

Nazi-inspired jewellery, trinkets wiped from Polish auction site

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Polish anti-racist group convinces auction site to punish sellers and buyers trading goods bearing fascist symbols.

Warsaw, Poland - An alarm clock with the letters SS on the face, a necklace of dozens of little silver swastikas forming a chain, a coffee grinder with the SS symbol and a flask with an engraved swastika are just some of the items that Polish internet users could have found and purchased with a few clicks.

Allegro, the largest e-commerce website in Central and Eastern Europe with more than 20 million users, has long been used by Nazi sympathisers to trade products bearing the symbols of the Third Reich.

But on March 21 - the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination - Allegro teamed up with Poland's anti-racist Never Again association to remove items promoting racism, fascism and the Nazi totalitarian system from the platform.

By the end of June, a team of Never Again volunteers had helped to take down more than 1,000 auctions.

While both Polish law and Allegro's terms of use forbid the promotion of racism, fascism and totalitarian systems, the platform's users for years were virtually free to sell and buy products bearing Nazi symbols.

Never Again had pressured Allegro for a decade to take down the auctions.

"We had not managed to initiate this cooperation for years, but we decided to change that," Paweł Klimiuk, Allegro's spokesperson, told Al Jazeera. "The talks began in the autumn last year and the reason was simple. The media reported on various controversial offers which appeared on our platform and this raised our attention."

Within the framework of the project, Never Again advises Allegro about auctions of items that bear the forbidden symbols, which are then inspected and taken down by the website administrators.

These include not only items which carry Nazi and fascist iconography, but also music and publications promoting fascism, racism and the alleged superiority of the white race.

'The disappearance of basic sensitivity'

The team does not take down historical items with a value for collectors and researchers, such as items produced in the Third Reich.

"The majority of items [taken down] were medals and pins that could be attached to uniforms, but also fictitious honours which did not exist back in the day, such as a medal with an image of Adolf Hitler," said Anna Tatar, a Never Again activist. "There were a lot of contemporarily-produced items stylised to look like historical ones, but having no value for collectors."

Tatar is pleased that several CDs and cassettes with neo-fascist music, including by such bands as Konkwista 88 and Honor - the "stars" of the neo-Nazi scene - have been removed.

"This music is played on festivals, such as Orle Gniazdo (Eagle's Nest) which have been organised in Poland for years now by far-right groups," Tatar said. "Poland has become a place which hosts bands praising Nazi criminals, glorifying the superiority of the white race and singing about pulling out the Hebrew root. This music [carries] ideology and is not only popular but, as we can see, also widely available."

According to Rafał Pankowski, a sociologist from Collegium Civitas and a cofounder of Never Again, racism has risen among the young generation born after the fall of communism - those who grew up in democratic Poland.

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ANNA TATAR, ANTI-RACIST ACTIVIST

"If we want to talk about trends, what we are facing is the disappearance of basic sensitivity, which was something obvious for the generations that lived through World War II and those growing up in the post-war decades," Pankowski told Al Jazeera.

"Back then, fascist symbols constituted a taboo, they were received with an unequivocal condemnation and it would not occur to anyone to produce such products. This social norm has shifted," he added.

According to Pankowski, young people socialise on the internet and therefore distribution channels like Allegro need to be closely monitored.

Taking down auction pages, however, does not solve the problem immediately, as users can re-advertise the product on the platform.

To enforce the new rules, Allegro can temporarily or permanently block users.

"Our cooperation has a preventive and educational aim. Such sales can of course eventually move to another place on the internet or - and this is what we hope for - stop," Klimiuk told Al Jazeera.

Never Again is convinced that users selling such items are ideologically motivated and seek to promote racism and fascism.

In theory, therefore, sellers could be charged under the Polish criminal code. However, the realities of the country's judicial system make it a difficult, if not an impossible, task.

According to lawyer Adam Kuczynski, proving an ideological motivation would require extra effort by police and the prosecutor.

"Everything depends on the prosecutor's approach and how they understand promoting totalitarian

systems,” Kuczynski said. “There was a famous case of a prosecutor in Bialystok, who claimed that the swastika was a Hindu symbol of happiness and did not see anything wrong in painting them on the walls.”

The swastika predates Nazism and carries religious importance for a number of Indian religions, including Hinduism.

Further, users can avoid punishment by claiming that their contemporary products are sold as reconstructions or for collection purposes.

But for those fighting against racism and fascism, the Allegro-Never Again initiative is a positive development.

“We can see that in our society and companies like Allegro there is a growing need to do something about the problem,” said Pankowski. “And we now know that we have to and are able to confront it.”

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