

Prisoners in the Warsaw concentration camp. Credit: Opracowanie Zbiorowe

The Fake Nazi Death Camp: Wikipedia's Longest Hoax, Exposed

For over 15 years, false claims that thousands of Poles were gassed to death in Warsaw were presented as fact. Haaretz reveals they are just the tip of an iceberg of a widespread Holocaust distortion operation by Polish nationalists

By **Omer Benjakob** | Oct 04, 2019

 [Send me email alerts](#)

10427

Tweet



5



Zen

[Subscribe](#)

“The first gassing there took place on October 17, 1943, killing at least 150 Poles caught in a street roundup and about 20 Belgian Jews Bodies were either cremated in crematoriums or open-air pyres (including at a former sports stadium) or simply buried under collapsed buildings during the systematic demolition of the former ghetto [Some estimates] place the number of the camp’s victims well above 212,000, mainly Poles and several thousand of non-Polish.”

This [dry description](#) of the systematic murder of ethnic Poles by Nazi forces during World War II was taken from the English-

language Wikipedia article for the “[Warsaw concentration camp](#),” also known as Konzentrationslager Warschau. The site where the camp stood is an object of pilgrimage for some in Poland, who hold periodic ceremonies on what they believe is hallowed ground. They come to honor the memory of thousands of Poles murdered in a gas chamber located near the Warsaw West (Warszawa Zachodnia) train station – which still exists – and have even erected monuments and plaques in their memory.

Want to read more articles?

Email*

Sign up

☐ I'd like to receive emails on offers, appeals and commercial info

The clip is unavailable

Haaretz Weekly Ep. 43 Credit: Haaretz

There’s just one problem: No such death camp ever existed. There is no historical evidence of German gas chambers ever existing in Warsaw, and nowhere near 200,000 people died in the cluster of Nazi internment centers that did stand at the basis of the myth of KL Warschau.

“It’s fake history,” says Prof. [Havi Dreifuss](#), a Tel Aviv University historian and Yad Vashem’s [expert on Poland and the Holocaust](#), when asked about gas chambers in Warsaw. Other Holocaust historians share her unequivocal position: “It’s a conspiracy theory,” says Prof. [Jan Grabowski](#), a Polish-Canadian historian from the University of Ottawa, when asked about the legend behind the death toll. Yet both claims appeared, almost without interruption, for 15 years on the English-language version of Wikipedia in what is said to be Wikipedia’s longest-standing hoax.

>> **Read more: Is the Polish government holding a Jewish museum hostage for being 'disobedient'?**

Related Articles

- **'Orgy of murder': The Poles who 'hunted' Jews and turned them over to the Nazis**
 - **The Jewish journalist who refuses to let Poland whitewash a dark past**
 - **Why are Israel's top Holocaust scholars so willing to deny this genocide?**
-

Since the Wikipedia article on the “Warsaw concentration camp” was [opened in August 2004](#), and until it was completely rewritten this [past August](#), it falsely claimed that there was an extermination camp in the Polish capital. The article was translated into a dozen languages, and false bits of information from it permeated other Wikipedia entries on related subjects, gaining over half a million views in English alone. For example, bogus details on alleged prisoner numbers and the death toll found their way to central articles on the Holocaust on Wikipedia. These include “[Nazi crimes against the Polish nation](#)” and even the entry “[Extermination camp](#),” where KL Warschau was listed alongside camps like Auschwitz and Majdanek for over 12 years.

The nature of this falsehood – the fact that it’s a well-known conspiracy theory that was deliberately pushed out – alongside the scope of its impact on other articles and their longevity within Wikipedia are what turn the extermination camp at KL Warschau into the longest-running hoax ever uncovered on the online encyclopedia. The [first version](#) of “Warsaw concentration camp” said the site was home to “death camps” where Warsaw’s Gentile population was “exterminated,” and before the article was [partially rewritten](#) this past May, it [was called](#) an “extermination camp” in the opening lines.

