



Holocaust Revisionism: the Implications of Poland's Criminalisation of Holocaust Complicity

Evaluate how the politicalisation of history has affected representations of history. Discuss with specific reference to Polish involvement in the Holocaust and the new laws regarding freedom of speech.

"The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them."

—George Orwell, *Notes on Nationalism*, 1945



This historiographical inquiry focuses on Holocaust Revisionism and the prevailing consequences which the politicisation of history brings. I seek to determine how these factors have already, and will continue to, contribute to the obfuscation and denial of Holocaust history. I will specifically be using the new legislation in Poland to display the consequences of politicising history. Poland's involvement and complicity have been incessant and complexed in regards to the acceptance and acknowledgement of the Jewish Holocaust. It is a very contemporary context as the legislation only came into the courts in March 2018. As such, this historical investigation aligns well with the "What are the purposes of history?" and "How has history been constructed, recorded and presented over time?" components of the Extension History course. The issues that this legality emphasises include the ownership of history, history utilised for political exploitation, and the value of truth in history. There are many examples of Polish civilians willingly taking part in violent anti-semitic behaviour, but at this stage a positive national narrative is of higher value than a truthful one. Jan Grabovski and Jan Gross are two Polish historians who have contributed significantly in debunking the "Polish helping myth" and have aimed to tell the "whole" truth, which has consequently led them to face legal repercussions. The international community and Israel has been enraged by this and by the increasing strength and support of Polish denial. It is in the face of these new laws and political conquests which exploit the truth of the Jewish Holocaust, that the historian must focus on the truth and put aside patriotic ties. It is crucial that Holocaust historiography does not become tainted by the motives of nationalistic governments and thus through this investigation essay, I seek to display how this politicisation has deserted integral longstanding values, tarnishing the repute of honest history and abandoned 21st century values regarding freedom of speech.

The revival of Holocaust revisionism sweeping through Poland claiming to be the final democratisation of Holocaust history¹ is no foreign concept to Polish Holocaust historiography. The recent increase of denial towards their involvement, complemented with the lack of acceptance towards their participation and complicity in the Jewish genocide has gained new height, delving into the realm of legal implications. Poland was a central site to the Second World War², with preponderance of the Holocaust occurring on Polish soil whilst under Nazi occupation. During World War II, Poland ceased to exist as an independent state as it was occupied by Nazi Germany (1939-1945). It was also the site for the most notorious concentration camps including Auschwitz, Treblinka and Belzec. Samuel Kassow states where the accepted orthodox view in Poland is derived from; "*The national narrative stresses the fact we were occupied and partitioned, but we never forgot our country and honour*". In order to defend Poland from possible vilification, the Polish President Andrzej Duda signed an anti-defamation bill in March earlier this year, making it illegal to assign responsibility, complicity or involvement to Poland in the Jewish Holocaust³. The supposed 'correction' to Polish Holocaust narrative is also coinciding with a heightened and perhaps concerning rise of anti-semitic behaviour in Poland, leading historians and politicians alike to question the true motives and ramifications of this new law. This turn of historical revisionism is not only a mass expression of patriotism, but an obvious consequence of the revival of politicised history⁴ exploited for the means of political power and national pride.

Holocaust denial can be blatantly denounced as incorrect and lacking substance in the 21st century, yet less obvious forms of it pervade revisionist historiography. This subtle denial has been branded by prominent Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt as '*soft-core denial*'⁵, a form particularly prominent in areas of Eastern Europe. Soft-core denial is often rooted in political and nationalistic motivation, such as the proposed laws in Poland which will essentially criminalise individuals who publicly accuse Poland or the Polish people of collaborating with Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. In addition, describing Nazi extermination camps established in Poland as 'Polish death camps' and claiming Polish complicity in these or other crimes against peace and humanity⁶ is also a criminal offence, resulting in incarceration. Poland "*wants to end ... a misleading culture of shame surrounding [the] country's treatment of Jews in World War Two*"⁷.

Yet the ignorance of these events can also be classified as soft-core denial, a policy Poland has actively and consciously chosen to pursue. It is evident in Polish Holocaust literature⁸ and is becoming even more so obvious as it moves towards legislative and legal implications. The implications of Poland's denial have severe ramifications on various realms of history, such as the ownership of history, the consequences of politicising history, and the importance of truth.

Revisionism in itself requires one to look upon history with a renewed perspective and to essentially 'revise' what is already known, but it is not only historians now, but also politicians who have stepped up to take this role. Revisionism in regard to the Holocaust is renowned for its belittling attitude and obfuscation⁹. Because of these attitudes, it is often heavily criticised, particularly by Jewish scholars. History at its core is a narrative, derived from fact and in turn interpreted with the benefit of retrospect in a broader social, political, cultural context¹⁰. The question of how to interpret the Holocaust has been a core historiographical issue ever since historians set about to record it. It forces the historian to confront fundamental issues not only about events, but also to delve deeper into human identity and psychological aspects¹¹. Because of this inevitable subjectivity, it is a very complicated issue to analyse. Thus, Poland's new wave of revisionism entailing the politicalisation of the Holocaust, consequentially calls into question the ownership of

Holocaust history, the consequences of utilising history as a means of a political tool and the relationship between history and truth.

