



The Resurgence of Antisemitic Discourse in Poland

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The surge of hostility to Jews and the Jewish State in the Polish media and politics in early 2018 took many observers by surprise. For some, it was shocking to witness a virtual tidal wave of antisemitism in the mainstream discourse of one of the largest member states of the European Union—on territory which, during the German occupation, was the epicenter of the Holocaust. It was also a great shock because for many years, bilateral relations between Poland and Israel had been especially cordial and fruitful.

While the history of antisemitism in Poland is relatively well known and has been thoroughly researched, few observers adequately assessed its potential as a tool with which to whip up the masses in contemporary Polish society. As late as February 4, 2018, Jonny Daniels, a controversial Anglo-Israeli public relations specialist frequently quoted in the Polish media on Jewish issues, boldly declared, “There is no such thing as Polish antisemitism.”¹ Daniels, who mysteriously surfaced in Poland after the elections in 2015 that brought the radical, right-wing Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) party to power, became the Orthodox Jewish poster boy of the Polish right. Sharply criticized by leaders of the Jewish community in Warsaw for acting as an apologist for the high priest of Poland’s notorious Radio Maryja, Tadeusz Rydyk, even Daniels suddenly found himself the target of vicious antisemitic verbal attacks in 2018.²

Konstanty Gebert (writing under his pen name Dawid Warszawski), a respected intellectual and commentator on Polish, Jewish, and international issues, penned a lengthy article for the leading liberal daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, on commonalities in the Polish and Israeli conservative-nationalist outlook. He noted the friendly relations between the two countries’ ruling parties. Within hours of its publication on January 27, 2018, Gebert’s erudite and well-documented article was suddenly old news and all but forgotten.³

On the evening of January 26, 2018, the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the lower house of the Polish parliament (Sejm) passed the so-called “memory law” radically restricting freedom of speech regarding the discussion of Polish complicity in historical crimes.⁴ The most controversial passages of the bill, as published in the *Dziennik Ustaw* [Polish Law Journal] of February 14, 2018 (Item 369), read:

1. Whoever publicly and contrary to the facts attributes responsibility or co-responsibility to the Polish Nation or the Polish State for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich, as specified in Article 6 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal annexed to the International agreement for the prosecution and punishment of the major war criminals of the European Axis, signed in London on August 8, 1945 (*Dziennik Ustaw* of 1947, Item 367), or for other felonies that constitute crimes against peace, crimes against humanity or war crimes, or whoever otherwise grossly diminishes the responsibility of the true perpetrators of said crimes, shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for up to three years. The sentence shall be made public.
2. If the act specified in Clause 1 is committed unintentionally, the perpetrator shall be liable to a fine or a restriction of liberty.

As many critics pointed out, the phrasing of the legislation was broad and imprecise. It left open the possibility that anybody criticizing any element of Polish historical record could be prosecuted under the new law. The current ruling party has often proclaimed that the nation is “the sovereign” of the Polish state. Thus, the law aimed against “defamation of the nation” can be compared to the controversial and broad-ranging *lèse majesté* laws in Thailand and Cambodia.

Although Polish politicians argued that the bill was enacted to counter the usage of the phrase “Polish death camps,” there was no mention of that term in the proposed legislation, and its scope was much broader. To be sure, the camps often referred to as “Polish” were built and operated by the Nazi Germans (not the Poles) on occupied Polish soil. Calling them “Polish” has long been deemed offensive and misleading, and major Jewish organizations have repeatedly condemned that formulation. Arguably, in the vast majority of cases, that phrase was used to denote the geographical location of the camps rather than to suggest that Poles were somehow complicit in their creation and operation. For example, Jan Karski’s historic article on Belżec in *Collier’s Weekly* in October 1944 was entitled “Polish Death Camp.” Under Communism, Polish officialdom had traditionally insisted on calling Auschwitz by its Polish geographic name, Oświęcim, which led to further confusion.

In 2012, the phrase was used by US President Barack Obama in his speech during a ceremony in which the Presidential Medal of Freedom was posthumously bestowed upon the heroic Polish courier. That unfortunate choice of words precipitated a storm of upset in Poland, and Obama subsequently apologized for his error.

The passage of the bill amounted to an official adoption of the ethno-nationalist narrative of Polish history, and a stifling of any critical assessment of the participation of elements of the Polish population in the destruction and despoliation of their Jewish neighbors. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that unlike other post-Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Poland had made significant progress in recognizing and researching the inconvenient truths about its own legacy of antisemitism. The penetrating works of courageous Polish scholars (such as Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, Jan Grabowski, Dariusz Libionka, Adam Puławski and a number of others) have revealed the most agonizing aspects of the history of wartime Polish–Jewish relations. In the wake of the new legislation, however, that progress has been seriously hampered and the findings of these historians, and even their patriotism, has been called into question.

