

Marxism and the Holocaust

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The following is an addendum to the lecture “Imperialism and the political economy of the Holocaust,” delivered by Nick Beams at San Diego State University on April 29. The lecture is available [here](#).

The collapse of the East European Stalinist regimes and the liquidation of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s saw a wave of triumphalism sweep through bourgeois political and academic circles. This was the end of socialism, the death of Marxism and even the end of history itself. That these regimes were not socialist, that the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR had consolidated its power through the mass murder of the Marxist intelligentsia—on a scale far greater than Hitler carried out—and that Marxists, above all Leon Trotsky, had predicted in the 1930s that the Stalinists would restore capitalism in Russia unless overthrown by the working class, counted for nothing.

This wave of ignorant celebration found its reflection in “left” academic and Marxist circles, especially among those examining the Holocaust. Marxism, it was claimed, could provide no explanation for this catastrophe. Based as it is, on an Enlightenment view of human progress, Marxism could not account for the systematic mass murder of the European Jews. How was it possible to provide a materialist analysis of this historical disaster? Where was the underlying economic motivation—even “in the final analysis”? It was not possible to explain the Holocaust in terms of a class analysis. Something more fundamental—an examination of the human condition and capacity for evil—was needed and Marxism could not provide it.

These positions reflected not so much the inadequacies of Marxism in understanding the Holocaust as the inability of their authors to understand Marxism—as opposed to various mechanistic caricatures—and their turn away from once-held socialist convictions towards bourgeois politics. Not for the first time, and no doubt not for the last, a sudden turn in the situation found a number of intellectuals in retreat. Marxism, they maintained, had not only failed to explain the Holocaust, its very occurrence called into question the Marxist conception that socialism arose out of fundamental historical and economic processes. The mechanised genocide of the Jews had shown that this was a false conception—the very development of modern society was not leading to socialism but could well result in barbarism.

An examination of two representatives of this school, Enzo Traverso and Norman Geras, will help to clarify some of the fundamental issues that have been the subject of this lecture. In an essay published in 2001, the leading theoretician of the British Socialist Workers Party Alex Callinicos cited these two authors as having made “an important contribution to developing a distinctly Marxist response to the Holocaust over the past few years.” [1] In fact, the opposite is the case: rather than developing Marxism, they seek to undermine it.

Enzo Traverso, born in Italy in 1957, entered politics in his youth as a member of a so-called “far left” political organisation. He became a member of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire after moving to France in 1985. He was a well-known follower of the late Ernest Mandel, the one-time theoretical leader of the international Pabloite tendency which broke from Trotskyism in the early 1950s. In his book *Understanding the Nazi*

Genocide: Marxism after Auschwitz, Traverso makes clear his deepening opposition to Marxism as a method of historical analysis and as the basis of a political perspective.

In the introduction he writes: “Between emancipation and genocide, the history of European Jewry, as much in its metamorphoses as in its wounds, can be seen as an excellent laboratory in which to study the different faces of modernity: its hopes and liberatory aspirations on the one hand, its destructive forces on the other. This history shows both the ambiguity of the Enlightenment and its heirs, including Marxism, and the extreme forms of barbarism that modern civilization can take.” [2]

This approach, in which “modernity” is made responsible for the crimes against the Jewish people—one could say the crimes against humanity committed on the body of the Jewish people—performs a very important political role. It obscures the political forces, and the social classes in whose interests they acted, which were really responsible. Modernity is an empty abstraction. It is wracked by class division and class conflict.

So far as the emancipation of the Jews is concerned, the history of Europe shows that from the time of the French Revolution through the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, the Jews of Western Europe, through various twists and turns, experienced an expansion in their democratic and civil rights. But from the last quarter of the century, coinciding with the development of the Great Depression that began in 1873 and the rise of imperialism and militarism, we see a definite change—the rise of a new and “modern” anti-Semitism, based on racial and nationalist rather than religious doctrines. In the earlier period emancipation was bound up with the growing power of the liberal bourgeoisie as it cleared away the old restrictions of the *ancien régime*. The new anti-Semitism was bound up with the changes in the situation confronting the bourgeoisie—a reflection of its deepening fear of and hostility to the rising workers’ movement and the growth of Marxism. Increasingly, the defence of the rights of the Jews was carried forward by the socialist and workers’ movement.