The person who first discovered the scale of the distortion – and [is now arguing to have it recognized as Wikipedia’s longest hoax](#) – is an Israeli editor dubbed [Icewhiz](#), who refuses to be identified by his real name but agreed to speak with Haaretz. Icewhiz has already rewritten the English-language article for KL Warschau to reflect

the accepted historical truth, but his attempt to cleanse other Wikipedia articles that incorporate material from it reveal that the principal entry is only the tip of an iceberg. An examination of his claims by Haaretz reveals the existence of what seems to be a systematic effort by Polish nationalists to whitewash hundreds of Wikipedia articles relating to Poland and the Holocaust.



A Polish memorial ceremony for the “German extermination camp for Poles.”

Credit: Screenshot from the YouTube channel Ewinia1

This attempt to revise the accepted history of the Shoah on the internet encyclopedia parrots the [revised historical narrative](#) currently being trumpeted by the Polish government. In this narrative, the Poles in general – not just the country’s Jewish population – were the main victims of the Nazi occupation. This line attempts to shift the light away from a growing body of research into cases of Polish cooperation and collaboration with the Nazis in the persecution of Jews. The effort to rewrite Polish history on Wikipedia joins Holocaust distortion efforts by Polish think tanks – picked up and echoed by nationalist media outlets – that try to increase the estimate of the number of Poles who perished during the so-called Polocaust, a term that has gained popularity in recent years and is used to describe the mass murder of non-Jewish Poles at the hands of the Nazis. Many times, this also includes minimizing the number of Jews who died during the Holocaust. And while this new Polish narrative has failed to make headway in academia or the world media, on Wikipedia it has thrived.

How to fake a death camp

One of Wikipedia's three core principles is "[verifiability](#)." It requires that every factual claim be attributed to a reputable source that can be verified independently. While the print encyclopedias of yesteryear derived their authority from the expertise of their authors, Wikipedia works thanks to a large community of dedicated, volunteer fact checkers. The more eyes – that is, the more diverse the community of editors – the better the quality of the online encyclopedia. That's why many of the local versions, especially those tied to languages spoken only in one country (like Hebrew or Polish) have a smaller pool of editors and therefore tend to reflect local national biases. However, thanks to the existence of a large community of editors dedicated to maintaining English Wikipedia's core policies, the site in recent years has emerged as "[the last bastion](#)" of truth online, the so-called [good cop of the internet](#). So how is it possible that a fake death camp managed to infiltrate even the English encyclopedia, famous for [weeding out conspiracy theories](#)?

One explanation is that though there was no death camp in Warsaw called KL Warschau, there was certainly a concentration camp with that name. The false facts that comprise the death camp hoax – the existence of gas chambers and the 200,000 death toll – managed to survive in Wikipedia because they were inextricably intertwined with real historical facts regarding the Warsaw concentration camp.

'It's fake history,' says Prof. Havi Dreifuss, a Tel Aviv University historian and Yad Vashem's expert on Poland and the Holocaust, when asked about gas chambers in Warsaw.

There is no dispute that a camp called KL Warschau was set up by the German occupiers and that its existence was tied to the two uprisings that took place in the city during the war – both the Jewish Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 and the Polish Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

“There were a number of smaller concentration and work camps in and around Warsaw,” explains Prof. Grabowski. “KL Warschau was actually a collection of a few places of internment spread out over the city. The most important was the prison inside the ghetto, which played a role in the putting down of the Warsaw uprising.”

Thus, there was nothing suspicious about the fact that a [Polish editor opened an article](#) for the “Warsaw concentration camp.” However, since its initial writing and until it was fixed, earlier this year, the article included false information detailing the existence of an extermination camp in Warsaw.

For example, the first version of the article [claimed](#) that per “various estimates, some 200,000 people were killed there by the Germans during the war.”



The Warsaw tunnel where the purported gas chamber was located.

Credit: Spetsedisa

“This is completely absurd,” explains Prof. Dreifuss, who is the head of Yad Vashem’s Center for Research on the Holocaust in Poland.

“There was indeed a concentration camp in Warsaw established on

the ruins of the ghetto and Jewish prisoners were brought there – mostly from Hungary, Greece and Italy – to help systematically dismantle any remnants of the Jewish ghetto. But that has nothing to do with this baseless story about 200,000 Poles being murdered in gas chambers – a story that is sadly gaining traction today as part of a wider attempt in Poland to distort the history of the Holocaust.”

