

Israel widely condemns Poland's new 'Holocaust law'

JERUSALEM — The diplomatic backlash had been immediate.

Polish President Andrzej Duda on Tuesday signed into a law a controversial Holocaust bill that criminalizes ascribing blame for crimes committed by Nazi Germany to the Polish nation, including use of the term "Polish death camp."

Penalties range from a fine to up to three years in jail. While Duda also asked the legislation be sent to the country's constitutional court for further clarification, critics in Israel view the check as a step too little.

"I don't think that the Polish are trying to clear themselves of their responsibilities, but they don't want people to stick the blame of the camps on them, because it happened on their land," said 90-year-old Stella Testa, a Holocaust survivor. "It's a dilemma. There is no one who is not guilty, everyone is guilty."

Testa was born in Macedonia and had to flee the Nazis, hiding with the partisans in Eastern Europe. Her future husband survived Auschwitz.

"Fear is responsible for many things," she said. "Some gave information on their neighbors away. But there were also Polish people who were with the partisans and fought the Nazis. It is difficult to generalize, it's individual guilt. My neighbor, for example — as soon as the Nazis arrived, he had a flag with a swastika in his hand."

The Polish senate's decision last week to pass the bill sparked a diplomatic dispute with Israel. Condemnations came swiftly from across the political spectrum. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the law "baseless."

"I strongly oppose it," he said in a statement. "One cannot change history and Holocaust cannot be denied."

However, the Israeli government itself stopped short of taking any immediate steps, like recalling its ambassador to Warsaw, as some cabinet members had suggested.

The diplomatic backlash was followed by a heated debate on social media, raising questions about anti-Semitism and responsibility for the crimes committed during the Holocaust.

"I feel it is really insulting and politically overcharged," said Norm Muskal, the son of a Holocaust survivor, while visiting a busy market area in Jerusalem. "It's upsetting. It feels like a provocation," said another passerby, former member of the Knesset Charlie Biton.

Poland was home to more than 3 million Jewish people before the Second World War. In 1939, Nazi Germany attacked and occupied Poland, building multiple concentration camps there, including the Auschwitz and Treblinka death camps. The pre-war Polish government fled into exile and opposed the Nazis.

Arye Carmon, chairman of the board at the Ghetto Fighters House in northern Israel, a small museum whose founders included the last survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, told DW via telephone he felt "appalled and angry and the first thing that came to my mind is how my country should react."

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"Israel should think more about a long-term mission," he said. "It should start to prepare for days to come, how to educate and perpetuate the lessons of the Holocaust, not just in Israel, but worldwide."

David Silberklang, senior historian at the International Institute for Holocaust Research and editor-in-chief of *Yad Vashem Studies* said that most scholars and researchers support the idea not to use the term "Polish death camps." But he warned the legislation is aimed at promoting a specific narrative of Polish history during the Holocaust — something he called "very problematic."

"The main point of the law is the public discourse," Silberklang explained. "It is trying to prevent education, investigative journalism, interviews, radio discussions about parts of the Polish nation, parts of the Polish people who did terrible things. Certainly it was not the whole Polish nation by any means, but there were people who did terrible things and all that needs to be discussed."

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