

The anti-Zionist campaign 1967-1968: a new synthesis (short summary)

This project is to produce a new, comprehensive and multi-perspective interpretation of the “anti-Zionist campaign”, which the communist government of Poland ran in 1967-1968. The campaign, consisting of a barrage of propaganda in the media, hundreds of rallies and meetings serving as the scene for the rituals of condemnation of the alleged enemies, and harassment of those labeled as Zionists, begun in reaction to student protests in Warsaw in March 1968, but it had been in the making since June 1967, when a controversy about alleged Zionists among Polish Jews, fueled by the biased reports of the Security Service, opened a conflict inside the leadership of the communist party and allowed for a secret, crawling purge in the army and media. The most aggressive stage of the campaign lasted just a few months and brought a wave of emigration of almost half of the Polish Jews and many Poles of Jewish origin, and almost complete implosion of the organized Jewish life in Poland.

The project is to verify and develop the hypothesis that the campaign was a compound of three elements: of a Soviet-type hate campaign aimed at counter-mobilization against the youth rebellion; of a populist tendency in the communist establishment, which was instrumental for both the mobilization of the masses and intra-party faction struggle; and of the eruption of bottom-up resentment and ethnic prejudice. The first component requires investigation of the top level decision-making, the working of the party, propaganda and security apparatuses and the pre-existing patterns of such campaigns. The second one requires content analysis of the texts and images deployed in the campaign and intra-party faction struggle - seen from the perspectives of new theories of populism. The third component requires analysis of the campaign as a mass social phenomenon, with many participants acting out of diverse motivations, anti-Jewish prejudice in particular. While the hypothesis focuses at the participants in the campaign, the project will also look at the people who were its targets and opponents, to identify and analyze their main coping strategies, in particular emigration, protest and evasion.

The broader context, which the project will take into account, includes the inter-generational conflicts, evident in the youth rebellion, but visible also in the party, state and economic bureaucracies, where a cohort of frustrated apparatchiks welcomed the campaign as a way to open paths for advancing their careers. Another important context is the “global 1960s”: if we cannot understand the rebellion of Polish youth in isolation from similar rebellions elsewhere, we should also look at the campaign as a part of the transnational reactions against the rebellion and of the cultural anxieties in a fast-changing world of 1960s.

The project aims at combining the factual knowledge accumulated in the last two decades in various studies of the Polish 1968 with new perspectives on and theories of the communist rule and societies, new theories of populism, and with a fresh look at specific key events of the campaign, to produce a new, comprehensive and advanced monograph of the campaign. Such analysis will not only bring a better, more nuanced understanding of the campaign, but should offer insights into the broader question of the nature of the post-Stalin regime of “really existing socialism”.