The manner by which this [myth was preserved](#) by hitching a ride on the Wikipedia article about a real camp reflects the nature of this new bid to rewrite Polish history. Written by [Halibutt](#), the username of the late [Krzysztof Machocki](#), who was a well-known Wikipedia editor as well as also the spokesperson for the Polish branch of Wikimedia, the article also [claimed](#) that “the files of the camp were burnt [and] the railway tunnel in which the prisoners were gassed to death [were] blown up” – which purportedly explains why so little is known about it.

The fact that it was a Polish editor who first wrote the article and included the falsehood, as well as the fact that it included the claim that the evidence that would establish the truth of the camp was destroyed, are part of what Grabowski calls the “competing victimology” of the Polish right.

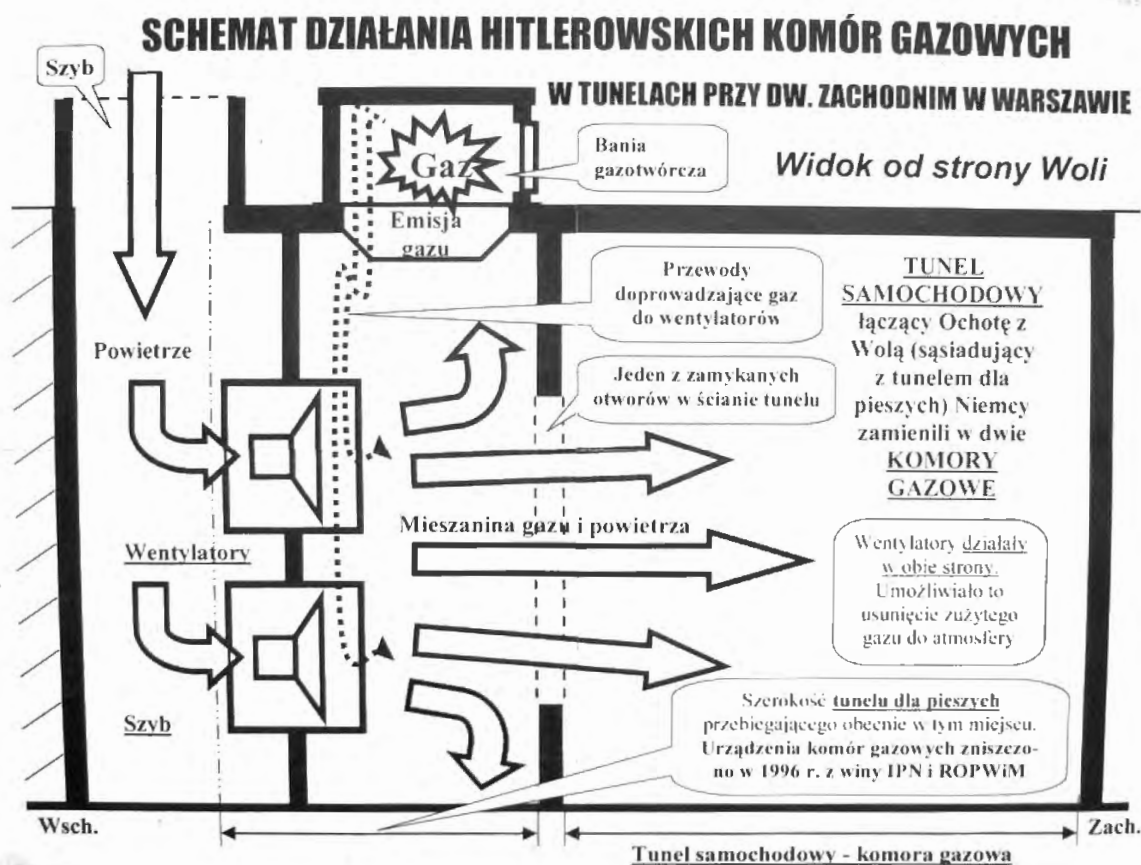
“In the beginning of 1990s, a new narrative was being pushed out by nationalists that there was an extermination camp in Warsaw and that there were gas chambers there. But it was totally, but totally, absurd as a theory.

“What you have are small-time concentration installations which are now getting magnified by right-wing conspiracy theories to include hundreds of thousands of Polish victims – their objective is to increase Polish losses and therefore Polish victimhood,” says Grabowski.