The same pertinent issues are raised in regard to the construction and ownership of history and the power that a governmental institution can have over the historian's moral responsibility to tell the truth. In Poland's situation, it seems that the Polish government has taken a dictatorial position, essentially taking ownership of history, exerting control through the means of legal repercussions. Research surrounding this issue has been largely controlled by the state since 1951, and thus interest rapidly diminished in the field of historiography regarding the Polish Holocaust due to the emphasis on specific interpretations¹². Is it a futile form of protestation to tell the truth if it means incarceration and legal repercussions? If Poland fails to reveal its involvement, will it be able to so simply erase any memory or acknowledgement of its Nazi collaboration? In his book, Jan T. Gross questions the methodology of Poland's national story, "*If people are indeed bonded together by authentic spiritual affinity—I have in mind a national pride noted in common historical experiences of many generations — are they not responsible so for horrible deeds perpetrated by members of such an "imagined community?"*"¹³ In the individual case of Poland, it becomes evident that history is being solely controlled by leading politicians, instead of the people. Despite history being "*the canon of collective identity is assembled from deeds that are somehow special, striking, or remarkable. It is made up, in other words, of actions that depart from routine, that are unusual*"¹⁴, Poland's government has stolen it from the people in an attempt to write a nuance-free narrative for its nation. In his book Gross carefully studies the horrific massacre of 1,600 Jews at Jedwabne, where their Polish neighbours filled a barn with Jewish men, women and children in July 1941 and set it alight. The villagers were told about the massacre, but that it was the Nazis who did it¹⁵. Gross even goes so far as to propose that Poland's history may soon have to be rewritten, in order to further purify its history and escape from the realities of Jedwabne¹⁶. This sense of secular ownership of history leads us to the next significant historiographical problem that has arisen due to this historiographical issue: history utilised as a political tool.

History then essentially becomes an instrument exploited in the aims of political power, tarnishing the reputation of academic history. In denying Polish complicity, it represents a theme common to this new wave of right-wing nationalists: a compulsive desire to sanitise the past, a theme present in the revision of nationalistic histories around the world¹⁷. Sanitising the past is a method of 'purifying' a country's national history in order to refine it to the most noble representation it can, omitting negative and discrediting elements. This is essentially a reflection of the government's history and memory, and instrumentalist's academia and politics which assist in the facilitation of this practice¹⁸. Howard Libit, executive director of the Baltimore Jewish Council states "*I'm not comfortable with government bodies deciding what history is or isn't*"¹⁹, owing to the monumental impact it has on the society's collective memory and identity. The job of the historian has thus evolved into a profession of political nature, used to strengthen the value and legitimacy of the leading government's ideals. It is not unknown that "*Political history prevails in Poland*"²⁰ as Dieter Pohl, a professor in History and Political Science specialising on the Nazi persecution of Jews, states. This trivialisation of the value in truth and accuracy, particularly in regard to Holocaust history, is evidence of the extent of governmental control over public memory and representation, and thus over all of history. Sara J. Bloomfield, the director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum wrote a letter to the Polish president, stating "*enshrining this statute into law could potentially reverse decades of widely respected, impressive efforts in Holocaust education, research and memorialisation in Poland*". The attempt to 'construct a nuance-free, nationalistic-

victim narrative²¹ is further emphasised by the current Polish President Andrzej Duda, leader of the Law and Justice Party²², Duda insists that outlawing this blame is a necessary step to preserve the country's reputation, as complicity with genocide sits uneasily with national pride. Contrasting academic and international outcry at these new laws are the Polish politicians who view this as a significant step forward, "*a moment of national catharsis*" (Patryk Jaki), a decision to "*establish the politics of shame ... to ensure that future generations were formed without the foundation of a strong national identity*"²³. Admitting willing participation in the Holocaust (Holocaust referring to the Jewish Genocide) would cut against the national narrative that Poland was exclusively a victim of history, not a victimiser²⁴.

It is at this stage that the lines that have been previously blurred become vividly clear for outsiders. What is to be remembered does not equate to what happened because of the political moulding it has endured by those in power. They seek to formulate a nationalistic interpretation of the past that preserves the country's reputation, instead of telling the truth. The Jewish Holocaust is essentially the cornerstone of which Polish political identity²⁵ is built upon today, which makes it all the more "*disturbing that [this is] the "historical policy" pursued in Poland*"²⁶.

