

Why did the Holocaust take place?

David Walsh
2 June 1997

More than any other trend of thought, Marxism insists on adopting a historical attitude to every phenomenon. It contends that an event can be understood only if it is viewed as the outcome of a complex of processes whose nature and development are brought to light and explicated. It is well known that this approach has been under unrelenting attack in academic and intellectual circles in recent decades.

In his discussion of the Holocaust, David North makes this important point: volume upon volume has been written about the extermination of the European Jews, but virtually no work in the postwar period has been able to explain its causes. North proceeds to provide the basis for such an explanation.

Every reader of the new pamphlet, *Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Holocaust: A critical review of Daniel Goldhagen's Hitler's Willing Executioners*, will have to decide for him or herself the extent to which the author succeeds, but no one with a concern for the critical social issues of our day can afford not to consider the argument.

North traces the evolution of attitudes toward the Nazi crimes. In the 1930s informed opinion within a broad layer of intellectuals and workers understood and accepted the explanation provided by Marxists such as Leon Trotsky that fascism's roots lay in the worldwide crisis of capitalism and the need of the bourgeoisie to mobilize the middle classes against the threat of social revolution.

In the postwar period, Cold War considerations prevented such an analysis from reaching a wide audience; the Holocaust was increasingly presented as a demonstration of the unspeakable evil lurking in men's souls. Goldhagen's "immensely successful and thoroughly deplorable" work, which asserts that Nazi barbarism was the inevitable expression of the Germans' supposedly congenital anti-Semitism, is the product of a process of intellectual degeneration; it brings together a demoralized view of mankind with a combination of ignorance and willful disregard for historical fact.

Goldhagen subtitles his work, *Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. As a means of illuminating a critical methodological issue, North asks: what is meant by an 'ordinary German'? He explains that vulgar thinking resorts

to "vacuous generalizations ... known, in philosophy, as abstract identities, that is, identities from which all internal difference is excluded."

Internal conflicts in German society

Goldhagen's "concept of 'ordinariness' does not reflect the internal antagonisms and conflicts of German society." He ignores an elementary reality: German society possessed a complex class structure in 1933. Who were the ordinary ones: workers, shopkeepers, small farmers, artisans, Junkers, bankers or factory-owners? To the anti-Semite's specter of the "eternal Jew," Goldhagen counters the specter of "the eternal German, the relentless and unchanging enemy of the Jewish people."

In keeping with his creation of a mythological German *Volk* without concrete characteristics or internal antagonisms, Goldhagen is compelled to exclude a discussion of German and European history. Leaving the Harvard professor behind at this juncture, North proceeds to outline the essential historical issues out of which an objective appraisal of Nazism must be constructed.

Definite social and political needs, North explains, gave birth in the late nineteenth century to modern anti-Semitism. The most significant factor was the emergence of a class-conscious, socialist labor movement, which posed a grave threat to the existence of the profit system. The bourgeoisie, terrified by such events as the Paris Commune of 1871, set about building up a mass base for the defense of capitalism, especially among sections of the population, paradoxically enough, which were threatened by the growth of modern industry and finance. The noxious fumes of nationalism and anti-Semitism were released throughout Europe to delude these petty bourgeois elements into embracing the cause of "the nation" against external and internal enemies.

North points out that a "central premise of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is that anti-Semitism was universally accepted by all segments of German society." This obliges Goldhagen

to ignore the history of German socialism, which "is one of unrelenting struggle against anti-Semitism." North cites the Social Democratic Party (SPD) election statement of 1881 and notes that Paul Singer, a Jewish socialist businessman, received more votes for the Reichstag than any other candidate in Berlin in 1887.

Anti-Semitism became a significant factor in German politics once again, after a decades-long decline, only following World War I, when economic ruin and political disorientation propelled desperate petty-bourgeois layers toward the politics articulated by Hitler and other right-wing demagogues. North, basing himself on the work of the German writer Konrad Heiden, makes the critical point that "Hitler's anti-Semitism was ... a by-product of his all-consuming hatred of the proletariat."

One can take note of all these objective factors, however, without truly providing an explanation for the triumph of fascism in Germany. In the first years of the twentieth century, political anti-Semitism was far more virulent in czarist Russia than in Hohenzollern Germany. Russia, not Germany, was the scene of state-inspired pogroms which killed thousands of Jews. Yet the crisis in Russia in 1917 concluded with the victory of socialism, while the collapse of the Weimar Republic some 15 years later led to Nazi barbarism. How is this to be explained?

Problem of leadership

Here attention must be focused on the problem of leadership within the working class. The largest single section of this pamphlet, accordingly, is devoted to "The Crisis of the German Labor Movement."

North demonstrates that from 1918-23 and again from 1929-33 profoundly unstable conditions prevailed in Germany, which gave rise to more than one revolutionary occasion. The working class was unable to capitalize on these precious opportunities because the SPD and the German Communist Party (KPD) showed themselves "to be politically bankrupt and utterly incapable of providing the distraught masses with a way out of the disaster created by capitalism."

Social Democracy

The SPD, which betrayed the working class by supporting

the kaiser's government in the First World War, proved to be the most dedicated defender of bourgeois rule. The KPD, founded in the wake of Social Democracy's capitulation, by the mid-1920s had come under the calamitous influence of Stalinism. From 1928 it carried out an ultraleft policy, dubbing the SPD "social fascists" and rejecting a united front with the SPD against fascism, as urged by Trotsky in a series of powerful works. While the Nazis, as a number of new works have pointed out, suffered a serious setback in the elections of November 1932, "the working class was immobilized by the irresponsible and defeatist policies of its leadership."

The coming to power of the Nazis, contrary to the repellent assertion of Goldhagen, was not an essentially "peaceful revolution." It meant the unleashing of a reign of terror against, first, the left-wing parties and working class opposition. "The downfall of the German socialist movement," North explains, "cleared the way for the destruction of European Jewry."

This pamphlet is not simply a work of historical clarification. It is a political warning of the most urgent kind. "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." If the assimilation of the lessons of the past century is the key to humanity's solving the great social questions of the day, then a study of the resistible rise of fascism in Germany is one of the most pressing tasks before us. This new pamphlet is a significant contribution.

See also:

Fascism & the Holocaust: A critical review of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*

A lecture by David North

[17 April 1997]

At University of Michigan forum
Historians criticize Goldhagen book

[17 November 1997]

Â



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact