

# A GAME OF COLORS

## Dr. Mikołaj Kunicki

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**W**e talk to **Dr. Mikołaj Kunicki**, an Oxford historian specializing in twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe, about the past and present of Polish nationalism.

**ACADEMIA:** In your book *Between the Brown and the Red*, you write about Bolesław Piasecki. Who was he?

**MIKOŁAJ KUNICKI:** Bolesław Piasecki, who was born in 1915 and died in 1979, was a politician from the Polish nationalist camp and one of the most intriguing figures in the history of 20th-century Poland. He started his career as a fascist leader in the 1930s and ended it as a pro-communist Catholic activist and leader of a Catholic association called PAX in post-war Poland. His political biography reflects the history of nationalism in modern Poland and offers proof of its ideological closeness to communism.

**What were Bolesław Piasecki's origins?**

He was born into an impoverished noble family in the Polish lands under Russian partition and raised in Catholic and nationalist traditions. After World War I, Piasecki's father entered state service in the Justice Ministry, which enabled him to send his son to a prestigious all-boys school in Warsaw. When Piasecki was in high school, he joined the National High School Organization (NOG), an illegal association controlled by the National Democrats. He matriculated to the University of Warsaw's Faculty of Law in 1931. As a student, he joined the Camp of Great Poland (OWP), a political organization. Curiously enough, political parties were officially banned from operating on the University's premises, but that was not observed in practice. Piasecki was a mediocre student. His grades grew worse every year, but his position within the OWP kept rising.



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**How strong was that organization compared to other similar groups?**

At some point before the war, the group had 120,000 members. It was a powerful, mass organization controlled by the National Party (SN). Piasecki's National Radical Camp (ONR) itself had several thousand members plus another several thousand sympathizers. It was hard to call it a mass organization, but it was very noticeable, having by far the most aggressive language. At the same time, we need to bear in mind that all groups – including the socialist party, which was a bastion of democracy, and the “*Sanacja*” camp

– became increasingly violent throughout the 1930s and the whole of the authoritarian period in interwar Poland. The ONR was a distinctly fascist organization.

**What were Piasecki's views?**

In 1932, he contributed to a publication that presented the OWP's position on Jews, Slavic minorities, and the economy in Poland. The authors of that document denied the Jews citizenship rights, believing that they should at most be granted the status of residents. Ukrainians and Belarusians, in turn, should be subjected to forced assimilation. In the section dealing



with economics, the authors discussed the necessity of self-sufficiency and independence from foreign capital and rejected the principles of liberal capitalism. They placed emphasis on national and moral solidarity in opposition to class divisions. Their most radical proposal was state supervision of private ownership.

#### **What about Piasecki's Catholicism?**

Piasecki's Catholicism was a religion of action and expansion, one that invoked nationalism together with its ethnocentricity, exclusion, and violence. As leader of the fascist National Radical Movement (RNR) prior to World War II, Piasecki saw Poland as a proto-totalitarian state founded on nationalism, Catholicism, and mass organization. The cornerstone of his doctrine was the belief that taking action to bolster the power of the nation was the path to God.

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#### **What did he do during World War II?**

He was in charge of a right-wing combat organization called the Confederation of the Nation, which merged into the Home Army in 1943. Arrested by the communists in 1944, Piasecki was released from prison 8 months later. Shortly after that, he founded a pro-communist movement of progressive Catholics later known as PAX. He was unique in being the only pre-war leader of a fascist party in this region of Europe who continued his career in the subsequent communist-dominated environment.

#### **What made that possible?**

The National Democrats had been the most popular political force in Polish society in the interwar period, despite the fact that they never came to power after 1926. Everything did not just start over from scratch in 1945; various people from the right did sometimes choose to collaborate with the communist regime. Or to put it a different way, the communist regime wanted to have sympathizers on the right, too. Of course, there was still no talk of the National Democrats being legalized after the war, even though there was then room for a certain political pluralism, which means that there was Mikołajczyk's Polish Peasant Party (PSL), the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), and the Labor Party (SP), which was quickly disbanded.

The biography of Bolesław Piasecki, as one of the founders of the National Radical Camp (ONR) and leader of the ONR-Falanga group before the war, shows very clearly that some people on the right, from the nationalist camp, and the communists, in particular the groups led by Władysław Gomułka and Mieczysław Moczar in the 1960s, found it convenient to walk the path to socialism together in Poland. Both Piasecki and the extreme left were opposed to capitalism and supported a centralized state. Both sides idealized the construction of a new society. Another thing they had in common was strong Germanophobia, which laid the foundation for Gomułka's propaganda. The struggle against the Germans found its embodiment in WWII veterans. These included members of the Home Army, of course, but on the other hand, there were plenty of soldiers from the Home Army who were admitted into the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (ZBOWiD). Forgetting wartime disputes was a policy pursued not only by Moczar but in general by the informal faction of "partisans" (named so in connection with Moczar's wartime past) in the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR).