The number 200,000 is significant in the context, both scholars explain. Some 200,000 ethnic Poles were indeed killed during the 1944 Polish uprising. Adding another 200,000 (fictitious) Polish deaths would raise the Polish death toll in the city to 400,000 – almost identical to the number of Jews who were murdered in the ghetto.

“By pulling another 200,000 victims out of thin air,” explains Dreifuss, “they’re trying to equate what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust to what happened to Poles during the Holocaust. In this sense, it is also no coincidence that the manner of death was also by gas,” she says, adding: “But it’s just false.”

There is some debate over the actual death toll at KL Warschau (anywhere between 4,000 and 20,000). However, in Wikipedia, the number 200,000 thrived and in the article for the camp itself it even grew to 212,000. More concerning, this lie fed into other articles: For example, the [entry on “Nazi concentration camps”](#) claimed that “up to 200,000” died in Warsaw, with the original article on the camp serving as its internal reference, showing how disinformation can spread inside Wikipedia.



Aa diagram of the bogus Warsaw "gas chamber." The vents were actually installed in the '70s. Credit: Spetsedisa

According to Icewhiz, simply the number 200,000 should have served as a red flag, for it would have meant that KL Warschau was a bigger death camp than the likes of Sobibor and Majdanek. That

didn't happen, however, and the disinformation only continued to spread with the help of Polish editors.

On the article on “German camps in occupied Poland during World War II,” for example, [false information relating to the camp](#) remained online for almost 13 years. The first time was in 2006, as part of what can only be termed a “[Polish cleansing](#)” of the text. In addition to adding the inflated Warsaw death toll, the editor also deleted a line explaining that, “the primary intention of these camps was the extermination of the Jews.” The revision highlights how the attempt to push out the false narrative regarding KL Warschau goes hand in hand with attempts to minimize the Jewish Holocaust and exaggerate the so-called Polocaust.

Fancy footnote work

By piggybacking on a real camp and inflating a real death toll, those peddling the KL Warschau conspiracy theory managed to pass Wikipedia's first muster. But how did they overcome the Wikipedia community's demand to attribute and source every claim?

Fancy footnote work with shady sources and a very liberal reading of real historical ones created the scaffolding to support the falsehoods on Wikipedia.

While the new Polish narrative has failed to make headway in academia or the world media, on Wikipedia it has thrived.

The centerpiece of the hoax – the one that supported the 200,000 claim – was the supposed existence of gas chambers in Warsaw during the war to systematically kill Poles. An [early version](#) of the Warsaw concentration camp article claimed that, the “SS, Wehrmacht and police rounded up [Gentile] civilians... Many of those caught were first transferred to the KL Warschau complex... Among those grouped in Warsaw, the majority was either shot to death or gassed in a provisional gas chamber situated in a railway tunnel near the Warszawa Zachodnia train station.”

“Ah, yes, the tunnel that is a gas chamber,” laughs Grabowski, “This is of course a joke,” since a 500-meter long tunnel can hardly serve as a sealed gas chamber. However, this joke has a rich history as a Polish conspiracy theory and shows how even debunked research can turn into seemingly legitimate sources by those seeking to sow disinformation.

Christian Davies, The Guardian’s correspondent in Warsaw, published a [brief but riveting history of the myth](#) of the gas chambers at Jozef Bem Street in a recent edition of The London Review of Books. There, he laid out how, riding on the coattails of the populist wind that swept the current government into power in Poland, the story has taken on a life of its own, assuming a key role in the Polocaust narrative and developing a cult-like following among nationalists.



A church memorial plaque commemorates the "200,000 victims." The number is "baseless," Prof. Dreifuss says. Credit: Adrian Grycuk

“The argument was first developed in the 1970s,” Davies wrote, “when [Maria Trzcinska](#), a judge who served on the communist

government's Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland, alleged that ... the road tunnel on Jozef Bem Street that runs under the railway line near Warsaw West station had been converted into a giant gas chamber."

"If it could be proved that the Germans had built a gas chamber for the purpose of exterminating non-Jewish Poles, this would undermine the status of the Holocaust as a crime of unique proportions," Davies went on.

