

Poland reduces Auschwitz death toll estimate to 1 million

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LONDON—Poland has cut its estimate of the number of people killed by the Nazis in the Auschwitz death camp from 4 million to just over 1 million.

The vast majority of the dead are now accepted to have been Jews, despite claims by the former Polish communist government that as many Poles perished in Hitler's largest concentration camp.

The revised Polish figures sup-

port claims by Israeli researchers that Poland's former communist government exaggerated the number of victims by inflating the estimate of non-Jews who died.

The new study could rekindle the controversy over the scale of Hitler's "final solution."

Shevach Weiss, a death camp survivor and Labor Party member of the Israeli Parliament, expressed disbelief at the revised estimates, saying: "It sounds shocking and strange."

But other Israeli experts said evidence to support the lower estimate

had been mounting for some time.

Auschwitz, 30 miles southwest of Krakow, was established in 1940 as a camp for political prisoners. It was later expanded with a huge extermination complex at nearby Birkenau, which included gas chambers and ovens.

Franciszek Piper, director of the historical committee of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum, said yesterday that, according to recent research, at least 1.3 million people were deported to the camp, of whom about 223,000 survived.

The 1.1 million victims included

960,000 Jews, between 70,000 and 75,000 Poles, nearly all of the 23,000 gypsies sent to the camp and 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war. Mr. Piper stressed that the figures are minimum estimates but said the total number of dead was unlikely to exceed 1.5 million.

Shmuel Krakowsky, head of research at Israel's Yad Vashem memorial for Jewish victims of the Holocaust, said the new Polish figures were correct.

"The 4 million figure was let slip by Capt. Rudolf Hoess, the death camp's Nazi commander. Some have

bought it, but it was exaggerated."

Mr. Krakowsky accused Poland's former communist government of perpetuating the false figure in an attempt to minimize the Holocaust and support claims that Auschwitz was not exclusively a Jewish death camp. He said that at most 300,000 non-Jews perished there.

The latest Polish research is based on studies of prisoners' personal numbers, transport documents and data about Jewish ghettos.

Plaques commemorating the deaths of 4 million victims were re-

moved from the Auschwitz museum earlier this month. But the Polish authorities said accurate estimates of the number killed could only be made by studying German documents seized by the Soviet Union. But Moscow has refused to return the archives.

According to Mr. Krakowsky, 5,860,000 Jews perished in the Holocaust, mostly in Auschwitz and five other Polish death camps. There were extermination camps in other occupied countries, including Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.