

Suppressing history: On Poland's 'Holocaust' law

A [new law in Poland](#) that makes it a crime to blame the country for Nazi atrocities has reopened the Holocaust denial issue. Expressions such as Polish death camps to describe concentration camps including Auschwitz have touched a raw nerve over the years. Now the ruling ultra-nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS) appears intent on drawing political mileage from this dark chapter in Polish and European history. The government of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has enacted legislation to impose a fine and three-year imprisonment for all references that imply the complicity of the Polish nation and the state in Nazi war crimes. Its contention that artists and scholars would be exempt from the restrictions has not assuaged critics, who are challenging assaults on freedom of expression. Clearly, responsibility for the atrocities perpetrated against Jews during the Holocaust rests with the occupying Nazis, and not the people of Poland. Yet, to discount or deny the complicity of some Polish officials who may have acted in collusion with the Nazis would be tantamount to falsifying history. Any refusal to recognise the heroism of Poles who rescued and rehabilitated Jews would also be liable to over-simplification of that larger narrative. The motive behind the latest law is to suppress evidence that has emerged of some of those uncomfortable truths. But then, rewriting Poland's recent history has been a persistent preoccupation with the current dispensation since its 2015 election.

Predictably, the 'Holocaust' law has stoked a major controversy with international reverberations. In an equally selective reading to counter the Polish move, some Israeli lawmakers are for expanding the definition of Holocaust denial to include a refusal to admit the role of those who collaborated with the Nazis. The U.S. State Department has cautioned Warsaw about the implications of the law for its strategic relationship with Washington. Warsaw has already come under sharp scrutiny from the European Union for attempting to undermine the independence of the judiciary. A formal sanction by Brussels for the breach of the rule of law and deviation from European values would be an unprecedented step. Moreover, the resulting loss of Poland's voting rights in the bloc would be most ironic for a government that has staked its position on the assertion of national sovereignty on the EU stage. Polish President Andrzej Duda seems more alive to the ire the Holocaust legislation has invited internationally. He gave his assent to the bill, but sought a review from the constitutional court, a body already rendered toothless by parliament. Moderates within PiS should exert greater influence to roll back the extreme steps taken by the government, such as the 'Holocaust' legislation, or Poles risk denial of the fruits of their 2004 EU membership.

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