

German journalist Götz Aly denounces pension system

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In a contribution for the *Berliner Zeitung* two weeks ago entitled, “Children, Children!”, the German journalist and publicist Götz Aly lashed out at the pension guarantee introduced in 2009 by the former grand coalition government of the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union.

Aly described the pension guarantee as a “misanthropic” and “disgraceful” measure aimed at contributing to the “politically desired redistribution of wealth from the young to the elderly”. Following a storm of protest from *Berliner Zeitung* readers who quite correctly interpreted Aly’s comments as an attack on the German pension system, Aly returned to the theme in his latest column for the newspaper.

Aly makes clear in his second article that his bone of contention is not merely the pension guarantee—a superficial concession designed to ensure that wage-linked pensions did not sink too drastically against a background of dramatically declining wage levels. Aly is after bigger fish: he is seeking to subvert the pension scheme as a whole. The main problem with the current German pension scheme, according to Aly in his second article, is that it has its roots in the pension system introduced in 1940 by the leading National Socialist and head of the German Labour Front, Robert Ley.

Anyone shocked at Götz Aly’s attempt to justify his criticisms of the German pension system with allusions to the policies of the Nazis is no doubt unfamiliar with his work. Aly has won a dubious reputation in recent years for his rewriting of the German Nazi dictatorship—most notably his contention that the evil at the heart of National Socialism was its striving for social equality!

While all serious researchers of Hitler fascism have acknowledged the class character of the NS regime as a violent, repressive dictatorship aimed at defending the interests of German big business and the banks, Aly takes a very different approach. As he told the newspaper *Die Welt*, “I knew better, I was disturbed from the start by the one-sided delegation of blame on German industry, on the banks, etc.”

It was in order to correct this “one-sided delegation of

blame on German industry, on the banks, etc.” that he wrote his book, *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* published in 2005. In Aly’s view, what needs to be emphasised about National Socialism is not the brutality of a regime based on concentration camps and torture chambers which crushed the organised worker’s movement and led Europe and the world into the most destructive war in history.

According to Aly, Hitler’s ability to win support for his plans for a Thousand Year Reich had less to do with the uprooting of all democratic rights and the imposition of a repressive dictatorship but rather the dictator’s promotion of a modern welfare state aimed at benefiting the entire German population. Aly wrote in his book, “Whoever seeks to understand the destructive success of National Socialism must also examine the reverse side of the policy of destruction...the modern, social political, warmed-over dictatorship based on favours.” For Aly, National Socialism represented an unprecedented experiment in the equitable distribution of social wealth. National Socialism created “a hitherto unknown level of equality and social mobility towards the top.”

There is some justification for Aly’s claim regarding social mobility during the reign of the National Socialists. After all, the Hitler dictatorship was able to sweep the dregs of society and the most disorientated layers of the middle class into positions of prominence. But that did not change the fundamental class character of his regime. As Leon Trotsky pointed out in his writings on fascism: “...fascism in power is least of all the rule of the petty bourgeoisie. On the contrary it is the most ruthless dictatorship of monopoly capital.”

In order to head off growing opposition to its dictatorship the National Socialists also made a few minor social concessions to some layers of workers at various points in their period of rule. But to argue that the NS regime undertook any serious redistribution of social wealth in favour of the broad masses of society flies in the face of all evidence and existing historical research.

Already in his analysis of fascism, entitled *Behemoth* (1944), the social democratic historian Franz Neumann had demonstrated the essential class character of the Nazi regime. Neumann pointed out that the destruction of the organised worker's movement by Hitler's Brown Shirts in 1933 formed the basis for a huge boost in the fortunes of big business. A wage freeze was imposed for skilled workers in 1933 at a level approximately 20 percent lower than the wage rates paid in 1928. At the same time the National Socialists set up a large-scale program of low-paid public works for millions of the unemployed. Freed from any commitment to assist in unemployment payments, employer profits soared.

Aly's many falsifications and distortions of empirical data in order to make his case for the alleged policies of social equality under Hitler have been challenged by a number of prominent contemporary writers and historians such as Christoph Buchheim, Richard Evans and Adam Tooze. Tooze, author of the valuable study of fascist economic policy *The Wages of Destruction*, concludes that Aly's claims are "contrary to all empirical evidence and to any body of economic theory."

In his own polemic with Aly, Tooze comments that the National Socialist dictatorship was not designed or directed to coerce the ruling business elite, instead, "...on the whole the industrial politics of the Third Reich rested on a mutually profitable partnership between the public authorities and the business community..."

Tooze goes on to draw a parallel between the arguments used by Aly and the notorious American historian Daniel Goldhagen. "Whereas Goldhagen spoke in undifferentiated terms of Germans as eliminationist anti-Semites, Aly is no less blanket in his condemnation of Germans as witless, apolitical animals."

Tooze also points to the political agenda motivating Aly. The journalist "is overt in his instrumentalisation of the atrocious history of the Third Reich for present-day polemical purposes." Aly represents "a segment of the German left which now takes flight into an absolute rejection of the welfare state, legitimised by Aly's association of social egalitarianism with National Socialism."

In the course of defending his book *Hitler's Beneficiaries* from its critics Aly continually denied that he had any political axe to grind and vigorously refuted claims that his depiction of National Socialism was in any way bound up with an aversion to the modern welfare state. In fact Aly's recent articles for the *Berliner Zeitung* make clear that he indeed has a very definite political agenda.

Tooze's remarks on a "segment of the German left" refer to Aly's own political biography. At the end of the 1960s

and the start of the 1970s Götz Aly was a member of the Maoist *Roten Hilfe* and founder of the radical magazine *Hochschulkampf*. According to his own recollections Aly sympathised at the time with the petit-bourgeois terrorist group, the Red Army Faction.

Today Aly moves in different circles. In his latest column for the *Berliner Zeitung* Aly writes that he has received support for his attacks on the German pension system from an "acquaintance" in the conservative Christian Social Union. Aly also notes approvingly that the former SPD Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück previously had vigorously condemned his own government's agreement to the pension guarantee. The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk is also on record expressing views similar to those now put forward by Aly.

Aly's tirades against the German pension system coincide with a systematic campaign by governments and leading politicians in Germany and across Europe to dismantle the existing system of pensions. Based on an initiative from the SDP, the German government has already increased the average retirement age to 67. A Green Paper issued by the European Union in July proposed increasing the retirement age to 70 by the middle of the century. In the US a similar debate speculates on raising the retirement age to 73.

In the wake of the financial crisis and in response to the demographic trend whereby people in developed countries live longer, ruling elites across the globe have decided that a pension capable of providing a decent income for those who have worked their entire lives is a luxury no longer to be tolerated. This is the chorus to be heard from cabinets across Europe and beyond, and Aly's latest outburst comes as music to their ears.

Götz Aly speaks on behalf of an increasingly unstable petit-bourgeois social layer that tossed aside its youthful radicalism a long time ago and has been able to forge a lucrative career during the past three decades—a period marked by accelerating social polarisation. This social layer is amply represented in both the SPD and the Green Party. Today Aly and his kind regard the social gains of the working class, including an adequate pension, to be the main threat to their status and privileges.



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