

An Antisemitic, Totalitarian Wind Blows in Poland as Right-Wing Consolidates Power

by Ben Cohen
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JNS.org – I’ve known Rafal Pankowski, the Polish academic and campaigner against antisemitism and racism, for almost 20 years, but I don’t think I’ve heard him sound as worried about the political situation in his country as I did when he addressed a seminar last week on Polish antisemitism.

Less than one day after Poland’s presidential election produced a narrow win for the conservative incumbent Andrzej Duda, Pankowski addressed an online gathering of scholars and journalists assembled by the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism (ISCA) at Indiana University, Bloomington.

As he explained, the election — delayed from its original date in May because of the coronavirus pandemic — was a fearsome battle that pitted Duda against a liberal challenger, Rafal Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw.

As election day neared, the identity politics that have roiled Poland over the last decade came to the fore, with the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) Party and its populist cohorts seeing all sorts of nefarious schemes to undermine the nation. Among them: the insistence that Poland bow down to an alien ideology otherwise known as respecting the rights of the LGBT community; the demand that Poland should pass and implement Holocaust-era restitution laws; and the constant stream of supposedly anti-Polish propaganda broadcast by privately owned media companies.

As Pankowski pointed out, whereas in previous elections the country’s leadership would have left dog-whistles such as these to their party activists, this time around they exercised no such caution. Five days before voters went to the polls, Duda told a Bloomberg interviewer that he was unmoved by appeals for Poland to legislate Holocaust restitution — apparently content with his country’s status as the only member state of the European Union not to have done so.

“There won’t be any damages paid for heirless property,” he said. “I will never sign a law that will privilege any ethnic group vis-à-vis others. Damages should be paid by the one that started the war.”

It doesn’t take a forensic-language analyst to figure out that the “ethnic group” reference here is a euphemism for Poland’s Jews — 3 million of whom were exterminated during the Nazi Holocaust. According to the Polish president, the responsibility for restitution lies solely with Germany (“the one that started the war.”)

There are a number of legal objections to Duda’s view, among them the fact that Poland is a signatory to the 2009 Terezin Declaration, in which 47 countries agreed to pass and implement laws for the restitution of property seized during the Holocaust. One could also point out that Holocaust restitution is a key concern for the United States, Poland’s indispensable ally; legislation passed by Congress in 2017 mandates the State Department to monitor and report on progress in this area.

But such technicalities cut little ice in Warsaw these days, chiefly because Duda’s government has “nationalized” the memory of the Holocaust. By that, I mean that the official depiction of the Holocaust by the state-run Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) would have us believe that Poles

and Jews were equal partners in victimhood, and that the Holocaust was as much a Polish tragedy as a Jewish one.

Within the confines of this distorted narrative, there is no room to discuss the thorny issue of collaboration — the very word elicits fury in the corridors of the IPN — of ordinary Poles with the occupying German authorities. Any notion that Poles contributed directly to the slaughter of their country's historic Jewish community is regarded not as historical fact, but as defamation. For Poland's current crop of leaders, it isn't enough that the most serious Holocaust historians, along with Jewish and Israeli leaders, have recognized that the Poles suffered profoundly as a nation under the Nazis, and that many of the mechanisms for collaboration that existed elsewhere in Eastern Europe — like, for example, joining local units of the SS — were absent in Poland. It seems that nothing less than a title deed to the word "Holocaust" will suffice.

At the same time as "sharing" the Holocaust with the Jews, the Polish government is apparently content to let antisemitic hate speech flourish on state-owned media outlets and private social-media platforms. One of the more high-profile targets has been the US ambassador to Warsaw, Georgette Mosbacher, whose support for Holocaust restitution and publicly expressed distaste for nationalist extremism and homophobia has transformed her into a hate figure on the far-right. That loathing extends far beyond the American envoy, however, to encompass Jewish organizations, the Israeli government, and indeed anyone who argues that Poland should abide by its moral and legal obligations.

The depth of antisemitism in contemporary Poland was neatly captured by Pankowski in his address to the Indiana gathering. "I never thought that [17th-century philosopher Baruch] Spinoza would become an election issue, but I was wrong," he observed, as he recalled the response to opposition candidate Trzaskowski's off-the-cuff comment that he "believed in the god of Spinoza." This remark was enough for the state-owned TVP broadcaster to denounce Trzaskowski as anti-Catholic, chiding him for following the teachings of a "Jewish philosopher."

For the majority of viewers, it's safe to say that without this TV report, they would never have come across Spinoza's name. And were it not for the fact that Spinoza was a Jew — albeit one cast out by the conservative community in his native Amsterdam — they would have remained ignorant of it.

As wrenching as it is to say this, episodes such as these demonstrate that the legacy of two forms of totalitarianism — Nazism and communism — continue to impact Poland, alongside its long, grim tradition of domestic antisemitism. Therein lies the paradox: Poland remains a key Western ally in terms of geopolitics, but any sense of shared values is rapidly shrinking.

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