Laying the blame on “modernity” for the Holocaust is the key plank of Traverso’s analysis. In an article published on February 15, 2005 in *Le Monde Diplomatique* on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, he points to the “exacerbated nationalism and biological racism” of the Nazis, the precedents established in the “culture and practice of imperialism”, the fact that *Lebensraum* was “essentially a transposition to the Old World of the model of colonial domination that other great powers had pursued in Africa and Asia” and that “the destruction of the Soviet Union and the extermination of the Jews were complementary aims that converged in a single war.”

But in an essay of some 1,700 words the term “capitalism” does not appear once. Nazism, he writes was “deeply rooted in the history, culture and technology of the modern world, and in modern forms of organization, production and domination.”

For Traverso, any class analysis is virtually ruled out from the beginning: “In Auschwitz we see a genocide in which racial hatred was virtually the one and only motive, carried out in disregard of any economic, political or military consideration.” [3]

Making the same point in a more expanded form in an earlier work,

Traverso wrote: “It should be remembered that since the sixties some Marxist historians had criticized the notion of an intrinsic economic rationale underlying the National Socialist system. For Tim Mason, the basic choices and overall operation of the Nazi system could be explained only in terms of the ‘primacy of politics’. However, if this interpretation of the general dynamic of National Socialism appears somewhat problematical, it also turns out to be more useful than ‘materialist’ explanations as a means of getting to the roots of the Shoah. Economic anti-Semitism of the traditional kind, based on the myth of the Jew as banker, moneylender, and starver of the people (a type of anti-Semitism that was exploited on a large scale in the past by various political regimes), might lead to the pogroms of the Czarist Empire but it was not about to be transformed into a mechanized massacre organized by a state. An element that strikes and disconcerts historians studying the Jewish genocide is its essentially antieconomic nature. Where was the economic rationality of a regime which, to kill six million men, women, old people and children, created, in wartime conditions, an administrative system, transport network, and extermination camps, employing human and material resources which would certainly have been put to better use in industry and on the increasingly depleted war fronts?” [4]

Viewed in a very narrow context such statements appear to be true. But the framework must be broadened. The genocide of the Jews and the establishment of Auschwitz came out of the drive by the Nazi regime to establish a German empire in Europe. A key component of this perspective was the removal of Jews from the areas of German domination as they were regarded, by their very existence, as being a potential source of opposition. Auschwitz was a product of the drive for *Lebensraum* or living space. *Lebensraum* had very definite economic motivations that were rooted in the crisis confronting German capitalism as it sought to overcome the collapse of the world market and the rise of American economic domination.

Introducing his book *Understanding the Nazi Genocide*, Traverso noted that some of his essays contained some “very harsh” criticisms of the Marxist tradition: “Auschwitz remains an ‘acid test’ for theorists, whatever their orientation, who identify with Marx’s thought. The incapacity of Marxism—the most powerful and vigorous body of emancipatory thinking of the modern age—first to see, then to understand the Jewish genocide raises a major doubt about the relevance of its answers to the challenges of the twentieth century.” [5]

In the first place, this is an outright falsification. The Marxist movement, led by Leon Trotsky, first in the form of the Left Opposition and then in the Fourth International, warned of the consequences of the Nazi victory and fought to prevent it, struggling to overturn the disastrous policies of the KPD and the Stalinist-led Communist International. As the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime deepened and the major capitalist countries closed their doors to Jewish refugees, Trotsky warned of the dangers confronting European Jews.

In an appeal to American Jews in December 1938, he wrote: “It is possible to imagine without difficulty what awaits the Jews at the mere outbreak of the future world war. But even without war the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the *physical extermination of the Jews*.”

In one of his last major writings, the *Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialism and War*, published in May 1940, Trotsky again turned to the situation confronting the Jews: “In the epoch of its rise, capitalism took the Jewish people out of the ghetto and utilized them as an instrument in its commercial expansion. Today decaying capitalism 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 one 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. ...” [6]

Traverso’s outlook is bound up with the course of events over the past four decades. He is by no means the only intellectual, radicalised in the late 1960s and 1970s and then disillusioned in a later period, to find that the source of his problems lies in the “failures” of Marxism.

