Between the Brown and the Red. Nationalism, Catholicism, and Communism in Twentieth-Century Poland—The Politics of Bolesław Piasecki

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Between the Brown and the Red by Mikołaj Stanisław Kunicki represents a much-needed contribution to the study of religion, nationalism, and Communism in Poland, and, more broadly, to modern Polish history. Through a fascinating biography of Boleslaw Piasecki, a controversial political activist and writer, Kunicki paints a complex picture of twentieth-century Poland and poses probing questions about the nature of church-state relations, affinities between different political ideologies, and continuities between seemingly antagonistic political regimes.

The book is structured chronologically around critical phases in Piasecki's life. The first phase is marked by Piasecki's leadership of the National Radical Movement (Falanga), a Fascist organization that promoted anti-Semitic, ultra-Catholic, and anti-Communist ideas. The second one is his activity during the Second World War, when Piasecki led a unit of the Home Army (AK). Arrested and interrogated by Soviets, Piasecki convinced them that his experiences and contacts could prove useful for the new Communist state. That marked the beginning of his political career in People's Republic of Poland. As the leader of PAX Association, which gathered Catholics favorable toward Communist authorities, he strove to act as mediator between the Catholic Church and the Communist authorities and developed his own vision of dialogue between Catholicism and Marxism. Criticized and alienated by Catholic authorities for his attempts to subordinate the church to the state, Piasecki did not fulfill his political ambitions, never managing to transform PAX into a political party. Supporting the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968, objecting to democratic reforms, and promoting a pro-Soviet, authoritarian, and nationalistic course in Polish policies, Piasecki's socio-political project fused nationalist, Communist, and religious ideas. As Kunicki's study demonstrates, his political trajectory needs not be seen as a trajectory from Fascism to Communism but rather as an embrace of different ideological influences and an ability to adapt them to current circumstances.
One of the strongest points of the book is the use of Piasecki’s biography as a means of examining key moments of Polish modern history. Piasecki’s movement between different ideological systems exemplifies important trends and developments in the twentieth century, in Poland and beyond. A strong comparative angle is the study’s biggest asset. It is also what makes Kunicki stand out among Polish scholars writing the history of Poland, who tend to discuss the “Polish case” in national frames. Worth mentioning here is, for example, Kunicki’s discussion of attempts to marry Catholicism with Socialism in various European countries (such as the French philosophical thought of Emanuel Mounier). Frequent references to cooperation and mutual influences between different Fascist movements in interwar Europe are both informative and inspiring for present-day debates on cooperation between far-right groups in the contemporary world.

Moreover, in presenting the ideological landscape "between the brown and the red," the book is far from offering a black-and-white picture of the events, personal decisions, and attitudes discussed. A variety of sources (including archival materials, diaries, letters, treatises, and interviews) enables Kunicki to paint a vivid picture of shifting alliances and to inquire into various motivations behind decisions of political leaders, ranging from zealous support of an ideology to pragmatism and conformism. Such an approach characterizes not only Kunicki’s reconstruction of Piasecki’s path but also his take on Polish Communist leaders and Piasecki’s opponents. What is particularly important, in my view, is the author’s success in showing the different faces of Polish Catholicism under Communism. Kunicki demonstrates the ambiguity of Catholic hierarchies, regarding, for instance, exchanges of privileges with Communist authorities or their passivity during the anti-Semitic campaign. His observations regarding the one-thousand-years celebration of the Christianization of Poland (dated to 966), which promoted a folk devotion (in line with Cardinal Wyszyński’s agenda) and was criticized by the Catholic intelligentsia, are crucial for understanding the face of Polish Catholicism today.

The setting of Kunicki’s book is the political arena and all the people presented in it, including Catholic bishops, who act first and foremost as political players. While such an approach is clear in light of the book’s scope, it does leave some questions unanswered. If there is anything I miss in the book it is precisely a look beyond the strictly political realm. References to Piasecki’s personal and family life are surprisingly scarce. For instance, information about his second wife and their five children is mentioned only in endnotes. Women are nearly completely absent from the book; this absence tells us a lot about gender relations in Communist power structures, yet, in order to be “telling,” it needs to be at least commented on. The murder of Piasecki’s son from his first marriage is—unsurprisingly—described as devastating for the PAX leader, but the point is not corroborated in the book. Once again, the lack of such details may be understandable given the emphasis on the “politics of Bolesław Piasecki,” as the subtitle suggests. However, some additional observations on Piasecki’s life outside of politics would have complemented his discussion by adding more nuances and perhaps more credibility to his portrait.

Furthermore, there is very little society in the book. Readers learn very little about society’s responses to the church’s and the state’s policies, some of which were clear and strategic responses to the public mood. Put differently, a sharper focus on the church-state-society triangle, its dynamics and its effects, would have made parts of the book more compelling. Kunicki himself provides a good example of such an approach in the closing lines to the chapter on the Communist anti-Semitic campaign, where he reflects on the effects of March 1968
on Polish society and a "collective amnesia" of those events in Poland (p. 161).

The absence of "society" is clear in the book's concluding remarks, in which the author briefly discusses the development of church-state relations and the use of religious-national rhetoric by right-wing parties in post-1989 Poland. Kunicki's description of clashes between "civic nationalism" and "ethnonationalism" leaves aside the question of the continuing attachment of Polish society to Catholic rituals and creed, and the role of Catholicism beyond national identity. His point on the importance of "socioeconomic concerns" vis-à-vis ethno-confessional ones deserves a more elaborated discussion, too. For, on the one hand, socioeconomic concerns have mattered tremendously in shaping electoral choices in post-Communist society, but, on the other, they also tended to be linked to and framed in "religious-national" language. Generally, the underdeveloped concluding remarks are in contrast to the main body of the book, specifically because they focus on the most recent developments.

Kunicki suggests that an accident has occurred in Poland by mentioning the success of an openly anti-clerical political leader, Janusz Palikot, and he wonders whether the leader of the Law and Justice Party, Jarosław Kaczyński, may constitute Piasecki's heir. As I write these words, two years after the book's publication, Palikot's political failure has become an object of jokes while the governing party (Civic Platform), in theory a centrist and liberal one, is winning over the Catholic hierarchies by helping to cover sex scandals within the church and allocating yet more funds for church buildings, thereby violating the principles of church and state separation. It is worth asking whether the people Kunicki writes about on the final pages will have any relevance and will be recognized by readers in twenty years time. What his study brilliantly demonstrates is why figures like Piasecki "made history" and why their legacy continues to shape the current national-religious landscape in Poland.

To sum up, Kunicki does not need to circumscribe the relevance of his findings by seeking to draw ideological-political lineages. The real importance of his findings is illustrative and not genealogical and it lies in his scrutiny of the ways in which the fusion of nationalism and religion, the state and the church, tends to dominate most of, if not all, aspects of Polish politics.

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