The arguments of the Polish authorities in the controversy over the bill that was just approved by the Polish parliament relating to the country’s World War II past actually raises three issues.

The first is the purported grounds for the entire controversy over the bill – opposition to calling the World War II-era death camps and concentration and forced labor camps in Poland “Polish camps,” demanding instead that they be called “German camps on the soil of occupied Poland.” This is a justifiable demand, and there is no Holocaust researcher today or country, certainly in the West, that would have it any other way.

Not only is Israel in agreement with this. So is the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, the intergovernmental organization that serves as the political umbrella group for education and research activities on the Holocaust, and unreservedly supports the Polish position on this. (In the interest of fair disclosure, I am one of the organization’s founders and am currently an active honorary chairman of the group).

The endless rehashing of this issue, over which there is consensus, gives the impression that it is serving as cover for the Polish government’s real aim: preventing significant discussion on the Poles’ relationship with the Jews during the period of the Holocaust.

The second subject is the provision in the bill – legislation that requires the signature of the Polish president before it becomes law – that provides that anyone claiming that the Polish state or Polish people were in any way a partner to Nazi crimes would be subject to a fine or prison sentence. It’s a matter of defending Polish national honor, it is claimed, but the claim is highly peculiar. Poland was an occupied land and the political forces in the country, some military and others political, operated underground. The underground, at least ostensibly, was subject to the authority of the Polish government-in-exile in London.

The “Polish people” therefore couldn’t have been a partner, even if it had wanted to be, to any act because the people was never asked its opinion (and
what is the “will of the people” under such circumstances?). The Polish state, meaning the official institutions, were in exile.

The claim that there was no Polish political entity that collaborated with the Germans – in contrast to most of the countries of Europe – is correct. The reason for this is simple. Nazi Germany’s policy was directed at turning the Poles into a nation of abject slaves who would serve the superior Germans. No Polish diplomatic negotiations on any issue would have been met with consideration. (The Germans recognized only a humanitarian relief committee that was, at least purportedly, composed of Polish, Ukrainian and Jewish representatives, but it was not a political entity.) The Polish argument regarding the defense of national honor in this regard is totally bizarre and devoid of historical context and serves nothing more than nationalism, with undertones of anti-Semitism.

The third issue, and apparently the primary one, relates to the argument that although there were in fact bad people among the Poles, as among every people, the occupied and suffering Polish people – and it was indeed occupied and suffering, and at least two million Poles died as a result of the acts of the German Nazis – actually made huge efforts to save Jews. It is even claimed that 60,000 Poles saved Jews.

That of course is a crude lie. Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Authority has recognized 6,700 Polish Righteous Among the Nations, and they were true heroes, because they had to hide the Jews not only from the Germans but also from their Polish neighbors. It’s very possible that the actual number of those Poles who saved Jews was at least double the 6,700 figure. There is no question that an exceptionally courageous minority of Poles did help Jews, but if it actually had been 60,000, the history of the Holocaust in Poland would have looked entirely different.

The claim that the Poles were a people who saved Jews found expression with the establishment of the museum in Poland dedicated to the members of the Ulma family, who tried to save two Jewish families in the town of Markowa. The Ulma family was betrayed by a local resident and was murdered along with the Jewish families.

This genuine act of courage is purportedly an example of the conduct of the Polish people as a whole, but meticulous and reliable Polish research has shown that in Markowa and in surrounding villages the Polish farmers set out with pitchforks and sticks as well as rifles hunting for the Jews in the houses and forests in the area to kill them or turn them over either to the Polish
police force that collaborated with the Germans or over to the Germans themselves.

In practice, the new legislation prevents any independent research because of the penalties it provides for anyone claiming that the Polish people participated in the German crimes. Granted that there is the assertion that genuine scientific research or artistic work (whatever that may be) is exempt from the scope of the law, but the bill doesn’t define who is to be considered a scientist or artist. If a Polish master’s degree student wishes to examine what happened in any particular place in Poland but knows that he would be subject to imprisonment for disclosing what he finds – because what happened in Markowa happened in many places – he clearly will choose a different topic.

Tour guides will also choose not to tell their groups that at locations that they are visiting Poles robbed the Jews and were pleased that they were killed or that the owners of the property disappeared. The same holds true for investigative journalists and the like.

The law is a crude assault on freedom of expression and research and should be condemned, in the spirit of the courageous remarks issued a week ago by a group of Polish historians from the Polish Center for Holocaust Research and in the strong protest expressed by the Polish historian who heads the museum on Polish Jewry in Warsaw.

And what did the Israeli government do? Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tweeted appropriate, strong and unequivocal remarks opposing the legislation. That was followed by a conversation of reconciliation with his Polish counterpart, Mateusz Morawiecki. The two decided that a team of experts would be appointed to try to bridge the gaps in their positions.

At the time of this writing, however, I am not aware of experts on the subject who have been invited to take part in such a discussion. It appears to be an effort at a cover-up, since the Polish legislature has already approved the bill and it will not be amended. Perhaps they will make do with some kind of statement to silence the opponents and the doubters. After all, it is clear that economic and security interests and support from the Polish government in the United Nations are more important than just some Holocaust.

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