Explaining his evolution, Traverso writes: “I took my first steps in the political and intellectual world in the early 1970s, in Italy, when I thought I was living in a time overshadowed by the prospect of revolution, in Europe as in Vietnam or Latin America. More recently I have become convinced that the dominant characteristic of the twentieth century is barbarism. This has not led me to renounce my beliefs or abandon my commitment, but rather to modify their horizon. If the awareness of living in a time of barbarism makes the task of transforming the world all the more imperative, it shows that the transformation will not ‘go with the flow’ of history but rather against the current. This approach has changed my reading of the past.” [7]

Here is the outlook of the disillusioned radical: I looked for the revolution but it did not come. But instead of analysing why it did not take place—that requires an examination of the role of the various leaderships of the working class, including the Pabloite tendency led by Ernest Mandel to which he belonged—Traverso concludes that the present epoch is dominated by barbarism and Marxism is itself at fault for not being able to recognise this. He maintains his commitment to socialism but the transformation of the world can only take place “against the current”. This means that the socialist transformation is really the struggle for a utopian perspective—there is no objective basis for it to be found within the historical development of capitalism itself.

According to Traverso the extermination camps were perfectly “rational”, “scientific” and “modern”. “Auschwitz consummated the marriage so typical of the twentieth century, between the greatest rationality of means (the camp system) and the complete irrationality of ends.” Auschwitz reveals the “hidden possibilities of modern society.”

But “modern society” has a social structure, it is a class society. Under the social relations of capitalism—in which the producers must sell their labour power to the owners of the means of production in order to live—human beings are treated as a means to an end—the accumulation of surplus value in the labour process. Capitalism is based on a system of social relations in which production—necessary for the maintenance of human life and civilisation—is not carried out in the interests of human need but according to the logic of capital itself. Capital dominates over human beings, who are cut off from the means of production, and, should the logic of capital demand it, from life itself. Irrationality is built into the very structure of the profit system itself. For example, under this system, an increase in the productivity of labour—the basis of all human progress—can produce a decline in the rate of profit, resulting in an economic crisis leading to recession, unemployment and ultimately to war.

Like many others, Traverso insists upon the unique character of the Holocaust. To the extent that it arises from circumstances that by their very nature have not occurred before and cannot be repeated in exactly the same form, every historical event is unique. Considered at this level the assertion is trivial. But the proponents of this view want to say much more. They aim to suggest that the Holocaust is such a terrible event that it is beyond the reach of the methods of historical analysis, including Marxism.

In the body of the lecture we drew out that the unprecedented violence of the Holocaust arose from the confluence of two processes rooted in the historical crisis of German and world capitalism: the war of colonisation against the Soviet Union—that is the transfer of the methods employed hitherto in Asia and Africa to the continent of Europe—and social counter-revolution—the overturn of the property relations established by the revolution of October 1917.

According to Traverso: “The historical uniqueness of the Jewish genocide does not consist in the concentration camp system, however, but in racial extermination: Auschwitz was the product of the fusion of racial biology with modern technology. This was a genuine *civilizational break*, which tore up the fabric of elementary human solidarity upon which human existence on the planet had until then been based.” [8]

Traverso seeks to divorce the Holocaust from the historical processes that preceded it and made it possible. The fusion of racial biology with modern technology, leading to mass murder, did not begin with Hitler and the Nazis. Its origins lay in the latter years of the nineteenth century when the Maxim gun was used to mow down tens of thousands of people resisting colonisation. Where, one can ask, was the “fabric of elementary human solidarity” in the Battle of Omdurman, near Khartoum, in the Sudan on September 2, 1898 when, by 11.30 a.m. nearly 11,000 Mahdists resisting British forces had been killed and 16,000 wounded, prompting the head of the British forces Major-General (later Lord) Kitchener to remark that the enemy had been given a “good dusting.”

Winston Churchill, who took part in the slaughter, both as a soldier and journalist, later wrote that it was “the most signal triumph ever gained by the arms of science over barbarians.” “Within the space of five hours the strongest and best-armed savage army yet arrayed against a modern European Power had been destroyed and dispersed, with hardly any difficulty, and comparatively small risk, and insignificant loss to the victors.” [9]

Where was the “fabric of elementary human solidarity” in the murderous campaign waged by German imperialism against the Herero people in South West Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century? On October 2, 1904 when, after the battle of Waterberg, the Hereros attempted to flee, the head of the German forces, General Lothar von Trotha issued a proclamation: “The Herero people must ... leave the land. If the populace does not do this, I will force them out with the *Groote Rohr* [cannon]. Within the German borders every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I will no longer accept women and children, I will drive them back to their people or I will let them be shot at.”

