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The FBI director got it wrong on the Holocaust



FBI Director James Comey (Cliff Owen/Associated Press)

by Anne Applebaum

The [Polish ambassador to Washington](#) has protested, the [Polish president has protested](#), the speaker of the Polish parliament (to whom I am married) [has protested](#) — and the [U.S. ambassador to Warsaw has apologized profusely](#). Why? Because James Comey, the director of the FBI, in a [speech that was reprinted in The Post](#) arguing for more Holocaust education, demonstrated just how badly he needs it himself.

In two poorly worded sentences, he sounded to Polish readers as if he were repeating the World War II myth that most drives them crazy: Namely, that somehow, those who lived in occupied Eastern Europe shared full responsibility for a German policy. Comey put it like this:

“In their minds, the murderers and accomplices of Germany, and Poland, and Hungary, and so many, many other places didn’t do something evil. They convinced themselves it was the right thing to do, the thing they had to do.”

There are a number of problems with that pair of weak sentences, starting with the vast difference between Germany and the rest. During the war, Germany had a state policy of exterminating the Jews. This policy involved not “accomplices” but hundreds of bureaucrats, tens of thousands of soldiers, train schedules and plans. Germany also encouraged the creation of collaborationist governments in other countries – Vichy France, for example – some of which used their own police officers to send their Jewish citizens into the German death camps.

Germany also occupied Poland, but there was no Polish “Vichy.” During the war, there was no Polish state at all. Indeed, it was the absence of the Polish state that enabled the Germans to create a lawless, violent world, one in which anyone could be arbitrarily murdered, any Jew could be deported — and any Pole who helped a Jew could be shot instantly, along with his entire family. Many were. Millions of others died too – Polish intellectuals, priests and politicians were all Nazi targets.

In the course of the war, most of Poland’s infrastructure, industry and architecture were destroyed. In that atmosphere, many people were frightened by or indifferent to the fate of the Jews, and some murdered in order to avoid being murdered. But that doesn’t mean that “in their minds” they “didn’t do something evil.”

Although the circumstances were different, Germany's leading role is equally clear in Hungary. The wartime government of Adm. Miklós Horthy did pass anti-Semitic legislation and did align itself with the Nazis. But the mass murder and deportation of the Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz began only in March 1944, when that government dissolved and was replaced with a straightforward German occupation. Once the Hungarian state had been dissolved, in other words, Hungary also became a lawless, violent zone where anything was possible.

So no, it is not true, as Comey made it sound, that “murderers and accomplices” in Germany, Poland and Hungary and lots of other places were somehow responsible for the Holocaust. And no, it isn't true that the Holocaust is a story of so many otherwise “good” people who “convinced themselves it was the right thing to do.”

On the contrary, it's a story about the power of fear, the danger of lawlessness and the horror that was made possible by a specific form of German state terror in the years between 1939 and 1945 – a terror that convinced many people to do things that they knew were terribly, terribly wrong. If the FBI director wants to take some lessons from Washington's excellent Holocaust museum, that's very admirable. But first he should make sure he's understood what he's seen.



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