

Poland's Holocaust Law and the Right-Wing Desire to Rewrite History

By Jonah Shepp
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On Thursday Poland's Senate passed a controversial bill that, if signed into law by President Andrzej Duda, will make it illegal to publicly accuse Poland or the Polish people of collaborating with Nazi Germany in the Holocaust. The bill imposes three years' imprisonment as a punishment for describing the Nazi extermination camps established in Poland as "Polish death camps," which most Poles consider an offensive slander, or otherwise claiming Polish complicity in these "or other crimes against peace and humanity."

Historians of the Holocaust agree that calling Auschwitz, Sobibor, and Treblinka "Polish" mischaracterizes them, as Poland was not responsible for establishing the camps, but inaccuracy is not generally considered a sufficient reason in a free society to throw people in jail for several years. The bill supposedly exempts academic research and artistic expression, but will surely have a chilling effect on any honest discussion of history in both these fields.

The passage of the law, which Duda has 21 days to decide whether to sign, was met with outrage from political leaders in Israel, who denounced it as Holocaust denial. Washington also voiced displeasure with the law, with State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert saying the U.S. was "concerned about the repercussions this draft legislation, if enacted, could have on Poland's strategic interests and relationships."

It might have been worthwhile for President Donald Trump to mention these concerns on his visit to Warsaw last summer, when the legislation was already being discussed, or to express concern over the Polish government's ongoing assault on democratic norms in general — but alas, he did not.

Poland's relationship with the Holocaust is complicated: Unlike other countries occupied by the Third Reich, Poland did not establish a collaborationist government in Warsaw, but rather was subject to direct and brutal control by Germany. At least 2.5 million non-Jewish Polish civilians and soldiers were killed by the Nazis and another 1.5 million were deported, according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum — along with 3 million Polish Jews, or 90 percent of what had once been the largest Jewish community in Europe. Nazi racial theories considered the Poles an inferior race and the Nazi plan for the colonization of Eastern Europe called for the removal of 80 percent of the Polish population and the enslavement of those who remained.

Of course, anti-Semitism was not some foreign ideology imported to Poland by the Nazis in 1939. Many individual Poles participated in pogroms, assisted in turning Jews over to the Nazi authorities, and profited from blackmail and the plunder of Jewish property, while some Polish agencies were used in the management of ghettos and concentration camps. On the other hand, thousands of Poles are recognized by Yad Vashem, Israel's official Holocaust memorial, as "righteous among nations" for their efforts to resist the Nazi occupation and rescue Jews from the Holocaust.

Because the country suffered tremendously under the Nazi occupation, Polish nationalists like the ruling Law and Justice Party have in recent years latched onto the idea that Poles should not be blamed in any way for the atrocities committed there by the Third Reich and insist that outlawing such blame is necessary to preserve the country's reputation. Leveraging this historical revisionism as an expression of patriotism has proven popular as nationalist sentiment in Poland has surged, sweeping the Law and Justice Party into power in 2015.

A call to stop apologizing to the Jews for the Holocaust has become a rallying cry for a new generation of right-wing populists across Europe. In Poland's case, that argument comes by way of saying there was never anything to apologize for at all. The Law and Justice Party is not officially anti-Semitic — Duda, whose wife is of Jewish heritage, lauded the contributions of Jews to Poland's culture on a state visit to Israel last year — but many of its members and supporters periodically express anti-Semitic views and the nationalist ideology it espouses is in many ways inextricable from anti-Semitism. The tens of thousands of young right-wing nationalists and overt neo-fascists who marched on Warsaw last November calling for a purely white and Catholic Poland were described as “a beautiful sight” by the interior minister. Polish Jews have been worried about what the party's rise means for them since its victory in 2015, and the new Holocaust law will only exacerbate those fears.

Right-wing nationalist parties like Poland's Law and Justice typically skirt accusations of anti-Semitism by voicing strong support for Israel, though this proves nothing, as Israel has always enjoyed the support of a certain kind of anti-Semite who figures that if the Jews are all *over there*, they won't be *here*. Furthermore, insofar as this support reflects the turning of European nationalist ire against Muslims instead of Jews, that's hardly a compliment to Israel.

Lest anyone doubt that old-fashioned Jew-hating is alive and well in Poland, Israel's denunciation of the Holocaust law sparked a burst of anti-Semitic backlash this week, with the director of one state-run TV station, for example, claiming on air that the death camps should be described as Jewish, as Jews in the camps operated the crematoria that disposed of their fellow prisoners (under duress, of course). Rafal Pankowski, a Warsaw-based political scientist who monitors anti-Semitism as head of the Never Again association, told the *Washington Post*: “Anti-Semitism is not a new phenomenon here, but we're seeing an explosion of that sentiment in popular media.”

Beyond the specific connotations of Holocaust revisionism, the Polish government's obsession with denying any Polish complicity in that crime is indicative of another theme common to the new wave of right-wing nationalists around the world: a compulsive desire to sanitize the past. In Europe, this means denying or downplaying collaboration with the Third Reich (or in Germany itself, casting off a sense of national responsibility for it). But this is by no means unique to Europe.

In Israel, it means banning Palestinians from marking the foundation of Israel as the Nakba (catastrophe), while in India, it means censoring books, films, and art and rewriting school textbooks to reflect Hindu-nationalist myths. Indeed, we see the same impulse among right-wingers in the U.S. today, in their efforts to rehabilitate the Confederacy, downplay the horrors of slavery, and deny the present reality of racial injustice that is its legacy.

As George Orwell wrote in his *Notes on Nationalism* in 1945: “The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them.” More than seven decades later, this observation rings as true as ever.

<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2018/02/polands-holocaust-law-and-the-right-wings-revisionism.html>