The Polish Review

Mikołaj Stanisław Kunicki, *Between the Brown and the Red: Nationalism, Catholicism, and Communism in 20th-Century Poland—The Politics of Bolesław Piasecki*

As the tripartite title suggests, this splendid and important book is much more than a political biography of the fascinating figure of Bolesław Piasecki (1915–1979), the interwar fascist political leader who—alone of his kind in Eastern Europe—managed to continue his political career after the war in the communist period. For that reason alone, this book would be worth perusing: to figure out how someone from the far right not only survived but even seemed to thrive politically under communist rule. Were we not taught that the communists wiped out fascism in Eastern Europe? Yet *Between the Brown and the Red* shows otherwise. Fascism—or certainly radical right-wing nationalism—continued on into the postwar period, if in a somewhat altered state, having embraced socialism. In this way, Piasecki’s PAX—a pro-regime movement of progressive Catholics that endeavored to convince the nationalist Right to embrace communism—“was the nationalist Right under communism” (p. 4). So much for the conventional wisdom.

This political biography is organized in chronological fashion. Chapters one and two cover interwar Poland and introduce Bolesław Piasecki, a radical Catholic nationalist, and his political activities. From a young age he was involved in politics, eventually serving as the leader of a fascist group known as the National Radical Movement. Not above using violence, its members were “anti-Semitic, antileftist, antiliberal, and ultra-Catholic” (p. 16). Piasecki eventually was given control over the youth branch of the Camp of National Unity (OZN), the Union of Young Poland, for a spell. His writings from the interwar period indicate that Piasecki wanted Poland to become—in Kunicki’s words—a “protototalitarian state integrated on the basis of ethnicity, Catholicism, and mass organization” (p. 3). Chapter three details his wartime exploits. Piasecki led a small group of right-wing combatants that eventually merged with the Home Army. He proved generally capable, respected, and lucky to miss the unhappy fate of so many soldiers, dying in the fight or after it, at the hands of the Soviets.

The remaining four substantive chapters deal with Piasecki’s postwar political activities—a paradox that there should be anything to write of, if one takes the usual view that postwar Eastern Europe was cleansed of fascism. Although the communists arrested Piasecki in late 1944, before a year had passed he would be released. Some assumed he had become a Soviet agent, although that cannot be proved. Most importantly, Piasecki became an ally of the communists, who did more than just tolerate the former fascist. With its publishing house and periodicals, Piasecki’s PAX promoted his new vision of Poland as a synthesis of socialism, nationalism, and Catholicism (the last central to his understanding of what it meant to be Polish).

The leader of PAX was a thorn in the side of Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, the Polish primate, who was against collaborating with the regime. Although his dream
of establishing his own political party after the war was never realized, Piasecki had the ear of major communist figures in the Polish People’s Republic. The head of PAX had been a strong advocate of purging the Jewish communists in 1968, which helped to turn the communist state into a national-populist one. Yet that was to be the nationalist politician’s final “crusade” (p. 140): in the Gierek period his hardline views would become unwanted as well as increasingly irrelevant.

The concluding chapter masterfully takes the reader from Piasecki’s age through Solidarity and martial law, up to 1989 and even beyond, to the Law and Justice (PiS) Party and Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, head of Radio Maryja, who Kunicki sees as carrying Piasecki’s banner. Indeed, as this reviewer was reading the book, it was hard not to think of present-day events and the current ethnoconfessional nationalism of the governing party. Kunicki has given this reader much food for thought.

Not only is Kunicki’s dispassionate analysis superb, the book is elegantly written, making it a pleasure to read. *Between the Brown and the Red* easily serves as a fine introduction to twentieth-century developments in the country as seen through the prism of the three “-isms”: nationalism, Catholicism, and communism. The author’s competence goes far beyond Polish events, as evident from his absolutely stellar contextualization of what was happening in Poland within a larger European framework. This book should be read by anyone interested in twentieth-century Polish history, by scholars of church-state relations anywhere in Europe, as well as by those concerned about Polish developments in the twenty-first century. The Polish and Polish-American Studies Series of the Ohio University Press should be commended for publishing yet another excellent monograph.

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Polish history in the twentieth century is full of difficult, even tragic, episodes and admirable individuals who managed to live through these tragedies while retaining their essential humanity. Beth Holmgren’s new book recounts the story of one of these everyday heroes, Krystyna Bierzyńska, in the larger context of twentieth-century Polish and Jewish history. While Bierzyńska’s story is inherently worthy of the reader’s interest (and full of interesting, even harrowing, details), Holmgren’s contextualization of this life in the larger history of this individual’s nation/s (both Polish and Jewish) lends this slim volume considerable significance for historians and students that goes beyond a mere biography.

Krystyna Bierzyńska was born in Warsaw in the spring of 1928. Her parents belonged to the well-to-do middle class; her father was a successful businessman. Her family was of Jewish background but Holmgren presents little evidence that