Those who were not shot and killed were driven into the desert where thousands died of thirst. According to the official record: “Like a wild animal hunted half to death the enemy was driven from one source of water to the next, until, his will gone, he finally became a victim of the nature of his own land. Thus the waterless Omaheke would complete what German weapons had begun: the destruction of the Herero people.” [10]

The bringing together of racist ideology and bureaucracy also did not begin with Hitler. As Hannah Arendt noted: “Two new devices for political organization and rule over foreign peoples were discovered during the first decades of imperialism. One was race as a principle of the body politic, and the other bureaucracy as a principle of foreign domination.” [11] In Hitler’s regime, the Ministry for the East in Berlin was said to be modelled on the British India Office.

For Traverso, the Holocaust, rather than underscoring the historic *necessity* for the overthrow of capitalist social relations—the basis of the perspectives of Marxism—calls into question the viability of Marxism itself.

“Rereading Marx after the catastrophe,” he writes, “in the shadow of Auschwitz, is not a pointless task because the gas chambers raise questions about the intellectual tradition of which he was the founder. Auschwitz puts in question certain paradigms of socialist thought, some of them contained in Marx’s own texts, some constructed and developed starting from gaps in his work.” [12]

Traverso is forced to acknowledge Rosa Luxemburg’s warning at the beginning of World War I that the future facing mankind was one of socialism or barbarism. However, he immediately dismisses its citation as an “evasive, disorienting smokescreen” because it has “summoned up the

spectre of a decline of civilization without acknowledging that Auschwitz was barbarism. With few exceptions—above all Walter Benjamin—Marxists had conceived of the decline of humanity as *regression*, a return to pre-modern, even primitive social forms. This left them disarmed, disoriented and sometimes blind in the face of a new, *modern* ‘barbarism’, which fitted in with the fundamental tendencies of historical development instead of deviating from or reversing them: in other words, a technological, industrial barbarism, organized and directed by its own instrumental rationality.” [13]

This argument simply does not stand up. Rosa Luxemburg’s warnings were based on an analysis of the tendencies within imperialism as they had emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, two decades earlier Frederick Engels had pointed out that modern technology meant that any future war in Europe would bring about unimagined horrors. Marxism did not conceive of humanity reverting to a previous stage of development, but pointed out that the enormous power of technology would have destructive effects—threatening the very continuity of civilisation itself—if it were not freed from the grip of the capitalist class and utilised to meet human need.

Traverso simply passes over all this because it does not suit his argument that the barbarism of Auschwitz and all modern barbarism is ultimately lodged within the process of reason itself, at least as it finds expression in the organisation of technology. Man himself is the problem not the social relations of capitalism which, as Marx explained, at one time led to a development of the productive forces but which now threaten their destruction, including humanity itself.

Traverso insists that: “Along with the idea of Progress, Auschwitz disposed once and for all of the conception of socialism as the natural, automatic and ineluctable outcome of history.” [14]

Marxism has never had such a perspective. Marx himself noted that capitalism “turns every economic progress into a social calamity” and in his famous article “The Future Results of the British Rule in India” explained that the English conquest of India revealed in its most naked form “the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization.” Only when the results of the bourgeois epoch had been brought under common control would “human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.”

In the Transitional Program, Trotsky wrote: “Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical epoch at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind.” The key to the situation, he insisted, was the resolution of the crisis of leadership of the working class. For Traverso and those who share his outlook this question is never to be examined—the problem lies in Marxism itself. Auschwitz means “jettisoning the naïve optimism of a way of thinking that claimed to be the conscious expression of the ‘movement of history’, and of a movement that believed it was ‘swimming with the tide’. It also means restoring socialism’s utopian dimension.” [15]

Giving vent to the pessimism that has gripped sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia over the alleged failures of Marxism and the working class, leading some of them in a very right-wing direction, Traverso rejects the conception that Marxism is the conscious expression of an unconscious historical process. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx explained that the theoretical conclusions of the Communists were “in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer” but merely expressed in general terms “actual relations springing from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.”

This is not to say that history is simply “on our side” or that eventually historical forces, in and of themselves, will bring about the downfall of capitalism. Quite the contrary. As Rosa Luxemburg put it so well, history is a “Via Dolorosa” [way of suffering] for the working class. Only to the

extent that the working class learns from history—the lessons of its victories and above all its bitter defeats—can it consciously intervene in the historical process, change the course of history and carry out the overthrow of capitalism.

This struggle, to understand and therefore to make history, is led by the Marxist movement. History is the source of all the problems that confront it. History is, at the same time, the source of their resolution. The struggle for socialism cannot be resolved via utopian schemes, which presumably somehow fire the imagination of the oppressed. Rather, the Marxist movement seeks to analyse the historical experiences through which it has passed, drawing out, above all, the problems of working class leadership. Traverso rejects such an approach.

“Marx conceived the development of capitalism as a dialectical process,” he writes, “in which the ‘civilising mission’ (the growth of productive forces) and ‘social regression’ (class, national, etc. oppression) were inextricably linked. This dichotomy was destined in his eyes to deepen until it ushered in a revolutionary break. The twentieth century would show, by contrast, that this dialectic could also have a *negative* character: instead of breaking the iron cage of capitalist social relations, the growth of productive forces and technological progress could become the basis of modern, totalitarian Behemoths like fascism, National Socialism or, in another form, Stalinism.” [16]

Completely absent from this assessment is any analysis of why the working class has so far been unable to wrest power from the bourgeoisie. Here it is necessary to consider what Marx *actually* wrote, rather than the completely one-side interpretation provided by Traverso.

In his famous *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx outlined the historical materialist method of analysis: “At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expressed the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.”

Having established the objective foundations of social revolution, Marx then turned to the way in which the transformation is carried out, insisting that it was “always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short ideological forms in which *men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out*” (emphasis added).

It is here, in studying the history of the twentieth century—the ways in which the political conflicts were fought out—and seeking to extract the necessary lessons, that attention must be directed. Traverso’s analysis might perhaps have some validity if the twentieth century had passed without the development of a mass socialist movement, and the emergence of revolutionary situations in which it was possible for the working class to overthrow capitalism. History shows that there were such conditions—the period that opened with the Russian Revolution in 1917 and continued until the aborted “German October” in 1923, the series of upheavals in the 1930s, the high point of which was the Spanish Revolution 1936-39, the post-World War II upsurge, and the series of potentially revolutionary struggles that began with the May-June 1968 events in France and continued until 1975. A study of this history shows that the objective conditions were certainly present for the seizure of power by the working class and that what was lacking was the necessary revolutionary leadership.

The “totalitarian Behemoths”—Stalinism and Nazism—were not the outcome of some “negative dialectic” of which Marxism had failed to take account, but the defeats suffered by the working class. The betrayal of the revolutionary struggles of the working class by social democracy in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution left the first workers’

state isolated, giving rise to its degeneration and the eventual usurpation of political power by the Stalinist bureaucracy through the political defeat of the Marxist and internationalist tendency led by Leon Trotsky. The Stalinist apparatus, then heading the Communist International, bore the chief responsibility for imposing the disastrous theory of “social fascism” upon the German Communist Party. This played the decisive role in opening the way for Hitler’s coming to power, resulting in the greatest historical defeat of the working class. Stalinism and Nazism were both, in their own way, an expression of the crisis of revolutionary leadership of the working class, not of the power of technology and the productive forces.

Traverso criticises his one-time mentor Ernest Mandel for the latter’s insistence that “Hitler’s Germany simply pushed to an extreme the violence inherent in capitalist society and imperialism.” [17] The problem with this view was that Mandel “had difficulty in admitting” that the genocide of the Jews “was determined ‘in the final analysis’ by ideology, despite the material interests (and military priorities) of German imperialism.” [18]

“The Jewish genocide cannot be understood as a function of the class interests of big German capital—this is, in truth, the interpretive criterion ‘in the final analysis’ of all Marxist theories of fascism—it can only be caricatured.” [19]

So in the end we are left with the conclusion that really only the Nazis, and Hitler chief among them, are to blame. Here we see where “in the final analysis” all this postmodernist, post-Marxist sweating leads to. German imperialism is not responsible for the Jewish genocide, it’s all down to the Nazis and Hitler. But in the end they are not really to blame either because the genocide was inherent in the destructive irrationality of modern technology and the productive forces and human reason itself.

