

Polish government seeks to criminalize mention of Polish crimes during the Holocaust

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The lower house of the Polish Parliament (Sejm) approved a bill January 26 which provides for severe penalties for both Polish and foreign citizens who use the term “Polish concentration camps” and who refer to the participation of Poles in the crimes of the Holocaust. The bill still needs to be approved by the Senate and the president, but is expected to pass these hurdles.

This far-reaching assault on free speech is part of the systematic effort of the right-wing Polish government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) to strengthen fascist forces and, along with that, falsify the history of Poland.

Coming a little over three months after the Polish government has helped stage the biggest fascist demonstration in Europe since the end of the Second World War, this bill marks another milestone in the shift to the right of not just the Polish but the European bourgeoisie. In an obvious and despicable effort to provoke and insult victims of the Holocaust, the bill was debated and passed one day before International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The bill provides for up to three years in prison for people and organizations, both Polish and foreign, who use the term “Polish concentration camp” or attribute participation in the Holocaust to the “Polish nation.” Those who are deemed to “deliberately reduce the responsibility of the ‘true culprits’ of these crimes” may also be punished.

The terms “Polish concentration camp” or “Polish death camp” are indeed factually incorrect, since the Nazi extermination camps were located in occupied Poland and run by German military and SS units. But the campaign against the use of these terms has for years served as a means for the far-right to deny any participation of Polish nationalists in the Nazi murder of the Jews.

The most aggressive organization in this campaign has been the Polish League Against Defamation. Founded in 2013 by the former vice-president of the Polish Press Agency, it has been going after historians and other figures for years. The bill backed by the PiS now gives right-wing organizations like the League the right to stand as accusers in civil suits against people and organizations.

The passing of the bill by the lower house has provoked a diplomatic crisis with Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu summoned the Polish ambassador for a discussion and bitterly denounced the new law. The Israeli press as a whole has reacted to the new bill with outrage.

The diplomatic fallout in Israeli has come as something of a surprise to the Polish government, which has maintained close relations with Israel since the 1990s. However, right-wing commentators in Poland insist that the bill was worth a deterioration in relations with Israel and the PiS government has signaled it has no intention of backing down.

The reasons for the aggressive posture of the Polish government on this question, at the expense of relations with one of its closest foreign allies, can only be explained by its deep crisis and fear of social unrest. Historically, the whipping up of anti-Semitism has served as a key tool for both the Polish bourgeoisie and the Polish Stalinist bureaucracy, to promote nationalism, divide the working class and crack down on the workers’ movement.

In the Poland of the 1930s, anti-Semitic legislation and assaults, including pogroms and bombings, were the order of the day. A right-wing student movement resulted in the institution of “ghetto benches” at major universities, and numerous murders of Jewish students. In 1936, the elimination of the Jews from Polish economic life and the “Polandisation” of major cities were proclaimed state policy. Several professional associations, above all doctors, lawyers and traders, banned Jews from their professions.

There is no question that the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazis were welcomed by the Polish state. In 1937, Polish justice minister Witold Grabowski travelled to Germany to discuss with senior Nazis the adoption of the Nuremberg race laws in Poland. In 1938, there were several high-level Polish-German meetings which included discussions of a “Gesamtlösung” (total solution) of various issues, including the so called Jewish question.

The historical roots of modern Polish and Nazi anti-Semitism were, in fact, quite similar. Both constituted a reaction to the rise of the Marxist working class movement. The Nazi bogeyman of the *jüdischer Bolschewismus* (Jewish bolshevism) had its Polish equivalent in the *żydokomuna* (Jewish commune). The social democratic and then the communist movement in Poland had a powerful constituency within the Jewish proletariat and intelligentsia. It produced figures such as Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches, and, in a later generation, Emanuel Ringelblum, Isaac Deutscher, and the Trotskyists Abraham Leon and Solomon Ehrlich. After Polish, Yiddish was the second language of the socialist movement. Socialist parties also stood at the forefront of the struggle against anti-Semitism in the 1930s.

That the Polish working class was unable to overthrow the reactionary Sanacja regime and found itself disarmed in the face of the Nazi invasion was largely a result of the rise of Stalinism. It threw the Polish communist movement into a deep crisis from the mid 1920s on and virtually paralyzed it in the 1930s. In 1938, shortly before the criminal Hitler-Stalin-pact, Stalin dissolved the Polish Communist Party. Almost its entire leadership and thousands of its members were murdered in the Stalinist purges.

