Oh Father, Can You Forgive My Sins?
A Study of the Polish Church's Tainted Past

Lisa Lin

Writer's Comment: *A major theme of Professor Quinn's History 146B course is that many conflicts and social problems prevalent throughout Europe today are rooted in unresolved issues from the past. For this research assignment, I had to investigate a controversial topic in contemporary Europe and trace its origins to political or social developments in the second half of the 20th century. In the beginning, the prompt overwhelmed me because I had not analyzed current events in this context before. But after thumbing through numerous newspaper articles, I was amazed at the scope of relevant topics. I was particularly intrigued by the media storm over the discovery of Soviet collaborators within the Polish Catholic Church because it revealed that the Communist legacy continues to cast its shadow over Polish society. Thus, I examined how Poland's Communist past and its Church have shaped the people's national identity. Writing this paper I realized that I am passionate about studying history because the past indeed helps us understand our society today.*

—Lisa Lin

Instructor's Comment: *Lisa Lin's work on the current political controversy regarding the Catholic Church's past Communist links combines the best of historical writing and journalism. The assignment, to write a research paper about Europe since 1945, preferably dealing with an unresolved issue from Europe's recent past, challenges students. Lisa jumped into the assignment courageously: she not only chose a topic currently debated in the press, but also one about Poland, a country rarely studied in depth by undergraduates. Lisa not only mastered the historical background regarding the role of the Catholic Church in bolstering postwar Polish national identity, but also investigated its complex relationship to Polish dissident movements. Lisa's analysis of the*

heated debate in Poland about the lustration of Church figures suggests a rocky road for post-Communist countries' transitions to democratic societies. Thus her paper is about more than Poland; it offers insights applicable to many states trying to build democratic institutions and vibrant civil societies.

—Erika Quinn, History Department

About thirty years ago, a religious leader betrayed his countrymen's trust to the Polish secret police, or Saluzba Bezpieczenstwa (SB), so he could fund his scholarly trips overseas. Until the late 1980s, Stanislaw Wielgus lived a double life, serving as a bishop in Plock while working as an SB agent behind closed doors. But after the Vatican appointed Wielgus as the archbishop of Warsaw, a right-wing Polish newspaper, *Gazeta Polska*, raised suspicions of Wielgus's past by accusing him of collaborating with the Polish secret service. These accusations spurred a series of investigations that, early in 2007, uncovered the former archbishop's tainted record. Upon the discovery of incriminating documents that proved his involvement with the SB, Wielgus resigned his position as archbishop and now must repent his past sins. Like Wielgus, many members of the Catholic Church have recently been investigated for involvement with the Polish secret police. The increasing instances of public vetting of the Church reflect Polish people's commitment to uncovering the truth of their past and the gradual separation of Catholicism from Polish national identity.

The controversy concerning Wielgus is only one example of a wider movement to purge Poland of former Soviet collaborators. Since 1989, Poles have tried to lift the veil of Communist secrecy by exposing the identity of numerous SB agents through public vetting. But only recently have members of the Catholic Church been included in this quasi-witch hunt for Soviet informers. Immediately after the Communist era, Polish citizens supported public vetting of politicians, but they did not place the Catholic Church under similar scrutiny because the Church was still an integral part of the nation's identity. While the Church has maintained its influence among Polish citizens since the end of the Cold War, its hegemony over Polish identity has been declining. As Poland's Communist past becomes more distant and as the Catholic Church loosens its ties with Polish identity, citizens are able to navigate the complicated nature of the country's history.

The roots of the Polish-Catholic identity emerged after World War I, when Polish territories were reunited after a long period of partition from 1795 to 1918. After Poland's reunification, nationalists launched an expansive campaign to bring ethnic Poles under one national identity. As part of this process, Roman Dmowski, the founder of a nationalist group, coined the term Polak-katolik[1] (literally translated as Poland-Catholic), meaning that the Polish and Catholic identity should be inextricably linked together.[2] The state, along with nationalist advocates, encouraged Poles to "imagine their national identity in association with Roman Catholicism."[3] Just as, centuries ago, the Polish people mobilized behind the Cross to fight for nationalism, Dmowski argued that Poles in the 1920s should do so as well. Over the years, Polak-katolik discourse proved to be widely popular as more Poles relied on the Polish-Catholic identity to distinguish themselves from foreign regimes that controlled their nation. This Polak-katolik identity was so strong that it prevailed under the Nazi regime and maintained its strength throughout the Soviet era in Poland.

