

German president uses Auschwitz commemoration to justify militarism

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30 January 2015

On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by Soviet troops, German President Joachim Gauck made a commemorative speech on Tuesday in parliament. The sermonizing tone of the former East German clergyman was difficult to bear. But even worse was the cynicism with which Gauck used the Holocaust memorial day to legitimise the reemergence of German militarism.

The key promise after Auschwitz was “never again,” Gauck said, before responding, “but what is it worth?” He cited the German-Jewish jurist Thomas Buergenthal, who as an eleven-year-old just survived the death march at Auschwitz, before emigrating to the United States and working as a judge at the International Court of Justice.

Ten years ago, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Buergenthal declared that the expression “never again” didn’t amount to much. “Were there not the genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur?” Gauck quoted Buergenthal, and Gauck added “were there not Srebrenica and today Syria and Iraq?”

“Even if here the crimes did and do not approach the dimensions of National Socialist mass murder,” Gauck went on, it was nevertheless terribly discouraging when, as Buergenthal said, genocide and mass murder have become almost routine, when the world declares “never again,” but closes its eyes in the face of the next genocide.

A year ago, Gauck announced the end of German military restraint at the Munich Security Conference and posed the question, “Do we Germans concern ourselves so intensively with our past because we are looking for an excuse to remain outside of the problems

and the conflicts in the world today?”

On Tuesday, he posed the same question but in a different form: “Are we then ready and able for prevention, so that it never even gets to the point of mass murder? Are we at all in a position to halt these kinds of crimes and to punish them? Is the desire sometimes lacking to intervene against such crimes against humanity?”

Gauck’s demagoguery in support of war follows a well-trodden and bizarre logic. Like no other country, Germany has experienced the crimes of fascism and the Holocaust. It was liberated by external military intervention. It established a stable democracy in the post-war years and must now rearm its military and intervene militarily everywhere in the name of human rights.

Gauck is using the terrible past crimes of German imperialism to prepare similar crimes in the future. His pious moralising plays an important role. He speaks about the Holocaust entirely separate from any political or historical context, as if evil suddenly overwhelmed ordinary people. His argumentation remains on the lowest level, never going beyond moral disgust at the incomprehensible depth of evil.

In the postwar period, the German population had not been willing to engage with the crimes of the Nazi era, said Gauck, failing to mention that the government of Konrad Adenauer was full of old Nazis and that at every level of society in West Germany, in business, politics, media, judiciary and universities, Nazi circles were in control.

Instead, Gauck pinned the blame on the ordinary people. Although Hannah Arendt had published her book on the “banality of evil” very early on, he said, it was only later that the culpability of the ordinary citizen, who had committed themselves to a criminal

führer and refused to take any responsibility for the consequences, was examined.

It had taken some time before the Germans began to accept, Gauck said, “that it was entirely normal men and women who lost their humanity, their consciousness and their morals, often people from the local neighbourhood, or even people from the same family.”

Gauck repeated such arguments in order to deny any connection between fascism and capitalism.

In order for the Nazis to be able to carry out their murderous anti-Semitism, a whole series of major societal changes were necessary. The most important were the destruction of the organised workers movement, which in Germany, in particular, formed a massive bulwark against anti-Semitism and war, and the beginning of the war of extermination against the Soviet Union.

It was once well-known among politically educated and class conscious people that the rise of European fascism after the First World War was a direct response by the capitalist order to the revolutionary danger of the socialist mass movement of workers which threatened it.

Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany and Franco in Spain mobilised the enraged middle class against the socialist workers movement. In this, anti-Semitism proved an effective means, just as the agitation against Muslims does today.

With the deepening of social tensions, in particular after the stock market crash of 1929, support for fascism within the ruling elite grew. Hitler did not have to violently seize power—it was handed to him by the highest level of the state, business and military in January 1933. Two months later, all of the bourgeois parties voted for a law giving Hitler emergency powers. The Communist Party, the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions were destroyed.

In contrast to Gauck’s disparaging talk of the “ordinary man,” it remains an historical fact that the workers movement in the 1930s opposed the rise of Hitler. This is not changed by the fact that the KPD, SPD and trade union leadership utterly failed, demobilised the working class with a false policy and thereby made it possible for Hitler to take power without a mass movement opposing him.

In the final analysis, the Holocaust was the price that

the Jewish population and the whole of humanity paid for the failure of the working class to overthrow capitalism.

But even after the Nazis had the reins of state power firmly in their grasp, they were not in fact able to impose their murderous fantasies unhindered. For that, the world war was necessary. The extermination of the Jews merged with the war of extermination in the east, which aimed to physically eliminate the political and intellectual leadership of the Soviet Union so as to secure German dominance for centuries. The cold-blooded murder of six million Jews was the high point of a campaign of extermination in which millions of Communists, partisans, intellectuals and ordinary people were killed in Poland, throughout eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union.

With its offensive against Russia in Ukraine, where it is collaborating closely with former allies of the Nazis, German imperialism is today setting out on the same course. The same is true of the Middle East and Africa, where Berlin is backing ever more openly criminal wars under the pretext of humanitarian intervention. Gauck’s cynical attempt to justify the reemergence of German imperialism with the slogan “never again another Auschwitz” must be decisively rejected.



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