If one considers the question very narrowly, as we have noted, then it is easy to show that the mass murder of the Jews ran counter to the immediate economic and military interests of German imperialism. But that is the problem—the narrow perspective through which the issue is viewed. If we widen the horizon then the underlying interests come into view. The Holocaust arose out of the war against the Soviet Union and the plans of German imperialism for the domination of Europe. German capital had handed over the reins of power to the Nazis to carry out these tasks. To be sure, as occurred before the war, some of their actions conflicted with the immediate short-term interests of German business—although there is no record of opposition from within the German ruling elites to the mass murder of the Jews—but there was a direct coincidence between the drive of the Nazis for *Lebensraum* in the East and the interests and needs of German imperialism.

The Nazi movement was handed the reins of power by the German ruling elites because there was no other party capable of carrying through the destruction of the organised working class and socialist movement. They certainly hoped that they may be able to curb some of the Nazi “excesses”. But at every stage the costs were too high. There was always the danger that any conflict with the Nazis would ignite a movement from below, so that in the end the “excesses” were an acceptable price to pay.

Within the thinking of the Nazi leadership, racism and the drive to exterminate the Jews may have taken priority over all other issues. But that does not settle the question. In pointing to the primacy of economics, in the final analysis, Marxism does not maintain that behind the decisions of every political leader there is an economic motivation, which ideology is used to conceal. It means that economic interests—the material interests of the ruling classes—determine the broad sweep of politics. And there is no question that the destruction of the socialist and workers’ movement, a necessary pre-condition for the Holocaust, and the war aimed at the conquest and colonisation of the Soviet Union, out of which it arose, were both determined by the “class interests of big German capital.”

Like Traverso, Norman Geras takes issue with explanations of the

Holocaust that locate its origins within German imperialism and the capitalist system more generally. Something more fundamental is required to provide an explanation and Geras finds it in the human capacity for evil.

The evolution of Geras points to the contemporary political pressures that find their expression in his opposition to a Marxist analysis of the Holocaust. A one-time member of the editorial board of *New Left Review*, an admirer of Rosa Luxemburg and a self-professed Marxist, Geras, like a number of other one-time radicals, swung behind the US-led war on Iraq and the “war on terror”.

Geras’ positions on the Holocaust are set out in an article entitled “Marxists before the Holocaust” published in the July-August 1997 edition of *New Left Review*. The article is devoted to a critique of Ernest Mandel’s analysis of the Holocaust. According to Geras, “the Holocaust is still presented by him [Mandel] as being an effect of *capitalism*; as the product of its global irrationality, its partial (functional) rationality, and the racist ideology generated by its imperialist forms.” But any explanation developed along these lines, he insists, will not suffice.

When approaching the Holocaust “there is something here that is not about modernity; something that is not about capitalism either. It is about humanity.” And Marxists, he maintains, have been reluctant to face up to this “monstrosity of radical evil.”

This takes us back to the age-old argument that socialism and the advance of civilisation is, in the end, impossible because there is lodged within mankind itself a kernel of evil that can never be overcome. Towards the conclusion of his article, Geras writes: “Writing about the Jewish question, both Mandel and Trotsky argued that there could be no satisfactory resolution of it except through the achievement of socialism. All of the foregoing indicates, I hope, the shortcomings I see in that formula.”

In his *New Left Review* article, Geras also pointed to the “servile complicity and lack of critical judgement of tens of thousands of people” that made the Holocaust possible.

He elaborated further on this issue in a book published the following year, 1998: “This was a world populated not by monsters and brutes—or not only by monsters and brutes, for in some necessary and still usable moral meaning there were more than enough of these—but by beings who were precisely human beings, with characteristics that are all too recognisable, human vices and weaknesses amongst them, common frailties.

“Most easily recognizable in that regard are the bystanders: those who, not directly active in the process of mass murder, did nothing to try to stop it either. These are the people who affect not to know, or who do not care to know and so do not find out; or who do know but do not care anyway, who are indifferent; or who are afraid, for themselves, or for others, or who feel powerless; or who are weighed down, distracted, or just occupied (as most of us) in pursuing the aims of their own lives. Such people formed the background to the tragedy of European Jews and they continue everywhere to provide an enabling condition for other tragedies large and small, and for great but avoidable suffering. The ubiquity of the bystander surely testifies to a remarkable capacity in members of our species to live comfortably with the enormous sufferings of others.” [20]

So in the end it’s not just the “monsters” who are responsible, humanity itself is to blame.

