Paul Hanebrink's *A Specter Haunting Europe*: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism

Part 2: Stalinism, communism and anti-Semitism

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Hanebrink frames his book as an attempt to understand why, even though "Communism is gone… the idea of Judeo-Bolshevism refuses to go away." This framework, based on the false equation of Stalinism with communism, leads to a significant and misleading omission in his discussion of the reemergence of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe after World War II and internationally today.

Echoing the works of figures like the anti-Communist Polish-American sociologist Jan Tomasz Gross, Hanebrink's response to the question of the persistence of anti-Semitism largely boils down to the presumably insurmountable popular prejudice against Jews in Eastern and Central Europe, which the Stalinists had to take into account. The historical record, however, completely contradicts this framework. The European socialist movement had a long and proud record of principled opposition to anti-Semitism, culminating in the Bolsheviks' struggle against anti-Jewish pogroms in 1917-1922, a struggle that Hanebrink completely ignores.

The Russian Revolutions of 1917 for the first time granted the Jews of the former Russian Empire full democratic rights, putting an end to decades of state-sponsored discrimination. Marxist revolutionaries had long understood the struggle against anti-Semitism as a crucial component of the struggle for a socialist, internationalist consciousness in the working class. Lenin, in particular, wrote numerous articles on this subject and insisted on an intransigent Bolshevik line in the struggle against anti-Semitism. (See also: Anti-Semitism and the Russian Revolution)

Well aware of anti-Semitic prejudices, particularly in the rural population, which lent itself to manipulation and mobilization by the counterrevolutionary forces opposing the Red Army, the Soviet military leadership sharply prosecuted everyone guilty of crimes against Jews. The early Soviet government also made significant efforts to distribute educational literature on the topic, including among the rural population. Throughout the 1920s, the Soviet Union was the only state in the world that sponsored schools in Yiddish, as well as academic institutions devoted especially to the study of Jewish history, culture and language.

On this basis, the Bolsheviks and the Soviet Union established their immense authority and prestige among the Jewish masses internationally. This was also why the anti-Semitic policies pursued by Stalinist governments after the war produced such disbelief and horror.

Such a profound shift cannot be explained without a discussion of the emergence of Stalinism. The seeds for a revival of anti-Semitism were laid with the increasingly nationalist orientation of Soviet policy, both domestic and foreign, on the basis of the Stalinist program of "socialism in one country." Though only with hesitancy and slowly, the Stalinists deployed anti-Semitism in their struggle against the Left Opposition under Leon Trotsky's leadership, which opposed the nationalist betrayal of the revolution and insisted on an orientation toward world socialist revolution.

The association between the "Jewish" Left Opposition and its program of revolutionary internationalism was the political basis for the resurgence of the old Russian nationalist and anti-Semitic trope of the "rootless, cosmopolitan Jew." Precisely because Stalinism represented, not an extension of, but a reaction against, the communist revolution of 1917, the Judeo-Bolshevik myth found a fertile basis within the Stalinist parties and bureaucracies.

Explaining this development in 1937, Trotsky pointed to the long tradition of Russian chauvinism, which had been historically associated with anti-Semitism, within the Russian peasantry, sections of the intelligentsia and urban petty bourgeoisie, as well as the most backward layers of the working class. It was these layers that the bureaucracy deliberately whipped up and mobilized against the Left Opposition. Trotsky wrote:

