

# The Dark Return of Polish Anti-Semitism.

## New legislation seeks to replace established history with dangerous myths

Ben Cohen  
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# Commentary

On February 6, Polish President Andrzej Duda approved a parliamentary act that sets exacting legal boundaries for any public discussion of the six years Poland spent under the boot of the Third Reich. The IPN (Institute of National Remembrance) Act states that anyone who speaks publicly about incidents of Polish collusion with the Nazis could face up to three years in prison.

Three years' incarceration, tellingly, is the exact sentence handed down by a Vienna court in 2006 to the Holocaust denier, David Irving, who broke Austrian law with a public lecture on the "gas chambers fairy-tale." Today in Poland, then, acknowledging the collaboration of thousands of Poles with the German authorities from 1939 to 1945 has become a slander on par with the assertion that the Zyklon B gas used to suffocate millions of Jewish prisoners was really a harmless pesticide.

Poland was the native land of nearly half of the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust and the location of the most significant Nazi slave-labor camps and death factories. It is true, however, that the Polish government's core concern is a reasonable one. Calling the exclusively German project that was Auschwitz a "Polish death camp" is offensive to Polish sensibilities. In fact, the majority of Western scholars of the Holocaust, including those at Israel's Yad Vashem memorial, have assisted Poland in its efforts to correct historical language that suggests the Holocaust was more of a Polish crime than a German one. But the Polish government is using this argument as convenient cover for its ultimate goals. These are the appropriation of Jewish victimhood for Poland itself, reframing the Holocaust as an evil visited foremost on Poland and the Poles, and imposing stiff penalties for any deviation from the official line.

The IPN Act is a milestone in the campaign by the nationalist-conservative Law and Justice Party to make Poland more religiously devout, more patriotic, and more Polish. Law and Justice (PiS) won a landslide victory in 2015, and the IPN Act sharpens the radical contrast between its leadership and the centrist and left-wing governments of the past.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, post-Communist Poland sought to play a special role in promoting tolerance through Holocaust education. During this process, Poland became one of Israel's most reliable European allies. In this climate of openness, there were no structural barriers to fresh historical inquiry. The work of one historian in particular, Jan Gross of Princeton University, became emblematic of a new school of historical research dedicated to answering the most vexing questions about Polish attitudes toward Jews. He wrote *Neighbors* (2001), which probed the 1941 massacre of hundreds of Jews by Poles in the village of Jedwabne, and *Fear* (2006), which related the events of the 1946 Kielce pogrom against Jewish survivors of the Nazis. In so doing, Gross quickly established himself as a *bête noire* for right-wing nationalists in Poland. So much so, in fact, that the new Holocaust legislation has been dubbed *Ius Grossii*—"The Gross Law"—in the expectation that Gross will be among its first targets.

Poland is not the only post-Communist state revisiting its wartime record. Similarly politicized battles over national identity and wartime collaboration have surfaced in Hungary, Latvia, Croatia, Romania, and Ukraine. These are in part products of mass disillusionment with the European Union, rising nationalist sentiment, and growing concern about Russian encroachment upon the former Warsaw Pact countries. But in Poland, the PiS government has demonstrated the extraordinary extent to which history can be politically manipulated—even in a democracy. The Polish historian Jan Grabowski, in a September 2016 paper delivered to the Israel Council on Foreign Relations, called this outcome a "state-sponsored version of history [that] seeks to undo the findings of the last few decades and to forcibly introduce a sanitized, feel-good narrative that has nothing to do with our knowledge of the past, but everything to do with national myths."

In relation to the Holocaust, four main "national myths" currently prevail in Poland. The first myth holds that Poles were just as much the victims of the Nazis as the Jews were. To conceive of Polish history in any other way supposedly demonstrates a malicious hostility to the nation, or what Polish nationalists now call "anti-Polonism."

The second myth holds that there was no Polish collusion with the Nazis, and that Poles experienced the Holocaust together with the Jews. But in thrall to the deceitful construction of the Holocaust as a Jewish tragedy, the outside world has supposedly chosen to believe fabricated tales of Polish collaboration.

The third myth maintains that Jews were the instigators of Soviet persecution of the Polish nation, as well as the agents of its execution. If the crimes of the Second World War are to be understood in their entirety, then, Jewish collaboration with the Soviet occupiers cannot be ignored.

The fourth myth claims that the Jews have written themselves into history as unadulterated victims purely for financial gain. It therefore follows that Israeli and Jewish objections to the IPN Act stem from a collective determination to compel Poland to pay restitution monies to the descendants of Jewish victims.

All these myths rely upon a twisting of basic truths, but perhaps none more cynically than the first. Many apologists for the legislation will shamelessly invoke the memories of the 6,000-odd Poles commemorated in Israel as “Righteous Among the Nations.” And it is an inescapable truth that the Polish nation suffered horrendously from the moment that the Nazi-Soviet Pact extinguished Poland’s sovereign existence in August 1939. In 1940, the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs forcibly deported 1.2 million Poles to the gulags of Siberia, transporting them in unheated cattle trains reminiscent of those that arrived at the gates of Auschwitz. Under Nazi occupation, between 2 and 3 million ethnic Poles lost their lives, and the nation as a whole was ruled directly by Germans. Some 200,000 Polish children, regarded as exemplars of the “Aryan race,” were kidnapped by the Nazis for their “Germanization” programs.

The mythical element here comes directly from the state body named in the IPN Act: Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance. The new legislation empowers the IPN to determine that someone who claims, “publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich...or for other felonies that constitute crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, or war crimes” has violated the law. Ultimately, the institute’s role is to secure as truth the patent falsehood that Poles were victims—and only victims—of Nazism.

The IPN’s mission statement describes this role as “preserving the remembrance about the great number of victims, losses and damages suffered by the Polish Nation during World War II and afterwards.” (The half-century Poland spent under Communism is the other part of the institute’s focus.) Instructively, nowhere in this mission statement is the word “Jew” mentioned. Ask the IPN how many Poles were murdered by the Nazis and you will be told 6 million—a figure that incorporates 3 million Jews.

This effort to turn the Holocaust into a crime against the Poles would be incomplete without burying, once and for all, the myriad tales of Polish collusion and collaboration. To speak of Polish responsibility for the Jedwabne pogrom, or the 60,000 Jews denounced to the Gestapo by their Polish neighbors, or the several thousand Szmalcownikis—petty, violent collaborators who preyed both upon Jews and Poles who protected Jews—is now, in accordance with the second national myth, forbidden. Those who say otherwise—like the “Israeli government”—are, in the words of an adviser to the IPN speaking on Polish TV, guilty of “recognizing the memory of the Holocaust as a form of religion where emotions play the crucial role at the expense of facts.” This adviser, Bogdan Musial, went on to explain: “The Holocaust is a supplementary religion for Judaism.” Jacek Zalek, the deputy chairman of the PiS faction in the Polish parliament, made a similar point in another interview. “If the Poles are held responsible for the Jedwabne pogrom,” he said, “then one might conclude that if the Jewish police were responsible for leading Jews to the gas chambers, the Jews created the Holocaust for themselves.”

If the first and second national myths recast Polish behavior under the Nazis as a tale of pure heroism, then the third invites us to reconsider the image of the Jews. The ultranationalist parliamentarian Marek Jakubiak has stated that “the Jews greeted our eternal enemy, Soviet Russia, with flowers.” The PiS Senator Jan Zaryn has spoken of “Jewish participation in the mass extermination of Poles.” While the IPN doesn’t mimic these charges exactly, such language expresses the commonplace belief among Poles that it was the Jews who pulled the levers of the Soviet occupation. The anti-Semitic trope of the Jew as part banker and part Bolshevik commissar was powerful among pre-war Polish nationalist leaders such as Roman Dmowski, who founded the precursor to today’s All-Polish Youth (MW). What all this ignores, however, are the 100,000 Polish Jews, including the prominent Warsaw rabbi Moses Schorr, who were among the 1.2 million Poles deported to Stalin’s gulags.

If, as the third myth suggests, the Jews have deliberately concealed their culpability for Soviet crimes, then the fourth and final myth of Jews seeking to capitalize on unearned victimhood represents the full flowering of their deceit. Poland has yet to pass restitution laws for its disinherited Jewish population, and draft legislation submitted last year was sharply criticized by Jewish representatives for foreclosing any possibility of compensation for non-Polish citizens. This has fed the claim that the Jews, driven by financial gain, are therefore fearful that Poland's discovery of the truth will end their lucrative monopoly on suffering.

Some Polish politicians, columnists, and church figures play on some variant of this ancient obsession at every turn. "We cannot call the Israeli Embassy before passing each piece of legislation and ask if they kindly agree to it," scoffed Patryk Jaki, Poland's deputy minister of justice, in February. "This is about big money, but it is easier to attack [us] from an ethical position than from a financial position, because it is easier to justify."

Taken together, these four myths depict Poland as engaged in a valiant struggle against a global adversary with enormous financial, intellectual, and cultural influence. Following the decades-old model created by advocates for the Palestinians, Poland's aggrieved nationalists, inside and outside its government, have figured out that the assumption of greater victimhood is the surest way to strike a blow against the Jews. Andrzej Zybertowicz, a prominent adviser to President Duda, acknowledged as much in an interview on February 9. He argued that Israel's "brutal treatment of the Palestinians and Hezbollah" was psychically grounded in the "same feeling of shame at the passivity of the Jews during the Holocaust" that informed Israeli objections to the IPN Act.

Most of the Jews who were in Poland at the end of World War II have since left. In 1968, a Communist Party campaign organized under the slogan, "No to Anti-Semitism: Yes to Anti-Zionism!" resulted in nearly 20,000 Jews, many of them Holocaust survivors, being purged from their homes, jobs, and positions in public life. "The anti-Semitic campaign of 1968 left permanent scars upon Polish society," observed Rafal Pankowski, a professor at Collegium Civitas University in Warsaw, in an essay on the repression of that year. "It resulted in a massive purge of alleged 'Zionists' in universities and many other key professional fields. Together with a wave of forced mass emigration of Jews, it deprived Poland of a big part of its intellectual talent."

There remains in Poland a vibrant, vocal community of 8,000 Jews; they enjoy synagogues, schools, and cultural festivals. Poland's neo-fascist parties have taken to calling them a "fifth column," in an unmistakable echo of the last time the country was in the throes of an anti-Semitic campaign.

The enveloping anti-Semitic atmosphere of 1968 has returned. As the former Polish Prime Minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz noted in a February 7 newspaper interview: "Anti-Semitism was and remains endemic in our country." How the situation evolves will depend to a great extent on how the government decides to implement its law nationalizing the Holocaust, and the zeal with which it goes after critics and opponents. But even at its most minimal application, the lasting damage of the law has already been achieved. For Poland is now claiming the Jewish victims of the Nazis for its own record of wartime suffering.

There are ways to counter this insidious rewriting of history. The PiS is not a marginal fascist grouping, but a part of the conservative mainstream in Europe that has particularly warm relations with Britain's ruling Conservative Party. If the counsel of these friends has ever been needed, it is now; sadly, there is not much evidence that European conservatives are, so far, particularly troubled by the historical fabrications of their Polish partners.

Foreign leaders traveling to Poland should now insist on visiting a specifically Jewish site as part of any Holocaust-commemoration ceremonies. When President Donald Trump paid a state visit to Poland last year, his itinerary did not include paying tribute at the memorial to the Jewish resistance fighters of the April 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising. That was cause, said Poland's chief rabbi, for "sadness." A similar omission next time would suggest to the Polish government that there is no political cost to its dark work. As Abraham Foxman, national director emeritus of the Anti-Defamation League and himself a survivor of the Holocaust in Poland, has said, that work is the "rewriting history and preventing history from being written."

Finally, and grimly, a careful eye needs to be trained upon the museums and exhibits at the sites of Nazi concentration camps in Poland, sites whose names—Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek, Chelmno—still produce a shiver. Some inkling into the Polish government's future plans may be gleaned from the remarks of

Przemysław Czarnek, a government representative who on February 5 told a television panel, “Out of altruism for others, we maintain the state museums in Auschwitz and Majdanek—maybe because of that we have lost control over the message.” Doubtless, we will soon find out what he means.

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