Anti-Semitic propaganda distributed at Polish parliament as government witch-hunts Holocaust historians

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16 March 2019

On Wednesday, an edition of the right-wing newspaper *Tylko Polska* with a front page article on "How to spot a Jew" was distributed at the Polish Sejm (parliament). In the manner of Nazi-style anti-Semitic propaganda, the article listed "names, anthropological features, expressions, appearances, character traits, methods of operation" and "disinformation activities" which allegedly allowed for identification of Jewish people.

A parliamentary deputy from the center-right Poland Comes First party denounced the distribution of the newspaper as an "absolute scandal" and described it as "filthy texts, as if taken from Nazi newspapers." Following a public outcry internationally, the Sejm Chancellery, which had initially refused to take action, declared that the newspaper would be removed from kiosks at the Polish parliament.

There was nothing accidental about the distribution of this far-right newspaper at the Sejm. Its very publication was part of what can only be described as a state-sponsored witch-hunt of Holocaust historians.

Next to the article "How to spot a Jew," the *Tylko Polska* newspaper ran the headline, "Attack on Poland at a conference in Paris," and a picture of the historian and sociologist Jan Gross, who has written extensively on pogroms against Jews by Poles.

What the newspaper described as an "attack on Poland" was, in fact, a far-right assault on a Holocaust studies conference in Paris on February 21–22. Hosted by the prestigious Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), the conference was entitled "The new Polish school of Holocaust history." It was disrupted by a group of some 30 Polish anti-Semites and nationalists, affiliated with the far-right newspaper *Gazeta Polska*, who shouted anti-Semitic slurs at the conference presenters (among them Jan Gross) and denounced them for spreading "anti-Polish" sentiments. In the weeks leading up the conference, its organizers in Paris had received threatening phone calls and mail. To ensure security, the conference started behind closed doors on its first day.

According to French media reports, the Polish government-controlled Institute of National Memory (IPN) was "effectively present and expressed itself without condemning what was going on." The Polish ambassador in Paris also retweeted criticism of the conference by the IPN along nationalist lines on his Twitter account.

While the EHESS later published a statement denouncing the assault by Polish nationalists as an "attack on freedom of speech and academic freedom," Poland's vice-prime minister Jaros?aw Gowin tried to downplay the incident in an official letter. He denied that the slurs had an openly anti-Semitic character and denounced the criticism of the Law and Justice (PiS) government by conference participants who described it as a "regime" as "not being protected by the freedom of academic expression."

Apart from *Tylko Polska*, numerous right-wing and pro-PiS publications have denounced the conference. The *Wiadomo?ci*, for instance, called it a "festival of anti-Polish slander."

The essentially state-backed, far-right attack on the Paris conference—an unprecedented event in academic life in recent European history—was the product of a massive campaign in Poland against all those working on the history of the Holocaust and Polish anti-Semitism. It is aimed at ensuring that the ongoing state-sponsored, systematic rewriting and falsification of the history of Polish nationalism and the crimes of Nazism goes unopposed.

The "legal" framework for this campaign was created with the "Holocaust bill," passed by the Polish parliament and president in early 2018, which criminalizes speech and writings addressing crimes by Poles against the Jews.

In the past few years, an unknown number of lesser-known historians and students have been victimized by this campaign. Now, it is openly targeting the best-known figures in Polish-Jewish historiography: Dariusz Stola, the head of the POLIN museum of Polish-Jewish history, and Barbara Engelking, the co-founder and head of the Center for Research on the Annihilation of the Jews (Centrum Bada? nad Zag?ad? ?ydów **)**. Both are scholars of world renown and are heading institutions that are among the most significant internationally in the research into and public education about the Holocaust.

In February, the Polish government announced it would not support the extension of Dariusz Stola's contract, which is

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running out at the end of this year, and opened a competition for the post of director of the museum. A petition denouncing the government's attempt to remove Stola from his position was signed by over 4,500 people. Stola announced that he would reapply for the position.

The moves against Stola came after official criticism of a special exhibition at the POLIN museum, held last year, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the anti-Semitic campaign waged by the Polish Stalinist government in 1968–69.

In response to student protests in March 1968 in Poland, and amid a mass general strike in France, the Polish Stalinist government, fearing that the working class struggles in Western Europe would spread to Poland and undermine its rule, unleashed a vicious anti-Semitic campaign against the student leaders. The Stalinist press depicted the protests as an intervention of Jewish "outside" forces. Within the following two years, at least some 13,000 people, among them numerous survivors of the Holocaust and some of the country's leading academics and scientists, were forced to leave the country and give up Polish citizenship. The exhibition, which openly raised parallels to the current promotion of anti-Semitism by the PiS government, was viewed by some 116,000 people. The POLIN museum itself has been attended by well over a million people since it opened its doors in 2014.

The Polish ministry of culture, which is among the main sponsors of the POLIN museum, refused to support the exhibition financially. Poland's vice-minister of culture attacked the exhibit at the POLIN, falsely claiming that "no Poles" had been involved in this campaign. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, who marched alongside far-right forces last November, said that Poland had nothing to apologize for with regard to 1968 and that the events were entirely the responsibility of an "outside great power," that is, the Soviet Union, which had "occupied" the country.

Parallel to the campaign against Stola and with perhaps even greater ferocity, the government and right-wing media have attacked Barbara Engelking and her Center for Research on the Annihilation of the Jews. The attacks started after the publication of an extensive, two-volume book on the "Fates of Jews in select districts of occupied Poland," edited by Engelking and Jan Grabowski and published under the aegis of the Center. The book, based on years of research, details the fate that Jews suffered including those hiding in Nazi-occupied Poland. It addresses the role of the Polish "Blue police" in hunting down Jews and handing them over to the Nazis or murdering them on their own, as well as anti-Semitic pogroms perpetrated by Polish nationalists. The study found that most of the 200,000 Polish Jews who were murdered outside the Nazi concentration camps were killed directly by or with the help of Poles.

The book and its editors were subject to an intense attack, spearheaded by the IPN and the Polish Anti-Defamation League, an extremist nationalist outfit for academics closely affiliated with PiS. Historian Jan Grabowski has pointed out that many of the "criticisms" by members of the IPN were based on notorious anti-Semitic pamphlets.

Engelking has since been removed by the government from her position as the head of the International Council for the State museum of the former concentration and death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.

To their credit, none of the historians are prepared to give in to the massive pressure by the state and affiliated far-right forces. Stola has denounced the attacks on himself and published a statement, on behalf of POLIN, to defend Engelking and her research Center. Grabowski has sued the Polish Anti-Defamation League before a Warsaw court for "defamation." He stated: "The line of action taken against Engelking and myself is designed to set an example. Polish teachers of history have told me that they are now under pressure to only teach according to the ideology of the government. Students of history and doctoral students openly say that they do not want to tackle burning topics because they fear for their careers."

The PiS government is spearheading what is an international campaign to systematically bolster fascist forces through state support and through targeted historical falsifications. These policies have created a right-wing and dangerous political climate which increasingly resembles that of the 1930s.

At the beginning of this year, the mayor of Gdansk, Pawe? Adamowicz, who had been an outspoken critic of the promotion of anti-Semitism and xenophobia by the PiS government, was assassinated. Later that month, some 100 fascists were allowed to march at the site of the Auschwitz death camp, where over 1 million Jews were murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. In February, the offices of the Polish political and human rights activist Pawe? Kasprczak were targeted with Nazi graffiti, including the words "Red Swine," and "Jude raus."

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