



PERSPECTIVES

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Israel Must Remain Vigilant in Its Relations with Poland

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In view of Poland's historical treatment of Jews, Israel must remain ever-vigilant that there be no falsification of history as Polish-Israeli relations develop. There is a strong desire in Poland to whitewash or otherwise minimize horrible events. Provided the Israeli authorities calibrate their statements and stick to the facts, they will maintain the moral high ground in the relationship.

Polish-Israeli relations are very complex, in view of Poland's past behavior toward Jews. Israel must be continuously alert if it is to avoid a falsification of history.

Consider the Polish Holocaust law, which was re-amended in 2018. The law has elicited many international reactions. The resulting publicity has shone a renewed spotlight on the massive participation of Poles in the murders of Jews during the Holocaust, as well as the country's persistent antisemitism both before and after the war.

Many details have reemerged in the media. Historian Jan Gross was widely quoted. He documented in his book, *Neighbors*, the way the Jews of the village of Jedwabne were burned to death in a barn by Polish residents of the town during the Holocaust. The work of historian Jan Grabowski, who teaches at the University of Ottawa, Canada, also received a great deal of renewed attention. He and his colleagues detailed the mass murder of 200,000 Jews by Poles during the Holocaust, confirming the figure established by Polish Jewish historian Szymon Datner about fifty years ago.

For the first time, the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) published a declassified US State Department document from 1946 that compared Polish treatment of

Jews to that of German Nazis. It stated that after the war, many Jews preferred to flee even to Germany rather than return to Poland.

Best known among Polish antisemitic crimes in the immediate postwar years was the 1946 pogrom in the town of Kielce, during which 42 Jews were murdered. In 1968, 13,000 people of Jewish origin were stripped of their Polish citizenship and expelled from the country. On the occasion of the 2018 anniversary of that antisemitic purge, Polish president Andrzej Duda offered what the *Washington Post* called “a non-apology apology.”

More than 15 years ago, I interviewed the then-head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, the late David Bankier. He said:

Most Polish underground organizations believed that post-Hitler Poland would be a country without Jews.... those who remained would have to leave Poland after the war. This view was expressed even in the Żegota organization, the council for aid to the Jews set up by the Polish resistance. Among them were people who endangered their own lives.

Bankier remarked that the belief that Poland was not a country where Jews should live was highly reflective of Polish feelings at that time.

A 2011 study by the University of Bielefeld found that 63% of Poles agree with this statement: “What the State of Israel does today to the Palestinians is in principle not different from what the Nazis did to the Jews in the Third Reich.” This percentage was substantially higher than in the other European countries where this poll was taken.

Polish diplomat Jan Dziędziczak, the deputy director of the Polish Foreign Ministry, complained about a text at the Yad Vashem museum that states that after 1939, most Polish police officers returned to duty under the German occupiers. It also says that in 1943, 16,000 Polish police officers – some armed – served under the Germans.

Yad Vashem states that the Polish police were employed “on a wide scale against the Jewish population,” and “had an active role in policing ghettos in occupied Poland and searching for Jews who sought refuge with the local population after escaping from ghettos and camps.”

The Polish police demonstrated “absolute devotion” to the Nazi authorities, according to Yad Vashem, “although a handful of cases of assistance to Jews by some officers also occurred.”

As long as Israeli authorities calibrate their statements and stick to the facts, they will have the moral high ground in the Israeli-Polish relationship.

A lack of sophistication, professionalism, or tact can easily upset the relationship. Israel Katz demonstrated this failing shortly after he became acting Israeli FM. Quoting former Israeli PM Yitzhak Shamir, he made the statement that Poles suckle antisemitism with their mother's milk.

Katz spoiled what could have been an important Israeli diplomatic success – an official meeting in Israel of the four Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). Poland refused to participate, which led to the canceling of the meeting. This was unfortunate, as Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu had worked hard on improving relations with these countries. Katz's words even drew the condemnation of pro-Israeli US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Katz would have served his country's interests if he had fully apologized for his offensive and damaging statement.

Another Israeli who apparently does not know the meaning of calibration is controversial Hebrew University historian Daniel Blatman, who accepted the Polish government's offer to become the chief historian of the Ghetto Museum scheduled to open in Warsaw in 2023. Blatman wildly attacked Yad Vashem in an article entitled, "Yad Vashem teaches the Holocaust the way totalitarian countries teach history." The choices of what will be represented at the museum, and how those things are represented, can lead to serious future conflict.

Israel's leading Holocaust scholar, Yehuda Bauer, has said that Blatman's role is apparently to serve as a Jewish-Israeli fig leaf for the new museum, which is supported by the nationalist Polish regime.

The strong desire of many Poles to rewrite their country's past requires Israel to anticipate coming problems. A current example is the discussion in Germany about establishing a monument in Berlin dedicated to Poles murdered during the German occupation. German atrocities should be remembered – even more so now, in view of contemporary developments in the country. Jews should be sensitive to atrocities committed against others, all the more so if they were committed concurrently by the very nation that exterminated its Jews.

In 1979, the "Polish" Pope John Paul II visited Auschwitz. There he said: "Six million Poles lost their lives during the Second World War, a fifth of the nation." This was a semantic amalgamation. Three million Poles – whom the Germans saw as an inferior people – were killed by the Germans in racist murders, or 10% of the Polish people. Three million Polish Jews were murdered in a mass act of exterminatory antisemitism – more than 90% of the Polish

Jewish population. The Germans considered the Jews to be subhuman, viewing them as bacteria and vermin.

The issue of a monument for Polish victims in Berlin was largely theoretical until very recently. During a visit to Poland just a few weeks ago, German FM Heiko Maas came out in favor of a German memorial for Polish victims of Nazi rule. He said: "Such a memorial is not only a gesture of reconciliation, it would be important also for us Germans as well."

If the monument for Polish victims does materialize in Berlin, Israel and the Jews will have to make sure ahead of time that no texts distorting history appear on it.

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