> In order the more sharply to demonstrate to the workers the differences between the 'old' course and the "new," the Jews, even when unreservedly devoted to the general line, were removed from responsible party and Soviet posts. Not only in the country but even in the Moscow factories the baiting of the Opposition back in 1926 often assumed a thoroughly obvious anti-Semitic character. Many agitators spoke brazenly: "The Jews are rioting." I received hundreds of letters deploring the anti-Semitic methods in the struggle with the Opposition. At one of the sessions of the Politburo I wrote Bukharin a note: "You cannot help knowing that even in Moscow in the struggle with the Opposition, methods of Black Hundred demagogues (anti-Semitism, etc.) are utilized." Bukharin answered me evasively on that same piece of paper: 'Individual instances, of course, are possible'...
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> In the months of preparations for the expulsions of the Opposition from the party, the arrests, the exiles (in the second half of 1927), the anti-Semitic agitation assumed a thoroughly unbridled character. The slogan, "Beat the Opposition," often took on the complexion of the old slogan "Beat the Jews and save Russia." The matter went so far that Stalin was constrained to come out with a printed statement which declared: "We fight against Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev not because they are Jews but because they are Oppositionists," etc. To every politically thinking person it was completely clear that this consciously equivocal declaration, directed against "excesses" of anti-

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> Semitism, did at the same time with complete premeditation nourish it. "Do not forget that the leaders of the Opposition are—Jews." That was the *meaning* of the statement of Stalin, published in all Soviet journals.

The question of anti-Semitism reemerged sharply during the Great Terror of the 1930s, something Hanebrink completely omits. The terror liquidated virtually the entire cadre and leadership of the Bolshevik Party of 1917: some 30,000 Left Oppositionists, and hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries, Marxist intellectuals and workers, from all over Europe, including Germany, Poland, Yugoslavia, and the Baltic states.

The Moscow Trials of 1936 and 1937 against the most prominent leaders of the October Revolution had definite anti-Semitic undertones, as Trotsky pointed out at the time: Out of the 16 defendants in the first Moscow Trial, no less than 10 were Jewish; in the second, 8 out of 17 defendants had Jewish origins. Moreover, in the denunciations of Lev Sedov, Trotsky's son and close collaborator, who was murdered in Paris by a Stalinist agent, the Soviet press suddenly started using the name "Bronstein," a name that Lev Sedov had never used, but that had become a code word for anti-Semitic slurs against Trotsky and Trotskyism.

Subsequent developments would fully confirm Trotsky's analysis. A defector later revealed that in 1939, a confidential decree of the party's Central Committee reestablished quotas for the admission of Jews at educational institutions. (These quotas would eventually become official state policy in the Soviet Union.) Jews were also removed from the main representative bodies of the Soviet government, and its diplomatic corps.

These tendencies were exacerbated by the war. While Red Army journalists were the first to document and report on the genocide of the Eastern European Jewish population by the Nazis, many of their reports were published only in censored form. The "Black Book" of Eastern European Jewry, compiled by the writers and journalists Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg, was the first comprehensive documentation of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Yet almost as soon as it was printed in the USSR in 1946, it was banned and printed copies were destroyed.

However, although anti-Semitic discrimination became increasingly integrated into state policy, there was still no open agitation of an anti-Semitic character. Moreover, as Hanebrink acknowledges, for masses of workers and intellectuals, including the survivors of the Holocaust, the fact that the Red Army had liberated the Nazi death camps and Eastern Europe as a whole from fascism, enormously enhanced the prestige of the Soviet Union.

In Poland, the Stalinist government initially pursued a course that sharply differed from its later overtly anti-Semitic policies. Not only were Jews granted equal democratic rights. Up until 1948, the government also allowed for significant cultural autonomy, sponsored various cultural programs in Yiddish and supported the work of the Central Committee of the Jews of Poland, which, among other things, uncovered the hidden archive of Emanuel Ringelblum's underground work in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The shift toward overt anti-Semitism in the USSR and throughout Eastern Europe only occurred with the outbreak of the Cold War in 1947-48. In the Soviet Union, Stalin launched a renewed series of purges, this time with an overtly anti-Semitic character, targeting the intelligentsia, above all.

The remnants of Yiddish life in the USSR were destroyed, with the state's disbanding of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the murder of its head, the actor Solomon Mikhoels, in 1948; and the subsequent murder of the USSR's leading Yiddish writers. Jews were portrayed as "cosmopolitans" and "Zionists." Similar developments took place in Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, Hungary and other countries. (At the same time, the Soviet Union supported the founding of the State of Israel, making clear that what was involved was not anti-Zionism, but anti-Semitism.) The purges did not end until Stalin's death in March 1953.

The purges occurred under conditions of a severe social and political crisis. For years after the war, the vast majority of the Soviet and Eastern European population continued to live in, or on the brink of, starvation, while the bureaucracy enjoyed vast social privileges. The purges' underlying cause was the profound fear within the bureaucracy that these conditions would lead to a reemergence of left-wing tendencies within the intelligentsia and the working class that would be directed against the Stalinist bureaucracy. As George Kennan, the architect of US imperialist policy in the Cold War recognized all too well, "Trotsky, and all that Trotsky represented, was Stalin's real fear."

And, indeed, throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, a series of left-wing youth groups emerged in the USSR. Several of these groups proclaimed as their program and demands the return of the USSR and the party to the "true Leninism" that they felt the party had betrayed. Politically, the most significant among them was the Union for the Struggle for the Cause of the Revolution, which sought to align its program with the perspectives of Leon Trotsky, even though almost none of his writings were available to them.

Founded in 1950 by a group of 16- and 17-year-olds, they read Marx, Engels, Lenin's *State and Revolution* and John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World.* Their leader, Boris Slutsky, was the son of a supporter of Trotsky, who had fallen in the Second World War. Through his father's library, Slutsky had gotten hold of Lenin's testament, as well as writings by Trotsky whom he, according to one of the surviving members of that group, considered to be the "greatest historical figure." Slutsky was determined to dedicate his life to the "struggle against the existing Soviet state stratum and to the resurrection of historical truth about Trotsky" who had "suffered for the cause of 'world revolution'." The group's aim was to "prepare the cadre for the impending world revolution." [2]

The group was violently suppressed, and its leaders were executed in 1952. Several of their members happened to be Jewish, and the interrogation records show that for the NKVD, the accusations of "Trotskyism" and "cosmopolitanism" were closely intertwined.

Similar political motivations and dynamics underlay the anti-Semitic campaigns by the bureaucracies throughout Eastern Europe. The promotion of virulent anti-Semitism, especially in Poland, always coincided with a resurgence in working-class struggles: whether in 1956—the year of the Hungarian Revolution and an uprising in Poland—or 1968, when a wave of working-class struggles internationally shook both imperialism and the Stalinist bureaucracies.

The social composition of the bureaucracy and the Stalinist parties also increasingly contributed to the blossoming of anti-Semitic conceptions. Their postwar leaderships were constituted of those who had helped implement the Great Terror, and the parties themselves recruited, to a significant extent, from sections of the nationalist intelligentsia and the rural population that had a long tradition of anti-Semitism.

In other words, it was not despite the fact that "communism" collapsed that the "Judeo-Bolshevik myth" remains alive and well. On the contrary: it was precisely because, in the form of Stalinism, a nationalist counterrevolution took place, directed against the Marxist and internationalist program of the 1917 revolution, that anti-Semitic and nationalist forces were allowed to persist and flourish in the Stalinist-ruled countries. And it was because not "communism," but Stalinism collapsed, that the specter of socialist revolution again started to haunt the bourgeoisie, prompting it, yet again, to resort to promoting the toxic combination of fascism, anti-Communism, and anti-Semitism.

This process began in the 1980s. The second half of the 1980s was marked, not only by the terminal crisis of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, which the bureaucracy solved by smashing

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the last remnants of the deformed and degenerated workers' states and restoring capitalism. Parallel to this process, fundamental ideological shifts were taking place within the bourgeoisie and the academic intelligentsia. Hanebrink hints at them, with his very brief discussion of both the "Historikerstreit" in Germany and the debate about Arno Mayer's book *Why did the Heavens Not Darken* (1988), but his account remains fundamentally inadequate.

In the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s , the German historian Ernst Nolte deliberately used the very same arguments that the Nazis had used to justify their own crimes: that their policies constituted a necessary and legitimate response to the threat of "Asiatic" Bolshevism. The crimes of the Nazis, Nolte wrote, constituted a "fear-borne reaction to the acts of annihilation that took place during the Russian Revolution." [3] Though Nolte and his supporters lost the *Historikerstreit* in the 1980s, as Hanebrink points out, his revisionist arguments have become the ideological basis for powerful tendencies within the national bourgeoisies and governments throughout Eastern and Central Europe since the 1990s. They are central to the outlook and far-right propaganda of extreme nationalist governments like the Orbán government in Hungary and that of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland.

Today, in Germany itself, a figure like Jörg Baberowski at Berlin's Humboldt University can proclaim that "historically speaking, Nolte was right," without encountering any kind of opposition from the academic and media establishment. It is a serious taint on Hanebrink's book that he does not even mention Baberowski's name, or the neofascist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) which has been deliberately turned into the main opposition party in the German parliament. [3]

The fact that this kind of open neofascist revisionism has become established is not least of all bound up with the dominance of the anti-Marxist and antisocialist conceptions and narratives of the 20th century, including of the sources of fascism and anti-Semitism. In this regard, too, the 1980s were a turning point. The vicious attacks by figures such as Daniel Goldhagen and Christopher Browning on Arno Mayer's *Why did the Heavens not Darken*, which Hanebrink summarizes very briefly, and without taking a clear position on them, were symptomatic of a much broader shift.

Exploiting certain weaknesses in Mayer's account, which insisted that the primary motivation for the genocide of European Jewry by the Nazis was their anti-Bolshevism, Browning and Goldhagen vehemently denied that any relationship existed between the rise of the Nazis and their genocidal hatred of the Jews, and the bourgeoisie's reaction against the threat of socialist revolution and the Marxist workers' movement.

By the mid-1990s, Browning sought to portray the Holocaust as the outcome of the actions and thoughts of "ordinary men" in "modern society". Meanwhile, Goldhagen, in his *Willing Executioners*, claimed that the Holocaust had been a "German national project," supported and implemented by "ordinary Germans." Such completely ahistorical and anti-Marxist conceptions have since come to dominate academic circles. They have done much to disarm workers and intellectuals in the face of the onslaught of fascist forces, including at the universities. [4]

Against this background, there is some significance to Hanebrink's attempt to draw attention, once more, to the connection between counterrevolution and anti-Semitism. This attempt, however, is ultimately half-hearted: failing to go beyond the framework of the anti-Communism and the anti-Marxism prevalent in academia, Hanebrink's account is not only inadequate and flawed, it also remains toothless, in the face of the very right-wing forces whose ideology and resurgence he seeks to address.

While Hanebrink's book deserves to be read, it should be seen, above all, as a means of encouraging further probing into the political and ideological origins of modern anti-Semitism, and the way forward in the fight against fascism today. This will require a much more serious and deeper examination than that provided by Hanebrink himself.

Endnotes

[1] Tumanova, Alla, "Shag vpravo, shag vlevo", in: I. A. Mazus (ed.), *Poka svobodoiu gorim. O molodezhnom antistalininskom dvizhenii kontsa 40-kh – nachala 50-kh godov*, Moskva: Nezavisimoe izdatel'stvo "Pik" 2004, pp. 223, 337.

[2] Ernst Nolte, "Between Historical Legend and Revisionism?", in: *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the controversy concerning the singularity of the Holocaust*, transl. by James Knowlton and Truett Cates. New Jersey: Humanities Press 1993, p. 14.

[3] It should be noted that Paul Hanebrink failed to respond to an email by the WSWS, drawing his attention to a $300,000 grant that Princeton University recently provided to Baberowski's project on "dictatorships in transition." See also: Princeton University provides $300,000 in funding for right-wing historian and propagandist Jörg Baberowski.

[4] For an analysis of Goldhagen, see David North. "The Myth of Ordinary Germans: A Critical Review of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* " in *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, Mehring Books 2014, pp. 277-300.

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