

History and freedom on trial

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10.02.2021

Today, two Polish historians await the verdict of a libel case brought against them for documenting Polish complicity in the extermination of the Jews during World War II.

Two weeks ago I was preparing a talk for a PCS union branch for Holocaust Memorial Day.

That day commemorates the liberation of the Nazis' largest death camp, Auschwitz, by the Red Army.



Jews from more than 20 countries were deported to their deaths there. But in that talk I remarked that the prime focus on Auschwitz obscures a key aspect of the Holocaust that needs to be assimilated: that, on the eve of the Nazi invasion, half of the Jews who would be murdered in the Holocaust were citizens of Poland.

Jews comprised 10 per cent of Poland's entire pre-war population. In Poland's capital, Warsaw, and its textile centre, Lodz, Jews formed one-third of the population.

Auschwitz accounted for around 300,000 of Poland's Jews who were murdered under Nazi occupation.

Much larger numbers of Polish Jews perished at Treblinka and Belzec; others starved in ghettos, but a few hundred thousand Jews escaped from ghettos or avoided being rounded up.

Some fled to the forests and formed partisan groups; many others were hidden by Polish Catholics, despite the Nazis threatening the death penalty for Poles caught hiding Jews.

Among my valued personal friends are two Polish-born Jews who survived because, as children, they were hidden by Polish Catholics.

But they were the lucky ones. Painstaking research by Polish historians has revealed that two out of every three of those Jews who went into hiding were murdered in Poland.

And not just by the Nazis, but by Poles themselves. Many were handed over to the Nazis by local Polish civilians who had captured them.

Last summer I attended an online Yiddish course based in Warsaw which included guest lectures.

One lecture in particular was a real eye-opener. It focused on the 18,000-strong Polish Blue Police, that the Nazis incorporated as an auxiliary in liquidating Poland's Jews.

They specialised in hunting down Jews in hiding.

The lecturer was Jan Grabowski, born in Warsaw to a Catholic mother and a Jewish father who was a Holocaust survivor.

Grabowski emigrated to Canada in 1988 and is a history professor at Ottawa University.

In 2003, he co-founded the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research, whose director is Warsaw-born Barbara Engelking, a sociologist specialising in Holocaust studies.

Grabowski's lecture demonstrated that Polish complicity in the Holocaust was not just a matter of assorted individuals and groups undertaking actions, but was institutional.

The Blue Police operated under the auspices of the Nazi occupiers, but carried out their tasks with independent initiative and considerable enthusiasm, becoming a "key element in the implementation of the Final Solution."

This week Grabowski is back in Warsaw where he and Engelking are awaiting the verdict of a libel trial expected today brought against them as editors of a two-volume study *Night Without End*, published by the Centre for Holocaust Research.

Based on thousands of testimonies, it describes the fate of Jews in nine districts of Poland, and reveals, in the centre's words, "ample evidence of the important, and previously underestimated levels of ... complicity of certain segments of Polish society in the extermination of their Jewish neighbours and co-citizens."

The libel case has been brought by 80-year-old Filomena Leszczynska, whose uncle, a village elder, was named.

The study acknowledges that he saved the life of one Jew, though he robbed her of some possessions, and alleges that he collaborated with the Nazis in the betrayal of 22 Jews in a nearby forest.

Leszczynska says she is fighting the case not only for her right to "enjoy the remembrance of a deceased person" but her right also to "national pride and identity ... to a fact-based history of World War II" and to "receive truthful information from historical research" paid for by her taxes.

That wording suggests that this goes beyond an individual seeking dignity for her family's reputation. And it does.

She was urged to pursue the case by the Polish League Against Defamation, a body that is strongly aligned with the ruling populist-nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS), and has received generous state subsidies.

Since PiS came to power in 2015 it has paid great attention to history, condemning an alleged "pedagogy of shame ... of disgrace" that was "attacking Polishness, Polish values and traditions and Polish identity" in Poland's educational institutions.

It wants to replace it with "a pedagogy of pride" emphasising "Polish heroism" and "noble behaviour."

These themes have been advanced by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) a body that has come under more direct political control since PiS came to power, described by critics as an increasingly sinister "ministry of memory."

In 2016 four PiS representatives replaced independent members of the IPN's ruling body.

The following year IPN came under fire when it was discovered that the deputy director of its publishing office, had, as an independent publisher between 2009-14, reprinted works by Holocaust revisionist David Irving. IPN rejected calls for his dismissal.

In February 2018 the Polish Teachers Union appealed to the media to stop using the term "pedagogy of shame," which they argued was a cover for seeking "the denial of parts of historical knowledge."

This appeal came in the wake of PiS adopting an infamous law, drafted by a hardliner, seeking to criminalise those who talk and write of Polish complicity in the Holocaust.

It was adopted by the Sejm (Polish parliament) on January 26 2018, the eve of Holocaust Memorial Day.

That law was controversial for Poland's close right-wing allies in the US and in Netanyahu's Israel, and PiS were forced into a partial climbdown — reducing it to a civil rather than a criminal offence — hence the current libel case brought by an individual citizen.

It has undoubtedly had a chilling impact on the work of historians, and those who have sought to withstand the pressure are condemned and abused as "traitors" and "falsifiers of history."

Online newspaper articles about the libel case have attracted comments from readers such as: "...deport people who spit on Poland Poles"; "Jews attack Poland with the help of lies slander... they are a fifth column"; "take citizenship away from this liar"; "People like he [sic] should be loaded into the cattle cars and sent East where they belong"; "Kick this Jewish scum out of Poland."

Rafal Pankowski of the Never Again Association, a Polish body monitoring racism and fascism, described the 2018 law as a “turning point” for Poland that “changed norms” and “opened the discursive space ... to organise politically around anti-semitic tropes.”

There are, he acknowledges, “few physical attacks on Jews in Poland” which he attributes to “few visible Jews walking the Polish streets,” but Never Again has documented “many acts of violence against ... symbolic sites, such as Jewish cemeteries or monuments to the victims of the Holocaust” and a “high level of hate speech cases” since the 2018 law.

Critical historians are right to view this current case as a dangerous attack on freedom of research, critical inquiry and free expression.

If it succeeds, it could well herald a number of other civil cases, to the detriment not only of historians but to the foundations of a free society, which are increasingly dominated by nationalist-conservative norms, nurturing a revived anti-semitism alongside other bigotries against LGBT and women’s rights.

And while attention has rightly focused on the significance of this libel case, under the radar, PiS recently appointed a new deputy education minister, Thomas Rymkowski, a former MP for the far-right Nationalist Movement coalition, who Rafal Pankowski describes as “notorious for extremely hostile statements about minorities, including Jews.”

<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/f/history-and-freedom-trial/>