

Danusha V. Goska. *Bieganski: The Brute Polak Stereotype in Polish-Jewish Relations and American Popular Culture*. Jews of Poland Series. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010. 344 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-936235-15-5.

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## Polish-Jewish Stereotypes Revisited

The subject of Polish-Jewish relations is fraught with complexities from which any author venturing into this emotionally charged minefield must expect particular scrutiny and most likely objections from one group or the other. For this reason, Danusha V. Goska should be commended for attempting to analyze the stereotype of Poles as brutish anti-Semites against the background of this hypersensitive historical intricacy. Published as a volume in the Jews of Poland series, the book examines literature, cinema, and other popular culture to show the development and dissemination of this stereotype, the relationship of Polish and Jewish stereotypes, and continual propagation of these typecast images. The portrayal of Poles and Polish Americans as “brutish” beings in film and literature is not a new subject of critical inquiry. Several such studies have appeared over the last thirty-five years—those of Eugene Obidinski, M. B. B. Biskupski, John Bukowczyk, Thomas Napierkowski, Caroline Golab, and my own come immediately to mind.

Goska’s work includes chapters on the origins of the Polish/East European stereotype, the history of Jewish victimization, a comparison of Polish and Jewish immigration in the period 1880-1920, the portrayal of Poles in American cinema, the function of the stereotype as an agent of validation for those propagating it, Jewish American identity, the role of the Holocaust in Polish Jewish stereotypes, and a review of information obtained from the author’s interviews with American Jews. The last chapter, titled “Final Thoughts,” does not, as one

might expect, draw conclusions but rather offers some additional commentary that is not clearly related to the previous chapters or to any specific conclusions.

What Goska adds as her contribution is the attempt to place Polish/East European typecasting in the context of general stereotypes and the Polish Jewish historical dialogue. In this respect, one may come away with two general impressions. The first is that while a minority of Poles are anti-Semitic and a minority of Jews hold anti-Polish sentiments, for those who do harbor these beliefs the stereotypes almost appear to be mutually supporting; that is, one cannot exist without the other as each provides some modicum of support—though fallacious—for their prejudiced beliefs.

The second general impression, although Goska does not exactly frame it in these words, is that the prevailing sense of “political correctness” in the United States that precludes negative commentary on some groups but not others is largely responsible for the continued dissemination of the “Bieganski” stereotype of Poles and, by extension, other East Europeans. An example of this is the illuminating comparison she makes regarding journalists’ handling of a speech by Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam at Kean College and a sermon by Poland’s Cardinal Józef Glemp. In the former, Muhammad argued in an explicative-laced harangue that the primary protagonists in the Bible were black, that Jews controlled the lives of blacks in Africa and America, and that Jews were

themselves responsible for the Holocaust. As Goska documents, typical press accounts followed an almost formulaic response that emphasized black suffering rather than, or as a rationale for, the clearly racist message of Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Those who did address the issue of black racism were careful to emphasize that it represented but a small proportion of the black community. On the other hand, when Cardinal Glemp attempted to add context and nuance to the controversy over the establishment of a community of Carmelite nuns near the site of the former German Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps, the press made no such attempts to understand the issues involved. Instead, there was a near-universal condemnation of all Poles as anti-Semites. Such unbalanced reporting, Goska argues, plays a significant part in the continuing dissemination of the “Bieganski” stereotype.

While Goska’s chapter on Polish immigrants of the Great Migration exposes the anti-Polish (and anti-East European) racism of many of the prominent so-called progressives of that era, it misses two important pieces of the puzzle that would have supported her arguments about lingering racist stereotypes directed toward Poles. The first is the Dillingham Commission reports, which presented a blatantly one-sided depiction of Polish immigrants designed to support the prevailing prejudices of the era. It was these reports that fixed the negative

“Bieganski” stereotype in the public mind while at the same time “legitimizing” it with the “official” US government imprimatur. It was also this study that Madison Grant, whose work Goska cites, used as a basis for much of his writing, including *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916). The second government sanction given to the Polish stereotype was based in several court decisions, including those of the US Supreme Court, whose cumulative effect was to deny Poles and other East Europeans equal protection under the various US civil rights laws and applicable sections of the US Constitution. Some attention to these would have greatly strengthened her arguments.

The book would have benefited from good editing. In some places the text wanders about, while in others the main lines of development are obscured by tangential material that could have been deleted to sharpen the focus. The index is particularly poor, being practically useless for anything other than finding personal names. Finally, as mentioned above, the work suffers from the lack of a truly concluding chapter that summarizes the evidence and conclusions in a concise manner. Despite these shortcomings, Goska’s book raises serious questions that deserve further objective study devoid of the emotional fog created by today’s political correctness and general acceptance of the very stereotypes that she identifies.

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