However, it was never proven and in fact, Trzcinska's work was never published by the body that employed her or the one that took its place after the fall of the communist regime: Poland's Institute of National Remembrance, also known as the IPN. Not only that, her findings, which she published independently in 2002, were completely debunked by two historians appointed by the IPN.

The first of the two, Boguslaw Kopka, published a book in 2007 that "completely blew Trzcinska's theory out of the water," noted Grabowski. For example, claims, attributed to eyewitnesses, that canisters of Zyklon B poison gas were found at the site, or that bodies were carried out of the tunnel, were found to be full of holes. No evidence of Zyklon B was ever found at the site. Three years later, Zygmunt Walkowski, a specialist on wartime Warsaw who works with photographic and video evidence, was also appointed by the IPN to look into Trzcinska's claims. Again, he found nothing to support her account. What he did find, instead, was clear proof her claims were baseless: for example, he found that the ventilation shafts that were key to the gas chamber story, were only installed in the 1970s, decades after the war.

However, as Christian Davies wrote, "the more Trzcinska's claims were challenged, the more determined her supporters became. Marches, demonstrations, public meetings and religious ceremonies were held, bogus maps circulated, false testimonies promoted, Wikipedia entries amended" – it is this line that first piqued Icewhiz's interest and led him to look into the episode.

Anatomy of a number

Trzcinska's theory is at the basis of much of the camp's myth on Wikipedia, for example the number 200,000. For many years, the

Wikipedia article for the camp [claimed](#) that “between 1942 and 1944, there were about 400 victim roundups in Warsaw daily, with the detainees first being transferred to KL Warschau.” The number 400 was based on a single uncorroborated eyewitness quoted by Trzcinska, but was used by Holocaust proponents on Wikipedia as part of a speculative calculation: 400 deaths a day times the number of days the camp was in operation, amounts to well over 200,000 dead.

In another case that shows how Trzcinska’s work supplied revisionists with the citations they needed, an editor called [“Poeticbent”](#) [insinuated the 200,000 death toll](#) figure from the Warsaw article to the one about Nazi crimes against the Polish nation. The claim was attributed [to a press release from the IPN](#), which in turn quoted the “Association of the Committee for the Construction of the Monument to the Victims of the KL Warschau Extermination Camp,” a local group that is a proponent of Trzcinska’s book – the same dubious source repackaged as a legitimate reference.

9.03.2019 KL Warschau Obóz zagłady dla Polaków - comiesięcz...



A nighttime memorial held at the site of the Warsaw concentration camp.

Even though the IPN had already debunked her claims, they were [misrepresented on Wikipedia](#) to be said to support her theory that a “considerable amount of Zyklon B was found there.” Through an array of inline references in Polish, and vague attribution to Trzcinska’s book – and with the help of Polish editors, [who](#)

presented her as a bona fide historian – the number spread through the encyclopedia.

These kinds of claims and calculations “allow the Poles to say, ‘not only you Jews were murdered with gas,’” explains Havi Dreifuss. “But the truth is that Jews and Poles were unequal victims. Poles were victims of a horrible ethnic cleansing, but that was not the systematic annihilation that the Jews faced.

“The current attempt to invent slaughters and victims that never took place is a horrible thing that may actually undermine the real history of the vicious persecution Poles suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany. The truth is that there was no systematized mass murder of the Polish population - and that is of course a good thing. The Holocaust is not something one should envy.”

