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Top Scholars and Educators Voice Opposition to Widely-Censured Polish ‘Holocaust Law’

by Ben Cohen

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Israel and Poland agreed on Monday to bilateral talks over the Warsaw government’s commitment to a new bill criminalizing any discussion of Polish collusion with Nazi Germany during the Holocaust, as Holocaust historians continued to express alarm at the far-reaching implications of the pending legislation.

Following a telephone conversation on Sunday between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Polish counterpart Mateusz Marowiecki, Netanyahu’s office said on Monday that “teams from the two countries would open an immediate dialogue in order to try to reach understandings regarding the legislation.”

In his earlier remarks to the Israeli cabinet’s weekly meeting on Sunday, Netanyahu made clear his “fierce objection” to the legislation, stressing that Israel had “no tolerance for the distortion of the truth, the rewriting of history and the denial of the Holocaust.”

Several of the world’s best-known Holocaust scholars warned on Monday that the proposed legislation could censor further investigation into the plight of Poland’s Jews under the Nazi occupation. In separate interviews with *The Algemeiner*, the Holocaust experts all agreed that the bill reflected a concerted effort by right-wing Polish governments over the last decade to rewrite the country’s history in accordance with a nationalist political agenda.

While Poles can justifiably be offended by historically-careless terms such as “Polish concentration camp” to describe the Nazi death factories constructed on Polish soil, “this is not about sensitivity, this is not about their emotions, this is political,” Abraham Foxman, the national director emeritus of the Anti-Defamation League and the head of an antisemitism study program at the Museum of Jewish Heritage — A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York, declared.

“The purpose here is to rewrite history and prevent history from being written,” Foxman said of the Polish legislation. In an interview last September with *The Algemeiner* — when he was still Poland’s deputy premier — Prime Minister Marowiecki positioned his government’s historical campaign alongside present-day attempts to secure war reparations from the German government.

“Today, Poland cannot pay for crimes and sins that were not ours,” Marowiecki said in that interview. “We were actually falling victim to what the Germans have done during the Second World War, and they have never paid for this, for the material losses.”

This deeper sense of historical injustice on the government’s part has helped to drive the legislation, Dr. Rafal Pankowski — a Warsaw-based scholar of contemporary antisemitism and racism, and co-founder of the anti-fascist NGO “Nigdy Wiecej” (“Never Again”) — told *The Algemeiner* on Monday.

“The legislation doesn’t say actually anything about the ‘Polish death camps’ description, which — as the Israeli government and the major Jewish organizations have readily acknowledged on many occasions — is an insensitive form of words,” Pankowski said. “It says that anybody can be criminalized, anybody who says anything about the

‘responsibility’ or ‘co-responsibility’ of the ‘Polish state or the Polish nation in the crimes of the Third Reich, or any other crimes against humanity or war crimes or crimes against peace during World War Two.’”

This last clause is of particular significance because of its potential to turn Polish culture and history upside down. “Remember, the Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote ‘Campo di Fiori,’ about how some Poles were out dancing while the Warsaw Ghetto was in flames,” said Prof. Michael Berenbaum, an American scholar of the Holocaust and a former director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Holocaust Research Institute.

Milosz’s poem — which includes the stanza, “That same hot wind/Blew open the skirts of the girls/And the crowds were laughing/On that beautiful Warsaw Sunday” — “would be illegal under this legislation,” Berenbaum asserted.

Accompanying what Berenbaum denounced as a “defiling” of Polish culture is the fundamental revision of Poland’s wartime history. “To leave out the contributions of non-Jewish Poles to the persecution and suffering and murder of Jewish Poles would be to falsify the historical record,” Prof. Alvin Rosenfeld — Irving M. Glazer Chair in Jewish Studies at Indiana University Bloomington — told *The Algemeiner*.

An important element of the Polish government’s complaint lies in the fact that from 1939-89, the country was under successive Nazi and Soviet occupations, which meant that the history books had already been written by the time an untainted account of Poland’s wartime experience could emerge. What this conceals, however, is that much of the path-breaking research on incidents of Polish collaboration with the Nazi authorities has been conducted since the end of Communist Party rule in 1989.

In that regard, Rosenfeld highlighted the contributions of the historians Jan Gross and Jan Grabowski in spotlighting the role played by Polish police and civilians in persecuting those Jews who managed to escape deportation from 1941 onward — about 10 percent of the pre-war Jewish population of 3 million, the vast majority of whom were slaughtered by mobile killing squads and, later on, in the death camps. Gross and Grabowski have also revealed the participation of Poles in anti-Jewish pogroms in 1941, as well as for two years after 1944, when Jews who survived the Nazis were frequently targeted by antisemitic and anti-Communist violence.

All this has led to the ongoing public vilification of the two historians in Poland. Pankowski pointed out that on Sunday night, one commentator on Polish television went so far as to question whether Gross — a professor at Princeton University — should even be considered a genuine historian, and therefore exempt from the legislation on “academic grounds.”

Moreover, the dispute over the proposed legislation has played out against the background of rising antisemitism and racism in Poland — on unvarnished display from the country’s soccer stadiums to its growing array of media platforms. “You have nationalism, neo-Nazism, antisemitism,” Foxman observed. “You have the political wind moving to the right.”

Having been rescued by his Polish Catholic nanny from the clutches of the Nazis and raised as a Catholic before he was eventually reunited with his parents in 1944, Foxman is one of the last people to diminish the complexity of the historical issues at hand. “The historical record shows that Poles were both victims and victimizers,” he said.

But the Polish government’s determination to flatten this history into a one-dimensional narrative of victimhood is itself leading to disturbing, flagrantly-biased inversions of the past, Pankowski argued. He pointed to a parliamentary resolution passed last October acclaiming the 75th anniversary of the National Armed Forces (NSZ). “This group was not the mainstream resistance, it was not the Polish Home Army,” Pankowski explained. “It was basically the military incarnation of Poland’s National Radical Camp of the 1930s. They were anti-German, yes, but they were far more anti-Communist and anti-Jewish.”

Pankowski noted that the resolution passed by the parliament had included a paragraph paying tribute to the *Brygada Świętokrzyska* (Brigades of the Holy Cross) — a unit of the NSZ that many historians agree was armed and supported by the Nazi occupiers. After the passage of the resolution, Polish President Andrzej Duda praised the

NSZ as resistance fighters who had aided in “the liberation of Poland from both occupants” — Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

“What was shocking was that this vote was unanimous,” Pankowski continued. “It showed the weakness of the opposition, as well as the power that this far right, nationalist vision of Polish history exercises. The National Armed Forces was a far-right, antisemitic group, it had this one unit that collaborated with the Nazis, and yet the Polish parliament has voted to honor them.”

Both Foxman and Rosenfeld cautioned that the proposed legislation would have a censorious impact on future research into the Nazi occupation of Poland. “If they enforce such a law, it would chill scholarly work on the war years and the Holocaust,” Rosenfeld said. “I don’t know of any precedent for that.”

Prof. Berenbaum was confident that the bill, if passed, would backfire soon enough, as no Polish law would be able to prevent the passage across the internet of historical research based on authoritative primary and secondary sources. “The real danger lies in something else,” he stated. “You have a new young generation in Poland. This is the third generation that’s been lied to — the first generation was lied to by the Germans, the second was lied to by the Soviets and the Polish Communists, and this new generation is being lied to by the Polish government.”

“The government is building up the distrust of the younger generation,” Berenbaum added. “They are going to ask, ‘What else are these guys hiding?’”

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