These developments created the conditions for the Nazis to invade the country, and turn occupied Poland into the main stage of the

murder of European Jewry. All six major death camps were built in Nazi-occupied Poland. Within three to four years, 3 million out of 3.5 million Polish Jews were annihilated, along with another 1.5 million Soviet Jews and some 1.5 million Jews from other parts of Europe.

Polish nationalist and fascist forces, much like the far-right throughout Eastern Europe, participated in this historical crime.

The so called Blue Police, created by the Nazi occupiers in the General Government in late 1939, numbered thousands of Polish policemen who helped round up Jews for their deportations to the death camps. Many others helped denounce Jews to the Nazis, often after blackmailing them for weeks and months and thus robbing them of all they had. Partisan groups of the far-right would hand out Jewish partisans and refugees to the Germans for murder, even while they themselves were being persecuted by the Nazis.

Pogroms against Jews by Poles occurred both during and after the Nazi occupation. The most notorious of these were the pogrom in Jedwabne in July 1941, which took the lives of some 350 Jews, and the pogrom in Kielce in June 1946, which killed over 40. Both have been historically documented and publicly discussed only over the past three decades.

The denunciation of Polish anti-Semitism, and of the support for or indifference to the murder of Polish Jewry, have long been a hallmark of left-leaning and democratic tendencies in Polish society. In his poem *Campo dei Fiori*, the later Nobel prize laureate Czesław Miłosz, who participated in the Polish underground movement against the Nazis, bitterly denounced the indifference of many Poles as the Nazis burned down the Warsaw Ghetto. Drawing an analogy to the burning of Giordano Bruno on Campo dei Fiori by the Catholic inquisition in 1600, Miłosz wrote in 1943:

*I thought of the Campo dei Fiori
in Warsaw by the sky-carousel
one clear spring evening
to the strains of a carnival tune.
The bright melody drowned
the salvos from the ghetto wall,
and couples were flying
high in the cloudless sky.*

*At times wind from the burning
would drift dark kites along
and riders on the carousel
caught petals in midair.
That same hot wind
blew open the skirts of the girls
and the crowds were laughing
on that beautiful Warsaw Sunday.*

*Those dying here, the lonely
forgotten by the world,
our tongue becomes for them
the language of an ancient planet.
Until, when all is legend
and many years have passed,
on a new Campo dei Fiori
rage will kindle at a poet's word.*

The Holocaust was not only a major blow to the Polish workers' movement, it also destroyed or buried a good portion of its history. The Stalinist bureaucracy in Poland, which had a substantial anti-Semitic wing, and bore a substantial share of guilt for this disaster, was engaged in an ongoing campaign of historical falsification about the Russian Revolution and the socialist workers' movement as a

whole. Far from fostering a closer examination of the Holocaust, the Stalinists in fact opposed and stifled such a study.

Tragically, this has led to a situation where the Holocaust and many aspects of Polish-Jewish history could be discussed and researched only after 1989. The recent effort to publish the entire underground archive that was assembled in the Warsaw Ghetto under the leadership of the socialist Zionist Emanuel Ringelblum is a major contribution to resurrecting the historical knowledge and truth about the Holocaust and the workers movement in Poland. One particularly important volume came out in 2016 and documents the heroic struggle of the Trotskyists in the Warsaw Ghetto for revolutionary internationalism.

There is little question that large sections of the Polish bourgeoisie are bitterly opposed to this development. What they fear in the historical truth about the Holocaust and the crimes of fascism, German or Polish, is the historical truth about the Russian revolution and the socialist movement. The next step might well be a ban on books addressing Polish anti-Semitism and the crimes of the Polish far-right, and the firing of people who nevertheless speak and write about them.

The return of the Polish bourgeoisie to its right-wing strategy of the Intermarium, an anti-Russian and anti-German alliance of far-right forces throughout Eastern Europe, the war preparations, and the massive social inequality in Poland, all these require a suppression of democratic rights, and the rewriting of history. Last summer, the Trump administration assured the PiS government of its full support in this reactionary endeavor. US imperialism bears full responsibility for what is happening in Poland right now.

With its policies, the PiS government has placed itself at the forefront of ideological and political reaction in Europe. However, it is ultimately only the most blatant expression of an international tendency. In Germany, the rise of the far-right AfD has been aided by the entire political establishment and historical revisionists, and a Nazi apologist like Jörg Baberowski teaches 'history' at one of the country's most prestigious universities. The only way to stem the tide of political reaction and historical revisionism is to educate and mobilize the working class on a socialist basis to fight against capitalism.



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