

Funded by the Polish Government, This Film Downplays Poland's Role in the Holocaust

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14 August 2023

The film alleges that accusations against Poles for the pogrom of Jedwabne were “invented by a Jewish-led conspiracy,” funded in large part by Poland’s Ministry of Culture.

A local antisemitism watchdog has called out Poland’s hard-right government over its funding of a new film downplaying Polish complicity in the murder of Jews and accusing the country’s chief rabbi of manipulating the political elites.

The watchdog declared that the film reflects a growing “level of acceptance of the far-right nationalist narrative.”

According to Rafał Pankowski, a Polish academic and founder of the Never Again Association, the film “Jedwabne: Historia prawdziwa,” which went live on YouTube last week and has already been viewed more than 11,000 times, seeks to distort a pogrom in the town of Jedwabne in which Poles killed at least 340 Jews on July 10, 1941. Most of the victims were locked inside a barn that was set on fire.

The pogrom in Jedwabne later became a symbol of Polish involvement in the murder of Jews during the Holocaust, with the publication of the book “Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland” by the Polish-Jewish historian Prof. Jan Tomasz Gross, in 2000.

To this day, the murder of the Jews of Jedwabne continues to spark controversial debate over the complicity of Poles in the murder of Jews during the Holocaust, with many Polish nationalists placing blame instead solely on Germany.

“Jedwabne: Historia prawdziwa” was produced by far-right magazine publisher Tomasz Sommer and funded in large part by Poland’s Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. It “alleges that the accusations against Poles for the pogrom have been invented by a Jewish-led conspiracy,” Pankowski said, citing attacks on both Prof. Gross and Polish Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich.

In one segment, Gross’ book is described as “an exercise in the ideology of social progress and critical race theory,” and his arguments dismissed as an effort to instrumentalize history “in order to benefit from sympathy evoked by the tragedy of the Jews.”

Previously, Gross has been portrayed as an enemy of the state and was even investigated for „insulting the Polish nation,” an offense which carries a penalty of up to three years in prison.

Chief Rabbi Schudrich, meanwhile, was targeted in the film for his efforts to prevent the excavation of the site of the massacre, which some Poles want to explore in order to uncover possible evidence that Germans ordered

Polish villagers to do the killings. The work was started in 2001 and stopped by the justice minister after several days due to Jewish objections.

A subsequent effort in 2019 was halted before it could begin after the Polish National Prosecutor's Office declared that exhuming the bodies of the Jewish victims would not provide any new evidence that could lead to the reopening of the case.

"Rabbi Schudrich has made it clear that thanks to his shrewdness and cunning he managed to fool the Polish politicians", the film's narrator declared.

Promoting the film on Instagram, which premiered last year but was not released theatrically, Sommer posted pictures of Hasidic Jews, declaring "They don't want you to see this movie!"

"The views as expressed in the movie have been around for years but the fact that it's sponsored by the Ministry makes it worse, and makes it extra problematic," Pankowski said, noting that Sommer had previously claimed that "Israeli-leftist companies" controlled the Polish and American film industries.

Speaking with Haaretz, Schudrich stated that "we have an obligation to those people killed during WWII. We have an obligation to our children and grandchildren, the next generations, to make sure we tell the truth. Any distortion of historical truth is a desecration of the memory of those who were murdered and is undermining the morality and the hope for the future for our children and grandchildren."

Asked why the Polish government would have funded such a film, the chief rabbi said "you said need to ask the Ministry of Culture."

Neither the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage nor the Institute for the Legacy of Polish National Thought, which served as the pass-through for the funding, responded to requests for comment.

Polish-Israeli relations have been repeatedly rocked by differing approaches to the commemoration of the Holocaust. Some critics accuse Warsaw of seeking to downplay Polish participation in the murder of the country's Jewish community and of silencing historians who differ from the official government narrative.

Last year, Warsaw demanded \$1.3 trillion from Berlin in reparations for losses suffered during the Nazi occupation. In its report, Poland ascribed the Jedwabne pogrom to German perpetrators and listed it as one of 9,292 places where Germans committed atrocities against Poles.

Prof. Jan Grabowski, who discovered this when reading the third volume of the report, called the report "shameful," and a "rewriting of the history of the Holocaust," noting that the pogrom was well documented through historical research based on archival material and eyewitness accounts.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

S. Sokol: "Funded by the Polish Government, This Film Downplays Poland's Role in the Holocaust". Haaretz.com, 14.08.2023.

<https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2023-08-14/ty-article/.premium/funded-by-the-polish-government-this-film-downplays-polands-role-in-the-holocaust/00000189-f472-d8b0-a1bd-fcf6a1a30000>