Polish president signs bill censoring free speech about the Holocaust

Clara Weiss
7 February 2018

Polish President Andrzej Duda signed into law Tuesday a bill censoring free speech about the Holocaust, after it has been passed by the lower and upper houses of the Polish parliament.

The bill criminalizes the use of the term “Polish death camp” for death camps such as Auschwitz or Sobibor that were built by the Nazis in occupied Poland during the Second World War. Both Polish and foreign citizens can be punished with up to three years in prison for using this term. The bill also penalizes people who are deemed to be ascribing crimes against the Jews to “the Polish nation” or the “Polish state.”

The law is a far-reaching assault on free speech. Even while it formally states that “scientific and artistic” creations are exempted, it will not only stifle public discourse on major issues such as Polish anti-Semitism and pogroms by Poles against Jews, but also impede scientific research.

For instance, a Holocaust survivor whose relatives were murdered by Poles or handed over by Poles to the Nazis could now be put on trial if his or her testimony could be interpreted as ascribing blame “to the Polish nation.”

The law will have massive implications for public education and public discussion. Moreover, there is little doubt that it is but a first step toward much further restrictions of free speech and scientific research into this and other parts of Polish history.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the curator of the core exhibit of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, has warned of the “chilling effects” that this law would have on scientific research. Other historians, including Barbara Engelking, one of the main experts of the history of the Warsaw Ghetto, have also spoken out against the bill. So have several foundations, among them the Center for Research on the Holocaust in Poland, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Yad Vashem in Israel.

In spite of this criticism, representatives of the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) and Polish President Duda continue to defend the bill adamantly. Duda declared in a televised address that the bill “protects Polish interests ... our dignity, the historical truth ... so that we are not slandered as a state and as a nation.”

Jaros?aw Kaczy?ski, the head of PiS, argued that the bill “is being interpreted totally wrong.” It would penalize everyone blaming the “Polish nation” but not “someone who says that somewhere, in some village, some place, a Jewish family or one Jewish person was murdered. I'm saying this with pain and regret and with a sense of shame but such things did happen and we never denied that.”

This is, of course, a blatant lie. PiS education minister Anna Zalewska has asserted publicly that she wasn’t certain about who was responsible for two of the most notorious anti-Jewish pogroms that were committed by Poles, that of Jedwabne of 1941, and the Kielce pogrom of 1946 (more than a year after the destruction of the Third Reich).

Antoni Macierewicz, the country’s defense minister, who is considered the most powerful figure after Kaczynski himself, is a well-known anti-Semite and edited anti-Jewish publications in the 1990s which denied that pogroms such as the one in Kielce in the summer of 1946 were committed by Poles.

The entire campaign against the term “Polish death camps” started and initially focused on the figure of Jan Tomasz Gross, a Polish-American sociologist who kicked off a major public debate in Poland with his book on the pogrom of Jedwabne in the summer of 1941. This pogrom, which killed some 350 Jews, was carried out largely by Poles from the village and surrounding area, with the support of the Nazi occupiers.

Like thousands of Polish Jews, Gross was forced to leave the country with his family due to the anti-Semitic campaign by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1968-69. Ever since his book came out, he has been the center of attacks by Polish nationalists and the far-right with implicit or overt anti-Semitic overtones. The campaign by PiS against him since 2015-16 has encouraged these forces, by portraying Gross deliberately as someone who would defame the Polish nation, an old trope of anti-Semites.

The language and argumentation of the bill need to be

© World Socialist Web Site

understood in this context. It deliberately picks up and caters to the argumentation of the Polish right, which traditionally has hidden its far-right views and anti-Semitism, usually only for a brief time, behind references to Poles who saved Jews or the deliberate Nazi murder of masses of Poles. To a hitherto unprecedented degree, their arguments are now being sanctioned and promoted by the state.

In a particularly scandalous incident of this campaign, the director of the state-run television station TVP 2, Marcin Wolski, suggested that the Nazi death camps should be called "Jewish" camps, asking rhetorically: "Who managed the crematoria there?" This despicable and cynical reference to the Sonderkommandos who were forced to manage the crematoria at gunpoint and were recruited from the camp's prisoners, many of them Jewish, fell just short of the old fascist argument that the Jews themselves were to blame for the Nazi genocide.

On his show, Wolski also provided a platform for Rafa? Ziemkiewicz, a well-known nationalist writer who calls himself an "endek" (adherent of Poland's fascist endecja tendency which was founded by Roman Dmowski), and has published anti-Semitic slurs on his twitter account.

The PiS law has provoked outrage and disgust internationally, and for good reason. Yet workers and youth in Poland and internationally must not lend any credibility to the fraudulent outcries by the Israeli and American governments.

While now in a diplomatic feud with PiS, the Israeli government has uttered no word of condemnation of the historical revisionism that is being promoted by the right-wing Ukrainian government in Kiev, that was brought to power in a coup backed by the US and EU that involved fascist forces.

The US government has expressed disappointment about the bill, with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stating that the law "adversely affects freedom of speech and academic inquiry."

Yet it is US imperialism that has been central to promoting and arming the far-right in both Ukraine and Poland. Poland has been a key military ally of the US ever since 1989, especially in the military build-up against Russia. Under Trump, the US government has started to openly back the project of reviving the Intermarium alliance against both Russia and Germany, an alliance that has historically been based on nationalist and far-right forces, led by Warsaw.

These forces are now openly supported by the governments in both Ukraine and Poland, which combine their support with the whitewashing of their bloody and criminal history. Since 2014, the Ukrainian government has issued a series of laws that glorify the far-right Ukrainian Insurrection Army (UPA) and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, both of which were responsible for mass murders of Jews, often in complicity with the Nazis, and the mass murder of Poles. The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINP), which is funded by the government, actively promotes Holocaust revisionism.

The *New York Times*, which greeted the Kiev coup in February 2014 as a "revolution" and has covered up for these right-wing policies for years, has recently started publishing op-eds that express concern with these developments. In an op-ed in January, Lev Gorokin criticized "the American Jewish community—including Jewish lawmakers in Washington" for being "largely silent about the widespread Holocaust distortion being carried out by Eastern European allies."

In early February, the *Times* published a piece by Marci Shore, a professor at Yale University, who criticized the PiS bill as a way for Poland "to dig itself a memory hole." Shore has no right to lecture anyone about "memory holes" and historical revisionism. Like her husband, Timothy Snyder, she has authored countless articles, and toured conferences and think tanks, to glorify the right-wing "Maidan" uprising, promote anti-Russian sentiments, and spread lies about what was going on in Ukraine. As academic cheerleaders for the policies of US imperialism in Eastern Europe, she and her ilk in academia and the media share political responsibility for what is happening now in both Poland and Ukraine.

Such articles and statements such as the one by Rex Tillerson express a real concern not with historical truth or free speech, but about the fact that Washington's most important allies in Eastern Europe for the war preparations against Russia are being discredited internationally and weakened domestically through their unabashed support for the far-right and Holocaust revisionism.

For the working class, the actions by the PiS government and the developments in Ukraine must serve as a warning of the forces that are being unleashed in the drive by US imperialism toward another world war.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site