Catholic by Baptism<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, Father Jerzy Popieluszkos who was associated with the Solidarity movement, held a mass for the Fatherland in Warsaw on the last Sunday of every month<sup>33</sup>.

Auschwitz memory was constructed within cultural and political frameworks, of which the Jewish experience did not become a priority of remembrance until after the fall of communism<sup>34</sup>. It became a site of national martyrdom in the Polish collective mind, the location of Polish political prisoners and reconstructed to show the valiance of national Polishness suffering in line with metaphor of Poland as 'Christ'. Witold's Report, details the experience of Witold Pilecki, imprisoned in Auschwitz on behalf of the resistance and recalls the instance of,

'An old priest stepped forward and asked the commander to select him and to release that young one from penalty'<sup>35</sup>.

This priest has been identified as Maximilian Kolbe, a Roman Catholic who was transferred to Auschwitz in 1940. On July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1941, Kolbe volunteered himself in the place of Franciszek Gajowniczek to be taken to Block 11<sup>36</sup> with nine others and starved to death as punishment for a prisoner's escape. After two weeks, where he led the other prisoners in prayer, he was administered a phenol injection and died. The Polish suffering became the focus of commemoration, aided by the establishment of the 'Department of Museums and Monuments of Polish Martyrology' by the Provisional government<sup>37</sup>. While the extermination of the Jews was acknowledged, it was deemphasised. The visibility of Roman Catholic commemoration and Polish martyrdom can be seen in the ceremonies around the beatification of Maximilian Kolbe. In October 1972, a crowd gathered

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<sup>26</sup> Pohl, 'War, Occupation', p.105.

<sup>27</sup> Joanna Michlic, 'The Open Church and the Closed Church and the discourse on Jews in Poland between 1989 and 2000, in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 37:4 (December 2004), p.464.

<sup>28</sup> Porter- Szücs, *Faith and Fatherland*, pp.294-299.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.340.

<sup>30</sup> Will, 'The Church and Contemporary Dynamics', p.3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>33</sup> Orla- Bukowska, 'New Threads on an Old Loom', p.192.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.XIV.

<sup>35</sup> Pilecki, Witold, *Witold's Report* (1942), trans. Jacek Kucharski, Internet Archive < WITOLD'S REPORT : Witold Pilecki : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive > ,p.42.

<sup>36</sup> Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics*, p.203.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.52.

on the fields of Birkenau. This was the first large scale exclusively Catholic<sup>38</sup> event which occurred at the site, establishing the Catholic framework by which commemoration and remembrance was taking place and placing Auschwitz within this framework. Reportedly, 90,000 people attended<sup>39</sup>. The sacrifice of Kolbe cannot be undermined, but the legacy of memory which coalesced around him further isolated the reality of Jewish suffering and sacrifices which were made by Jewish individuals which are arguably of the same scale. This can be seen in the case of Janusz Korczak, a Polish individual who ran both Christian and Jewish orphanages and whose story is commemorated in the Ringleblum Archives. Albeit being offered sanctuary by both the resistance and by an SS officer who recognised him, he did not abandon the 200 children he looked after as they left the Warsaw Ghetto for Treblinka. Treblinka is further significant in showing the negligence of the Jewish experience in Poland's Holocaust memory. In spite of 800,000 Jews being murdered there between Spring 1942 and August 1943<sup>40</sup> there was no extensive investigation or excavation of the site until approximately ten years ago<sup>41</sup>, nor has there been significant commemoration for the Uprising which was orchestrated by Treblinka prisoners, the majority of whom were Jewish and which led to the closing down of the camp. As the foundation of nationalism remained rooted in Catholicism, seen in a memo from the Warsaw Archdiocese from 1976 which said,

'In Poland, attacks on Catholicism are attacks on the national spirit, on the national heritage and on our very selves'<sup>42</sup>

Incidents of Jewish rebellion and revolt or Jewish martyrdom was excluded within the Catholic national framework of Holocaust popular memory as they were not seen as Polish in the Catholic mind, the consequence of antisemitic rhetoric and indifference on behalf of Catholic Poles.

The separation of the church and state<sup>43</sup> under Soviet rule reinforced ideas of Polish Catholic nationhood, as it allowed for Catholicism to maintain a national framework, separate from the communist authority. As the stereotype of Judeo-Communism<sup>44</sup> remained embedded in antisemitic narratives with roots back to the 1920's<sup>45</sup>, Catholic ideology and therefore national identity remained uncorrupted by this influence in the minds of Catholics. The 1980s have a distinct historiographic significance. The success of the Solidarity movement and the opening of Soviet archives presupposed a shift away from Soviet dominated narratives which centred on Soviet resistance and allowed for new national narratives<sup>46</sup> to take hold. The association of Solidarity with Catholic symbolism<sup>47</sup> aligned the movement with the Catholic population but also emphasised Catholicism as the foundation of nationalist ideology. There remained little focus on the legitimacy of the Jewish experience due to the diminished Jewish population and the limitations which continues to restrict the publications of the Jewish Historical Institute<sup>48</sup>. The Catholic church in

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.205.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> BBC News, 'Treblinka: Revealing the hidden graves of the Holocaust', 23 January 2012, {Treblinka: Revealing the hidden graves of the Holocaust - BBC News} Accessed 26.03.2023.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Brian, *Faith and Fatherland*, p. 349.

