

Polish court convicts leading Holocaust historians

Clara Weiss
10 February 2021

On Tuesday, a Polish court found Professors Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, two of the most renowned historians of the Holocaust in Poland, guilty of defamation and spreading “inaccurate information.” The two historians had been sued by the niece of Edward Malinowski, the mayor of a Polish town during World War II, for a passage that appears in their 1,700 page *Night Without End* about the genocide of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. In the 2018 volume, testimonies are quoted which suggest that Malinowski was implicated in the local massacre of Jews by German soldiers. Engelking and Grabowski were ordered to write an apology to the niece for allegedly defaming her uncle and “providing inaccurate information.”

The trial represents a new milestone in the assaults on historical truth and democratic rights by the Polish state and the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS). In addition to the trial against Engelking and Grabowski, a journalist, Katarzyna Markusz, is threatened with a three-year prison sentence for “defaming the Polish nation,” because of a passage she wrote on Polish complicity in the Holocaust.

These actions are part of a state-orchestrated campaign, aimed at promoting anti-Semitism and far-right forces. In 2018, the Polish government passed a law criminalizing any mention of Polish collaboration in the Holocaust. Since then, historians have faced increasing pressure, including threats of lawsuits, along with hate mail and death threats from far-right forces which feel so emboldened that they often do not even hide their names anymore. While the lawsuit against Engelking and Grabowski was brought by Filomena Leszczyńska, it was heavily backed and driven by the Polish League against Defamation, a far-right outfit that is directly funded by the state. For many years, the League has been harassing Holocaust historians with threats of lawsuits.

Engelking and Grabowski have correctly denounced the trial as an attack on historical research and free speech

and will appeal the verdict. The “guilty” verdict was meant to not just discredit their historical work. By legally ordering them to apologize to the niece of Malinowski, the court also tried to force these historians to lend legitimacy to the campaign by the Polish state that is trying to whitewash Polish anti-Semites from any involvement in the Holocaust.

Both Engelking and Grabowski have authored some of the important studies in Holocaust research that have appeared in recent decades. Engelking is renowned as one of the world’s top experts in the history of the Warsaw Ghetto and is the chair of the International Auschwitz Council.

The two-volume *Night Without End* (2018), which they edited together and which formed the basis of the trial, provides an extensive analysis of the life and fate of 140,000 Polish Jews in the countryside in the Nazi-occupied General Government of Poland. The work highlights, in particular, the role played by the Polish police (“Blue police”), a force that the Polish right has long sought to whitewash.

Professor Dariusz Stola, who was forced out as a director of the POLIN museum of the history of Polish Jews, denounced the trial: “No book is without mistakes, but academic discussion, not a court trial, is the right place to deal with them. This book is a result of solid, meticulous research. If one can sue its authors, one can sue half of the historians who deal with the 20th century.”

Eva Schlotheuber, representative of the German associations of historians, warned, “It has enormous potential to intimidate others,” especially younger historians, if “scientifically founded research results are debated not in scientific or public discourse, but in front of a court.”

In an interview with *Krytyka Polityczna* from 2020, Grabowski, who is a professed admirer of the socialist Zionist historian Emanuel Ringelblum, said: “The goal of

our opponents is that we stop publishing books. I would very much like to see some kind of social solidarity awaken against this background. ... An attack on history is an attack on all of us.”

He also called out the de facto complicity of Poland’s liberal opposition party, Civic Platform (PO), in enabling the right to dominate the field of history. “History in Poland—and this pains me—has been largely appropriated by the Polish right and extreme right. ... I have a great deal of resentment towards the so-called democratic and liberal elites who, by neglecting history, have handed over this very important—as it turned out—area in the hands of mythomaniacs and myth-makers. This disregard for history as an important battlefield was visible at the beginning of this century, when the left was in power. Nothing changed in this matter during the rule of the centrists from PO.”

The political trial of two of the most renowned Holocaust historians internationally has vast implications and must be opposed by all politically conscious workers, intellectuals and youth. The PiS government is at the forefront of the assault on historical truth and democratic rights, and the state build-up of the far-right that is underway internationally. In neighboring Germany, the German ruling class has bolstered neo-Nazi terror networks and the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD), while the government is backing figures like Jörg Baberowski, a professor at Humboldt University, who has declared that “Hitler wasn’t vicious.” In the US, former president Donald Trump, acting with the backing of much of the Republican Party, instigated a fascist coup on January 6, whose most critical aspects are now being covered up by the Democratic Party.

At stake in the fight to defend historical truth is the political arming of the working class for its struggle today against fascism and its root cause, capitalism.

During the war, Poland was the main site of the Nazi-led genocide of European Jews. All the major death camps, including Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bełżec and Sobibor, were located in Nazi-occupied Poland. 90 percent of Poland’s pre-war Jewish population of 3-3.5 million were murdered, making up roughly half of the total of 6 million murdered European Jews. Among those murdered were many outstanding socialist intellectuals and working class leaders, including Abraham Leon, a leading figure in the Belgian Trotskyist movement; Solomon Ehrlich, leader of the Polish Left Opposition; as well as the socialist Zionists Emanuel Ringelblum and Abraham Lewin, to name but a few.

Research into the Holocaust in Poland is intrinsically bound up with research into the history of the workers movement. For instance, a major volume of documents by the Polish Trotskyist movement appeared in 2018 as part of the publication of the complete archives that Emanuel Ringelblum had compiled in the Warsaw Ghetto.

While the genocide was led and organized by the Nazis, they could rely upon the collaboration of local nationalist and anti-Semitic forces throughout Eastern Europe, especially in Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states. Historically, modern anti-Semitism emerged as a central ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie against the revolutionary working class movement. In Poland, a multi-ethnic country before the war, the highly combative workers movement was based largely in the Polish and Jewish working class. Hence, anti-Semitism acquired a particular intensity in the country’s ruling class and far right.

In the early and mid-1930s, the Polish government, “inspired” by the anti-Semitic legislation in Nazi Germany, implemented far-reaching anti-Jewish measures, while allowing fascist bands to terrorize Jews on the streets and in the universities. The Polish PiS government is basing itself politically on the traditions of these forces, and is systematically promoting and collaborating with their modern-day equivalents. In trying to preempt any serious historical research into the history of Polish anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, the Polish state seeks to both historically whitewash the crimes of the far right, and preempt the long overdue reckoning with the powerful but tragic history of the working class movement in Poland.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact