

The anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism of the German Nazis: a letter and reply

23 December 2003

The following letter was written in response to the article "Germany: MP's anti-Semitic speech exposes ugly face of the CDU," posted by the World Socialist Web Site last November 14. The letter was originally circulated via a mailing list of disgruntled supporters of the German Greens. We publish it with a reply by the WSW.

Dear grass roots Greens, *Gleichheit* [the magazine of the German Socialist Equality Party] and others,

An article by the WSW contained the following passage:

"The Nazis' hatred of the Jews, and, in particular, Hitler's own hatred, were directly bound up with fascism's deadly attack on the socialist workers movement. The anti-fascist author Konrad Heiden described this very well. He wrote in his biography of Hitler that when the future dictator discovered that many Jews played prominent roles in the labor movement, 'The great light dawned upon him. 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 can only agree with Heiden's conclusion that 'it was not Rothschild, the capitalist, but Karl Marx, the socialist, who kindled Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism.'"

While it is correct to point to the close connection between anti-Semitism and hostility towards the workers movement that prevailed among the right wing during the Weimar Republic, the friends of the WSW are simply wrong on this issue.

First of all, nothing definite is known about the origins of Hitler's anti-Semitism in a biographical sense. In "Mein Kampf" he puts it down to his encounter with a "caftan Jew" (a 19th century derogative for the usually poor Jews from Eastern Europe). While a number of Hitler's biographers took this for good coin, it was, in fact, a self-stylization and an obvious lie. It is an established fact that Hitler was an anti-Semite before this "encounter" supposedly took place.

It appears more probable that Hitler assimilated fixed cultural stereotypes about "the Jews" while not yet a radical, national anti-Semite. How precisely this took place, we do not know. Heiden's interpretation is arbitrary and I believe it to be wrong, because it ascribes the central role to hostility towards the workers movement and tends to view anti-Semitism as a mere "propaganda tool." However, anti-Semitism was an independent, and the most important, factor of national socialist propaganda and policies.

First of all, it must be noted that anti-Semitism is far older than the modern workers movement. One cannot, I believe, establish a clear break between its "medieval/ religious" and its "modern/ racist" variant. The catalogue of accusations leveled against the Jews has remained strikingly constant from the first wave of pogroms in 1349-50 to the Holocaust. In addition, long before the onset of the era of imperialism, the Jews were persecuted due to their origins, and not even conversion could save them from death or being driven away during numerous waves of persecutions in the early modern age.

During the Kaiserreich [the newly founded German Empire from the end of the Franco-German war in 1871 to the founding of the Weimar

Republic in 1918], this cultural stereotype is filled with a political and racist content. While it exists in all social layers (including the workers movement), it is mainly the right wing who use it as a political weapon. In doing so, the explicitly anti-Semitic movements ("Berliner Bewegung" in the early 1880s, Böckel [Hesse] and Ahlward [Pommern] in the early 1890s) don't always directly attack the workers movement. Yet the latter is the most important factor in the not explicitly Jewish resistance against these movements. In France, however, the situation is clearly different: some of the French anarchists are rabid anti-Semites, and a large part of the French workers movement takes a neutral to anti-Semitic position during the Dreyfus affair. Parts of the early German workers movement (above all, among the followers of Lassalle) put forward clearly anti-Semitic positions or take violent action against Jewish members of the Marxist wing.

Among the "Völkische Bewegung" [the nationalist right wing in the Kaiserreich] and the National Socialists, anti-Semitism and the fight against the workers movement go hand in hand, while the former clearly carries more weight. The mechanism at work here can be described as follows: The idea that "Jews" are an alien element, entitled to fewer rights than "Christians" or "Arians," and the embodiment of all evil, is a longstanding stereotype. During the medieval and early modern ages, hatred is provoked by the fact that a non-Christian group, the majority of whom is poorer than its non-Jewish environment, includes a small portion (some 1 to 3 percent) of very wealthy members. These are used as a justification for corresponding prejudices. At the same time, envy of the success of these people (despite their being outsiders) plays a not insignificant role.

In addition, quite contrary to the usual prejudice, it is not the Jews who, through their trade in money, "exploit" the Christians, but the Christians who, through pogroms or Jewish taxes, regularly commit organized robbery or robbery with murder. From 1871 on, we see the emancipation of the Jews (they were given equal legal rights) in the newly founded German Reich. At the same time, they moved (the details of this development have not yet been established) from the position of a predominantly impoverished group to a middle-class layer in the Kaiserreich. In the face of the "Gründerkrise" [the economic slump that hit after 1873], which led to a general frustration of previous expectations, old stereotypes were revived and reflected in the early anti-Semitic movements. The "Anti-Semitic Petition" of the early 1880s, for example, was directed against equal rights for the Jews and called for special taxation and a general ban on the immigration of Jews.

It was signed mainly by people from middle and upper social layers. A disproportionately high number of signatories belonged to the intelligentsia or the officer corps. One last point to be made is that the persecution of Jews and workers differed in quality. While the Nazi terror against the Left was extreme, it never reached the dimensions of the Shoah. The workers movement was occasionally wooed by Hitler, something that would never have occurred to the NSDAP in relation to the Jews.

Best regards and best wishes of success for your work.
S.

The central point of S's criticism of our article is contained in the following paragraph:

"Heiden's interpretation is arbitrary and I believe it to be wrong, because it ascribes the central role to hostility towards the workers movement and tends to view anti-Semitism as a mere 'propaganda tool.' However, anti-Semitism was an independent, and the most important, factor of national socialist propaganda and policies."

Further down, he repeats: "Among the ... National Socialists, anti-Semitism and the fight against the workers movement go hand in hand, while the former clearly carries more weight."

Three main reasons are given for this estimation: (1) Hitler assimilated "fixed cultural stereotypes" about the Jewry before he became the leader of the National Socialists; (2) anti-Semitism is far older than National Socialism—it goes back to the Middle Ages, and during the Kaiserreich it was not always directed against the workers movement; there were even anti-Semitic prejudices within this movement; (3) Hitler on occasions courted the workers movement, which would have been inconceivable in relation to the Jews.

By ascribing to anti-Semitism a life of its own, which supposedly spans historical epochs, S falls behind the insights reached by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels more than 150 years ago. They laid the basis for a scientific approach to human history by taking as their starting point not the ideas and conceptions of a given period, but the material conditions of life.

"In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men developing their material production and their material intercourse alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. In the first method of approach, the starting point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness... [1]

"If now, in considering the course of history, we detach the ideas of the ruling class from the ruling class itself and attribute to them an independent existence, if we confine ourselves to saying that such and such ideas were dominant at a given time, without bothering ourselves about the conditions of production and the producers of these ideas, if we thus ignore the individual and world conditions which are the source of the ideas, we can say, for instance, that during the time that the aristocracy was dominant, the concepts honour, loyalty, etc., were dominant, during the dominance of the bourgeoisie the concepts freedom, equality were dominant, etc." [2]

The fact that there had been anti-Semitism in earlier historical periods provides no viable basis for the explanation of its role and significance during the Third Reich. It does not explain how and why the National Socialists made use of traditional clichés.

On this problem, Abraham Léon, author of the Marxist study *The Jewish question*, quotes Friedrich Engels: "Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness.

The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence, he imagines false or apparent motives." [3]

Instead of looking for the "real motives" of their anti-Semitism, S bases himself on what the "so-called thinkers" of the National Socialists themselves believed when they reached back to medieval conceptions.

In doing so, however, he is inconsistent. In relation to the past—preceding the 20th century—he does acknowledge the political and social background of anti-Semitism. But when it comes to Hitler, this approach is suddenly dropped. While S does connect the Anti-Semitic Petition of the early 1880s to the "Gründerkrise," he locates the main reason for the anti-Semitism of the Nazis not in the given historical context, but ascribes much greater importance to certain ideological traditions.

Hitler himself only "hit upon" the effectiveness of anti-Semitism in the autumn of 1919, during his debut as a right-wing agitator before soldiers returning from the World War. Barely two years after the Russian Revolution, and in the immediate aftermath of the brutally suppressed Soviet Republic of Munich, he gave speeches on behalf of right-wing, nationalist and racist groups in Bavaria. His first known written statements on the "Jewish question" stem from these days.

It is plausible that Hitler did indeed assimilate the widespread anti-Semitism that surrounded him during his youth in Vienna, before the outbreak of the First World War. But it took his extreme class hostility against the workers movement to transform this common brand of anti-Semitism into the racial madness Hitler employed to mobilize impoverished and desperate layers of the petty bourgeoisie.

It was the correlation with anti-Bolshevism that infused the anti-Semitism of the National Socialist movement with its specific, lethal character. The historically unprecedented hounding of Jews under the Nazis originated not from some medieval tradition, but from the political and class contradictions in Germany that had been brought to white heat in the aftermath of World War I.

Hitler, who at that time was active mainly as an agitator, assimilated the reactions of his petty-bourgeois and lumpen audience not in an analytical, but in an instinctive manner. He fused their hatred for the Marxists, the "traitors to the fatherland," the perpetrators of the German November revolution, whom the right wing held responsible for the defeat of their country in World War I, with hatred for the Jewish minority.