Initially, the party-state attempted to suppress Polish nationalism and the Catholic Church's influence in Polish society. However, when the Poles' discontent with the Soviet government escalated during the 1970s, Soviet authorities had no choice but to cede some of its control to the Polish people. Although Communist authorities promised progress to its satellite states, ineffective Soviet policies plagued Polish society; the party-state relied on a "malfunctioning" command economy and political oppression to control inhabitants of the Eastern bloc.[4] Even if Poles wanted to implement their own remedies to alleviate economic problems, they could not overcome the regime's restrictions on their political and economic autonomy. Increasingly, frustrated Poles questioned the legitimacy of Soviet policies because the regulations were imposed by a foreign government, and they did not address the interests of Polish peo-

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[1]Genevieve Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2006), 57

[2]Ibid., 56.

[3]Ibid.

[4]The Polish League for Independence, "An Alternative Political Programme of the Polish Opposition," in Peter Raina, *Political Opposition in Poland* (London: Poets and Painters Press, 1976), 469.

ple.[5] Moreover, the government suppressed any effort to organize public gatherings that were not sanctioned by the state.[6] Consequently, the people needed to find a platform, hidden from the immediate purview of Soviet authorities, which offered an opportunity for them to voice their grievances.

Soviet oppression, then, solidified bonds between the Catholic Church and the Polish populace. Because Communist authorities restricted public gatherings, the Church became a haven for people to express their desires for "genuine national sovereignty."[7] People sought guidance from the Church because, unlike leaders of the Communist party, members of the clergy were also Polish. Furthermore, the Church, like the Polish people, wanted to break from Soviet oppression. Clerical leaders also provided moral guidance and a sense of community that the Soviets tried to extinguish.[8] So the Catholic Church invoked its "'traditional' role of guardian and defender of the nation"[9] and united with Polish citizens to fight against the totalitarian regime.

Not only were people using religious faith as a form of resistance to the Soviet government, but the Church itself promoted Polish nationalism through Catholicism. Pope John Paul II's visit to Poland in June of 1979 provides one example of this. The Pope's return to his native country drew immense attention. Reportedly, 20 to 25 percent of Poland's population "gathered along the Pope's motorcade route."[10] In one of the sermons he delivered before massive crowds, the Pope spoke about the Polak-katolik ideology: "without Christ it is impossible to understand the history of Poland."[11] By making this claim, John Paul II recognized the Church's importance to nationalist movements in Poland. After witnessing the pontiff's highly publicized trip, more Poles rallied behind the Church to fight Soviet communism. Eventually, it became clear to Soviet

[5]Zubrzycki, 60.

[6]The Polish League for Independence, 469.

[7]Ibid., 470.

[8]Norbert A. Zmijewski, *The Catholic-Marxist Ideological Dialogue in Poland* (Vermont: Dartmouth Publishing Co., 1991), 125.

[9]Zubrzycki, 60.

[10]Zubrzycki, *Crosses of Auschwitz*, 65.

[11]Brian Porter, "The Catholic Nation: Religion, Identity, and the Narratives of Polish History," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (2001): 290.

authorities that the ties between Polish people and the Church were indestructible.

Throughout the 1980s, Solidarity, the strongest source of opposition in Poland, also espoused Catholic teachings to mobilize supporters against the Soviet regime.[12] Solidarity leaders borrowed traditional Catholic icons—such as the cross—and used them as symbols of Polish dissidence from Soviet authorities.[13] And during workers' protests, they alluded to stories of Catholic martyrdom that illustrated the Church's involvement in the long history of Poland's struggle for independence.[14] These religious icons and Catholic rhetoric—by the people, the Church and political leaders—effectively united and inspired people to oppose totalitarian oppression. Therefore, the Polish-Catholic identity remained strong even after the party-state collapsed.

When the Soviet Union finally relinquished control over its satellite states in 1989, Poles tried to find ways of coping with their Communist past. Although Polish citizens gained independence from the oppressive regime, people also expressed uncertainty about how to address the Soviet absence.[15] When journalist Eva Hoffman traveled to Eastern Europe in 1989, she observed that while it was simple to destroy physical symbols of the past such as Soviet statues and relics, cleansing Polish society of Communist "habits and modes of thought" was difficult.[16] This difficulty was highlighted by the issue of Soviet collaborators. Like citizens in other former Soviet states, many Poles wanted to depart from the Soviet system based on secrecy and establish "openness and confidence" within the government.[17] They wanted to learn the truth of their state's history. In other post-Communist countries of the Eastern bloc, the pursuit of openness and truth led to mass purges of public officials, a process also known as lustration, or "the systematic vetting of public officials for links with the Communist-era security services."[18] A similar process unfolded in Poland.

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[12]Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 67.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 3

[16]Ibid., 36.

[17]The Polish League for Independence, "Alternative Political Programme," 472.

[18]Aleks Szczerbiak, "Dealing with the Communist Past or Politics of the

Nationalistic right-wing political leaders promoted public vetting because they thought that it was an appropriate measure for dealing with the past.[19] They wanted "retroactive justice"[20] so that former Soviet collaborators would be held accountable for Polish suffering under the Communist regime. One key issue of Lech Walesa's presidential campaign in 1991, for example, was to take more radical measures for removing former Soviet leaders in office. In the early 1990s, politicians like Walesa who called for an extensive lustration process also received significant support from the public. A survey of Polish public opinion showed that 57 percent of Poles agreed with public vetting, and only 36 percent disagreed with the process.[21] Although 57 percent was not tantamount to dominant support for lustration, it revealed that a significant number of citizens wanted to directly address Poland's past, to cast aside Soviet secrecy and create more openness within the government.

On the other hand, the government's official position, proposed by Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki in the early 1990s, was to avoid systematic vetting as much as possible.[22] As part of a compromise with the former regime during the Round Table negotiations in 1989, the new democratic government propagated "gruba kreska," or the "thick-line policy."[23] Mazowiecki argued that Polish people should draw a thick line in the nation's history at 1989 which delineated the previous party-state and the post-Communist government.[24] This meant that Poland would begin anew, and the state's priority should focus on policies that advanced Poland's future instead of regulations that dealt with the country's past. Since Mazowiecki's government was more concerned with stabilizing democracy and the market economy in Poland, it did not create any formal laws for lustration, which would have shifted the nation's attention towards the past. The Prime Minister disregarded the possibility

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Present? Lustration in Post-Communist Poland," *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 4 (2002): 553.

[19]Ibid., 557.

[20]Natalia Letki, "Lustration and Democratisation in East-Central Europe," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 4 (2002): 534.

[21]Szczerbiak, "Dealing with the Communist Past," 559.

[22]Ibid., 554.

[23]Janine P. Holc, "Liberalism and the Construction of the Democratic Subject in Postcommunism: The Case of Poland," *Slavic Review* 56, no. 3 (1997): 412.

[24]Ibid.

that Polish citizens had collaborated with the Communist secret police because further investigation on this issue could undermine the legacy of national unity against the Soviet regime. For some Poles, it was simply too soon to investigate possibilities of collaborations with the SB.

Regardless of whether Polish citizens supported or rejected lustration, the Church was clearly not a target of public vetting at that time. Evidence of this can be seen in another survey, titled "Polish attitudes on groups to include in lustration," which showed that Poles wanted public figures like diplomats and ministers to be investigated for Soviet collaboration, but did not mention members of the clergy.[25] Perhaps this reaction could be attributed to the Catholic institution's strength in Polish society and Solidarity at that time.[26] Entering into the post-Communist era, the Church shaped public policies concerning Christian ethics in areas like religious education and abortion, and influenced public opinion by endorsing certain candidates who promised to advance the Church's interests.[27] Because the Church wielded immense influence in the realm of civil society, Polish identity was still strongly linked with Catholicism, and so Poles did not question the Church's role during the Communist era.

In 1997, the Polish parliament passed a vetting bill that codified the lustration process into law. One reason that lustration suddenly became a national priority was that, in the mid-1990s, former Soviet leaders began to fill key political positions locally and nationally throughout Poland.[28] After the demise of the party-state, Poles had been "resentful" towards the former Soviet elite who regained power by "re-invent[ing] themselves" as businessmen.[29] Consequently, citizens responded to the increase of pre-1989 leaders in the public sphere with great ire. Furthermore, when Walesa ran for presidency again in 1995, he lost to a former Communist minister named Aleksander Kwasniewski.[30] The resurgence of Soviet elite in the political realm alarmed Polish citizens. While the Soviets had ceded their power nearly a decade earlier, the shadow of the former

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[25]Ibid.

[26]Mirella Eberts, "The Roman Catholic Church and Democracy in Poland" in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 50, no. 5: 820.

[27]Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 80.

[28]Szczerbiak, "Dealing with the Communist Past," 560.

[29]Ibid, 561.

[30]Ibid.

regime continued to loom over Poland in the 1990s. In a sense, the emergence of former Soviet elite in the public realm meant that the country's Communist past was still unsettled. From 1993 to 1996, the number of Poles who felt that lustration was an urgent issue rose from 27 to 44 percent,[31] suggesting that Poles feared the country was regressing back to the secret government politics of the past. By adopting stricter lustration policies, citizens hoped to continue developing the idea of openness within the government.

