

Strangers Among Their Own
Political and Identity Dilemmas of Polish Communists of Jewish Origin
1918-1968

Did the communist Jews function in society and the communist party the same way as the communists who were ethnically non-Jewish, or did they constitute a specific group with slightly different practices?

Which experiences of Polish Jewish communists were common among the German and Soviet communists of Jewish origin?

This project seeks to find answers to these questions.

The main aim of research is to examine the fate, attitudes, and political and identity dilemmas of communists of Jewish origin based on an analysis of their documents. That will create a group biography of Polish communists of Jewish origin born around 1918, whose common fate was entangled with the history of the Polish state. It was a small group that nevertheless played an essential role in post-war Poland due to the dramatic consequences of the Second World War and the Holocaust. The group included leading Polish intellectuals, such as Zygmunt Bauman, Włodzimierz Brus, and Bronisław Baczko. It also included individuals recognized as notorious Stalinist criminals, such as Helena Wolińska and Samuel Morel. Their collective figure played a bold and negative role in the Polish Imaginarium as the personification of Judeo-communism.

The myth of Judeo-communism had a tremendous impact on European Jewry. But many historians have preferred not to deal with the uncomfortable, uneasy phenomena. Jewish participation in establishing the communist system is usually presented from an external political perspective: to measure the proportion of Jews among party members, their positions, and their influence on power. In contradistinction, the project proposes a new, "internal" perspective to explore the sources of the political choices of communists of Jewish origin, as well as their consequences.

A common belief taken from religious Jews was that "a Communist Jew was no longer a Jew." However, this is misleading. The tangled relationship with their Jewish heritage significantly shaped the attitudes of communists of Jewish origin, even those who camouflaged their identity after the Holocaust.

Comparison with the generational experience and background of communists of Jewish origin from Germany and the USSR will allow situating the group in the context of the transnational history of European Jews.