The British historian Ian Kershaw, author of a recently published, lengthy Hitler biography, believes that Hitler's conception of the Russian Revolution was the final, decisive factor cementing this linkage. "These images," he wrote, "appeared to have provided the catalyst to the merger of anti-Semitism and anti-Marxism in his world view—an identity which, once forged, never disappeared." [4]

This was the birth of the construct of "Jewish Bolshevism" or "Jewish Marxism," which was to play such a huge role in the ideology of the Nazis and which—as the conservative MP Martin Hohmann demonstrated in his recent speech—remains a part of the consciousness of some right wingers to this very day.

The issue is not, as claimed by S, to, as it were, reduce anti-Semitism to the role of a mere by-product. In fact, the full weight of its significance can only be gauged on the basis of a class analysis.

While S concedes that among the National Socialists "anti-Semitism and the fight against the workers movement go hand in hand," he does not explain the concrete relation between the two. Instead, he sets up a straw horse, suggesting that we as Marxists reduce the role of anti-Semitism to a mere "propaganda tool," in order to then reject this straw horse in the face of the monstrosity of the fascist genocide.

This is a misunderstanding. A Marxist analysis does not ascribe some secondary propagandistic role to the ideology of anti-Semitism, but studies the concrete content of its relationship to the class development of

society.

In his unsurpassed writings on Germany, Leon Trotsky shed some light on this issue.

“The bonfires which burn the impious literature of Marxism,” he wrote in June 1933, “light up brilliantly the class nature of National Socialism. While the Nazis acted as a party and not as a state power, they did not find an approach to the working class. On the other side, the big bourgeoisie, even those who supported Hitler with money, did not consider the party theirs. The national ‘renaissance’ leaned wholly upon the middle classes, the most backward part of the nation, the heavy ballast of history. Political art consisted in fusing the petty bourgeoisie into oneness through its common hostility to the proletariat.”

In order to achieve this, anti-Semitic racism played a central role:

“Hitler’s nation is the mythological shadow of the petty bourgeoisie itself, a pathetic delirium of a thousand year Reich. In order to raise it above history, the nation is given the support of the race. History is viewed as the emanation of the race. The qualities of the race are construed without relation to changing social conditions. Rejecting ‘economic thought’ as base, National Socialism descends a stage lower: from economic materialism it appeals to zoologic materialism.” [5]

While in their ascent to power, the National Socialists based themselves on the mobilization of the petty bourgeoisie, they fully put themselves at the service of German imperialism once they had taken over. Their ideological madness notwithstanding, the leading figures of German fascism were highly conscious of their class dependence and class function.

As is widely known, the first brutal wave of repression following the inauguration of the fascist regime was directed against the organisations of the workers movement—above all, the Social Democrats, the Communists and the trade unions. The smashing of the organized workers movement was the precondition for the preparation of the Second World War and the genocide of the Jews.

On 20 February, 1933, Hitler gave a speech before Germany’s most powerful industrialists, which Kershaw describes as follows: “He assuaged his business audience, as he had done on earlier occasions, by upholding private property and individual enterprise, and by denying rumours of planned radical experimentation in the economy. The rest was largely a restatement of his views on the subordination of the economy to politics, the need to eradicate Marxism, restore inner strength and unity, and thus be in a position to face external enemies.”

When Hitler had finished, Kershaw writes, the president of the Industrial Association of the German Empire, Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, “felt in no position to deliver his prepared speech. He merely improvised a few words of thanks and added some general remarks about a strong state serving the well-being of the country.” [6]

“Never, never will I depart from the task of eradicating from Germany Marxism and its accompaniments,” Hitler shouted in a radio address to the nation given that same month. “One must be the victor here: either Marxism or the German people!” [7]

There is an abundance of such evidence to support this interpretation of the relation between anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism in Nazi ideology and politics.

As far as “wooing” the workers movement is concerned, the National Socialists did occasionally attempt to win supporters among workers as individuals. In this, they had almost no success at all before coming to power, and only very limited success afterwards.

But never did they try to court the political workers movement, e.g., the workers parties. Towards “Marxism” in the form of the Social Democratic Party and Communist Party, their policy was total extermination.

Annotations:

1. The German Ideology, *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, International Publishers, pp. 36-37

2. Ibid., p. 60

3. *The Jewish Question*, Abram Leon, *The Jewish Question*, Pathfinder Press, pp. 234-35

4. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, Penguin Books, vol. 1, pp. 153

5. “What is National Socialism?” Leon Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in German*, Pathfinder Press, pp. 409-10

6. Op. cit. p. 447

7. Ibid. p. 453



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