At the same time that the government was implementing vetting laws, the Church was beginning to lose its control over Polish society. Heated debates over proper wording of the reference to Poles in the preamble of the Polish constitution showed that the Church's influence over Polish identity was diminishing.[32] The preamble, as it stands today, refers to the people as "we, the Polish Nation—all citizens of the Republic."[33] On its surface, this phrase may seem uncontroversial, but the words "citizen" and "nation" carried strong implications for Polish identity. Before the current constitution was ratified, Center-Left politicians proposed "We, Polish citizens," implying the "civic vision of the nation"[34] and emphasizing the importance of civil society to Polish identity. The Church, on the other hand, preferred "We, the Polish Nation" because it evoked the strong Polak-katolik identity that was an important element of Poland's nationalist struggle during the Communist era. "Nation," in this context meant Catholic identity. So, codifying the notion of "nationhood" in the preamble meant officially recognizing the Catholic Church's importance to Polish identity. But after Poland became a democratic state where the people could exercise political autonomy, the country no longer needed to rely on the Church for political legitimacy.[35] Therefore, using both "citizen" and "nation" in the preamble indicated that Polish and Catholic had gradually become distinct identities.

In the context of the Church's declining influence, the controversy surrounding Wielgus's past showed that the separation between Poles' civic and religious identity had begun. The reaction of Lech Kaczynski,

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[31]Ibid., 562.

[32]Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 86.

[33]Official translation of the Preamble, Constitution of the Third Republic of Poland in *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, pg. 225.

[34]Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 88.

[35]Eberts, "The Roman Catholic Church," 836.

the current president, to the discovery of Wielgus's involvement with the SB serves as an example of the diminishing Polak-katolik identity. Kaczynski is a devout Roman Catholic and a staunch anti-Communist leader.[36] Since winning the presidency in 2005, he and his Law and Justice Party (PiS) have made the purging of pre-1989 Communists a priority in their political agenda.[37] Last year, Kaczynski filed an amendment to the Vetting Bill of 1997 that sought to expose even more Soviet collaborators.[38] Although his proposal did not specifically target the clergy, Kacyznski supported investigations of Wielgus's past. Moreover, he commented that vetting members of the Church was a "painful and belated, but necessary" process in Polish society.[39] Despite his Catholic background, Kaczynski advocated lustration against the clergy to examine possible collaboration between the Church and the secret police. Previously, conservative leaders who identified with the Catholic Church did not publicly support vetting the clergy. Kaczynski's stance on investigating Catholic leaders, however, demonstrated that Poles have now begun to challenge the Church's past without undermining their identity as Polish citizens. The separation of the president's civic and religious identity allowed him to question the Church's role under the party-state.

Not only political leaders, but the Polish people, too, have showed support for vetting the Catholic Church. Whereas, in the past, investigating religious leaders would have been unthinkable to many Poles, polls taken during the recent media scandal over Wielgus' past have shown that 65% of Polish citizens support vetting the clergy.[40] This support for vetting Catholic leaders shows that attitudes towards the Church have changed since the nationalist movements in the Soviet era. The Church is no longer the bulwark that defended the Polish nation against the

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[36]Jan Cienski and Stefan Wagstyl, "Twin Leaders are Remaking Poland," *Financial Times*, 30 August 2007.

[37]"Poland Passes Tough Law to Weed Out Communism," *Agence France-Presse*, 21 July 2006.

[38]"Kaczynski: I Don't Trust Communist Secret Service Documents," *Polish News Bulletin*, 17 January 2007.

[39]"Facing Up to the Twin Challenges of Home and Europe," *The Irish Times*, 16 February 2007.

[40]"Polish Polls Show 65 Percent Support Vetting of Clergy," *PAP News Agency*, 1 February 1 2007.

totalitarian regime. Poles could depend on their democratic institution to voice their grievances and exercise political autonomy, demonstrating that more Polish citizens have separated their civic and Catholic identities. Because of this trend, the exposure of Wielgus's past did not affect the people as much as it could have when the Polak-katolik ideology was still a potent force in Poland.

No longer perceived as an infallible moral institution, the Catholic Church has also become a target for accusations of secret Soviet collaboration. Although the Church was held in high regard in the past, Poles want to start anew by investigating the more public figures and cleansing the country of any lingering remnants from the Soviet era. Wielgus's case demonstrates that Poles are willing to sacrifice the legacy of Polak-katolik ideology in order to uncover secrets within their government. However, vetting religious leaders would not have been conceivable without the expanding rift between Catholic and Polish identity. Only now could citizens cope with the fact that not all members of the church resisted the Soviet regime.

Current support for stricter lustration policies also suggests that Polish citizens have not been satisfied with their government's progress to establish openness in civil society. Therefore, many Catholic leaders will be scrutinized along with 400,000 civil servants, diplomats, teachers, and journalists who are suspected to have collaborated with the SB.[41] Unfortunately, this hunt for secret service collaborators is increasingly reminiscent of Communist purges during the Soviet regime. Even though the initial purpose of this widespread lustration movement was to cleanse Poland of its Soviet past, systematic vetting might actually link the country more closely with the practices of the party-state. If Polish citizens continue to support extensive lustration, then they will never be able to escape the shadow of their Communist past.

[41]"Vetting Act Passed," *Poland News Bulletin*, 17 February 2007.

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