

The Polish far-right's vicious campaign against Agnieszka Holland's film *The Green Border*

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Director Agnieszka Holland's new film *The Green Border* (*Zielona Granica*) was released in Polish cinemas September 21. The trailer can be seen here. On its first weekend, more than 137,000 people are said to have seen the film. In the run-up to its screening, the Polish state and the far-right ruling party, PiS (Law and Justice), unleashed a vicious and unparalleled campaign with antisemitic and fascist undertones against the film.

The Green Border poignantly depicts the cruel reality of the European Union's external border with Belarus. In 2021, several thousand refugees, mostly from Iraq and Afghanistan, sought to enter the EU via Belarus. The representatives of all the EU and NATO states denounced this at the time as a "hybrid attack on democracy."

Poland and neighbouring Lithuania reacted by declaring a state of emergency, deploying thousands of soldiers and setting up a three-kilometre-wide exclusion zone in which basic democratic rights, including freedom of the press, were suspended. Following the erection of a temporary barbed wire fence, re-enacted in the film, the construction of a five-metre high border fence was completed in 2022.

The WSWS wrote about the events at the time: "The EU and NATO are instrumentalising the fate of a few thousand helpless refugees they have encircled on the Belarusian border with Poland and Lithuania to threaten Belarus and Russia with war, mobilise troops, suspend elementary human rights and stir up a right-wing, fascist mob."

This assessment has been amply confirmed. The long-provoked Ukraine war, which began with the reactionary invasion by Russia in February 2022, and is being dramatically escalated by NATO and the EU policy of Fortress Europe, is increasingly taking the form of a "war against the majority of humanity."

The state-organised smear campaign against Agnieszka Holland and her film can only be understood in this context. It is a direct component of the deliberate strengthening of far-right forces against the background of the imperialist war against Russia and intensifying class struggles in Europe.

The attack on *The Green Border* commenced at the beginning of September following its world premiere at the Venice Film Festival where the film received a special prize from the jury. By the time it premiered in Polish cinemas, members of the entire Polish political establishment had joined in the campaign of smears and attacks.

The opening shot was fired by the far-right Polish Minister of Justice Zbigniew Ziobro, who compared *The Green Border* to Nazi propaganda films. Ziobro, whose Solidarna Polska party is a junior partner in the far-right PiS government, wrote on his X account on September 4: "During the Third Reich, the Germans produced propaganda films in which Poles were portrayed as bandits and murderers. Today they have Agnieszka Holland for that purpose."

Stanisław Żaryn, secretary of state for Digital Security for Prime

Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, cited Belarusian media reports about the film on his X account and commented: "Belarusian propaganda is quite happy with A. Holland."

Holland then demanded a public apology from Ziobro within seven days, but he only doubled down in his comments. In the following days, an unparalleled media smear campaign was unleashed, involving Poland's three highest-ranking politicians.

Morawiecki declared: "All those who do not distance themselves from this film sully the Polish uniform and disgrace the good name of Poles."

President Andrzej Duda declared, "In view of the fact that Ms Holland shows Polish officers doing their work for Polish society, for the security of all of us, in such a way, I am not surprised when border guards who saw this film respond with same slogan we know from the time of the Nazi occupation, when Nazi propaganda films were shown in our cinemas: 'Only pigs sit in the cinema.'"

Finally, the head of PiS and deputy head of government, Jarosław Kaczyński, declared: "This is a mockery. A shameful, disgusting mockery I do not want to characterise in too much detail. (...) The hatred of our homeland typical of many people from this milieu must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Especially in the situation Poland finds itself today."

One day before the film's release, Błażej Pobożny announced on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior that a special insert had to be aired in all Polish cinemas before the film, "honestly presenting the course and context of the hybrid operation of the [Belarusian Alexander] Lukashenko regime against Poland." The justification given for the film insert was the alleged "extremely unfair, unauthorised and harmful way" in which "border guards" were depicted in the film. According to media reports, the Helios cinema chain intends to refuse to show this government spot and it remains unclear whether the ministry will enforce this under threat of fines.

Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek declared the film was just as "anti-social" and "anti-human" as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and declared that the "affront" to the Polish army and border guards in the film was "simply treasonable."

He then proceeded, remarkably, to denounce teachers who wanted to show the film to their students, as an "attempt to ideologise young people." Czarnek referred to a case in Kłodzkie grammar school, where one teacher was a candidate for the main opposition party, Civic Platform (PO). After a campaign by PiS supporters, the school cancelled its planned visit to the cinema. The state secretary in the Ministry of Education, Jagiellonian University professor Włodzimierz Bernacki, proclaimed in far-right fashion that a "so-called intellectual elite" was working to "restore a pedagogy of shame."

This expression is integral to the official campaign aggressively pushed

by Czarnek. The term “pedagogy of shame” refers to any serious examination of antisemitism or right-wing extremism in Poland, including in particular the authoritarian and fascist tendencies of the regimes of Józef Piłsudski and Edward Rydz-ŹmigŹy, who governed Poland before the Second World War.