The law allowed for certain exceptions. “Scholarly” and “artistic” activities would be exempt from the new legislation, but those terms were left undefined. Significantly, the law referred to both the “state” and the “nation” as two separate, protected, categories, the meaning of the latter word in Polish [*Naród*] being commonly understood as the Polish ethnic group (the Polish people). Moreover, the legislation allowed a specific class of nongovernmental organizations (those with statutes including a mission to act against a defamation of the Polish nation) to initiate criminal proceedings in the Polish courts against alleged perpetrators, wherever they happened to be in the world. As reported on March 15, 2018, at least forty-four cases of an alleged violation of the law were reported to the public prosecutor.⁵ One of the first cases, initiated by the right-wing group *Reduta Dobrego Imienia* (also known as the Polish Anti-Defamation League), concerned a publication in a media outlet in Buenos Aires. This led to a rare instance of a public spat between Polish and Argentinian authorities.⁶

Even when it became clear that the bill had precipitated a major international controversy, with high-level criticism coming from both Israel and the US, Polish decision makers were not deterred. On the contrary, they chose to speed up the legislative process, apparently determined to bolster their nationalist credentials. On February 1, the bill was hastily passed in the Senate in an unusual late-night vote at 2:00 a.m. On February 5, extreme-right groups *Ruch Narodowy* (RN) [Nationalist Movement] and *Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny* (ONR) [National-Radical Camp] held a demonstration outside the president’s palace. Among various antisemitic slogans such as “Enough of Jewish lies!” the demonstrators unfurled a banner addressed to President Andrzej Duda: “Take off your yarmulke;

sign the bill!" President Duda duly affixed his signature to it the next day. Although he simultaneously referred the legislation to the Constitutional Tribunal, the president's endorsement meant that the bill became law.

What has been even more problematic and troubling than the wording of the legislation itself and the curious pace of its passage is the type and tone of discourse that has accompanied it. Until 2018, antisemitic hate speech had been largely confined to the far-right margins of Polish politics and was rarely heard in mainstream discourse. This changed very rapidly after January 26–27, and both the scale and wildfire-like spread of the phenomenon were truly astonishing. During the days and weeks that followed, literally hundreds of antisemitic statements were made in the Polish media, not only by fringe elements but also by mainstream actors, including parliamentarians (some were even well-known members of the ruling party) and staff commentators on major media channels, particularly those owned by the state. The vast amount of material produced in those weeks might one day provide inspiration for a larger-scale study of the language of prejudice similar to the historic works of the German-Jewish diarist Victor Klemperer in Dresden and the well-known Polish-Jewish historian of antisemitism in Poland Michał Głowiński.

Some of the crudest examples of antisemitic speech appeared in the public sphere very soon after the passage of the controversial law, and in reaction to the subsequent public opposition expressed by Israeli Ambassador to Poland Anna Azari. On January 27, a popular columnist, writer, and commentator on Polish state TV, Rafał Ziemkiewicz, wrote on Twitter that he was abandoning his previous pro-Israel position: "For many years I have convinced people that we must support Israel. Today, because of a few stupid and greedy scabs, I feel like an idiot," he tweeted, employing a term historically used in antisemitic discourse in Poland: *parczy* [scabs]. According to Głowiński, that word—originally meaning a type of skin disease—is deeply rooted in the history of radical antisemitism in Poland.⁷

Contrary to some media reports, Ziemkiewicz did not delete his offensive tweet; in fact, he refused to apologize, and in subsequent media appearances repeatedly defended his use of extreme language.⁸ Although Polish State TV forbids its employees from using any language on social media they would not use on air, Ziemkiewicz (who has more than 150,000 Twitter followers) was not disciplined for the tweet and his career blossomed. After having been mentioned in a 2018 Tel Aviv University report on antisemitism, Ziemkiewicz proclaimed that being labeled an antisemite was a measure of his "professional success."⁹

Many of the participants in the debate on Polish–Jewish history—both politicians and media commentators—resorted to what Michael Shafir famously called "deflective negation," i.e., denial of any wrongdoing by members of one's own ethnic group, while frequently portraying imagined opponents (the Jews) in a

negative light.¹⁰ For example, MP Jacek Żalek, a deputy chairman of the parliamentary faction of the ruling party (though himself technically a member of a smaller party, Polska Razem [Poland Together] led by Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin), often denied Polish responsibility for the infamous pogroms of Kielce and Jedwabne. In one interview, on February 8, 2018, Żalek claimed that the tragedy in Kielce in July 1946 “was a provocation of the UB [Polish Communist security services].”¹¹ In another televised interview that same day, Żalek claimed, “The Jews in Jedwabne were murdered by Germans”—thus absolving their Polish neighbors of the responsibility for the slaughter despite widely known and convincing evidence to the contrary.¹² In his TV appearance, Żalek went on record as saying that if the Poles are held responsible for the 1941 Jedwabne pogrom, “one might conclude that, since the Jewish police were ... responsible for leading Jews to the gas chambers, the Jews prepared the Holocaust for themselves.”¹³

The myth of *Żydokomuna* [Jewish Communism] resurfaced immediately after the emergence of the current controversy. During a TV discussion on January 28 (the day after Israel protested the new law), Paweł Kukiz, a former punk rock star and the leader of the third-largest political group in the Polish parliament—the “anti-establishment” Kukiz’15—strongly alluded to an alleged link between Jews and Communism: “I don’t call the [post-war communist] camps in Świętochłowice and Jaworzno led by Mr. [Salomon] Morel of Jewish nationality ‘Jewish concentration camps.’”¹⁴ Kukiz went on to accuse the Jews of defaming Poles, something equal to the crime of the Holocaust itself: “Making Poles co-responsible for the Holocaust is a moral and ethical Holocaust against the Poles.” In a typical figure of speech, Kukiz used the purported history of his own family to prove the case of Polish heroism and the Jewish lack of gratitude—as well as the link between Jews and the imposition of Communism: “My mother helped Jews in Warsaw; she told me about it. I have many Jewish friends. At the same time, I would not call the communist system ‘Jewish’ despite the fact all the senior personnel in the security service, the NKVD, and the judiciary were people such as [Ozjasz] Szechter, [Stefan] Michnik, [Salomon] Morel, [Józef] Światło, [Józef] Różański, [Józef] Goldberg, etc.”¹⁵ The journalist interviewing Kukiz interjected, “But now we have a crisis” Kukiz angrily interrupted, “I don’t have a crisis, sir. Maybe the Jews have a crisis, a moral crisis, since they accuse the Poles of participation in such crimes.”¹⁶ In other words, Jews don’t just have a skewed view of Poles, they are also amoral.

In this same vein, MP Marek Jakubiak, a leading member of the Kukiz movement, made the case for equivalence between the wartime plight of Poles and Jews (both should be seen as equal victims of the Holocaust), stressing the alleged unfair treatment of Poles by international public opinion. In an interview with *wpolityce.pl*, a pro-government website, Jakubiak boldly stated: “Seventy percent of students from North America are convinced that the Nazis were of Polish descent. We

have a lot of work ahead of us to undo the lies about Polish history.” Significantly, Jakubiak did not provide any source for that figure. “The Poles were also victims of the Holocaust because we were murdered as ferociously as the Jews. Today, a one-sided look at the results of World War II leads to nobody else being considered right, apart from Israel.” In the same interview, Jakubiak demanded that the Polish authorities directly intervene in the educational activities at former Nazi death camps, once again complaining of too much Jewish influence:

Yesterday I watched *Studio Polska* [on Polish state TV] and one of the ladies in the audience said, “We’ve lost the Auschwitz Museum.” We have to look at that. Perhaps we should only allow Polish guides to lead tours in Auschwitz. We have to verify all the captions on the grounds of the museum, because from what the lady said, there is very little about Poles. Listening to that lady, I remembered the Jewish Diaspora once borrowed a barrack from Majdanek and still hasn’t returned it . . . ¹⁷

In a separate interview, on Polish state radio, Jakubiak went one step further and claimed Polish moral superiority over the Jews: While Poles rescued the Jews during the Nazi oppression, the Jews allegedly refused to help the Poles under Soviet occupation. The politician (a former military officer during the Communist period and current brewery owner) also emphasized the link between Jews and Communism:

On September 17, 1939 we were attacked by our eternal enemy, Soviet Russia. The Jews welcomed them with flowers. I’m asking where the Jews were when 500,000 Poles were murdered in front of their eyes and 2 million Poles were put on the death trains to Siberia. I’m asking if there was even a single Pole saved by Jews in a situation like that.

Jakubiak went on to state: “I want to say that the Poles also suffered a Holocaust, which was not less than the Jewish Holocaust.” Taking his cue from Jonny Daniels, he concluded the conversation by denying the existence of any antisemitism in Poland at all, cheekily claiming to reflect the opinion of the Jews in Poland on the matter: “The Jews who live in Poland today say they don’t know of any antisemitism; they just live among us.”¹⁸

Similar arguments, constructing moral equivalence between Jewish and Polish suffering in the Holocaust, have also been employed by politicians of the ruling party. For example, MP Ireneusz Zyska claimed on state TV: “Let us remember that there was also a Holocaust against the Polish people. The Jews and Israel have no monopoly on the word ‘Holocaust.’”¹⁹

Representatives of the ruling party also repeatedly alluded to the stereotype of *Żydokomuna* in discussions surrounding the new legislation. Jewish participation

in communist crimes against Poland was stressed by several politicians. For example, a summary of Senator Jan Zaryn's interview on state radio included the following passage: "Professor Zaryn discussed on Radio 3 the participation of Jews in the mass killings of Poles in the Eastern territories, and the assistance provided by Jews in the occupation of Poland by the Red Army."²⁰ A well-known PiS MP, Krystyna Pawłowicz, referred to alleged Jewish crimes against the Poles in an even cruder way, and associated them with Israel, by posting on her official Facebook page: "The Holocaust against the Poles continued after World War II. ISRAEL, are these JEWS guilty of crimes against the Poles?" The comment was accompanied by a list of Stalinist security officials of Jewish background.²¹

The discursive mobilization focusing on the conflicting interpretations of history—the competition over victimhood—rapidly spilled over into a more general assault on the role of the Holocaust in contemporary Jewish identity. For example, historian Bogdan Musiał, a newly appointed member of the Council of the Museum of World War II in Gdańsk and adviser to the chairman of the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (IPN) [National Memory Institute], declared on state television channel TVP, "The Holocaust is a supplementary religion for Judaism." According to Musiał, the Israeli reaction to the Polish law is a result of recognizing the memory of the Holocaust as a form of religion, in which emotions play a crucial role at the expense of facts. At the same time, Musiał defended the role of Polish Catholics and deflected blame for historical antisemitism to the political left. Asked about the Church's role, he said: "Trying to get the Church into the Holocaust is a diversion of attention from the left-wing ideas that laid the foundations for national socialism."²²

Somewhat similar arguments about the place of the Holocaust in Jewish identity were employed in a long interview given by one of President Duda's advisers, Andrzej Zybertowicz, and published in *Polska—The Times* (the Polish edition of the British *Times*). Zybertowicz is a sociologist and specialist on security issues who often represents the president in mainstream media discussions. His interview was published under the headline: "Anti-Polonism in Israel results from the feeling of shame at the passivity of the Jews during the Holocaust. It's a form of compensation." In that interview, Zybertowicz linked the Holocaust with current politics in the Middle East: "The brutal treatment of the Palestinians and the Hizbullah [by the Israelis] is also a form of the compensation ... Earlier they experienced the trauma of humiliation and now—perhaps in line with their tradition of *chutzpa*—they are making up for it."

Conveniently forgetting about Jewish resistance to the Germans, such as in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Zybertowicz managed to combine a negative assessment of the alleged Jewish passivity during the Holocaust with a condemnation of Israel's policies in the Middle East—and a negative reference to Jewish

culture in general (“the tradition of *chutzpa*”). He repeated his allegations several times throughout the interview:

Many Jews engaged in denunciation and collaboration during the war. I think that Israel has still not worked it out. ... I wonder if this political and symbolic attack of Israel on Poland and Poles is not, apart from all else, a smokescreen against remembering how they behaved in the face of the Holocaust—they were passive, they collaborated, and the Jewish elites from the East Coast of the USA, having learned from the Poles about what was going on in the concentration camps, behaved passively ... But as a Pole, I don't agree to Israel conducting its own reckoning with history at the expense of our country.

Zybertowicz ended by accusing Israel of unfairly benefitting from the Holocaust and once more alluded to the Polish–Jewish competition of victimhood:

In this dispute one can see clearly that Israel is fighting to keep a monopoly on the Holocaust. The “religion” of the Holocaust has become a symbolic shield for that country, which is used by Israel to create for itself a special position in many places in the world—a shield meant to protect Israel against any criticism. And now Israel is afraid that Poland's IPN law will break its monopoly on the Holocaust?²⁵

Predictably, Zybertowicz's assertion made international headlines.²⁴ After several days, the president's chief of staff stated that the adviser's comments were not made on behalf of the president himself.²⁵ However, Zybertowicz was not publicly reprimanded and continued to play an active role in various discussions. In fact, he repeated many of the same comments at a public debate in Warsaw's Collegium Civitas University on February 15, 2018 in which this author participated. It should be noted that Zybertowicz was not alone in ascribing blame for collaboration with the Nazis to the Jews themselves. In fact, such arguments have become commonplace. For example, a well-known right-wing analyst, Jerzy Targalski, declared in his weekly show on TV Republika: “Among the Jews, it was the elite who collaborated with the Germans. It was the *Judenrat*, the Jewish police. So, our defense must rely on reminding people of the Jewish accounts of Jewish collaboration in the Holocaust; then the Jewish exclusivity will end.”²⁶

Another politician, MP Kornel Morawiecki, said in an interview on March 22, 2018, published after most of the international controversy had already erupted, “Do you know who chased the Jews into the Warsaw Ghetto? The Germans, you think? No. The Jews themselves went because they were told that there would be an enclave, that they would not have to deal with those nasty Poles.”²⁷ For years, Morawiecki had been considered a moral voice in Polish politics. The leader of a radical wing of the Solidarity movement in the 1980s, he is also well

known because he is the father of the current prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, and the leader of his own group in parliament: Wolni i Solidarni [Freedom and Solidarity]. His statement can be seen as another example of the deflection of guilt for Holocaust-era crimes onto the Jews themselves. It also stresses their supposedly ingrained, irrational prejudice against the Poles. While the son cannot be held responsible for the father's views, the latter's statement shed light on the peculiar context of the prime minister's remark about "Jewish perpetrators" of the Holocaust made at the Munich Security Conference on February 17, 2018, in answer to a question by Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman.²⁸

Some mainstream politicians also blamed the Jews themselves for the contemporary wave of hostility against them in Poland. For example, Beata Mazurek, a deputy speaker of the Polish parliament and the official spokesperson of the ruling party, approvingly tweeted a quote from Father Henryk Zieliński, a Catholic priest who said on state TV: "What the Israeli ambassador has done makes it difficult for me to look at Jews with friendship and sympathy." Mazurek's comment was posted on February 2–3 after midnight, and has, as of the time of this writing, not been deleted. Another PiS MP, Iwona Arent, participated in a discussion aired on an independent station, TVN24, on February 3, 2017, and said: "If there is now a wave of antisemitism, or a different perspective on the Jews, then one must say it is the fault of the Jews themselves." The journalist objected, but Arent continued to regurgitate the discursive repertoire of antisemites and went on to talk about the role of Jewish Communists in the secret police.

Many of the public comments made in the wake of the passage of the history law were accompanied by thinly veiled conspiracy theories. A direct reference to imagined Jewish power was made by MP Janusz Sanocki (elected from the Kukiz'15 group), writing in the nationalist weekly *Mysl Polska*. According to Sanocki, the Jews manipulate historical facts and use their influence over the United States for financial gains at Poland's expense:

And what kind of order would Uncle Sam's army be supposed to install and what are the crimes attributed to us by "the older brothers in faith"—the Jews? It's simple. It's about the post-Jewish property worth billions of dollars left behind by the Holocaust victims, the Jews who left no heirs So the narrative of our "older brothers in faith" as well as their front organization, that is the US Congress, is simple. The Poles have to give them billions for the heirless property left by Jews. Thus, the Poles need to be softened and accused of Nazism. Hence "Polish death camps" and tales of Polish crimes against Jews.²⁹

