Anti-Semitism, Fascism & the Holocaust

A critical review of Daniel Goldhagen's Hitler's Willing Executioners

By David North
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The following was given as a lecture by David North, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, at Michigan State University in East Lansing.

A little more than a half-century has passed since the collapse of Hitler's Third Reich, and mankind is still struggling to come to grips with its legacy of horror and bestiality. The scenes of mass murder that were exposed in the spring of 1945 with the opening of the Nazi extermination camps are images that will never be erased from human consciousness. But it is not enough that the crimes against humanity that were committed at Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald and Dachau should never be forgotten. It is no less vital that the significance and meaning of those crimes be understood.

Here we encounter a terrible problem: For all that has been said and written about the Holocaust, it remains a strangely obscure event. It is true that a vast amount of empirical data about the Holocaust has been collected. We possess detailed information about how the Nazis organized and executed their "Final Solution," the murder of 6 million European Jews. And yet the issues that are central to an understanding of the Holocaust—its historical origins, political causes and, finally, its place in the history of the twentieth century—have, with very few exceptions, been dealt with poorly. This is, really, an intolerable state of affairs. The one basic question raised by the Holocaust, "Why did it happen?", is precisely that to which it is most difficult to obtain an answer.

This situation is rationalized too often with the argument that the Holocaust is so terrible an event that it simply defies a rational explanation. If, as Adorno said, it was no longer possible to write poetry after Auschwitz, it was presumably also no longer possible to place much confidence in the historian's ability to comprehend the forces that drive the social—or, more precisely, the antisocial—activity of man. Historical science and political theory were seen to be helpless in the presence of such unfathomable evil.

Thus, to those who hold this view, there is nothing of great importance to be gained from a study of the economic foundations, class structure and political struggles of European and German society prior to the advent of the Third Reich. At best, such a scientific-materialist approach will offer nothing more than background information about the incidental social setting in which the forces of human evil, lodged deep in man's soul or psyche, gained ascendancy, as they inevitably must, over the restraining moral influences of civilization.

In the 1950s a novel was written that promoted this gloomy vision of the human condition. Most of you are, I am sure, familiar with William Golding's Lord of the Flies, which argued that barbarism is the natural condition of mankind. Release a group of ordinary school boys from the normal restraints of civilization and they will, within a few weeks at most, revert to a state of homicidal savagery. This misanthropic work flowed from the conclusions drawn by Golding from the experiences of the Second World War. "Anyone who moved through those years," he later wrote, "without understanding that man produces evil as a bee produces honey, must have been blind or wrong in the head."[1]

The popularity of Lord of the Flies reflected the bewilderment and despair provoked by the horrors of World War II. This mood was strengthened by the political relations that arose in the aftermath of the war. It actually became more difficult to engage in an objective discussion of the nature of the Third Reich after 1945 than it had been before. In the reactionary political environment of the Cold War, it was no longer considered appropriate, especially in the United States, to dwell too seriously on the relation between fascism and modern capitalism.

In the 1930s, politically-literate and class-conscious people understood that the rise of European fascism after World War I was a direct response by capitalist society to the revolutionary dangers posed by mass socialist workers movements. The examples of Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany and Franco's Spain had shown all too clearly that fascism was, in essence, the counterrevolutionary political mobilization, in the interests of capitalism, of the enraged middle classes, the petty bourgeoisie, against the socialist labor movement. Where fascism came to power, the working class ceased to exist as an organized political and social force.

In the 1930s, it was not only the relationship between capitalism and fascism that was widely understood. Socialists warned over and over that the world capitalist economic crisis, which had ruined the middle classes and driven it into the arms of fascism, threatened the Jews with physical annihilation.

As Leon Trotsky wrote in 1940: "The period of the wasting away of foreign trade and the decline of domestic trade is at the same time the period of the monstrous intensification of chauvinism and especially of anti-Semitism. In the epoch of its rise, capitalism took the Jewish people out of the ghetto and utilized them as an instrument of its commercial expansion. Today decaying capitalist society is striving to squeeze the Jewish people from all its pores; seventeen million individuals out of the two billion populating the globe, that is, less than 1 percent, can no longer find a place on our planet! Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison."[2]

To the extent that a frank discussion of the real origins, class bases and political objectives of fascism was circumscribed by the prevailing political interests of the US government, an intellectual vacuum was created which encouraged the infiltration of ahistorical and thoroughly unscientific conceptions of fascism, the Third Reich and the Holocaust. This had far-reaching consequences for popular consciousness. Having been torn out of its essential historical and political context, the Holocaust...
was rendered incomprehensible. Public consciousness of the Holocaust was more and more conditioned by exploitative sensationalism, cheap moral platitudes and existential hand-wringing.

If any lesson was to be drawn from the Holocaust, it was that man is capable—if only given half a chance—of unspeakable brutality; and that it is delusory to believe, after the cold-blooded murder of 6 million human beings, in progress and the perfectibility of man. In this way, the Holocaust was used to justify the postwar status quo and deprecate the struggle for a better world.

I do not wish to suggest that no works of scientific value have been produced over the last 50 years. There have been a number of historians who have produced outstanding monographs on different aspects of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. But public consciousness is barely touched by the research of such outstanding historians, whose works are generally followed, especially in the United States, only by specialists in the field.

