

POLISH HOLOCAUST BILL

Guest: Rafal Pankowski



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JD: It's always been taboo to refer to Nazi death camps in Poland as "Polish death camps." Now, however, using those words is more than just offensive — it's illegal. Today, the Polish president signed a bill into law that makes it a crime to say "Polish death camps" — or to accuse the Polish nation of complicity in the Holocaust. The law has pleased the extreme right in Poland. Some, however, are worried that it will silence anyone who argues that any Poles were complicit in Nazi crimes. Rafal Pankowski is a political scientist. We reached him in Warsaw, Poland.

CO: Professor Pankowski, what message do you think that Poland's President Andrzej Duda is trying to send by signing this bill into law?

RAFAL PANKOWSKI: I am very critical of this law. And I think there are many people who are critics of this law because, unfortunately, it looks like it's going to silence the debate about Polish history, Polish identity, you know the Polish history in World War 2, and some of the dark pages of The Polish history. Which I'm afraid is something that that we should we should talk in a free way.

CO: But are the lawmakers who are putting this together and the president who is signing it, are they speaking to you, or are they speaking to Poland's right wing, who are applauding this bill?

RP: Well, unfortunately, there is also the kind of rise in the far-right activity in Poland. The far-right and the extreme nationalist movement that is sort of trying to capitalize on this kind of debate in a negative way I'm afraid. This kind of radical right, fascist movement is also out there. And it is obviously attempting to sway especially the younger generation of the Polish people.

CO: Let's just look at what this new law would do, which is that it says would criminalize references to Poland's role in the Nazi atrocities. And said anyone who claims that Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes — or any crimes against peace, humanity, war crimes, anything that would be said about its being a perpetrator — shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for up to three years. Is it the case that Poland played no role — had no co responsibility — for Nazi crimes within Poland?

RP: Well, like you said, the phrasing of this bill is very broad. It could mean anything. And it could be anything meaning for anybody who says anything critical of Polish responsibility or co-responsibility of any crimes at any time in Polish history. I think we should be very much concerned about that. And I think it is giving the authorities a kind of tool which they could use against anybody at any time.

CO: The Nazis invaded Poland, occupied it for about six years during the war. Millions of Poles killed, millions of Jews, and, of course, the most notorious camps for the Jews: Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Belzec all in Poland. But Poland was not a collaborator though, was it?

RP: Well, there was very little or no organized collaboration — political collaboration — in Poland with the Nazis. And, of course, Poland suffered enormously during the Nazi occupation. And there were many of ethnic Polish people too who died during the Nazi occupation. So I think we should not play that down in any way, and we should not forget it. Having said that, of course, among Polish people, there were also those who collaborated with the Nazis in terms of denouncing the Jewish victims of the Nazi occupation.

CO: But now what we're seeing is that the criminalization of that full and frank discussion you just described. What happens if someone says that they were collaborators, as you just mentioned; that there were Poles who were part of it. What happens to Holocaust survivors who want to talk about what happened to them in Poland in the camps? Is this speech that will be possibly going to get them convicted of breaking this law?

RP: Well, this is the question, isn't it? You know maybe us on this show talking about it you know might be problematic in terms of this particular legislation. And I very much hope that doesn't happen in the case of the Holocaust survivors who had something important to say in terms of the less positive experience they had with their Polish neighbours during World War Two.

If I understand you that the very conversation we're having now — what you're saying to me right now about the history, of the historical fact — could actually have you arrested, charged, convicted, thrown into prison for three years?

RP: Well, you know if you look at the legislation in the literal way — in you know in a crude way...

CO: Well, that's how you look at legislation — it's very literal.

RP: Then I'm afraid this could be a case. But I very much hope it doesn't happen. But I think that actually illustrates the danger of this legislation. And that it poses to an open debate about the Holocaust and Polish history.

CO: All right. Professor Pankowski, it's good to talk to you and thanks for explaining to us.

RP: Thank you. Goodbye

JD: Rafal Pankowski is a political scientist. We reached him in Warsaw.

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