Telling the *whole* truth about the Holocaust is now a criminal offence in Poland²⁷. This modified version will inevitably become detrimental to the historian's search for pure history and truth²⁸. Historians can agree that calling Auschwitz, Sobibor and Treblinka "Polish" can mischaracterise them, as Poland was not responsible for establishment of the camps²⁹, but nevertheless local Poles "*did not merely witness the murder of their Jewish neighbours but were actively involved in the killing...bloody pogroms were tolerated, sometimes even invited*"³⁰. The criminalisation associating Poland in German-fuelled anti-Semitic behaviour will inarguably heavily affect the honesty of the historicity and discussions regarding the Holocaust³¹. The new laws essentially facilitate the obfuscation of the events and accuracy concerning Holocaust narratives in Poland, allowing the already detrimental Holocaust denial culture present in Poland to thrive under new legislation. Allowing legality to filtrate and dictate history reveals a political agenda, emphasising objective truth is no longer an aim or a possibility, as it is left susceptible to the distortional view of politics³². As Jan T. Gross states "*Even if selectivity in the process of forming national identity is unavoidable ... the boundaries of a collective identity is constructed—in order to remain authentic—would have to remain open forever.*"³³ What is represented and remembered as the past is required to offer a direct link based on facts (accomplished by evidence and proof), whilst also offering a narrative, which essentially compromises the '*fact of representation*', but also differentiates history from a scientific report³⁴. Unfortunately, it seems that in these circumstances, the truth and/or facts based upon supportive evidence are no longer the main objective, perhaps not even an objective at all. It has instead been replaced with a political movement which emphasises the importance of ultranationalistic history, commonly found in eastern European nations because of their desire for identity and recognition³⁵. As Professor Jan Tomasz Gross asks, "*Can we arbitrarily select from a national heritage what we like, and proclaim it as patrimony to the exclusion of everything else?*"³⁶? Can this representation be a true biography of the people of Poland?

Professor Jan Grabowski, a researcher in the field surrounding the extermination of the Polish Jews, is part of a new, younger small group of Polish historians who challenge commonly held myths of Polish innocence during the Holocaust³⁷, as well as the history of the Jewish-Polish relations³⁸. He discusses many examples and provides evidence regarding voluntary Polish contribution to the Holocaust in his book, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland*. He

claims that the government funded historical investigations and “*encouraged studies that painted a rosy picture of wartime Polish–Jewish relations*”³⁹. Though Poland didn't establish a collaborationist government in Warsaw and was subject to the direct and brutal control of Germany, Poles voluntarily participated in pogroms and assisted in turning Jewish neighbours and friends over to Nazi authorities⁴⁰. After Poland was liberated, there was a long period of systematic falsehood and amnesia. The pogroms carried out by Poles were denied or unmentioned⁴¹. Vivian Bervovici writes in a confronting article, “*A large number of Poles, enthusiastically supported the Nazis in their unprecedentedly vicious anti-Jewish pogrom*”⁴². Thus, the evidence not only of Poland's complicity, but also of initiation of contribution towards the Jewish genocide is so profound that it is inconceivable that Poland may be successfully sanitising its history.

Grabowski claims “*...no-one was forced to kill the Jews... the so-called local population involved in the killing of Jews did so on their own free will*”⁴³ and as a result of this claim is now facing legal repercussions. Despite efforts to avoid the truth, it is well-known that during the Second World War, the violent aspect of the anti-Semitic campaign was adopted almost immediately— East Poland being the most severe with its anti-semitic policies. Without pressure from the Nazis, Poles initiated pogroms and turned in their fellow Jewish neighbours. It was after the war that a headline article titled, “*Dark Continent: Hitler's European Helpers*” raised the idea that the Jewish Holocaust was also a result of the rest of the complicit Europe. It is not surprising that this raised much controversy in Poland, “*mostly among politicians and journalists, who accused the German authors (not without justification) of trying to share the blame... but the question still requires an answer: would the Germans have succeeded as completely as they did in exterminating the European Jews?*”⁴⁴. The investigation area of the Holocaust was and still is restricted to one area of enquiry, ‘the rescue of Jews by Poles’⁴⁵, which by comparison to the whole story is only a very small fraction. Kassow summarises the context of these suggestions: “*When historians like Grabowski or Gross say their research shows Poles probably killed more Jews than Germans, people see it as slander, as invalidating their suffering, as impugning their national honor.*”⁴⁶

The historiography regarding Holocaust revisionism and the politicalisation of history can be clearly visualised through Poland's criminalisation of Holocaust involvement and ownership. The implications of this are yet to be truly seen, as only time will tell. Representations of Holocaust history have undoubtedly been limited within Poland because of the strong political desire for a sanitised national story. The legal implications that threaten historians and even politicians who wish to seek the truth are compelling enough for this orthodox perspective to be maintained. The consequences this can have on the universal understanding of historical ownership and exploitation are detrimental. It is essential that historians and politicians alike stand by the truth, regardless of the desire for a pure patriotic narrative.

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