

Polish Embassy Backing Grassroots Campaign to Glorify Anti-Semite Buried in London

By Tim Hume
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Władysław Studnicki called for Jews to leave Poland and sought collaboration with the Nazis. Historians and anti-racist groups say they're shocked at attempts to rehabilitate him.

Historians and anti-racist groups say they're appalled at a campaign promoted by a Polish embassy official to glorify a notorious anti-Semite who argued for the removal of Jews from Poland, and sought to collaborate with Nazi Germany.

The campaign group has already completed a gleaming restoration of the long-neglected London grave of Władysław Studnicki, a Polish nationalist politician who died in exile in the UK in 1953. Despite Studnicki's anti-Semitic writings, in which he called for Jews to gradually leave Poland over a 30-year period, the campaign to rehabilitate his legacy is being carried out with the blessing of the Polish embassy in London, one of whose employees is actively promoting the project online.

Agata Supińska, a political expert at the embassy, has championed Studnicki on Twitter as “one of the greatest Polish thinkers of the 20th century, who, despite the accuracy of his predictions, has not been accorded respect, and was forgotten for many years.” Ahead of a planned gathering to commemorate the anniversary of his birth last Sunday, she tweeted a video of his renovated grave in the London neighbourhood of Kensal Green, decorated with fresh flowers, saying she hoped the event would be just the first step in restoring his legacy and ideas.

She told VICE World News in an email that Studnicki deserved to be remembered as someone who dedicated his entire life to Polish independence, although she didn't endorse all his beliefs.

Historians and anti-racist groups say that Studnicki represented toxic anti-Semitic ideology that should be left behind in the 1930s and 40s.

“This is shocking,” Anita Prazmowska, a history professor at the London School of Economics told VICE World News. She said mainstream historians would reject the “tawdry” attempts to rehabilitate Studnicki's legacy, given his blatant anti-Semitism.

“This is a straightforward case of elevating an unseemly person to a position of patriotic glory, and it is done intentionally,” she said. “There's absolutely no doubt as to what this person represents... This is really in your face.”

Despite Studnicki's beliefs, the Polish embassy in London said it had no problem with an employee working to restore Studnicki's legacy.

“The efforts to restore Władysław Studnicki's grave in London is a civic initiative. Agata Supińska got involved in this project in a purely personal capacity,” the embassy said in a statement.

“The Embassy of the Republic of Poland in London supports all grassroots civic initiatives aimed at preserving the memory of Poles and their achievements in Great Britain.”

Rafał Pankowski, head of Polish anti-racism organisation Never Again, said he was outraged by attempts to present Studnicki as a heroic Polish patriot.

“We are appalled by this case of glorification of an anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi collaborator by officials of the Polish state, on British territory,” he said.

Prazmowska said the push to whitewash Studnicki's legacy, with the tacit approval of the Polish embassy, and the involvement of at least one other government official, reflected the revisionist approach of Poland's ruling Law and Justice party to the country's complex wartime history.

The right-wing populist party has made history just another front in its full-spectrum culture war during its years in power, widening the divide between liberal and conservative Poles on issues from immigration and LGBTQ rights to abortion. Despite its politics regularly setting it at odds with the European Union, and alienating many liberal and left-wing Poles — the battle over abortion rights has resulted in record crowds at anti-government protests in recent weeks — its championing of a traditionalist, Catholic Polish identity has commanded a high level of support.

“This government has elevated many of these wartime figures to the rank of unblemished, true patriots,” said Prazmowska.

“This is something many Poles actually like — stories about patriotism, Catholicism... There's the European Union kicking us about, and we're going to respond by instead focusing on the days of dignity and pride.”

The latest revisionist campaign, to rehabilitate the legacy of Studnicki, is being driven by a group that includes historian Sławomir Cenckiewicz, the director of the Polish Army's military history office. His office did not respond to requests for comment. The campaign has drawn praise from some Law and Justice politicians, with one, Michał Wypij, tweeting that it also was a “beautiful thing” and he would be happy to contribute financially to the project.

