

The Polish Response to Soviet Anti-Baha'i Polemics

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Response to Soviet Anti-Baha'i Polemics, bahai-library.com.

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The Polish Response to Soviet Anti-Bahá'í Polemics

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published in Associate29

London: Association for Bahá'í Studies English-Speaking Europe, 1999 Winter

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show the response of non-Bahá'í scholars to Marxist-Leninist polemics and attacks on the Bahá'í Faith, in particular the attitude of Polish scholars writing in Poland between 1945 and 1988, while Poland was still a 'satellite' of the Soviet Union.

In dictatorial and totalitarian states, as are all communist countries, the office of the censor plays an important role in the cultural, political and religious life of the country. It is because of this that all publications from these countries are official, semi-official or illegal. Official publications originate from the government and its departments, or from the Party and its organizations. Semi-official publications vary from those of state sponsored institutions such as universities or research stations, to those of literary circles and religious organizations. The reason why these should be considered as semi-official in the context of this paper is because they all have gone through the censor's office and have been passed. Any publication that is contrary to the ideology of the State or the Party does not get published. The exception to this might seem to be religious publications. However, religious publications are not against, but rather support the ideology of the Polish State as being traditionally and historically tolerant toward all religions.

Therefore, in light of the powerful role of the censor's office we can readily see the importance of the articles that deal with the Bahá'í Faith in giving a view of the temperament of the Polish system.

A Review of Soviet Writings in Polish

In writing about the Bahá'í Faith the Polish scholars had access to all of the Russian and Soviet literature published from 1866 to the 1980s. However, this analysis is limited to only those articles that were translated into Polish and published in Poland. There were four publications, issued between 1954 and 1980, which contained information on the Bahá'í Faith. Three of

these contain articles on the Bahá'í Faith written by very well known Soviet scholars. Chronologically, they were: an article entitled 'Babí uprisings 1844-1852 in Persia and southern Azerbaijan' by K. A. Boldyrev in vol. 1 of the Modern History of the Countries of the East, the Polish translation published in 1954; a few pages in a very strange publication, the Polish translation of Sputnik Ateista (The Atheist's Companion), the title was translated as The Main Religions of the World and it was published by the Provincial Centre for Party Propaganda of the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers Party in Katowice in 1961; in 1970 a ten-page article by T. S. Korotkovi, called 'The Bábí Uprisings in Irán', appeared in volume 6 of the Universal History in Ten Volumes, published in Warsaw in 1970; and the last one was a three-page commentary by the well-known Soviet writer and Orientalist, M. S. Ivanov 'The Bábí uprisings in the year 1848-1852' in The Modern History of the Countries of Asia and Africa, published in Poland in 1980. There was at least one more reference to the Bahá'í Faith by a Marxist writer in translation. The author was Bozorg Alavi, writing in his book The Country of Roses and Nightingales that was translated into Polish from an East German publication in 1957.

None of these Soviet writers or their publications could be considered as 'fringe', or even as 'popular-scientific'. In the Soviet Union these were all established academics, who had published many scientific works.

The Soviet articles, available in Polish, had two major tracks or themes. One was to exemplify and extol the Bábí Faith as a primitive anti-feudal movement, conducted by impoverished peasants and small merchants and craftsmen against the feudal repression of the Shah and the economic imperialism of the British, under a religious disguise. The second track is to discredit the Bahá'í Faith as a bourgeois, reactionary movement, which supports imperialism, and Bahá'u'lláh as committing a treasonous attack on the Faith of the Báb. To achieve their goal they use erroneous information, half-truths and lies. Much of Boldyrev's sources are from the Persian enemies of the Bahá'í Faith. Since it is not the purpose of this paper to examine Soviet articles, but Polish, it is hoped that the above description will suffice.

An Analysis of Articles on the Bahá'í Faith Published in Poland after 1945

Throughout most of its 1000 years, Poland has established a long and proud tradition of religious tolerance. It is not surprising therefore to see this attitude reflected in the writings of Poles about the Bahá'í Faith.

Practically all of the articles show very little bias or are openly sympathetic. The earliest known articles were written by A. Jablonowski in the 1870s, and one of these was to defend the Bahá'í Faith against an erroneous article in another publication. This tradition of tolerance toward all religions, and sympathy for oppressed groups continued after World War II under the communist regime in the Polish People's Republic, at least as far as the Bahá'í Faith is concerned. In only one article can the unmistakable Marxist-Leninist ideology of the author be discerned. This is a very remarkable occurrence considering that the official socio-political ideology of the government for over forty years has been Marxist-Leninist, and with this must

be coupled the fact that Poland's geo-political situation bordering as it did with three communist countries: the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

In post-World War II Poland, two types of articles appeared which concern the Bahá'í Faith. The first type is ones written and published in Polish in Poland. The second type is articles translated into Polish from material originally published abroad. It is the first of these which is the most important and which will be examined in some depth. These works can be subdivided into encyclopaedias, lexicons, etc.; works on comparative religion; works on history; and Catholic publications.

The most important reference works which mention the Bahá'í Faith are the encyclopaedias: *Wielka Encyklopedia* (The Large Universal Encyclopaedia) (1968), the newer but smaller version *Encyklopedia Powszechna* (The Universal Encyclopaedia) (1973) and the *Mala Encyklopedia Powszechna PWN* (The Small Universal Encyclopaedia), which appeared in three editions (1959, 1969 and 1974). A dictionary of foreign terms was published in 1954 entitled *Słownik Wyrazów Obcych* and again in 1972 as *Słownik Wyrazów Obcych PWN*. All of these contained articles on the Bahá'í Faith under one or more of the following headings: 'Bab', 'Babism', 'BahaAllah', or 'Bahaism'.