The fact that Holland is the daughter of the Jewish communist Henryk Holland, who fought against fascism first in the Polish army, then in the Red Army and again in the Polish army, while other family members perished in the Holocaust, adds a particularly repulsive dimension to the whole campaign. The insinuation of “treason against the fatherland” and working on behalf of the “enemy” corresponds to antisemitic tropes, denigrating Jewish people as “foreign bodies” committing “treason.”

One intended result of the state smear campaign is the incitement of a fascist mob pouring out its filth on social media under the hashtag #MuremZaPolskimMundurem (For the Polish Uniform). Denouncing Holland as a “communist pig” the group has organised rallies in front of cinemas.

The campaign against the film is not restricted to the Polish ruling party. Tomasz Siemoniak, defence minister under Donald Tusk (Civic Platform) until 2015, also mocked the film in a television interview, comparing its veracity to *Star Wars*.

Tusk himself has repeatedly spoken out against “uncontrolled migration” in the current election campaign and attacked the PiS government from the right. Responding to the latest corruption scandal involving the sale of official visas to some migrants, the opposition circulated a racist propaganda video claiming there was unhindered mass immigration of hundreds of thousands, mainly Muslims from Africa and Asia. PiS responded by describing the PO as a smuggling mafia.

Tusk remained silent for days on the campaign against Holland. Finally, at a press conference in Kalisz, he evasively stated that one cannot judge a film one has not seen. He spoke of a “disgusting campaign,” but explicitly avoided defending Holland. Instead, he declared, “If anyone insults border guards, it is the PiS,” which had allowed entry to “almost 300,000 people.”

While soldiers and border guards systematically repulse migrants from the country with illegal pushbacks, leave them to die in the cold and wet or mistreat them in camps, the leader of Poland’s supposedly “democratic opposition” waffles on about the guards’ “difficult service”: “They risk their health, often their reputation, when they don’t let in a woman with a child just because they haven’t paid the foreign ministry.” Tusk accused the government of “spitting in the face of soldiers and border guards for years, deceiving them and exposing them to suffering.”

Across Europe not a single politician has risen to defend Holland—and this is not coincidental. The PiS’s far-right refugee policy and the associated strengthening of fascist forces is the policy of EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen who works closely with the fascist Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, an open admirer of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.

The attacks on Agnieszka Holland are part of the hysterical and reactionary campaign for the parliamentary elections to be held on October 15. They create a fertile ground for the openly fascist Konfederacja party, to which commentators are already ascribing the role of kingmaker after the election. At the same time more fundamental, international developments are involved.

The PiS has been systematically working to strengthen fascist ideologies and forces since coming to power in 2015. Since 2018, historical research on Polish antisemitism during the Holocaust has been prohibited by law in Poland. Polish historians who specialise in Jewish history and Polish antisemitism are regularly the victims of smear campaigns in the press and on the internet, and increasingly victims of physical attacks.

In May, Grzegorz Braun, chairman of the fascist Konfederacja, stormed onto the podium at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw to interrupt

a lecture by historian Jan Grabowski, one of the most renowned experts on Polish antisemitism. Braun, who was seated in the front row, jumped up at the beginning of the lecture and smashed the microphone, shouting “Enough of this” and “Get out of Poland” before being removed by security. Grabowski is a professor of history at the University of Ottawa and a member of the Royal Society of Canada.

In an interview, Grabowski explained, “This microphone might as well have been smashed on my head. I felt as if I were in 1930s Poland.” While the incident caused alarm in international academic circles with many colleagues as well as the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem condemning the attack, there was no significant protest in Polish political circles.

With the state campaign against Holland, the fomenting of an extreme right-wing, pogrom-like climate in Poland and Europe is reaching new heights. It is taking place under conditions where the Canadian parliament applauds a Nazi collaborator from Ukraine, German professors like Jörg Baberowski rehabilitate Hitler with state support, fascists sit in a number of European governments and in Germany large parts of the programme of the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party are adopted and realised by the governing parties.

The targeted strengthening of far-right forces and the campaign against Holland are not only directed against the director and other critical intellectuals, but above all against workers and youth who oppose war, fascism, militarism and social inequality. Along with the German and French elites, the Polish ruling class is using the war in Ukraine as a pretext for massive rearmament. It is striving to turn Poland’s army into the largest land force in Europe. Despite fierce conflicts between the PiS and the PO over foreign policy, especially towards Germany, all factions of the Polish ruling elite are united in their war policy directed against Russia.

This is why the incitement of racism and antisemitism goes hand in hand with the creation of a repressive climate to silence anyone who in any way harms the “national cause” and the forces of the state. If *The Green Border* can be denounced as “treasonous,” then it is not difficult to imagine the same can be applied to strikes and demonstrations against the government’s policy of social cuts and war.

Particularly remarkable about the PiS campaign against Holland is the public denunciation of teachers. In 2019, there was a nationwide teachers strike that rocked the government. After the trade union bureaucracy sold out the struggle, conditions in the Polish education sector remain disastrous with many teachers critical of the government’s far-right policies.

The ruling class in Poland and Europe is aware that Holland’s empathy for refugees and opposition to right-wing government policies gives artistic expression to broader sentiments in the working class and among young people. Workers, intellectuals, artists and young people in Poland and across Europe must defend Holland against the far-right state campaign in Poland and link this struggle with the struggle against war, fascism and dictatorship rooted in the capitalist system.



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