

Jan Grabowski, “Student and Faculty Guide to Holocaust Distortion, or How to Domesticate the Shoah in a Few Easy Steps”

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Poland, on whose soil three million European Jews were murdered, has become the reluctant custodian of Holocaust memory. In an attempt to deal with this, and with their own complicity in the genocide, Polish society – and the state – have attempted to dissociate themselves from this history. Jan Grabowski, professor of history at the University of Ottawa, discussed the processes of dissociation and distortion, that have led to an unprecedented shift in public consciousness towards the dejudaization of the Holocaust. Michele and Robert Simpson sponsored the lecture in memory of Herbert M. Rein.

In Poland, the epicenter of the Holocaust, historical distortion stems from a deeply embedded envy of suffering, which results in efforts to raise Polish national suffering to the level experienced by Jews. This is not, as Grabowski points out, denial of the Holocaust, but rather an insidious – and more dangerous – deception and manipulation of historical context. Denial is easy to recognize because it is based on outright lies but distortion is a partial lie that requires a knowledge of history. As part of its campaign of distortion, the Polish state presents antisemitism and antipolonism, a concept invented by Polish nationalists, as two equally dangerous ideologies. In response, the state has established its own memory institutions devoted to regulating national consciousness regarding Holocaust narratives. In addition, they amplify the actions of righteous Poles who tried to save Jews despite the fact that they were a tiny minority who were deeply afraid of their Polish neighbors.

By filling the countryside with monuments to Polish glory, the state and its memory institutions distort Holocaust history. In the past three years, in the region of Treblinka alone, the Pilecki Institute has built ten monuments dedicated to courageous Poles who aided Jews. One monument erected at the Treblinka train station celebrates a Polish man shot by Germans for offering water to Jews on trains headed to the extermination camp. The monument, however, obscures the many Jewish and Polish testimonies documenting Jewish exploitation, including charging exorbitant sums for water but often taking Jewish belongings without offering water. At the site of the Płaszów concentration camp, a monument erected 76 years ago, commemorates officers of the Polish Blue Police executed by Germans. The Blue Police were deeply complicit in murdering Jews, yet this monument continues to stand where 12,000 Jews perished. In Warsaw, a ‘sanitary cordon of Polish memory,’ celebrates Irene Sendler and Jan Karski, brave Poles whose actions deserve recognition. Yet, these markers to Polish martyrdom and righteousness sit atop spaces of Jewish suffering and death – spaces where Jewish memory should continue to breathe but is unable to do so.

Polish memory institutions control commemoration at sites of Jewish mass murder like Treblinka and Auschwitz. For example, activities in remembrance of Jewish victims from the ghettos around Treblinka, all liquidated on 22 September 1942, were held in the postwar period; yet, on this date in 2019, the Pilecki Institute unveiled a monument dedicated to Polish rescuers – taking over a formerly Jewish commemoration and reinscribing it with a Polish narrative. Equally egregious is the Polish government’s decision to establish June 14 as the National Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the German Nazi Concentration Camps and Death Camps. On

this day in 1940, the first transport arrived at Auschwitz – and it was a transport of Polish inmates. This decision aligns with the efforts of memory institutions to blend Polish and Jewish suffering by making the extermination sites (Jewish) and the concentrationary sites (Polish) of camp complexes indistinguishable in commemorative narratives.

There exists a continuity in Holocaust distortion in Poland – the refusal to acknowledge history is part of a pattern that has flourished since 1945. Memory institutions have all the resources of the state at their disposal in the manipulation of Holocaust narratives. The real history of the Holocaust is counterproductive to Polish authorities and so they have created a useable past in which the Holocaust is decontextualized and manipulated into a narrative of Polish victimhood and heroism that erases Jewish suffering.

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