In the field of comparative religion the most important article appeared in the journal *Euhemer* in 1959. *Euhemer* is published by the Polish Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, in Warsaw. The article 'Bahaism' was written by Tadeusz Margul. It is well written with few errors, more inclined to misunderstandings than to an ideological bias. The same author the year before in his 'Notes on a projected handbook on the science of religion' also published in this journal listed the Bahá'í Faith as one of the subjects to be included. This listing also included a short statement on the nature of the Bahá'í Faith. In 1964 the first edition of *Zarys Dziejów Religii* (Outline of Religious History) was published. This collective work contains a chapter by Franciszek Machalski titled 'Islam' in which several pages were devoted to the Bahá'í Faith. Though the title of the chapter changed in future editions: 'Religie Persji' (1968) and 'Religie Iranu' (1976), the pages on the Bahá'í Faith were basically unaltered. Franciszek Machalski was a professor at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow in Persian philology and literature and has written a number of works in this field.

In the Soviet Union dictionaries, handbooks and textbooks on religious studies almost always carried the word atheist somewhere in the title, i.e. *Sputnik Ateista* or *Slovar Ateista*, but in Poland because of the religious sensitivity of the people the word atheist is never used in the title. The term that materialists use means 'the scientific study of religion' as in the case of the *Maly Słownik Religioznawczy* (The Small Dictionary of Religious Studies), published in 1969. It contained two short articles on the Bahá'í Faith written by Jan Reychman and Zygmunt Poniatowski respectively. These articles are a bit stiffer in tone than the one written by Margul, but again totally lack the Marxist-Leninist jargon. Both authors were university professors and

respected Orientalists. Jan Reychman was the chairman of the Polish Oriental Association and Director of the Department of Turkish and Iranian Studies at Warsaw University.

A recent work in this field is the book *Religie Współczesnego Świata* (Religions of the Contemporary World), by Andrzej Tokarczek and published in 1979. It contains a whole chapter on the Bahá'í Faith titled 'A Muslim derivation Bahaism'. This is a fairly evenly balanced account of the Bahá'í Faith except for the concluding paragraph where Tokarczek in summarizing talks about the ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and states that these social regulations prove the Marxist theory that behind religious slogans and regulations are real social concerns, and that these religious principles mask the real needs of society.

The articles published in the Catholic publications are not very numerous but they are very favourable. In 1973 the Catholic University of Lublin published the first volume of the massive *Encyklopedia Katolicka* (The Catholic Encyclopaedia). In this volume four articles appeared on the Bahá'í Faith by Franciszek Machalski, Teofil Chodzidło and Stanisław Witek. The popular magazine *Mysł Społeczna* (Social Thought), published by the Catholic Organization 'Caritas' included in its 24 August 1975 issue an illustrated article called 'Bahaism', by Karol Zaleski. These articles contain a few errors in dates and in naming the Bahá'í Faith a sect, but they completely lack any polemics or attacks on the Bahá'í Faith.

Kazimierz Sidor, a career diplomat, formerly with the Polish Embassy in Írán, wrote *Bogowie, Magowie I Nafta* (Gods, Magi and Oil), in 1967, which was published by the commercial publisher of the Ministry of National Defence. A second edition appeared in 1971. This is a general history of Iran with one chapter devoted to the Bábís. It portrays the Bábís and Tahirih, if not historically accurate, at least heroically and romantically.

Several other books published during this period mentioned the Bahá'í Faith in passing.

The Polish articles do not only deal with the social teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, but also with many of the theological doctrines, such as progressive revelation, God, the nature of the soul, etc. Very little is mentioned about the so-called 'Bábí uprisings'.

The Polish writers, both academic and popular, literally turned their backs on their Soviet counterparts and their writings. Over sixteen Polish works in which there were articles, which mentioned the Bahá'í Faith, have been analyzed and their bibliographies combined. This combined bibliography shows that approximately 39 works were referred to. The authors include Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, Abu'l-Fadl, E. G. Browne, T. Chase, H. Dreyfus, J. E. Esslemont, H. Holley, A. L. M. Nicolas, M. Phelps, G. Townshend, P. K. Hitti, and others. The books cited were either in English, French, German, Italian or Polish (Bahá'u'lláh, i Nowa Era). No Russian or Soviet publications, either in translation or in original were cited. Another

interesting feature of the combined bibliography is the dates of the books cited, out of 27 with dates, 16 were published before World War II, and of these 12 were published before the conclusion World War I. This shows that the Polish scholars had little access to contemporary Bahá'í literature and had to scrounge for whatever publications they could get hold of, and yet despite this they refused to use Soviet sources.

To conclude, I will give you the translation of the last line from two articles:

'The movement, called after Him, Bahaism, became a reactionary ideological element of compradorism, selling out the national interests of Persia'.
'From these points of view Bahaism stands as a type of international movement which has noble and humanitarian aims'.

The first is from M. S. Ivanov, published in Polish in 1980, and the second from Stanislaw Witek in the Encyklopedia Katolika (1973).

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Views6309 views since posted 2012-12-02; last edit 2025-03-09 20:25 UTC;

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