<sup>43</sup> Will, 'The Church and Contemporary Dynamics', pp.24-25

<sup>44</sup> Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics*, p.41.

<sup>45</sup> Chrostowski, *The Suffering, Chosenness*, p.7.

<sup>46</sup> Dieter, 'War, Occupation', pp.89-91.

<sup>47</sup> Mikołaj Stanisław Kunicki, *Between the Brown and the Red: Nationalism, Catholicism and Communism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poland* (Athens, 2012), pp.183-184.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas C Fox, 'The Holocaust Under Communism', in Dan Stone (ed.) *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York, 2005), p.426.

Poland did begin to take a critical approach towards Holocaust remembrance in the 1990s with the publishing of a pastoral letter signed by twenty bishops in January 1991. It was read throughout Poland's 20,000 parishes. The paradox of accountability is still present in phrases such as,

'It is this land that became the grave of several million Jews, not by our will nor by our hand'<sup>49</sup>

But it goes on to acknowledge the responsibility of the Church in the dissemination of antisemitic rhetoric,

We particularly suffer because of those Catholics who were in any way instrumental in causing death of the Jews... we express our sincere regret for all the causes of antisemitism that have occurred on Polish soil'<sup>50</sup>

this letter is contentious as it only references antisemitism during the Holocaust and the issue of Catholic indifference instead of an explicit condemnation of the culture of anti-Jewish hate which was fostered in the interwar period and solidified as the foundation of ties to a national state. The fact this statement occurred only after the fall of communism suggests that the ideological basis of Catholic nationalism could not survive in the face of international influence and pressure which forced a critical review of skewed historical memory. Therefore, Catholic nationalism reached its peak and exerted the most influence on collective memory during the nineteen eighties. The fall of communism saw the opening of Soviet archives and the shift of western scholarship towards Poland<sup>51</sup> which brought a need for critical inquiry into the Polish holocaust memory and the rediscovery of Polish- Jewish relations<sup>52</sup>. Yet, the tradition of Polish martyrology has remained pertinent even to this day. In 2022, Pope Francis declared a couple who were killed by Nazi soldiers for hiding Jews as martyrs<sup>53</sup>, re-establishing the idea that a sacrifice for others is a sacrifice for the country and thereby for Catholicism. The Christian response to the Holocaust can be seen in the context of the antisemitism, which was rampant in Poland before the war, and encouraged by the Catholic press<sup>54</sup>.

The canonization of Maximilian Kolbe presented the most visible display of Polish Catholic nationalism. Holocaust remembrance in Poland focused on creating a culture of national martyrdom around the suffering of Poles under German occupation and was necessary to form a national identity outside of the oppression of a Soviet political state. The creation of a homogenous cultural state following the war created the social context for catholic rhetoric to become the foundation of collective memory which detracted from the Jewish experience and attempted to reorganise Polish narratives around historic trends related to inseparability of Polishness and Catholicism. While the fall of communism opened the opportunity for international pressure surrounding a critical revisit of the past, the Polish memory remained within this catholic framework. Arguably the overrepresentation of the historic relationship of the Catholic church in Poland to Jews acts as a deflection from the role of the Catholic church's indifference to Jewish suffering during the

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<sup>49</sup> Polonsky, Anthony and Michlic, Joanna B., Introduction, in Anthony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (Eds.), *The Neighbour Responds the Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, (Princeton and Oxford, 2004), p.19.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>51</sup> Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography a Jewish Perspective* (London 2003), p.358.

<sup>52</sup> Pohl, 'War, Occupation', p.101.

<sup>53</sup> 'Poles executed for hiding Jews are declared martyrs by Pope' December 17 2022, The Associated Press, ABC News. {Poles executed for hiding Jews are declared martyrs by pope - ABC News (go.com)}

<sup>54</sup> Kochanski, *Resistance*, p.267

Holocaust. Individuals within the institution who could be considered as aiding the Holocaust hide behind a guise of piety, their focus instead pertaining to the protection of a national Catholic state of which Jews are seen as the ideological enemy. The embedding of antisemitic rhetoric aided by the legacy of the catholic press and the almost invisible Jewish presence contributed to the continued obstruction of commemoration for Jewish suffering, even on the physical grounds of Jewish genocide demonstrating the triumph of Catholic nationalism in dictating Poland's Holocaust remembrance.

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