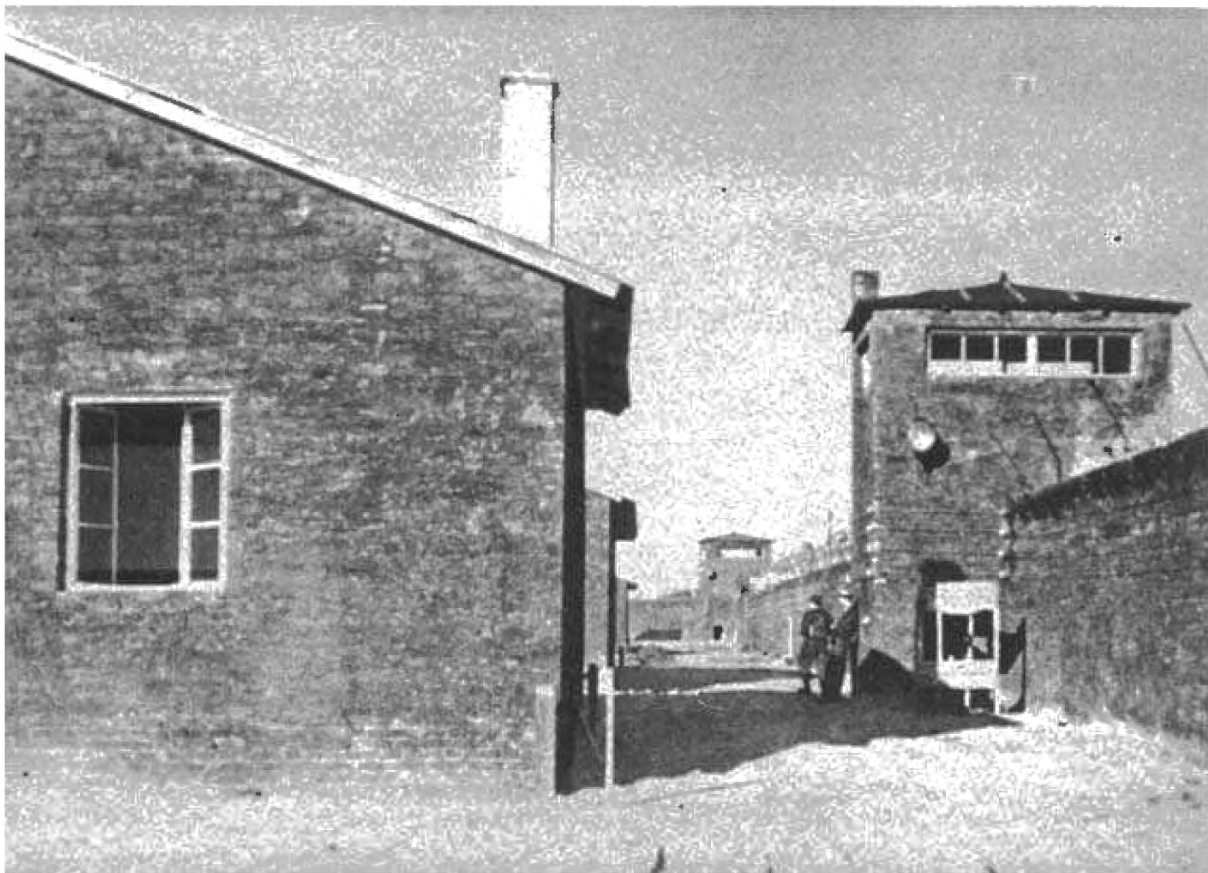
'By pulling another 200,000 victims out of thin air,' explains Dreifuss, 'they're trying to equate what happened to the Jews to what happened to Poles. But it's just false.'

‘Polocaust’

Since the rise of the Polish Law and Justice party’s right-wing government in Poland in 2005, this type of Polocaust revisionism has emerged from the shadows to become the law of the land.

Dreifuss notes as a prime example the so-called Holocaust law from a year and a half ago that banned the attribution of responsibility for Nazi crimes to the Polish people of the nation. It also changed the formal role of the IPN and incorporated in it the obligation to protect the good name of the Polish nation.

“Since the law changed, the IPN’s fundamental role has changed,” says Dreifuss. “Today their official mission statement is to defend Poland’s reputation, and it is in that light that they should be viewed.”



The Warsaw concentration camp. Credit: Pictures in the book "Pamiętni

Other sources claim that #KLWarschau was already in operation prior to the #WarsawGhettoUprising and consisted of six parts located in various boroughs of #Warsaw. Some of them were within the #WarsawGhetto walls. The #IPN estimates that 20,000 people perished in KLWarschau.

pic.twitter.com/RiDBsKr4gx

— Institute of National Remembrance (@ipngovpl_eng) June 11, 2019

Grabowski adds that up until five years ago, he would still have considered organizing a conference together with researchers from the IPN, “but today they are focused on Holocaust distortion – they are very simply the new face of this revisionism.”



Omer Benjakob
Haaretz Contributor



Comments
