



How Poland Is Stoking Anti-Semitism

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After Israel's ambassador to Poland criticized that nation's bill to outlaw words that suggest Polish complicity in the Holocaust, a spokesperson for Poland's ruling party retweeted the comment that the ambassador's action "makes it difficult for me to look at Jews with kindness and sympathy."

The bill, which has passed Poland's parliament and which President Andrzej Duda has until Feb. 21 to decide whether to sign, would set prison terms of up to three years for using phrases like "Polish death camps" and suggesting "publicly and against the facts" that Poland or its government was complicit in Nazi Germany's slaughter of more than 3 million Jewish Poles.

To be sure, Poland deserves a fair shake about the World War II murder of Jews within its borders, and other nations have long sought to allay its concerns. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel said just the other day that the term "Polish death camps" was wrong, Israel says it doesn't oppose Poland's efforts to discourage its use, and President Barack Obama apologized for using the term in 2012.

Rather than correct history, however, this bill is designed to curtail efforts to speak openly about the past. And it's driven far less by the government's concerns for accuracy than by its desire to nourish its right-wing, nationalistic base at the expense of Jews and other targeted minorities.

First, a few facts about Poland's experience during the war: For one thing, it was treated savagely by both Germany and the Soviet Union, which conspired to carve it up. For another, and unlike its neighbors, it was never ruled by a pro-German collaborationist government in Warsaw. For still another, the death camps within its borders were built by the Nazis, not by Poles.

Not surprisingly, in the frightening atmosphere of World War II, the record of the Polish people is decidedly mixed. Some worked with astonishing bravery to save Jews; others, however, turned them in to curry favor with Nazi authorities, stole their property and even participated in their massacre.

To understand what's really behind this bill, however, consider its timing.

It passed the lower house of Poland's parliament on the eve of the international Holocaust Memorial Day, which falls on the Jan. 27 anniversary of the liberation of the notorious Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Poland, where more than 1 million people (mostly Jews) died.

And consider the anti-Semitic atmospherics around Warsaw's efforts to promote and defend the bill.

Along with the ruling party spokesperson's comments about Israel's ambassador, one pro-government journalist called Israeli parliamentarians who criticized the bill "greedy scabs," another said such criticism was part of an international conspiracy against Poland's government, and still another suggested that Polish Jews who don't like the bill should move to Israel.

Curtailling free speech is usually a problematic idea, and the government has undercut its efforts to sell the bill in laughable fashion.

When, in the face of criticism, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki delivered a prime-time TV address to insist that Poland respects the memory of Holocaust victims, an English translation on YouTube carried the words, "Camps where millions of Jews were murdered were Polish." Though it later corrected the translation, inserting the word "not," the original presumably would have violated the pending law because it makes it a crime to say the camps were Polish.

Moreover, when Morawiecki's office took foreign correspondents to the southeastern village of Markowa, showing them a new museum about a Polish family that was killed for sheltering Jews, Politico reported that "the family was shopped to the Gestapo by their Polish neighbor and the firing squad included Polish officers - exactly the kind of events that the new Polish law would forbid speaking about."

More dangerously, in the wake of opposition to the bill by Israel as well as international Jewish groups and others, Israel's embassy in Warsaw says that it's received "a wave of anti-Semitic statements."

Beyond stoking anti-Semitism, the legislation could have at least two other harmful impacts if, as expected, Duda signs it.

First, with top Israeli officials denouncing the bill and Polish officials taking umbrage, it could threaten a longstanding Israeli-Polish relationship that benefits both sides. Second, it could curtail research by threatening those who seek an open discussion of Polish activities during the war.

Anti-Semitism has long been a refuge for demagogues, and Poland's leaders are pushing this bill to stir the Jew-hating that will rally their hard-core base. It's one more example of the rising autocratic forces in Europe and elsewhere that are putting freedom and democracy on the global defensive.

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