

1619 Project director speaks at New York University

# Nikole Hannah-Jones, race theory and the Holocaust

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On the evening of November 18, *New York Times* staff writer and 1619 Project director Nikole Hannah-Jones addressed an audience at New York University on the subject of the *Times*' initiative marking the 400th anniversary of the landing of the first African slaves in Virginia. NYU President Andrew Hamilton introduced the event, stating that the 1619 project had the trademarks of "the best pieces of journalism." The event was moderated by Fordham Professor and MSNBC commentator Christina Greer.

There was not a single statement made by Hannah-Jones that evening, on historical issues, that withstands serious examination.

She presented her personal opinions—and, in the absence of historically informed substance, that is all they were—on the "undemocratic" character of the American Revolution and Constitution. The white working class opposes social programs because of a conscious desire to "punish black people," she claimed, adding that "whiteness" is in the best interest of white people: "So we hear again and again, why are poor white people voting against their interests? Well, it's assuming that whiteness isn't in your best interest. And it is. And they know that. And so we cannot rid ourselves of that."

Hannah-Jones never explained what this "best interest" actually is. The assumption underlying her ungrounded assertion is that racial self-identification is a self-supporting interest *in itself*—indeed, the supreme interest that overwhelmed all others.

The intellectually bankrupt, historically false and politically reactionary character of Hannah-Jones' race-fixated conceptions found its most disturbing and chilling expression when she turned to the subject of the anti-Semitism and genocide carried out by the Nazi regime in Germany. Hannah-Jones stated:

I've thought a lot about this. I'm reading this book now comparing what Nazi Germany did after the Holocaust to the American South or America. And one thing you realize is Germany, though they didn't initially want to, dealt with a cleansing of everything that had to do with Nazism and in some ways had a reckoning of what the country did. But that's also because there's really no Jewish people left in Germany, so it's easy to feel that way when you don't have to daily look at the people who you committed these atrocities to, versus in the United States where we are a constant reminder.

It is hard to know where to begin with Hannah-Jones' head-spinning combination of ignorance, historical falsification and anti-scientific race theory. Failing to work through the implications of her opinions, Hannah-

Jones came dangerously close to endorsing the conception that genocide, by ending the daily encounter of Germans and Jews, was a solution to inherent racism. Hannah-Jones does not, of course, support genocide. However, she argues that once the Nazis killed the Jews, it eliminated the source of the underlying racial problem and, therefore, anti-Semitism disappeared in Germany. In the United States, on the other hand, racism has persisted because whites still have to look at and interact with blacks. There is nothing in this twisted narrative with which a Nazi would disagree.

But it is a narrative that has nothing to do with real history. As a preliminary matter, Hannah-Jones' assertion that there was "a reckoning of what the country did" is a grotesque distortion of post-war German politics. It is a well-established fact that the vast majority of Nazi officials were never held to account for their crimes. Many leading Nazis, including individuals who played a major role in the extermination of the Jews, led successful political, corporate and academic careers after 1945.

With the complicity of the United States, the denazification program initially implemented after Germany's surrender was abandoned so that it would not interfere with the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The new federal government, established in 1949 under the leadership of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, provided a safe haven for countless Nazis.

Adenauer's principal adviser, Hans Globke, had played a central role in drafting the anti-Jewish laws of the Nazi regime. The new head of the secret police of West Germany, Reinhard Gehlen, who had been in charge of intelligence operations of the German Nazi army on the Eastern Front during World War II. And from 1966 to 1969, a former Nazi, Kurt Kiesinger, was the country's chancellor. The fight for a reckoning with the legacy of Nazism began in earnest only in the late 1960s, as a consequence of the political radicalization of German students and youth.

Hannah-Jones spoke flippantly about the Holocaust, tossing off her half-baked impressions about a crime of staggering dimensions. Condemnation of the vicious racism and oppression of African-Americans in the American South (and throughout the United States) does not require, let alone justify, facile comparisons to the Holocaust. In the span of six years, the Nazis mobilized the industrial power of an advanced 20th century economy to systematically exterminate, with bullets and poison gas, European Jewry. The Nazis murdered 6 million Jews, killing up to 90 percent of the total Jewish population in each of the countries they invaded.

Hannah-Jones' explanation of the Holocaust, and the alleged absence of anti-Semitism in present-day Germany, proceeded entirely from racist premises. The mass murder of the Jews, she implied, was the outcome of an inherent racial conflict between Germans and Jews. She accepts the fundamental framework of Nazi racial theory: that German Jews constituted a race and not a religious community, that Jewish existence

and interests were organically antagonistic to those of Germans, that hostility to “the other” was inherent within both groups, and that violent conflict between the races was inevitable.

This explanation of the Holocaust is based, not on a study of objective facts and social forces, but on racialist mythology. German anti-Semites did not hate Jews because they could see them. The growth of anti-Semitism, as a political movement in the late 19th and early 20th century, arose not out of inherent racial differences between Jews and Germans (or, for that matter, the French). There is no such thing as a Jewish or Aryan race. Politically motivated anti-Semitic movements were a product of growing class antagonisms within capitalist society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and efforts by the ruling elites to break up the growth of the socialist movement and the class struggle.

The main function of political anti-Semitism, as it developed in Germany, Austria-Hungary, France and other European countries, was to deflect growing social anger against capitalism in a reactionary direction, to eliminate the class struggle from politics and replace it with a mythologized struggle between the races. The concept of inherent “racial” differences between Germans and Jews, where none existed, was developed as a pseudo-scientific mythology—supported by the grotesque falsification of evolutionary theory known as Social Darwinism [i.e., “the survival of the fittest”]—to obscure the real economic, political and class structure of society.

It took a great deal of work by reactionary intellectuals in the nineteenth century to lay the theoretical foundations for the growth of anti-Semitic movements. The Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács explained in *The Destruction of Reason* how the racial theorists of the late nineteenth century sought to “substitute race for class in sociology.” Lukács wrote: “This reversal of the relation between politics and economics was connected with the central issue in Social Darwinism, namely the endeavor to grasp biologically, and thus do away with, every social distinction, class stratification, and class struggle.”

It was not the case, as Hannah-Jones claimed, that the Nazis came to power due to a groundswell of anti-Semitism that arose organically from the masses of non-Jewish Germans.

In 1933, Jewish people comprised only 1 percent of the German population, approximately 600,000 out of 60 million. Jewish people, particularly in the urban centers, had played an important role in the cultural and professional life of the country. In many parts of the country, and particularly the rural areas, anti-Semitism flourished despite the fact that the local population had little contact with or interaction with Jews. Contrary to Ms. Hannah-Jones’ opinion, seeing Jews was not a necessary precondition for hating them. Particularly among peasants and small businessmen, frustrated resentment of economic oppression was directed toward anger against “Jewish capitalists.” It was not without reason that anti-Semitism was referred to as “the socialism of fools.”

In any event, anti-Semitism was not the main factor that brought the Nazis to power. In *The Logic of Evil: The Social Origins of the Nazi Party, 1925-1933*, historian William Brustein writes: “Hitler was astute enough as a politician to realize that his rabid anti-Semitism lacked drawing power among the German masses. Indeed, it appears that increasingly the Nazi Party relegated anti-Semitism to a role as a backdrop to more materialist appeals.”

The Nazis generally toned down anti-Semitic rhetoric in the run-up to elections, and, as Brustein notes: “As difficult as it may be for many of us to believe, Nazi anti-Semitism, though a driving force in the foundation of the Nazi Party, hardly explains the NSDAP’s spectacular rise to power.”

It is also false to claim that the absence of Jewish people in present-day Germany has led to a decline in anti-Semitism.

First of all, Hannah-Jones is wrong when she states there are “no Jewish people left” in Germany. In fact, there are an estimated 80,000 Jewish people living in Germany today. And they play, despite this small number,

a significant role in the intellectual and cultural life of the country.

As for her claim that the absence of Jewish people has allowed Germany to “cleanse everything that had to do with Nazism,” a neo-Nazi party, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), is presently the third largest party in the federal parliament. Attacks on Jews in Germany are increasing, of which last month’s assault on a Synagogue in Halle is only the most publicized example. This past Monday, Israel’s *Haaretz* newspaper posted an opinion article titled, “The German Jews Who Think Now Is the Time to Leave, Before It’s Too Late—Again,” which warns of the contemporary existence of “thousands of armed extremists and an ascending political far right.”

The resurgence of German fascism is rooted in political interests, especially the efforts of the ruling elites to legitimize the reestablishment of militarism and an aggressive imperialist foreign policy. In this process, right-wing academics are attempting to revise history and downplay the crimes of Hitler’s regime.

Hannah-Jones’ race-based explanation of German history and politics is fundamentally of the same character as her presentation of American history. Hannah-Jones and the *New York Times* 1619 Project are utilizing racial mythology to divert class antagonisms into racial division. Whether this is Hannah-Jones’ intention, or if she even understands the implications of her arguments, is really beside the point.

Racism in the United States has always served as an ideological justification for brutal forms of economic exploitation, first under slavery and then particularly through the policies of post-Civil War Jim Crow segregation. The development of racial myths about the supposed supremacy of white people became a critical mechanism for blocking the threat of a racially unified movement of whites and blacks, first against slavery and then against the capitalist system.

Then, as now, race theory is the mechanism by which the ruling class justifies a strategy to divide and weaken the working class, shrouding its aims with lies about intrinsic differences between the races, about “whiteness,” “blackness” and other such nonsense.

Almost as distressing as Hannah-Jones’ remarks was the response of the affluent audience. The president of NYU, Andrew Hamilton, offered no objection to her ignorant remarks. Nor—with the exception of a speaker from the Socialist Equality Party, whose microphone was cut off—was there any critical response to Hannah-Jones’ racialist interpretation of history and ignorant comments on the Holocaust.



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