A similar point about the existential clash of Polish and Jewish identities, and disproportionate Jewish international influence, was made by Professor Mieczysław Ryba from the Catholic University of Lublin (also an adviser to the president) in a

long interview published in Radio Maryja's daily paper, *Nasz Dziennik*, on February 2, 2018: "This is a dispute about our national identity; that's why we must not give in ... All this has to be told to the world, but it takes a lot of effort and financial resources as well as good planning." Journalist Mariusz Kamieniecki noted: "It's not simple, because the Jewish circles are strongly privileged in the world." Ryba: "Of course today the Jewish arguments—in the field of diplomacy—are better able to reach world opinion."³⁰ In a similar vein, Senator Jan Żaryn, a historian-turned-politician who plays a key role in the ruling party's "history policy," gave an interview (published on February 1, 2018) to a pro-government media outlet, and spoke in the same breath about the US, its powerful Jewish lobby, and property claims, as well as the "Jewish–German–Russian alliance."³¹

The alleged danger posed by the Jewish lobby in the US was stressed by then-Vice-President of the European Parliament Ryszard Czarnecki (of PiS—a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists group composed of, among others, the British Tories), who stated on the state television channel TVP on February 3, 2018: "The circles of American Jews have often been even more aggressive [toward Poland] than the Jewish circles in Israel. But I am a Polish politician and I have Polish duties."³² The latter phrase was not accidental; it was a coded quote from Roman Dmowski, the founding father of antisemitic ethno-nationalism in Poland. "I am Polish and I have Polish duties" is the nationalist motto coined by Dmowski and commonly used by the far right.

One of the most wide-ranging international conspiracy theories around the issue of the Polish history law was offered by Jerzy Targalski during his weekly broadcast on TV Republika on February 2:

The United States would like to share with us the burden of their expenses related to Israel. The Jewish organizations simply want to milk us ... Of course, a witch hunt against Poland and playing the anti-Polish card can get you a lot of votes in Israel. Israeli youth believe the whole world wants to conduct another Holocaust against them, so they start to hate everybody ... This is about the cost of maintaining Israel and the cost of maintaining the Jewish organizations in the US ... And finally, it is about the ideology of the Holocaust ... Jewish exclusivity is falling apart. According to this ideology, the whole world must constantly support Israel and pay money lest it be accused of antisemitism ... This is really about the state ideology of Israel ... Netanyahu offered us as a gift to Putin.³³

According to a widespread view in the Polish media, the Jewish opposition to the Polish history law has been mostly motivated by a hidden desire for financial

gains at the expense of Poland. For example, the headline on one of the most widely circulated Polish newspapers, *Super Express*, proclaimed on February 3, 2018: “What the Jews want from Poland: forests, factories, houses—worth even one trillion.”³⁴

Sometimes the assertion was made subtly, sometimes explicitly. One example of a thinly veiled accusation of materialistic intentions at the core of the protests against the history law was expressed in an interview with Patryk Jaki, a deputy minister of justice who spearheaded the legislation. The headline on February 9, 2018 consisted of the Jaki quote: “We cannot call the Israeli embassy before passing each piece of legislation and ask if they kindly agree to it.” In the interview, asked if the reprivatization [restitution] issue is not the main source of the problem we are facing today, Jaki admitted that “there are many commentators, also abroad, who point to the fact these issues can be linked; it is about big money, but it is easier to attack [Poland] from an ethical position than from a financial position, because it is easier to justify such an attack.”³⁵

On February 5, in an interview on state radio, Senator Jerzy Czerwiński (PiS) made the assertion more explicit still when he said:

Another issue is the reaction of the Jewish state ... and the political circles inside Israel. Maybe you can call it a conspiracy theory, but I think this was a nervous reaction, not signaled earlier; we heard that representatives of Israel were consulted on the bill. I think this reaction results from a hidden agenda, after all we know that Jewish circles, including American ones, but mostly the State of Israel, are trying to get restitution of property or at least compensation.³⁶

The same claim was made by another pro-government MP, Adam Andruszkiewicz (a former chairman of the extreme-nationalist youth group the *Młodzież Wszepolska* [All-Polish Youth]), “This conflict is linked with the reprivatization law. There are opinions that it is because Poland wants to finally solve the problem of inheritance. Some circles connected with Israel are unhappy about it.”³⁷ MP Janusz Sanocki made a similar comment for the Russian *Sputnik* website: “We, the Polish people, cannot allow German guilt to be transferred on to us, especially because it is followed by Jewish property claims. Some Jewish circles abuse this tragedy and try to obtain financial gain from it.”³⁸

Significantly, an analogous view was expressed during a press conference given by the chair of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, to discuss the issue of the new history law: “The reason for the controversy is probably heirless Jewish property. Those Jewish organizations ... would like to seize this heirless Jewish property for themselves in order to promote knowledge about the Holocaust or implement their programs.” Israeli Ambassador

Anna Azari publicly refuted the archbishop's interpretation by saying that "combining these two issues represents nothing but an antisemitic stereotype, as if the Jew is not able to fight for his honor, just constantly thinks about money."³⁹

The allegation of financial motivation on the part of the Jews is often accompanied by various other offensive stereotypes and accusations, sometimes seemingly unrelated. Another representative of the Catholic Church, the aforementioned Henryk Zieliński, stated during a TVP Info broadcast:

We have to link it all to Act 447 [a US Congress legislative initiative on monitoring the issue of Holocaust-era property restitution] and the topic of reprivatization ... The president [Andrzej Duda] has no other option than to sign the [Polish memory] law because it is a question of our sovereignty ... And then there is the question of the biography of George Soros and what he did as a Jew during the war: Can't he be called a *szmalcownik*? [an offensive term denoting an individual who blackmailed Jews during the occupation].

Piotr Semka, a well-known journalist, responded by saying: "The Israel lobby may try to block funding for the stationing of US soldiers in Poland ... This pressure is extremely brutal so we must stand firm." Another pundit on the same program, Maciej Pawlicki, said: "For Poland it is a matter of survival in the year of the 100th anniversary of its independence Actually, Israel's policy is antisemitic in the long term."⁴⁰

Ziemkiewicz, the right-wing commentator who was cited earlier, used the history law controversy to characterize the members of the political opposition as traitors, signaling another dimension of the nationalist campaign, the question of Poland's "internal enemies:"

One can have different views about the law, about the authorities. But in moments like this, when Poland is a target of attacks from all sides, the opposition should think twice. That whole bunch only supports Israel. Together with [independent] media they constitute a fifth column ... The political scene has divided itself into Polish and anti-Polish."⁴¹

Thus, conveniently, the government's detractors—both Jewish and non-Jewish—have been portrayed as "anti-Polish." The author of this article, for example, was subjected to a vicious online campaign of public vilification for "attacking his own country" by a high-ranking Polish official upon presenting facts on the present situation in Poland at the Global Forum on Combatting Antisemitism held in Jerusalem in March 2018.⁴²

As we can see, the expressions of antipathy extend well beyond the realm of historical discussion. In some cases, they have been directed against the tiny Polish-Jewish community. Despite its small size, the Jewish minority has been the target of what journalist Paul Lendvai called (back in the early 1970s) “antisemitism without Jews.” The loyalty of Poland’s Jewish citizens was called into question, and it was impossible not to see parallels with the vicious anti-Zionist campaign that had been unleashed by the Communist authorities in 1968. That campaign and the witch hunt that accompanied it led to the exodus of most of the Jews remaining in Poland, and of Poles who were “outed” because they were allegedly of Jewish origin.

In the words of Ben Cohen, writing in *Commentary* on February 16, 2018, “The enveloping antisemitic atmosphere of 1968 has returned.”⁴³ For example, Polish state radio commentator Piotr Nisztor suggested on air that Polish citizens who share Israel’s criticism of the Polish history legislation should consider relinquishing their citizenship. “If somebody acts as a spokesman for Israeli interests, maybe they should think about giving up their Polish citizenship and accepting Israeli citizenship,” Nisztor said in a comment highlighted on the radio’s official Twitter account.⁴⁴

Not surprisingly, such messages in the mainstream media were echoed in the discourse of openly antisemitic extremist groups such as the fascist ONR. During the abovementioned street demonstration in front of the Polish president’s palace on February 5, ONR leader Robert Bakiewicz—harking back to the infamous 1968 speech by First Party Secretary Władysław Gomułka denouncing “Zionists” in Poland—characterized the Jewish community as a “fifth column.”⁴⁵ Despite the existence of anti-hate speech laws in Poland, those guilty of antisemitic utterances were not punished.

While the existence of an antisemitic political tradition in Eastern and Central Europe has never been a secret, the rapid spread of antisemitic discourse through the contemporary Polish political and media mainstream must be viewed with great concern. While some elements of the antisemitic campaign were spontaneous and resulted from the activation of existing, deep-rooted patterns of prejudice, the fact that some of it emerged from political decisions taken on the highest level is especially worrisome. Significantly, the high-profile expressions of hostility both toward Israel and the Jews as such were combined in the recent outburst of hatred.

To be sure, many Poles resisted the tsunami of anti-Jewish propaganda and spoke out about this episode. Among the most notable examples are Bogusław Chrabota (editor of the center-right daily *Rzeczpospolita*) and former social-democrat Prime Minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz. President Andrzej Duda, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, and the PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński issued statements condemning antisemitism in more general terms.

The voices so forcefully and eloquently protesting the wave of antisemitism are important, but they were, arguably, much less audible than the shrill expressions of antisemitism (only a small sampling of which has been cited here). The subject of Jews dominated the national media for many weeks. On private media outlets, antisemitic comments were usually contradicted by the hosts or other discussants; however, in the state-controlled media they generally went unchallenged. As is so often true in the history of antisemitism, this is not just about Jews. The surge in radical nationalist discourse reflects a deeper crisis of liberal, democratic, and humanistic values—in Poland and elsewhere in post-Communist Europe, as well as in the wider world. It is likely that the problematic history legislation will eventually be amended and forgotten, but the long-term repercussions on Polish identity and democracy of the recent frenzy of antisemitism remain to be seen.