And, if only to draw attention to the depressed level of modern politico-historical consciousness, permit me to note that it is highly unusual to find in contemporary works of historical scholarship any reference at all to Leon Trotsky's writings on the subject of Nazism between 1930 and 1934, although no other man of his time understood so clearly the immense danger and destructive potential of German fascism.

The works that attract the greatest attention are precisely those which leave unchallenged, or actually reinforce, the basest prejudices and misconceptions. Daniel Goldhagen's immensely successful and thoroughly deplorable Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust falls within this category.

Goldhagen's argument

The principal theme of Goldhagen's book is easily summarized. The cause of the Holocaust is to be found in the mind-set and beliefs of the Germans. A vast national collective, the German people, motivated by a uniquely German anti-Semitic ideology, carried out a Germanic enterprise, the Holocaust. The systematic killing of Jews became a national pastime, in which all Germans who were given the opportunity gladly and enthusiastically participated.

Germans killed Jews because they were consumed, as Germans, by an uncontrollable Germanic anti-Semitism. Hatred of Jews constituted the foundation of the universally accepted Weltanschauung, world view, of the German people.

The politics of the regime was of only secondary importance. Goldhagen insists that terms such as "Nazis" and "SS men" are "inappropriate labels" that should not be used when referring to the murderers. Goldhagen seems to suggest that the only essential causal relationship between the Third Reich and the extermination of the Jews was that it allowed the Germans to act, without restraint, as Germans, in accordance with German beliefs.

As Goldhagen writes: 'The most appropriate, indeed the only appropriate general proper name for the Germans who perpetrated the Holocaust is 'Germans.' They were Germans acting in the name of Germany and its highly popular leader, Adolf Hitler' (page 6).

So as not to distract attention from the flow of Goldhagen's astonishing insights, I will not dwell on the fact that Hitler himself was an Austrian, or that his racial theories were plagiarized from the writings of a nineteenth century French count, Gobineau, or that his political hero, Mussolini, was an Italian, or that his chief ideologist, Alfred Rosenberg, hailed from a Baltic province of czarist Russia, or that Hitler's closest comrade-in-arms, Rudolf Hess, was born in Egypt.

Rather than ponder the implications of such awkward contradictions, let us move quickly to Goldhagen's conclusion: "that antisemitism moved many thousands of 'ordinary' Germans—and would have moved millions more, had they been appropriately positioned—to slaughter Jews. Not economic hardship, not the coercive means of a totalitarian state, not social psychological pressure, not invariable psychological propensities, but ideas about Jews that were pervasive in Germany, and had been for decades, induced ordinary Germans to kill unarmed, defenseless Jewish men, women, and children by the thousands, systematically and without pity" (page 9).

Employing a crude version of Kantian epistemology, Goldhagen argues repeatedly that anti-Semitism was an integral, virtually a priori, component of the cognitive apparatus of the Germans: "the antisemitic creed," he writes, "was essentially unchallenged in Germany" (page 33).

The methodology of Goldhagen

I will examine somewhat later the degree to which Goldhagen's arguments are based on facts. But, first, I would like to make a few observations about his method of thought and analysis.

The most common feature of vulgar thought is its tendency to simplify a complex and multifaceted reality with overly broad, amorphous and one-dimensional definitions. Scientific thought strives to identify and examine in their mutual interaction the diverse and antagonistic elements of which every phenomenon is composed. It attempts to develop concepts that accurately express the complexity, that is, the contradictory nature, of the reality that is being reflected in the mind of the scientist.

Vulgar thinking, on the other hand, resorts to vacuous generalizations that ignore the essential internal contradictions that constitute the structure of the phenomenon it presumes to analyze. Such empty generalizations are known, in philosophy, as abstract identities, that is, identities from which all internal difference is excluded. They are abstract, in the bad sense of the word, because they are inadequate mental representations of reality: The material world simply does not consist of such internally undifferentiated phenomena.

Every "identity" contains difference within itself. Herein lies the basic flaw of vulgar thought: it operates with one-sided concepts of the lowest order, with such abstract identities that are incapable of providing a scientific and truthful representation of reality.

The methodological flaw of Professor Goldhagen's book is indicated in its title: Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust. Let us stop right there: What is meant by "ordinary Germans?" For those of you who would like a textbook example of an "abstract identity," this is it. This is a category that is so broad, it is capable of including virtually everyone, except, presumably, Germans of Jewish parentage. What, after all, makes any particular German an "ordinary" one? Is it a large girth and a fondness for knockwurst and sauerbraten? Is it blond hair, blue eyes and a penchant for sunbathing in the nude? Is it a talent for abstruse philosophizing and a passion for 300-pound Wagnerian sopranos? A concept built upon such foolish and arbitrary stereotypes cannot be of any scientific value in the cognition of objective reality.

But if we should attempt to include in our definition more serious sociological characteristics, the worthlessness of the concept of "ordinariness" becomes immediately apparent. In 1933 German society possessed a complex class structure. Was the "ordinary German" at the time of Hitler's accession to power a factory worker, a ruined shopkeeper, a demoralized member of the lumpenproletariat, a heavily indebted peasant, an East Prussian land-owning Junker or an industrial magnate?

If all these elements of diverse social strata are to be lumped together as "ordinary Germans," it simply means that the concept of "ordinariness" does not reflect the internal antagonisms and conflicts of German society as it existed in 1933. What Goldhagen, therefore, offers his readers is not a scientific examination of German society as it really was constituted in 1933, but rather—and it is unpleasant to say this—an idealized portrait of a homogeneous society that uncritically substantiates the Nazi myth of a unified German Volk, defined by race and blood.

Having chosen this concept of the "ordinary German" as the basis of his
entire analysis, Goldhagen is compelled to exclude from his book anything or anyone that might call into question the validity of this stereotype. His reply to the Nazi specter of der ewige Jude, the eternal Jew, as the relentless enemy of the German people is the specter of der ewige Deutsche, the eternal German, the relentless and unchanging enemy of the Jewish people.

Having posited a nation without any sort of internal differentiation, other than the fixed division between German and Jew, Goldhagen is compelled to posit a nation without any real history. There is virtually no reference to the events and personalities that determined the course of German development in the 100 years that preceded Hitler's accession to power.

In Goldhagen's book, the socialist movement is all but invisible. Not a single reference is to be found, in the course of this 622-page book, to Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Ferdinand Lassalle, August Bebel or Wilhelm Liebknecht. Not a word is to be found about the anti-socialist laws of 1878-90 implemented by the regime of Bismarck. The Social Democratic Party, the first mass party in history, which by 1912 held the largest number of seats in the German Reichstag, is mentioned only in passing. There is no reference to the 1918 revolution or the uprising of the Spartacus League.

These omissions cannot be explained as an oversight. Goldhagen simply cannot deal with the German socialist movement because its historical existence represents a refutation of his entire theory. Yet without an examination of the emergence of the German socialist workers movement, it is impossible to understand the nature and significance of modern anti-Semitism.

The rise of modern political anti-Semitism

Hostility to Jews is certainly not a modern phenomenon, let alone one confined to Germany. But it was only in the last third of the nineteenth century that anti-Semitism emerged as a distinct and powerful political movement, not only in Germany, but in a number of European countries. It is indisputable that the growth of Anti-Semitic political movements was rooted in complex social processes related to the development of modern industrial capitalism.

The most important of these was the emergence of a new and immensely powerful social class, the industrial proletariat. By the 1870s, certainly after the Paris Commune of 1871, the existence of a mass working class, increasingly influenced by socialist ideology, was recognized as a potentially revolutionary threat to capitalist interests.

In response to this danger, the privileged classes—the bourgeoisie and still substantial landowning interests—sought to cultivate a mass base for the defense of the existing social order. Paradoxically, the mass base for the defense of capitalism against the socialist labor movement was to emerge out of the elements of the middle class whose social and economic position was being steadily undermined by the processes of modern industrial development.

In Germany, the onset of a severe depression was announced in 1873 with a spectacular stock market crash that took an especially heavy toll on the savings of middle class investors. Mass sentiment against Bismark's free trade and laissez-faire policies developed fairly rapidly. The unfortunate involvement of a significant number of Jewish speculators in the scandals surrounding the stock market crash provided a focus for the anger of the disoriented middle classes. In this situation, the identification of the Jew with the evils of modern capitalism acquired a new political significance.

To be sure, the susceptibility of the petty-bourgeois masses to such appeals was facilitated by long-standing religious prejudices. But definite objective conditions, created by capitalist development, directed these old prejudices along extremely reactionary lines and endowed them with an extraordinary destructive force.

Anti-Semitic writers such as Otto Glagau, Rudolf Meyer and Wilhelm Marr, who depicted the Jews as the embodiment of capitalist rapacity, acquired a substantial audience among the despairing sections of the German Mittelstand—petty tradesmen, artisans, the unemployed and nervous professionals.

The effort to direct the confused anticapitalist sentiments of the German Mittelstand into anger against the Jews was facilitated by significant improvements in the social position of the German Jews in the course of the nineteenth century. "By the 1870s," writes the historian Robert Wistrich, "the Jews appeared as the bourgeois par excellence in a society that was still not fully embourgeoisé, as innovative modernizers in a nation that was not yet modernized."[3]

According to figures provided by Wistrich, 22 percent of the employees working in banks and on the stock exchanges in 1882 were Jews. At a time when Jews accounted for little more than one percent of the German population, they represented 43.25 percent of the proprietors and directors of banking and credit enterprises. Some of the greatest banks in Germany were controlled by Jews, such as that of Bleichröder in Berlin, Warburg in Hamburg, Oppenheim in Kõln and Rothschild in Frankfurt. In the early 1900s, the renowned economist Werner Sombart noted that 25 percent of the members of the boards of directors in 10 major branches of German industry were Jews.

Another important feature of the success of German Jewry was its prominent position in the skilled professions: by 1882 11.7 percent of all doctors, 8.6 percent of journalists and 7.9 percent of all lawyers were Jews. As these figures indicate, Jewish youth attended colleges in great numbers.

This success provided further grounds for anti-Semitic appeals to the insecurity of the German Mittelstand, which resented Jewish competition.

In an earlier age, anti-Jewish sentiments had focused on the supposed exclusivity of the Jews, whose religion and traditions kept them apart from the general population. The new political anti-Semitism now protested the excessive integration of the Jews into national life; and these protests were buttressed with pseudoscientific racial theories that were the rage of the late nineteenth century. The demagogic calls for a struggle against Jewish capital were combined with hysterical appeals for the defense of the Germanic race against the danger of Semitic domination. Wilhelm Marr declared that "the struggle between 'Semitism' and Germandom was an irreversible 'world-historical fate.'"[4]

Anti-Semitism in Europe

Political anti-Semitism was not confined to Germany. An analogous phenomenon developed in France. Anti-Semitism was seen by its proponents as the most effective means of mobilizing mass support against not only the emerging socialist proletariat, but all elements of liberal democracy as well. On the basis of anti-Semitism, a new national consensus was to be forged, transcending the class divisions that had been created by the process of capitalist industrialization and upon which the appeal of socialism was based. The reactionary theoretician, More, conceived of anti-Semitism as a means of reintegrating the proletariat into the body of the nation. "One must suppress the proletariat," he wrote. "One must give these people something to defend, something to conquer." This national project was to be realized through the anti-Jewish revolution.[5]

The arch-reactionary Charles Maurras declared that an integral national unity could not be achieved without the use of anti-Semitism, which facilitated the suppression of class antagonisms. "Everything seems impossible or terribly difficult without the providential appearance of anti-Semitism. It enables everything to be arranged, smoothed over, and simplified. If one were not an anti-Semite through patriotism, one would become one through a simple sense of opportunity."[6]

This was the ideological background against which the Dreyfus case
explored in France in 1894. The wealthy Jewish army officer falsely accused of espionage on behalf of Germany became the center of vitriolic anti-Semitic agitation. More than 70 towns and cities witnessed anti-Semitic rioting by mobs which screamed, "Death to the Jews!" Synagogues were attacked, Jewish-owned shops were ransacked and Jews were beaten in the streets.

As in Germany, the anti-Semitic movement drew its popular support principally from the middle class, especially among shopkeepers and other segments of small and marginal businesses. No references to the Dreyfus affair or to the anti-Semitic movements in France are to be found in Professor Goldhagen's book.

Anti-Semitism and the Social Democratic Party

A central premise of Hitler's Willing Executioners is that anti-Semitism was universally accepted by all segments of German society. Professor Goldhagen goes so far as to insist that there is no significant or credible documentary evidence that there existed the slightest opposition to anti-Semitism in Germany. That such a statement can be made in a book that purports to be a work of scholarly research is staggering.

The history of the German Social Democracy, in the years when it represented a revolutionary mass movement of the working class—that is, from the 1870s to the outbreak of the First World War I in 1914—is one of unrelenting struggle against anti-Semitism. The exigencies of the political struggle in the working class required an intransigent attitude toward all forms of anti-Semitic propaganda. Aside from democratic principles and moral considerations, the Social Democratic Party saw the association of anti-Semitism with demagogic anticapitalist rhetoric as an attempt to disorient the working class and subordinate it to the political representatives of the middle class.

The formation by Adolf Stoecker of his explicitly anti-Semitic Christian Social Workers Party sought to use Jew-baiting as a means of winning the working class away from the increasingly influential, albeit illegal, Social Democracy. In opposition to Stoecker, the Social Democracy waged a powerful campaign to educate the working class as to the reactionary nature of anti-Semitism. In the official statement of the SPD for the 1881 election, the party stated:

"The scandal of the anti-Semitic disturbances was first made possible after the anti-socialist law; that they did not assume the extent of a general Jew-bait is solely due to the Social Democrats, who warned the working class against this disgraceful activity, springing from the basest motives."

The counteroffensive of the SPD exerted immense political and moral influence over the working class. Anti-Semitic rallies were broken up by workers, and Stoecker was jeered. The opposition of the SPD to anti-Semitism found a powerful symbol in its selection of a Jewish socialist businessman, Paul Singer, as its candidate for the Reichstag in an important Berlin district. In the elections of 1887, Singer received more votes than any other candidate in the city.

"Opposition to anti-Semitism," writes Wistrich, "had become a badge of honor for the workers movement...."

"The fierce campaign undertaken by the German Social Democrats against Adolf Stoecker's Berlin movement did to a large extent immunize the working class against anti-Semitism. It did not eliminate anti-Jewish prejudice in the labor movement but it rendered it politically marginal.... The struggle against Stoecker was a fight for social democracy, an assertion of the democratic rights of the working class itself."[8]

The role played by the SPD in the struggle against anti-Semitism eventually won it broad support from one segment of the German population that had viewed its activities for many years with a marked reserve, the Jewish middle class. Notwithstanding the important role that had been played by a small but significant section of German Jewish intellectuals since the earliest days of the socialist movement, the vast majority of the Jewish middle class and bourgeoisie, for reasons of crass economic self-interest, remained aloof from the Social Democracy. An additional reason for the antagonistic attitude adopted by many Jews toward the SPD was the desire, born perhaps of an inner insecurity, to demonstrate, as ostentatiously as possible, their loyalty to the regime of Kaiser Wilhelm.

By the turn of the century, however, it had become impossible for German Jews to ignore the fact that the Social Democracy was the only party that unequivocally opposed anti-Semitism. Indeed, the SPD was the only party that selected Jews to stand as its candidates for the Reichstag. In the election of 1903, the SPD won for the first time a substantial section of the German Jewish vote.

This is, by the way, another important element of the pre-1933 political history of Germany to which Professor Goldhagen makes no reference.

As a result of the struggle of the SPD, the political influence of the anti-Semitic parties declined precipitously between the mid-1890s and the outbreak of World War I. In the first years of the twentieth century, the most violent outbreaks of anti-Semitism occurred not in Germany, or even in France, but in Russia.

Anti-Semitism in Russia

The bloody pogroms that occurred in Russia were a direct response by the czarist regime to the growing revolutionary movement of the working class. The government sponsored the formation of right-wing paramilitary squads, known as the Black Hundreds, to terrorize the working class.

"As with the Fascist movements of inter-war Europe," writes the historian Orlando Figes, "most of their support came from those embittered lumpen elements who had lost—or were afraid of losing—their petty status in the social hierarchy as a result of modernization and reform: uprooted peasants forced into the towns as casual laborers; small shopkeepers and artisans squeezed by competition from big business; low-ranking officials and policemen ... and pub patriots of all kinds disturbed by the sight of 'upstart' workers, students and Jews challenging the God-given power of the tsar."[9]

The regime of Czar Nicholas II responded to the revolutionary movement of 1905 by unleashing a wave of terror, of which Jews were a principal target. In the two weeks that followed the issuing of the czar's Manifesto of October 1905, which pledged to support the establishment of democratic institutions, 690 pogroms occurred. Three thousand Jews were murdered during this period. A pogrom in Odessa cost the lives of 800 Jews. Five hundred were wounded and more than 100,000 were made homeless. It was soon established that the pogroms had been organized with the direct assistance of the government. The political mechanics of the pogroms were described in a socialist newspaper of the time:

"The old familiar picture! The police organizes the pogrom beforehand. The police instigates it: leaflets are printed in government printing offices calling for a massacre of the Jews. When the pogrom begins, the police is inactive. The troops quietly look on at the exploits of the Black Hundreds. But later this very police go through the farce of prosecution and trial of the pogromists. The investigations and trials of pogromists conducted by the officials always end in the same way: the cases drag on, none of the pogromists are found guilty. Sometimes even the battered and mutilated Jews and intellectuals are dragged before the court, months pass—and the old, but ever new story is forgotten, until the next pogrom."[10]

The author of this article, written in June 1906, was Lenin.

Rather than permit his thesis of the uniqueness of German anti-Semitism to be disturbed by the intrusion of historical facts, Goldhagen simply avoids any reference to the worst outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in Europe prior to the establishment of the Third Reich.

The revival of political anti-Semitism in Germany
It was following World War I, which had ended with the outbreak of revolution in Germany and the collapse of the Hohenzollern monarchy, that the use of anti-Semitism as an instrument of political organization once again became a serious factor. The potency of anti-Semitism, which played a major role in the propaganda of the Nazis, was in direct proportion to the desperation of the petty bourgeoisie and the political disorientation of the working class.

The petty bourgeoisie was traumatized and ruined by the events which followed the defeat of Germany in the war. The Weimar Republic, founded on the basis of a strangled revolution, staggered from crisis to crisis.

"The postwar chaos," wrote Trotsky, "hit the artisans, the peddlers, and the civil employees no less cruelly than the workers.... In the atmosphere brought to white heat by war, defeat, reparations, inflation, occupation of the Ruhr, crisis, need, and despair, the petty bourgeoisie rose up against all the old parties that had bamboozled it. The sharp grievances of small proprietors never out of bankruptcy, of their university sons without posts and clients, of their daughters without dowries and suitors, demanded order and an iron hand."[11]

The desperation, anxieties and traumas of this milieu, forever fearful of being driven down into the ranks of the proletariat, were articulated by Hitler. Himself a product of the lower middle class, he spent his formative years in Vienna, where his world view was shaped by the cheap right-wing gutter press and where he acquired his life-long hatred of the working class and socialism. Hitler's anti-Semitism was, according to the perceptive antifascist German writer Konrad Heiden, a by-product of his all-consuming hatred of the proletariat.

Hitler, Heiden explained, "hated the whole great sphere of human existence which is devoted to the regular transference of energy into product; and he hated the men who had let themselves be caught and crushed in the process of production. All his life the workers were for him a picture of horror, a dismal gruesome mass ... everything which he later said from the speaker's platform to flatter the manual worker was pure lies."

Herein lies the key to an understanding of Hitler's demonic obsession with the Jews. In Mein Kampf, Hitler explained how his conversion to anti-Semitism flowed from his encounters with the labor movement. It was among the workers that Hitler first came into contact with Jews. He then discovered, to his amazement, that many Jews played prominent roles in the labor movement. "The great light dawned upon him," wrote Heiden. "Suddenly the 'Jewish question' became clear.... The labor movement did not repel him because it was led by Jews; the Jews repelled him because they led the labor movement."

One thing is certain, Heiden concluded. "It was not Rothschild, the capitalist, but Karl Marx, the socialist, who kindled Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism."

Professor Goldhagen could have profited intellectually from a careful study of Heiden's biography of Hitler. But, he might then have written quite a different work, which would probably not have yielded such handsome monetary profits as Hitler's Willing Executioners. In life we all make our choices.

The crisis of the German labor movement

Anti-Semitism was, without question, a potent force in post-World War I Germany. And yet, notwithstanding the claims of Goldhagen, hatred of Jews could not, of itself, have provided the political base necessary for Hitler's rise to power. The Nazis did not come to power by riding an irresistible wave of anti-Semitism. Careful studies of the social bases of the Nazi party have established that the appeal of anti-Semitism remained limited prior to 1933. Indeed, the Nazis discovered that anti-Semitism actually limited their appeal in certain areas of Germany, and local leaders were instructed to restrain their anti-Jewish vitriol, and even, at times, to excise from their speeches all anti-Semitic references.

At any rate, measuring the quantity of anti-Semitism that existed in Germany in 1933 will not explain the victory of the Nazis. However disgusting the prevalence of anti-Semitism, it was only one factor—and by no means the most important—in the political life of Germany. A political regime, whether of the right or the left, is not merely the product of the sum total of all the prejudices and hatreds of the population. It is, in the final analysis, the expression of a certain relationship, forged in the course of social and political struggles, between the main classes in society. In the outcome of those struggles the character of the political leadership of the contending classes, and the program upon which they base their struggle, are of immense significance.

If it were possible to quantify the precise amount of anti-Semitism in any given country, such a measurement would in all likelihood establish that this poison was no less abundant in the Russia of 1917 than it was in the Germany of 1933. And yet, the political decisiveness and clarity of the Bolsheviks played a crucial role in enabling the working class to establish its political authority over substantial sections of the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie, that very segment of society which was not known for its sympathy toward Jews.

The political struggles of 1917 in Russia concluded not with the victory of the fascists, but with the victory of the socialists.

The victory of fascism was not the direct and inevitable product of anti-Semitism, but the outcome of a political process shaped by the class struggle. In that process, the critical factor was the crisis of the German socialist movement, which was, it must be pointed out, part of a broader political crisis of international socialism.

Hitler's rise was not irresistible and his victory was not inevitable. The Nazis were able to come to power only after the mass socialist and communist parties had shown themselves, in the course of the entire postwar period, to be politically bankrupt and utterly incapable of providing the distraught masses with a way out of the disaster created by capitalism.

Only a brief review of the crisis of the German workers movement is possible in the framework of this lecture.

In August 1914, upon the outbreak of the Great War, the Social Democracy had abandoned its revolutionary principles and voted in support of war credits for the German government. This betrayal, the product of years of opportunist degeneration, marked the end of the SPD as a revolutionary party. From that point on, the Social Democracy functioned ever more openly as a pillar of bourgeois rule. The passage of the SPD into the camp of the bourgeoisie was confirmed by the events of 1918-19.

The Social Democratic government that was brought to power by the revolution of November 1918 devoted itself entirely to the political and physical disarming of the working class and the preservation of capitalist rule. In January 1919 it organized the suppression of the Spartacus uprising and sanctioned the murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.

The victory of the Bolshevik Revolution provided the political inspiration for the founding of the Communist Party, the KPD. But from the beginning the party was plagued with an unending crisis of political leadership. In a sense, it never recovered from the loss of Rosa Luxemburg. There was no leader of comparable experience and skill available to take her place. The development of revolutionary political leadership, as the experience of the Bolshevik Party had demonstrated, is a protracted and difficult process that requires years, not months.

Thus, the KPD was utterly unprepared for the revolutionary crisis that unfolded in 1923, in the aftermath of the French Occupation of the Ruhr. The eruption of hyperinflation ruined the middle classes, undermined the authority of the reformist Social Democracy and led to a powerful upsurge of support for the KPD.

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All the conditions for a social revolution were present in Germany except one—a politically mature and decisive leadership. As the crisis came to a head in October 1923, an attempt by the KPD to organize the overthrow of the Weimar government was widely anticipated. Indeed, plans for an insurrection were formulated, only to be called off at the last minute by the nervous and indecisive leadership of the KPD. In Hamburg, where the Communist workers had not been informed of the change of plans, the insurrection was started. But this isolated action was easily suppressed. The bourgeois government, which only days before had been convinced that its overthrow was all but inevitable, recovered its nerve. The crisis passed, and bourgeois rule was stabilized.

In the years that followed, the political life of the KPD was shaped by the growing influence of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and the suppression of the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky. The victory of Stalinism in the Soviet Union was to have tragic consequences for the German Communist Party and the working class.

The brief period of stability and prosperity that had followed the defeat of the working class in 1923 came to an end with the Wall Street Crash in October 1929 and the beginning of the world Depression. German industry collapsed, millions lost their jobs and the middle class was ruined. These were the conditions which enabled the Nazi party very rapidly to acquire mass support.