#### **Incidentally, it seems the "partisan" faction has a certain reflection in today's Poland?**

It is evident that the ruling camp wants to create something that has never existed, namely a mythical, homogenous community of "accursed soldiers." Of course, there was an anti-communist underground, whose members were very often real heroes – they were persecuted and killed. But the people known as "accursed soldiers" comprised no homogenous political or organizational group. On the one hand, there was the organization Freedom and Independence (WiN), which tried to avoid armed struggle and relied on propaganda. On the other one, there were also people who had been linked to the National Armed Forces or other nationalist organizations during the war. Aside from that, some "accursed soldiers" were involved in executing innocent civilians and murdering Jews. Among some members of the underground, the border between being a partisan and banditry also became fluid over time, especially after the end of warfare.

#### **In the last elections in Poland, right-wing parties were backed by a large portion of society – some say, by the less-educated members of the public who don't have their roots in the intelligentsia.**

#### **Have Piasecki and Moczar won out?**

Let's not forget that Moczar's people had supporters among members of the Polish intelligentsia. The same holds true for Law and Justice (PiS). A serious misunderstanding has occurred here: both the members of the party and its voters are pictured as representatives of the "backward provinces," as people who have failed in their lives. But this is not entirely true. Surprisingly,

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there is a lot of people from the Polish intelligentsia in the PiS. The Polish left, despite the argument some people advance, has never monopolized the intelligentsia. Before WWII, some members of the Polish intelligentsia had nationalist leanings, too. The battles they waged with one another were in a sense swept under the rug in the Polish People's Republic, but there was no reason why they should not resurface after 1989.

After the outburst of freedom, some of my colleagues in my field of study started to display strongly nationalist and anti-Semitic views. There were also other people, for example those related to the "Grunwald" Patriotic Union (a nationalist organization in communist-era Poland), and skinheads, and PAX members.

### What do you think about Poland AD 2016?

When I hear politicians deliver speeches about the need to consolidate the national space and oppose global anti-Polish sentiments, this is, in my opinion, definitely the language of nationalism. Another thing is this new rhetoric and new initiatives in historical policy, which are aimed at redefining what happened in Poland after 1989 based on models from the Polish People's Republic. Contemporary historians will certainly have their hands full for the next few years, if not longer.

### So far, this new narrative of Poland has fallen on fertile ground. Why?

Apparently, there was a certain demand for it. I can also see a link to the teaching of history at schools and universities and a huge impact of popular culture. We should pay attention to the distinct character of the Warsaw Uprising Museum, which was established in 2004. It quickly turned out to be something more than merely an exhibition space. It is a publishing house and a cultural center as well as a political group that has acted as a patron of various forms of the cult of the uprising that took place in August 1944. It was a precursor of efforts to reach out to young people, to allow those born in the 1990s to identify with those who fought in the Warsaw Uprising.

I very often see young people in England who have come here from Poland. At the University of Oxford, a local association of Polish students organized a ceremony in November 2014 in commemoration of Polish Independence Day. Its participants wore "Fighting Poland" armbands. This tells us something about the historical awareness, or lack thereof, among members of the young generation and about what they find very attractive.

### Many people fear that the reality in Poland is starting to take on some brown-hued undertones. Are these fears well-founded?

No. What is now happening Poland is not fascism. All fascist movements have always had several

things in common. They were paramilitary organizations, led by a strong leader. They avoided calling themselves parties. Piasecki is a very good example. He used the term "movement." The National Radical Camp "Falanga" was the unofficial name of his group, but the official name was the National Radical Movement. That attested to more profound ambitions, but also to a rejection of the traditional political system. The current ruling party is clearly a party led by a strong leader and it has authoritarian leanings, but it is closer to "guided" or "managed democracy," the term that was used to describe the political system after Piłsudski's May Coup in 1926.

Of course, there are people in Poland who have fascist leanings. I was shocked by the incident involving people from the ONR at the cathedral in Białystok,

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by what the priest said there, and by the fact that the Church let something like this happen. That is indeed very dangerous.

### What research has been done as part of Oxford's Programme on Modern Poland?

We have recently focused on Poland's foreign policy. We have invited representatives of the new ruling elite to come to Oxford to discuss if there would be radical change or continuation.

My goal has been to invite people from opposing political camps to sit and talk, without going at each other's throats. For example, I invited Jacek Stawiński and Igor Janke, who have different approaches to Polish politics. They disagreed, but there was no verbal aggression. Similarly, when I invited Krzysztof Szczerski from the Polish President's Chancellery, his discussant was Gerhard Gnauck, whose articles on the PiS government in *Die Welt* can be very scathing. No scandal erupted, either, despite the fact that the atmosphere was somewhat more heated.

We are creating a forum for people with different views to hold discussions in a civilized manner. That may be a solution.

INTERVIEW BY ANNA ZAWADZKA  
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