Notes

- ¹ Agaton Koziński, “Daniels: Nie ma polskiego antysemityzmu. Rozmowa z Jonnym Danielsem, założycielem fundacji ‘From the Depths’” *Dziennik Zachodni*, February 4, 2018, www.dziennikzachodni.pl/opinie/wywiady/a/daniels-nie-ma-polskiego-antysemityzmu-rozmowa-z-jonnym-danielsem-zalozycielem-fundacji-from-the-depths,12905554/.
- ² On occasion Daniels echoed some of the worst antisemitic tropes, including the claim that the left-wing Jewish media had besmirched Poland’s good name and that Jews were using the restitution issue to make money off Poles. See Filip Styczyński, “Powinniśmy powiedzieć Merkel: Masz tu rachunek, płać!” TVPInfo, October 14, 2017, www.tvp.info/34382010/wywiady/powinnismy-powiedziec-merkel-masz-tu-rachunek-plac/ and Larry Cohler-Esses, “The Holocaust Activist Who’s Warning Poland—About Danger Posed by Jews,” *The Forward*, November 5, 2017, <https://forward.com/news/world/386714/the-holocaust-activist-whos-warning-poland-about-danger-posed-by-jews/>. Poland’s chief rabbi, Michael Schudrich, suggested that what Daniels was doing was tantamount to practicing the “world’s oldest profession,” adding that the PR man “has become a supporter of the ultra-right wing. It is the politicization of the Holocaust that is the most dangerous aspect of what he is doing—and the politicization of history.” Another critic called Daniels a grifter, and the Israeli politicians whom he enlisted to take part in his activities with Father Rydzyk “useful idiots.” See Laurence Weinbaum, “In Poland, an antisemite, a conman and a useful idiot,” *The Times of Israel*, December 4, 2017, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/in-poland-an-anti-semite-a-conman-and-a-useful-idiot/>, and “When history clashes with politics in Poland,” December 19, 2017, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/history-and-politics-in-poland-a-combustible-brew/>.
- ³ Dawid Warszawski, “Polsce coraz bliżej do Izraela, a PiS i Likud to partie bliźniacze,” *Gazeta Wyborcza Magazyn*, January 27, 2018, <http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,22947592,polsce-coraz-blizej-do-izraela-a-pis-i-likud-to-partie-blizniacze.html>.
- ⁴ For Poland’s “history policy” —the background to that law, see Jan Grabowski, “The Holocaust and Poland’s ‘History Policy,’” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, X:3 (2016), 481–86.

- ⁵ Agata Łukaszewicz “Ustawa o IPN: 44 doniesienia ws. znieważania narodu polskiego”, Rzeczpospolita, March 14, 2018, www.rp.pl/Prawo-karne/303149911-Ustawa-o-IPN-44-doniesienia-ws-zniewazania-narodu-polskiego.html.
- ⁶ “Historyczny pozew. Zapisami ustawy o IPN w argentyński portal,” TVN24, March 17, 2018, www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/ustawa-o-ipn-reduta-dobrego-imienia-i-argentynski-portal-pagina-12,822912.html.
- ⁷ Rafał Pankowski, “Tutaj działa sam język. Wywiad z prof. Michałem Głowińskim,” *Nigdy Więcej*, No. 16, (Winter/Spring, 2008), www.nigdywiecej.org/pdf/pl/pismo/16/017_Tutaj-dziala-sam-jezyk.pdf.
- ⁸ Rafał Ziemkiewicz, “Nie mam powodu przepraszać za „parchów” i ‘żydowskie obozy zagłady’, Marcin Wolski dał się podejść. March 2, 2018, www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/rafal-ziemkiewicz-nie-mam-powodu-przepraszac-za-parchow-i-zydowskie-obozy-zaglady-marcin-wolski-dal-sie-podejsc.
- ⁹ “Rafał Ziemkiewicz: Jestem na liście antysemitów. To zawodowy sukces,” frondaPL, www.frondda.pl/a/rafal-ziemkiewicz-jestem-na-liscie-antysemitow-to-zawodowy-sukces,109031.html.
- ¹⁰ Michael Shafir, *Between Denial and Comparative Trivialization: Holocaust Negationism in Post-Communist East-Central Europe* (Jerusalem, 2004), cf. Natalia Sineeva-Pankowska, “Holocaust memory and Holocaust denial in Poland and Moldova”, *Kantor Centre Position Papers*, Tel Aviv University, March 2014.
- ¹¹ “Ostra dyskusja reportera z posłem PiS o Żydach. ‘Pan chce z wyjątku zrobić zasadę,’” WPTelewizja, February 8, 2018, <https://wp.tv/i,ostra-dyskusja-reportera-z-poslem-pis-o-zydach-pan-chce-z-wyjatku-zrobic-zasade,mid,2014665,cid,4051,klip.html>.
- ¹² “Czy po to była ustawa o IPN? Poseł PiS już ma nową teorię o zbrodni w Jedwabnem,” *Newsweek PL* February 8, 2018, www.newsweek.pl/polska/polityka/jacek-zalek-zydow-w-jedwabnem-zamordowali-niemcy,artykuly,422964,1.html?utm_source=fb&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=fb_nw.
- ¹³ “Poseł Żalek: Żydów w Jedwabnem zamordowali Niemcy,” *Polsat*, February 7, 2018, www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2018-02-07/zalek-polakow-w-jedwabnem-zamordowali-niemcy/.
- ¹⁴ Salomon Morel, an officer of the Polish Internal Security apparatus, was the Jewish-born commandant of the Zgoda detention camp in Świętochłowice and later, of the central labor camp in Jaworzno, in which thousands of prisoners were brutally maltreated and in which many lost their lives. In 1992, Morel fled to Israel after charges were brought against him in post-Communist Poland. He is often cited as an example of the purported misdeeds of Jewish-born Communists.
- ¹⁵ Jews who purportedly served in the Communist Security apparatus. Blaming Jews for the worst excesses of Stalinism is one of the most popular tropes circulating in Polish nationalist circles.
- ¹⁶ Piotr Łapiński, “Kukiz: przypisywanie nam odpowiedzialności za holocaust, jest etycznym holokaustem” *Kresy.pl*, January 28, 2018, www/kresy.pl/wydarzenia/kukiz-przypisywanie-nam-odpowiedzialnosci-holokaust-etycznym-holokaustem/.
- ¹⁷ “Jakubiak: Jeżeli nie będziemy szanowali własnej godności i pamięci historycznej, tonie jesteśmy warci Polski,” *wPolityce.pl*, February 4, 2018, <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/>

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- ¹⁸ "Jakubiak z Kukiz'15: Polacy również doznali Holokaustu. Wcale nie mniejszego niż żydowski," *Wprost*, February 2, 2018, www.wprost.pl/kraj/10101700/jakubiak-z-kukiz15-polacy-rowniez-doznali-holokaustu-wcale-nie-mniejszego-niz-zydowski.html.
- ¹⁹ A quote transcribed by the author while watching the TV program live, February 3, 2018.
- ²⁰ "Nasz Wywiad. Jakubiak: Jeżeli nie będziemy szanowali własnej godności i pamięci historycznej, to nie jesteśmy warci Polski," *wPolityce.pl*, February 4, 2018, www.frona.pl/a/prof-zaryn-o-udziale-zydow-w-masowych-mordach-na-polakach-z-kresow-wschodnich,106341.html.
- ²¹ "Prof. Pawłowicz: Holokaust Polaków trwał też po II wojnie. Czy Żydzi są winni zbrodni na Polakach?" *Do Rzeczy* February 3, 2018, <https://dorzeczy.pl/kraj/55086/Prof-Pawlowicz-Holokaust-Polakow-trwal-tez-po-II-wojnie-Czy-Zydzi-sa-winni-zbrodni-na-Polakach.html>.
- ²² " 'Holokaust religią zastępczą dla judaizmu'. Prof. Bogdan Musiał o historii Izraelczyków," *Polonia Christiana*, February 9, 2018, www.pch24.pl/holokaust-religia-zastepcza-dla-judaizmu-prof-bogdan-musial-o-historii-izraelczykow,58174,i.html#ixzz5Ig2CBULK.
- ²³ Agaton Koziński, "Prof. Andrzej Zybortowicz: Antypolonizm w Izraelu bierze się z poczucia wstydu za bierność Żydów w czasie Holokaustu. To forma odreagowania" *Polka Times*, February 9, 2018, www.polskatimes.pl/opinie/wywiady/a/prof-andrzej-zybertowicz-antypolonizm-w-izraelu-bierze-sie-z-poczucia-wstydu-za-biernosc-zydow-w-czasie-holokaustu-to-forma,12920030/.
- ²⁴ Vanessa Gera, "Polish official accuses Jews of 'passivity' in Holocaust," *AP/Ynet*, February 10, 2018, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5103865,00.html.
- ²⁵ Dariusz Grzędziński, "Szokujące słowa doradcy prezydenta o Żydach!" *Fakt24*, February 12, 2018, www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/polityka/antypolonizm-zydow-to-wstyd-z-powodu-biernosci-szokujace-slowa-doradcy-prezydenta/hk0ep75.
- ²⁶ J.Targalski, "Skończy się wyjątkowość Żydów," February 3, 2018 www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4_9A-SPg_M.
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- ²⁸ "Polish PM: There were also Jewish perpetrators of the Holocaust," *AP/Ynet*, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5118011,00.html.
- ²⁹ Janusz Sanocki, "W sojuszniczej okolicy," *Mysl Polska*, www.mysl-polska.pl/1467.
- ³⁰ Mariusz Kamieniecki, "Czas skończyć z pedagogiką wstydu," *Nasz Dziennik*, February 2, 2018, <https://naszdzienik.pl/polska-kraj/194111,czas-skonczyc-z-pedagogika-wstydu.html>.
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- ³³ Targalski, op. cit.
- ³⁴ Andrzej Lange “Tego chcą Żydzi od Polski: Lasy, fabryki, kamienice nawet bilion zł,” *Super Express*, www.se.pl/wiadomosci/polityka/tego-chca-zydzi-od-polski-lasy-fabryki-kamienice-nawet-bilion-z-aa-WXED-ADzu-Uy3J.html.
- ³⁵ “Patryk Jaki dla wPolsce.pl: Nie może być tak, że przed przyjęciem każdego projektu będziemy dzwonić do ambasady Izraela i pytać, czy łaskawie się na to zgadzają,” wPolityce.pl, <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/380697-patryk-jaki-dla-wpolscepl-nie-moze-byc-tak-ze-przed-przyjeciem-kazdego-projektu-bedziemy-dzwonic-do-ambasady-izraela-i-pytac-czy-laskawie-sie-na-to-zgadza>
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- ³⁷ Adam Stankiewicz, “Nasz Wywiad. Andruszkiewicz: Zachęcam prezydenta, aby jak najszybciej podpisał ustawę o IPN. Przeciąganie dyskusji nie ma sensu,” wPolityce.pl, February 2, 2018, <https://wpolityce.pl/m/polityka/379644-nasz-wywiad-andruszkiewicz-zachecam-prezydenta-aby-jak-najszybciej-podpisal-ustawe-o-ipn-przeciaganie-dyskusji-nie-ma-sensu>.
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