

Berlin exhibition: “Hitler and the Germans”—a historical travesty

By Verena Nees
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The exhibition “Hitler and the Germans: Nation and Crime” ended its season at the German Historical Museum in Berlin on February 27, having broken all attendance records.

However, the public’s great interest and long visits to the museum, as registered by the organisers, say little about the quality of the exhibition. This only proves that, 66 years after the end of the Nazi dictatorship, millions of people in Germany and abroad are still asking the question of how Hitler and the Nazi crimes were possible. This is even more so today, now that the international capitalist crisis is again rocking society and raising the spectre of war and dictatorship.

The answer to this question, however, was not to be found at the temporary “Hitler and the Germans” exhibition. Instead, the exhibition reflected deep-seated confusion surrounding this issue and gave a very subjective view of the issues involved.

The exhibition’s brochure declares that “By no means can Hitler’s power be explained by his personal traits [but] rather by the political and social conditions, and mental sensitivities of the German people.” The brochure goes on to claim that conditions at the time were influenced by “the interrelationship between Hitler’s charismatic ‘Führer power’ and the expectations and behaviour of the people”.

The problem was that the exhibition had very little to say about the prevailing political conditions, while social conditions were primarily reduced to an extremely selective presentation of the behaviour “of (all) Germans”.

The enforced “coordination” (Gleichschaltung) of politics and society is also said to have been “the self- coordination of a society...longing for security and strong leadership, as well as for participation in social community and social ascendancy” in a time of crisis. As Hans-Ulrich Thamer, one of the curators, says in his contribution to the exhibition catalogue, “They (the Germans) followed him loyally, supported and strengthened his rule and his leadership group owing to political-ideological conviction, to social fears and hopes, and also by possibly associating their individual needs for security and a small measure of personal prosperity with the promises and policies of National Socialism, thus ‘working towards’ Hitler”.

This argument is neither new nor original. It takes its place among recent theories put forward by writers from Daniel Goldhagen to Götz Aly. In his book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* of some 15 years ago, Harvard professor Goldhagen ascribed to all Germans a latent anti-Semitism that allegedly existed long before the Hitler dictatorship.

Götz Aly claimed in his book *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War and the Nazi Welfare State* (2005) that the vast majority “of Germans” followed—not primarily due to ideological conviction, but to material greed (perhaps their “small measure of personal prosperity?”)—the regime that secured for them material benefits and concessions derived from the expropriation, expulsion and murder of the Jews. In particular, according to Aly, the workers would have benefited socially from the Nazi crimes.

The 600 objects in the Berlin exhibition—documents, posters, letters and photographs—are also supposed to show the massive, enthusiastic support of “Germans” for Hitler. For the organisers, however, this was not primarily due to a yearning for material benefits, as claimed by Götz Aly, but because they were hoping for an alleviation of class conflict and acquiring peace and security as part of the “national community” or “nation” (Volksgemeinschaft) propagated by the Nazis.

At the same time, the exhibition tried to show that membership in the Nazi’s “nation” involved excluding Jews and other minorities, and passively witnessing the crimes committed against them—as already suggested in the exhibition’s title, “Nation and Crime”.

“National community”

The selection of items shown was made in accordance with this perspective. On the one hand, the exhibition demonstrated how the Führer myth and Hitler’s “charisma” were created for propaganda purposes. Many interesting details—such as footage of Hitler’s 1932 election campaign—revealed how the Nazis used the latest technologies to reach the masses. Hitler was the only politician to fly by plane to his political meetings and conduct several rallies in the same day. His personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, produced posters and postcards of Hitler in his own 300-employee company, adopting these methods of mass communication to create a charismatic figure, suggesting that the Führer was a man of the people rather than of the capitalist elite.

Also worth seeing was newsreel film footage of the arrival of the Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini at the Berlin Heerstrasse railway station in 1937 and, in comparison, a contrasting excerpt from Charlie Chaplin’s film *The Great Dictator*, which hilariously re-enacted the arrival scene that had been meticulously planned by Hitler’s propaganda department.

On the other hand, there were plenty of items related to other Nazis’ propaganda campaigns—from sporting competitions, the Winter Relief Fund and the Strength Through Joy state-sponsored holidays, to the provision of toys for children—all purporting to demonstrate the close bonds between the population and the Nazi regime. A collection of the uniforms of officers and the SS (Hitler’s personal elite force) as well as the “duty” clothing of financial officers and nurses pointed to the process of “coordination” or alleged “self-coordination”.

A central place in the exhibition was occupied by a tapestry showing a Christian cross, the Lord’s Prayer and swastikas. This had been embroidered over several years by the women of the small town of Rotenburg an der Fulda, in Hesse, and hung next to the pulpit of the Church of Jacobi from May 1, 1935. This object is recorded in the catalogue under the heading “Working towards the Führer”. However, instead of discussing the much more interesting fact that this enterprise was initiated by local Protestant church leaders and shows how the religious institutions “assisted” the regime, the exhibition stresses community engagement of Protestant, Catholic and Nazi women. The catalogue text quotes the Nazi Party’s local and district culture warden in

Rotenburg as saying, “The church provided the opportunity, the women’s group its meaningfulness”.

A wall covered with letters celebrating Adolf Hitler’s 43rd birthday in 1932—as well as home-made cards, poems, prayers and pictures of children, in one case a young boy in SA (Hitler’s standing army) uniform—is supposed to demonstrate the personal commitment to Hitler, even before 1933.

The subjectivity and eclecticism of the items selected to demonstrate the close interaction between “leaders and people” was revealed by a chart showing the results of the July 1932 election, when the Nazis were able to win a greater number of votes than the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Communist Party (KPD) combined. Absent from the exhibition was a chart dealing with the election just four months later in November 1932, when the Nazi party lost 2 million votes and the SPD and KPD gained a combined majority! This despite the growing terrorism from Hitler’s SA.

The terror waged by the Nazis against the organised workforce immediately after Hitler’s seizure of power was hardly touched upon in the exhibition. The book-burning that took place only a few metres from the location of the exhibition was not mentioned at all. Apart from a photo of prisoners in an SA cellar in 1933, only an open photo album belonging to a Nazi supporter from Heilbronn documented the arrest and beating of the social democratic city councillor, Ernst Rieger, before the eyes of curious onlookers in 1933. This photograph gave the impression that the population supported the Nazis even in “red” Heilbronn, where a majority had voted for the SPD and the KPD in 1933, shortly before the event pictured. The exhibition organisers remained silent about the fact that Ernst Rieger, his son Hellmut, the KPD city councillor William Swan and many other members of the KPD, the Social Democratic Workers’ Party (SAP), the Communist Party Opposition (KPO), and the trade unions in Heilbronn and the surrounding area created an active resistance movement that was only broken in 1938.

A tour of the exhibition followed by a perusal of the catalogue leads one to conclude that the selection of exhibits was primarily aimed at hiding the relationship between capitalism and fascism.

The solid support for Hitler on the part of major industries and civic elites before 1933, together with their close relationship with the Nazis during the war, was intentionally concealed. Fritz Thyssen’s brochure “I paid Hitler” (London, 1941) was no more evident in the exhibition than documents about balloting on the Enabling Act of 1933, when members of all of the bourgeois parties voted to grant Hitler the unlimited powers that led to the dictatorship.

The exhibition’s brief section on the post-war period also attempted to distort the facts. Rather than expose how leading industries like the Krupp and Thyssen empires, Deutsche Bank, and others responsible for one of history’s greatest catastrophes affecting millions of people were able to recover their fortunes after the war and assume leading posts in politics and business—along with innumerable Nazi jurists, Gestapo thugs and National Socialist ideologues—the exhibition stresses that “German society” failed to acknowledge its own complicity. The people’s view of Hitler had simply changed from “the Führer is always right” to “Hitler is to blame for everything”.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there were many serious scientific studies addressing the relationship between capitalism and fascism and the class nature of Weimar society. Since the 1990s, however, a number of historians have exploited the collapse of the Soviet Union and East Germany and the associated apparent triumph of capitalism to jettison any honest and objective approach to historical analysis. Genuinely scientific methodology has been replaced by totally subjective, postmodern ideology, questions about the psychological make-up of Nazi followers and gender issues (“The...Nazi party was a male-dominated party”), etc.

National Socialism was an expression of the most aggressive tendencies of German capitalism. This is the key to an understanding of Nazism. The

social composition and psychology of Hitler’s supporters cannot explain his rise from a Vienna homeless shelter, and from a simple corporal in the First World War, to a brutal dictator. He owed his power to the ruling elite, who raised him to head of state because they saw no other way to suppress the working class. What Hitler brought to this task was not a finished programme, but rather his hatred of Marxism and Bolshevism combined with anti-Semitism. It was this which made him attractive to the German ruling elite—his ability to exploit the despair of the petty-bourgeois masses ruined by the global depression and mobilise them against the workers’ organisations. For its part, the working class was crucially weakened and divided by the policies of the SPD and the KPD.

On June 10, 1933, Leon Trotsky wrote in his essay, “What is National Socialism?”: “The pauperisation of the petty bourgeoisie, barely concealed by their ties and socks of artificial silk, eroded all official creeds and, above all, the doctrine of democratic parliamentarism.... In the highly fevered atmosphere brought about 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 cheated it”. And Trotsky adds, concerning Hitler’s role: “Political art consisted in fusing the petty bourgeoisie into oneness through its common hostility to the proletariat. What must be done in order to improve things? First of all, throttle those who are underneath”. [1]

The curators attempt to mask the real class character of society by referring to all workers, the petty bourgeoisie, industrialists and bankers as “the Germans”. They assume that Nazi propaganda about the “German nation” expressed the general hopes and longings of all “Germans”.

