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Mnemonic Populism: The Polish Holocaust Law and its Afterlife

Published: 04.05.2020

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Journal	European Review
Short title of the journal	European Review
Number/Volume	(online first)
Page references	(online first)

ISSN: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798720000502>

Cultural Studies, History

English

In early 2018, the Polish parliament adopted controversial legislation criminalising assertions regarding the complicity of the 'Polish Nation' and the 'Polish State' in the Holocaust. The so-called Polish Holocaust Law provoked not only a heated debate in Poland, but also serious international tensions. As a result, it was amended only five months after its adoption. The reason why it is worth taking a closer look at the socio-cultural foundations and political functions of the short-lived legislation is twofold. Empirically, the short history of the Law reveals a great deal about the long-term role of Jews in the Polish collective memory as an unmatched Significant Other. Conceptually, the short life of the Law, along with its afterlife, helps capture poll-driven, manifestly moralistic and anti-pluralist imaginings of the past, which I refer to as 'mnemonic populism'. By exploring the relationship between popular and political images of the past in contemporary Poland, this article argues for joining memory and populism studies in order to better understand what can happen to history in illiberal surroundings.