Let us examine this issue more closely, for in doing so we can draw out some of the most important political and historical lessons of the Holocaust for our own times.

We are, quite naturally, horrified and appalled both by what took place, and, most importantly by the response of the “bystanders” who did nothing to prevent it. But the key question is what lessons do we draw? Our task here, as Spinoza put it in a phrase frequently recalled by Trotsky, is not to laugh, not to weep but to understand.

For Geras the callous indifference is rooted in human nature itself, along with the capacity for radical evil.

The Marxist analysis draws very different conclusions. The shocking indifference that helped to make the Holocaust possible was one of the most tragic consequences of the historic defeat of the German workers’ movement that opened the way for the coming to power of Hitler and the Nazis.

A critical public opinion, in the sphere of politics, social issues or for that matter the arts, is not the outcome of the opinions and decisions of individuals as individuals. The shaping of the outlook of individuals is itself a social process. And the key question here was the destruction and atomisation by Nazism of the socialist workers’ movement. This movement was the bearer of the highest achievements of human thought and culture. With its destruction, other processes shaped society. As Trotsky put it: “Everything that should have been eliminated from the national organism in the form of cultural excrement in the course of the normal development of society has now come gushing out from the throat; capitalist society is puking up the undigested barbarism. Such is the physiology of National Socialism.” [21]

What are the lessons for today? Can we somehow hope that the conditions that led to the Holocaust are now well and truly behind us, that such a catastrophe could never happen again and, that whatever problems it confronts, humanity will somehow muddle through? Hardly.

The inter-imperialist rivalries and antagonisms that led to 30 years of war in the first half of the twentieth century and out of which the Holocaust arose are ever more apparent. Likewise, the economic contradictions of capitalism, far from having been overcome, have exploded. The lives of billions of working people all over the world are dominated by economic uncertainty as social and economic inequality grows.

These contradictions will produce a mass upsurge of the working class—the signs of this can already be seen. But in and of itself that is not sufficient. The political situation is characterised by the absence of an independent mass socialist movement. The longer this situation continues, the more the historic crisis of the capitalist system will assume increasingly malignant political forms.

What is our perspective? The resolution of the crisis of leadership through the building of the world party of socialist revolution, the International Committee of the Fourth International. In the words of the founding document of our movement, words that take on even greater significance than when they were written: “The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership.”

Notes:

1. Alex Callinicos, “Plumbing the Depths: Marxism and the Holocaust” in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol.14, No. 2 (2001). [back]
2. Enzo Traverso, *Understanding the Nazi Genocide: Marxism after Auschwitz* (Pluto Press London 1999), pp.2-3. [back]
3. Ibid., p. 3. [back]
4. Enzo Traverso, *The Jews and Germany* (University of Nebraska Press Lincoln 1995), p. 127. [back]
5. Traverso, *Understanding the Nazi Genocide*, p. 4. [back]
6. Leon Trotsky, *On the Jewish Question* (Merit Pamphlet New York 1970), pp. 29-30. [back]
7. Traverso, *Understanding the Nazi Genocide*, p. 5. [back]
8. Ibid., p. 17. [back]
9. Winston Churchill, *The River War* (Kessinger Publishing 2004), p. 161. These issues have lost none of their contemporary relevance. If you go to *Amazon.com* you will find a review of Churchill’s book by Newt Gingrich, written on July 22, 2002, that is, between the invasion of Afghanistan and the launching of the war against Iraq. Gingrich writes that it is a “very useful book as we think about the complexities of the 21st century third world and its problems of poverty, violence, disorganization

and ruthless petty tyrants.” [back]

10. Cited in Jürgen Zimmerer, “The birth of the *Ostland* out of the spirit of colonialism: a postcolonial perspective on the Nazi policy of conquest and extermination” in *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2005, pp. 209-210. [back]

11. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt Brace and Company 1979), p. 185. [back]

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13. Ibid., p. 20. [back]

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16. Ibid., p. 25 [back]

17. Ibid., p. 54. [back]

18. Ibid., p. 59. [back]

19. Ibid., p. 60. [back]

20. Norman Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy After the Holocaust* (Verso London 1998), p. 96. [back]

21. Leon Trotsky, “What is National Socialism?” in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (Penguin Harmondsworth 1975), p. 413. [back]



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