

‘We Won’t Pay for German Crimes,’ Insists Polish PM, as Antisemitic Invective Swirls Around Controversial Holocaust Restitution Law

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by Ben Cohen
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Poland’s Prime Minister has summarily rejected Israeli criticism of new legislation passed this week that effectively closes off Jewish restitution claims related to Nazi-era persecution, insisting that “Poland will not pay for German crimes.”

Speaking at a press conference in Warsaw on Friday, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki was asked to respond to the trenchant condemnation of the bill by Israel’s new Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, who earlier warned that “this immoral law will seriously harm relations between the countries.” Lapid continued: “It is a horrific injustice and disgrace that harms the rights of Holocaust survivors, their descendants, and members of the Jewish communities that existed in Poland for hundreds of years. This is an incomprehensible action.”

Without addressing Lapid’s claims directly, Morawiecki underlined the Polish government’s long-standing objection to paying compensation to Holocaust survivors and their descendants.

“I can only say that as long as I am the Prime Minister, Poland will certainly not pay for German crimes: Neither zloty, nor euro, nor dollar,” Morawiecki declared.

Three million Jews residing in Poland, around 90 percent of the country’s total Jewish population, were exterminated during the Nazi occupation of 1939-45. Since the fall of communism in 1989, attempts by Holocaust survivors and their representatives to secure compensation for stolen Jewish property valued at \$30 billion — according to an experts report commissioned by the Israeli government in 2007 — have failed.

Despite endorsing the 2009 Terezin Declaration on Holocaust property restitution, Poland remains the only nation among its 47 signatories to have entirely ignored its commitments. In 2017, the US Congress passed the Justice for Uncompensated Survivors (JUST) Act, which obliges the US government to report on compliance with the Terezin Declaration, resulting in angry demonstrations mounted by right-wing groups in Poland.

Under the new Polish law, outstanding claims for the restitution of property seized during the Holocaust that are more than 30 years old will be dismissed. The law also rules out appeals against legal decisions made outside the same 30-year deadline. On

Thursday evening, the bill passed overwhelmingly in the lower house of the Polish parliament, the Sejm, with 309 votes in favor, no votes against and 120 abstentions. The legislation is widely expected to pass through the Polish Senate, which will conduct its own debate on the bill.

Marowiecki's defiant restatement of his government's position came as Lapid's criticisms met with a hail of antisemitic invective from nationalist politicians and media commentators.

Patryk Jaki — who demeaned Jewish restitution claims while serving as Poland's Deputy Justice Minister in 2018 — asserted in response to Lapid that “the Jews need us more than we need them.”

Now a member of the European Parliament for the staunchly Catholic United Poland Party, which is allied with the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS), Jaki posted on Twitter: “I'm out of government and I can say this today. The Jews today need us more than we need them.”

In an apparent reference to the conflict in May between Israel and Hamas, Jaki added: “Even the US was against them because of their aggressive actions.”

Speaking on the breakfast program of right-wing broadcaster TV Republika on Friday morning, Rafal Ziemkiewicz — an ultranationalist TV pundit who last year accused Jews of inviting a “new Holocaust” on themselves — was similarly venomous.

Denouncing Lapid as a “scoundrel who hates the Polish people,” Ziemkiewicz said that Jewish efforts to claim compensation were being orchestrated by the “New York mafia.”

“A major confrontation with international Jewry is coming,” he announced.

Rafal Pankowski, executive director of the Never Again Association, a leading anti-racist NGO in Poland, observed that the issue of restitution had been eagerly manipulated by nationalist politicians to whip up antisemitism.

“The issue of Holocaust-era property restitution has become a tool of political mobilization for the nationalist politicians and media in Poland,” Pankowski told *The Algemeiner* on Friday. “They have utilized it to poison the discourse on Polish-Jewish history and Polish-Israeli relations.”

Pankowski pointed out that “antisemitic utterances have been commonplace in Polish politics and media since 2018,” when the Sejm passed the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) Law. Under the terms of that legislation, historians and others who research Polish civilian collusion with the Nazi occupation can be subjected to civil libel suits.

US Jewish organizations, many of whom developed close ties with Polish institutions in the aftermath of the Cold War, also condemned Thursday's passage of the new law.

“Poland's poor history on Holocaust-era restitution just got worse,” the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) said on Twitter. “We strongly oppose this legislation that would ‘effectively make restitution or compensation for Holocaust era property unobtainable.’ We urge the Polish Senate to not vote this through.”

The American Jewish Committee (AJC), which maintains an office in Warsaw, pronounced itself “deeply concerned by Polish parliamentary majority steps taken to make property restitution virtually impossible.”

“The amendment of the Code of Administrative Procedure is the opposite of justice and the right to own property,” the AJC said on Twitter. “We urge the Polish Senate to reject the law.”

Speaking for the World Jewish Congress (WJC), Ronald Lauder, the organization's president, decried the law as “a slap in the face to what remains of Polish Jewry and survivors of Nazi brutality everywhere. It also sets a terrible precedent throughout Europe as survivors and descendants continue to seek justice.”

Lauder pointed out that he had “been an unwavering advocate of Poland in Washington and elsewhere ever since that country rejected the Communist system in favor of democracy.” However, he continued, “this flagrant and entirely gratuitous act by the Polish Parliament leaves me questioning my own commitment and the future of US-Polish relations.”

He added: “It pains me to say this, but I think that the time has come for the international Jewish community to reevaluate our relationship with a government that is behaving with unimaginable callousness and is emulating the worst traditions in Polish history, rather than the best and most uplifting ones.”

In Israel, several politicians expressed their solidarity with Lapid amid the Polish reaction. Among the group was Ayman Odeh, the head of the Arab nationalist Joint List, who declared that “the new law in Poland restricting compensation claims of Holocaust survivors is a terrible and antisemitic injustice.”

“The Holocaust is one of the most serious crimes in human history. We must fight every attempt to deny it, for the sake of the memory of the victims and survivors and for the sanctity of the life of all humankind,” Odeh stated.

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