According to statements in the catalogue, this assumption is based on new scientific evidence, reproduced in the book *Volksgemeinschaft: Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschaft des Nationalsozialismus* (“Nation: New Research into German Society Under National Socialism”), edited by Michael Wildt and Frank Bajohr. Michael Wildt, a history professor at Humboldt University in Berlin, also served as scientific advisor to the exhibition. In the book and in his contribution to the catalogue, he goes into the history of the concept of “nation”, subjecting it to a long, wide-sweeping analysis. In a typically Teutonic manner, he stresses the importance of this concept in the development of the society—so much so that the impression is conveyed that the term gained tremendous momentum and enveloped the country in January 1933.

Nevertheless, this treatise on the “nation” is illuminating because it shows how much the exhibition is dominated by social democratic conceptions of class harmony. The famous statement of Kaiser Wilhelm II in his Reichstag (German parliament) speech at the beginning of World War I—that he no longer recognised any political parties because he only recognised the German people—derived from the treachery of the SPD and the willingness of its deputies to permit the passage of war loans. In the same speech, Wilhelm praised the policy of a “truce between the classes” on the part of the trade unions, which had agreed to refrain from industrial action for the duration of the war.

Two years later, the former left-wing social democrat Konrad Haenisch declared that “solidarity with the people’s community facing adversity and death” was the order of the day. And during the 1918 revolution, social democratic propaganda about the German nation was used as a cover for the SPD leadership’s cooperation with the supreme command of the army to subdue the revolutionary workers’ movement. This systematic suppression of the class struggle served to strengthen reactionary forces and eventually paved the way for the Nazi’s National Socialist Workers’ Party to assume power.

Workers’ resistance

The extent to which propaganda about “the Germans”—willingly accommodated by Hitler—jarred with what was actually happening is made clear by another book documenting the resistance of the working

class to the Nazi regime.

In his comprehensive work published in 2007, *Die "andere" Reichshauptstadt—Widerstand aus der Arbeiterbewegung in Berlin von 1933 bis 1945 (The Other Imperial Capital: Resistance by the Berlin Labour Movement from 1933 to 1945)*, Hans-Rainer Sandvoss, deputy head of the German Resistance Memorial Centre and member of the SPD, meticulously researched the workers' resistance in Berlin. He took into account all the labour organisations from the SPD and KPD, trade unions, smaller left-wing entities, including Trotskyist groups, to Christian workers' associations. For the first time, moreover, he carried out research into interrogation protocols and files in East Berlin archives that had been inaccessible until 1989. [2]

Sandvoss made no attempt to limit himself to resistance fighters who had been prosecuted and imprisoned, but also examined their relation to the many workers who were members of labour organisations prior to 1933. Descriptions of the funerals of murdered KPD or SPD members show the strength of solidarity on the part of workers with their old organisations.

This detailed material consistently shows that the working class remained substantially immune to Nazi propaganda even after the Nazis' seizure of power. For many years, the Nazis found the going tough in Berlin and other centres of the labour movement such as Cologne, Dusseldorf, Hamburg and Halle. A Gestapo report from March 1936 states: "You can be in Berlin for days without hearing the Führer salute, unless it's from officials of rank or in uniform, or from people from the provinces". A year later, in April 1937, the Reichsführer SS (highest-ranking SS official) characterised the imperial capital as one of the five "permanent trouble spots" in the country.

In a panel discussion held on April 8, 2008, Sandvoss drew from his book to counter Daniel Goldhagen and Götz Aly, making the point that their arguments happen to coincide with the Nazi propaganda of "one people, one empire, one Führer". The fact that only a minority of people was listed in the legal documents as evidence of active resistance fighters does not mean that the rest of the population consisted only of Nazi supporters.

"In view of the thousands of persecuted labour officials", argues Sandvoss, "the several tens of thousands who openly objected, as well as the continuous though varying intensive resistance of workers that had certainly not dissipated by 1935...the idea that Nazi society was a consensus or 'popular dictatorship' can be dismissed, at least as far as Berlin is concerned.

"Hundreds of interviewed witnesses, as well as contemporary historical sources...question the proposition of a total fascist takeover of the workforce. On the other hand, spying and denunciation in everyday (working) life and the threat of draconian penalties for even small offences made many anti-Nazis reluctant to join the active opposition. But, not least, the statements of former Jewish and eastern European forced labourers provide plenty of evidence to show that their persecution was countered by humanitarian and supportive behaviour in the German population, particularly from the ranks of previously organised, politically and union-trained skilled workers".

Hans-Reiner Sandvoss's book is a veritable treasure trove of facts about various resistance groups, and leaves no doubt that a large proportion of the working class, even long after 1933, remained hostile to Hitler's dictatorship. It constitutes an extremely effective counterweight to the totally one-sided presentation of the German people in the exhibition "Hitler and the Germans".

Notes:

1. Leon Trotsky, "What is National Socialism?" Arbeiterpresse Verlag, Essen: 1999
2. Hans-Rainer Sandvoss, *Die "andere" Reichshauptstadt—Widerstand aus der Arbeiterbewegung in Berlin von 1933 bis 1945 (The Other*

Imperial Capital: Resistance by the Berlin Labour Movement from 1933 to 1945), Lukas, Berlin: 2007

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