But both the SPD and the KPD, that is, the political organizations of the working class, remained gigantic factors in German politics. These two parties commanded the loyalty of millions of workers. Confronting the danger of fascist counterrevolution, the urgent strategic task of the workers movement was to unify its forces in a common struggle against the Nazis.

But the Social Democratic leaders, committed to the defense of the bourgeois Weimar regime, opposed all political collaboration with the KPD, even for the purpose of organizing a united defense against the attacks of the Brown Shirts.

Notwithstanding the obstructionist position of the Social Democracy, the task of the KPD was to call upon the SPD leaders to accept, regardless of political differences, the need for united action by both parties against the Nazi danger.

However, the KPD, following the instructions of Stalin, pursued a political line that played into the hands of the Social Democrats and the fascists. In 1928, one year after the expulsion of Trotsky and the Left Opposition from the Communist Party and Communist International, the Stalinists suddenly announced the beginning of the so-called Third Period of decisive revolutionary battles. This policy was largely introduced to complement and justify collectivization in the USSR. In its practical implementation, the Third Period consisted of denouncing the Social Democracy as nothing more than an appendage of fascism. Thus, in Germany, the Stalinists insisted that a united front with Social Democracy was impermissible, for the latter was merely the left wing of fascism. The Social Democrats were dubbed "Social fascists."

The consequence of this criminally irresponsible, almost insane, policy is that it all but excluded the possibility of a unified struggle by the massive socialist workers movement against fascism.

In his very brief review of the political events that preceded Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933, Goldhagen points out that the Nazis received almost 14 million votes in the election of July 1932, 37.4 percent of the voters. The number is placed in italics, in order to emphasize the overwhelming character of pro-Nazi sentiment.

Goldhagen does not give the vote for the Social Democratic and Communist Party. In fact, the SPD received 7.95 million (21.6 percent) and the KPD received 5.2 million (14.6 percent). That is, the combined vote of the two socialist parties in Germany was nearly 13.2 million, or 36.2 percent. In other words, the political life of Germany was polarized between socialist revolution and fascist counterrevolution.

The next election in November 1932, which Goldhagen does not mention, saw the vote of the Nazis fall dramatically by 2 million. Their total vote was 11.73 million (33.1 percent). The SPD vote fell to 7.24 million (20.4 percent), while that of the KPD rose to 5.98 million (16.9 percent). The combined vote of the two socialist parties was now a half million more than that of the fascists. In percentage terms, the combined SPD-KPD vote was 37.3 percent.

This election was an unmitigated political disaster for the Nazis. It clearly demonstrated that their high tide had passed, and that Hitler's political tactics—an erratic combination of ultimatums and vacillation—had cost the Nazis dearly.

"The November election dealt a staggering blow to Hitler and his party," states the noted American historian Henry Ashby Turner in a recent study of the last stage of the Nazi rise to power. "After an unbroken succession of dramatic gains over the previous three years, the Nazi juggernaut faltered. Many voters who had cast their ballots for the Nazis in July in the expectation that they would soon come to power and provide quick, decisive remedies to Germany's plight, defected in frustration at the failure of Hitler's bid for the chancellorship."[12]

In purely electoral terms, even on the eve of Hitler's appointment as chancellor, the socialist workers movement represented a larger force than the fascists. As a social force, occupying decisive positions within industry, the socialist workers movement was, in its potential, infinitely more powerful. As Trotsky wrote in 1931, "On the scales of election statistics, one thousand Fascist votes weigh as much as a thousand Communist votes. But on the scales of the revolutionary struggle, a thousand workers in one big factory represent a force a hundred times greater than a thousand petty officials, clerks, their wives and their mothers-in-law. The great bulk of the Fascists consists of human dust."[13]

And yet, the working class was politically immobilized by the irresponsible and defeatist policies of its leadership. The Social Democracy clung to the rotting corpse of the Weimar Republic, reassuring itself that the democratic constitution would provide protection for the working class even if Hitler came to power. The KPD refused to alter its disastrous tactics, hiding its growing demoralization behind a mask of demagogic bombast.

The end game was played out in January 1933. Finally convinced that the two workers parties were too paralyzed to offer serious resistance, the German bourgeoisie invited Hitler to take power through constitutional means. Without a single shot being fired, Hitler became chancellor on January 30, 1933.

The working class suffered the greatest defeat in its history, and this defeat cleared the way for the catastrophe that followed.

A peaceful revolution?

Toward the end of his book, Goldhagen writes, "The Nazi German revolution ... was an unusual revolution in that, domestically, it was being realized—the repression of the political left in the first few years notwithstanding—without massive coercion and violence.... By and large, it was a peaceful revolution willingly acquiesced to by the German people. Domestically, the Nazi German revolution was, on the whole, consensual" (p. 456).

Until I read those words, I had been inclined to look upon Goldhagen as a rather sad and somewhat pathetic figure, a young man whose study of the fate of European Jewry had left him intellectually, if not emotionally, traumatized. But in this paragraph something very ugly emerges. Except for its treatment of the Jews, the Nazi "revolution"—Goldhagen does not use the word "counterrevolution"—was a rather benign affair. His reference to the "repression of the political left" is inserted between hyphens, suggesting that it was not all too big a deal.