Studnicki was a prominent pro-German Polish statesman who had unsuccessfully pushed for Poland to align itself with Nazi Germany, said Prazmowska. He was also an

ardent anti-Semite, arguing in one 1930s publication, *Sprawa polsko-żydowska* (“The Polish Jewish Question”) for the gradual emigration of 100,000 Jews a year from Poland, ethnically cleansing the country of a people he referred to as “parasites on the healthy branch of the Polish tree.”

“Generally he attributes to Jewish people a determination to destabilise Europe as a whole... He saw Nazi anti-Semitic laws introduced after 1934 as a fightback, therefore he thought Poland should ally itself with Germany in order to continue this type of policy,” said Prazmowska.

“He certainly was not a Nazi, or a man who wanted to see the extermination of Jews, but he was committed to ‘ridding’ Poland of its Jewish citizens.”

Studnicki was also an important member of the collaborationist National Radical Organisation, which organized attacks on Polish Jews, including a notorious Warsaw pogrom in 1940, carried out with German encouragement.

He actively sought an alliance between Poland and the Third Reich against the Soviets, travelling to Berlin in January 1940 to seek an audience with Adolf Hitler, although he was only able to meet with Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels. After a couple of stints of imprisonment under the German authorities, Studnicki left Poland and eventually settled in London, where he was shunned by other Polish émigrés for his political views. In 1951, the Communist government in Poland banned his books.

In an email to VICE World News, Supińska defended Studnicki as an inveterate fighter for Polish independence, and said he had also protested the Nazis’ treatment of Polish Jews.

But in a different tone to her previous public comments on Studnicki, which made no mention of his shortcomings, she acknowledged he was mistaken in many respects. She also argued, contrary to her previously stated hope her group’s efforts would lead to the restoration of his ideas, that the work on the grave didn’t amount to a glorification of Studnicki or an endorsement of his ideology, but was simply a matter of “decency.”

“He was mistaken in many matters as every human being (is), and as a politician and publicist he was very radical in many of his judgments, but the fact that we do not share his perspective and judgments does not mean that we should accept his tomb rotting in the mud,” she wrote.

“Those opposed to his ideas may argue that giving any attention to this deceased person is glorifying him, however honesty, decency and the traditional Polish commitment to the memory of the heroes of the struggle for independence of the Republic of Poland required us to renovate the tomb.”

Prazmowska, the LSE professor, said she was not surprised by the embassy's position, which she considered "a tacit endorsement of Studnicki's views," as it reflected the broader nationalist rewriting of history promoted by Law and Justice. These efforts have included a move to criminalise the act of alleging that Poland or the Poles were complicit in Nazi crimes — a measure that was later watered down amid international pressure.

"The present government has used history very much to raise the Polish sense of dignity, if you can see the irony and awfulness here," she said.

"They elevate particular personalities or periods or events in a way that is not historically correct, to make out that they are people who are proud, battling for Poland, looking after Polish dignity."

Faith Matters, a UK non-profit that works to reduce extremism and inter-faith tensions, said it had previously documented UK-based Polish far-right groups using grave-cleaning campaigns of people of Polish heritage as a means of drawing people in to their ideology.

"They use this simple and honourable thing as a means to wrap their tentacles around people," Iman Atta, the group's director, told VICE World News. While maintaining graves was a positive act, she said, "when the upkeep involves the graves of people with a history of Nazi sympathies, it does raise eyebrows."

"When an individual employed by an embassy in the UK is involved, that should raise eyebrows further."

Pankowski, of Poland's Never Again Association, said he saw the embassy official's public involvement in the project as a troubling example of the endorsement of extremist ideology by Polish state institutions. Poland's UK embassy has previously been accused of helping to platform far-right extremists. A BBC investigation found that in 2017, the embassy part-funded an event organised by a UK-based chapter of far-right group Polska Niepodległa, which featured a Polish blogger who has been accused of hate speech against Muslims, feminists and the LGBTQ community.

Prazmowska said that while she was dismayed by the embassy's tacit endorsement of the Studnicki campaign, she was heartened by the many online responses from Poles describing his ideas as "worthy of being forgotten."

"We now condemn racist and anti-Semitic views, so his achievements are not ones worthy of preserving and celebrating," she said.

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvxna5/wladyslaw-studnicki-poland-london-grave>