The claim that the Nazi conquest of power was "a peaceful revolution
willingly acquiesced to by the German people” is a despicable falsification. What Goldhagen refers to as the “repression of the political left” consisted, in fact, of the physical destruction of mass socialist parties that represented the hopes and aspirations of millions of workers and the best elements of the German intelligentsia for a just and decent world. German socialism was not only a political movement: it was, for all its internal contradictions, both the inspirer and expression of an extraordinary flowering of human intellect and culture. Its destruction required the barbaric methods in which the Nazis excelled.

The burning of books, the flight of scientists, artists and writers from Germany, the establishment of Dachau concentration camp and the incarceration of thousands of left-wing political opponents, the illegalization of all political parties other than the National Socialists, the liquidation of the trade unions—these were, in the first months of the Nazi regime, the principal achievements of its “peaceful revolution.”

Despite the terror unleashed by the Nazis, there was persistent and considerable opposition.

"A sizeable minority of Social Democrats and Communists," writes the historian F.L. Carsten, "were not willing to knuckle under and to accept passively whatever the new regime might order them to do. The widespread terror accompanying the 'seizure of power' and the mass arrests of the early months told them enough. Large numbers responded by forming underground groups, producing and distributing underground leaflets and papers and disturbing Nazi propaganda as best they could. In 1933 and 1934 hundreds of clandestine groups sprang up all over Germany—and quite often they were equally quickly liquidated by the Gestapo.... It has been reliably estimated that the KPD between 1933 and 1935 lost 75,000 members through imprisonment and that several thousands of them were killed. That means that about a quarter of the members registered in 1932 were lost."[14]

The Nazi terror intimidated and cowed millions of Germans. Large sections of the working class, dejected and demoralized by the shameful collapse of its organizations, retreated into apathy. Yet, even in the face of the merciless brutality of the Nazis, there was significant active opposition to the regime among workers.

"Even if the majority of the workers had made their peace with the Nazi regime," Carsten explains, "it also remains true that of those who were imprisoned for political reasons the large majority belonged to the working class. Of 21,823 Germans imprisoned at the Steinwache in Dortmund for political offenses, the overwhelming majority were workers. Of 629 people from Solingen who were involved in political opposition, over 70 percent were workers and presumably many of the 49 housewives listed also belonged to the working class. In Oberhausen in the Ruhr the number was close to 90 percent. For less industrialized areas the figure would no doubt be lower, but the German working class certainly provided the bulk of those who suffered for their political convictions. In the years 1933 to 1944, 2,162 people were arrested in Essen for leftwing political activity and 1,721 in Duesseldorf, among them 297 women. In the penitentiary of Brandenburg 1,807 people were executed for political reasons during the war and 775 of them were workers or artisans. It was a proud record. They could not overthrow the regime, but that was an impossible task. When it was attempted in 1944 by military and conservative circles they failed equally. It was only after a lost war that the regime finally succumbed and even in its downfall it engulfed many of its opponents. For the dictatorship the disjointed opposition was only an irritant but—like other minorities—it was persecuted without mercy."[15]

Facts such as these are not mentioned in Hitler's Willing Executioners. Goldhagen gives the impression of not being particularly concerned with the impact of fascism on anyone other than the Jews. This callousness is derived from his narrow and embittered outlook: conceiving of the Holocaust as a crime committed by "ordinary" Germans against Jews, he is not especially interested in what Germans may have done to each other. At any rate, his thesis does not permit him to recognize the existence of any substantial opposition to Hitler among Germans.

This is not only wrong in a factual sense. The irony of Professor Goldhagen's position is that it renders him incapable of understanding either the cause of the Holocaust or its universal, world historical, significance.

The fate of the Jews as a historically-oppressed people and that of the working class were inextricably and tragically linked. The downfall of the German socialist movement cleared the way for the destruction of European Jewry. The democratic rights of the Jews, indeed, even their right to exist, depended upon the political strength of the working class. The mass killing of Jews did not begin in 1933. Before a crime of this magnitude could be organized and executed the Nazis had to terrorize and destroy the intellectually vital, progressive and humane elements in German society.

The Holocaust was, in the final analysis, the price which the Jewish people and all humanity paid for the failure of the working class to overthrow capitalism.

That is a lesson that must not be forgotten. We live in a world in which the contradictions of capitalism are once again assuming explosive dimensions. Masses of people are being marginalized, if not completely separated from the productive process, by the manic operations of global capitalism. In virtually every European country, unemployment stands at 10 percent or higher. Without the development of a genuine alternative to the social insanity of the world capitalist market, the disoriented victims of capitalism are susceptible to the ranting of right-wing demagogues.

Only yesterday, the New York Times carried a report on the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Russia: "Frustrated with the wrenching economic and social upheaval that followed the collapse of Communism and the Soviet Union, in 1991, and spurred on by politicians willing to tap their resentments, many people are returning to the traditional scapegoat: Jews."

Of what value is the work of Goldhagen in countering the danger posed by such developments?

Under conditions of deepening economic crisis and dislocation, the political lessons of the 1930s will again assume extraordinary contemporary relevance. That is why it is necessary to study and assimilate the origins and real causes of the Holocaust.

Notes for this lecture:

10. V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, vol. 10 (Moscow: Progress Publishers,


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