

This week in history: November 7-13

6 November 2022

25 years ago: Historians criticize Goldhagen book

On November 8, 1997, a forum was held at the University of Michigan of an international panel of historians who concurred that the bestselling book by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, was a travesty of historiography.

Goldhagen's 1996 volume, published by Random House, became a bestseller in the United States and Germany with its claims that the Holocaust was the outcome of the German national character. Goldhagen argued that anti-Semitism was universal in Germany and that Hitler's slaughter of the Jews was only the logical conclusion of the prejudices of "ordinary Germans."

The panel discussion, sponsored by the Center for European studies, attracted a standing-room-only audience at the Michigan League, an indication of growing interest in a serious discussion of the major historical issues of the 20th century.

The forum brought together five university professors to discuss the impact of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* on public opinion in the United States, Germany, France and Austria. The speakers dealt with the content of the book only in passing—making clear their scorn for its method and argument—while concentrating their remarks on the political and cultural significance of the book's reception by popular audiences.

Omer Bartov of Rutgers University noted that Goldhagen's thesis that all Germans were guilty of the Holocaust was based on a study of those Germans who served as policemen during World War II, a much narrower cross section of the population than the Wehrmacht, the German Army, which enlisted more than 10 million men.

Laura Downs of the University of Michigan described Goldhagen's argument as a version of identity politics, in which anti-Semitism was presented as the essence of Germanity, and all the explanations of a structural character—rooting the rise of Nazism in the social structure of Germany, including its economic structure—were rejected.

Atina Gossman of Cooper Union and Columbia University said she had been appalled by the positive response of her German friends to the book. She referred to Goldhagen's "breathhtakingly ill-informed comments on the history of anti-Semitism in Germany."

Another scathing critique of the book came from Pieter Judson of Swarthmore College, who examined the impact of the book in Austria; and from Professor Geoff Eley of the University of Michigan, one of the organizers of the forum, who summed up professional opinion as "a very bad book, not just on the Third Reich, but on German history as a whole."

Many students and teachers continued the discussion after the forum at a literature table set up by the Socialist Equality Party, which included the pamphlet version of a lecture by David North, leader of the SEP, which made a devastating critique of Goldhagen's thesis and his distortion of the history of Germany, and particularly, his

deliberate suppression of the long struggle of the mass socialist movement in Germany against anti-Semitism.

50 years ago: Nixon reelected in landslide

On November 7, 1972, Richard Nixon was reelected US president in one of the most one-sided victories in US electoral history.

Nixon won with over 60 percent of the popular vote and carried every state in the electoral college except Massachusetts. His Democratic opponent, Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota, won about 37 percent. Participation fell sharply. Only 55 percent of eligible voters cast ballots, reflecting the disillusionment of millions of workers and youth toward the official political system.

One of Nixon's chief priorities in his first term was to break up the mass antiwar movement and other radical groups through a combination of covert operations and political maneuvering. Nixon used police-state measures, including the COINTELPRO infiltration program, to sabotage antiwar organizations and political opponents. He paired this with highly publicized troop withdrawals and peace negotiations in Paris. Just weeks before the election, Nixon announced that an initial peace agreement had been reached with North Vietnam.

The details of Nixon's abuse of presidential powers in the Watergate scandal had not fully come to light. These dictatorial methods were aimed, in the final analysis, at crushing opposition not only to his own administration, but to the Vietnam War, which he had expanded throughout Indochina through his bloody "Vietnamization" policy. Nixon's posture as a candidate who would end the war was a fraud.

Far more than a positive endorsement of Nixon, the election results marked a massive repudiation of the Democratic Party, which under presidents Kennedy and Johnson had led the US into Vietnam and thereby paved the way for the destruction of the social reformism associated with the New Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society. McGovern's campaign was the first in American history to embrace identity and lifestyle politics. It simultaneously distanced the Democratic Party from its pretense to be the party of "the common man." This move won the ardor of middle-class radicals, who flocked into the Democratic Party just as workers were being driven out.

75 years ago: US and allies step up Cold War against Soviet Union

On November 11, 1947, US Secretary of State George C. Marshall

delivered a speech to Congress outlining the need for a vast expenditure of resources to ensure the domination of US imperialism over Europe.

The speech detailed the costs of the eponymous Marshall Plan, which had first been announced in June 1947. Under it, the US would oversee the economic reconstruction of war-ravaged Europe. In his November address, Marshall declared that the cost would be \$597 million in immediate aid and another \$16–\$20 billion over the following four years.

While the Marshall Plan was presented as being motivated by concern over the social crisis afflicting working people in Europe, Marshall's address to Congress spelled out its geopolitical motivations. "[T]he Congress in the coming session will be called upon to make decisions which, although less spectacular and dramatic, will be no less important for the future of our country and the world than those of the war years," he declared.

Marshall continued:

The war ended with the armies of the major allies meeting in the heart of this community. The policies of three of them have been directed to the restoration of that European community. It is now clear that only one power, the Soviet Union, does not for its own reasons share this aim. ... The present line of division in Europe is roughly the line upon which the Anglo-American armies coming from the west met those of the Soviet Union coming from the east.

Marshall was outlining the program of the Cold War: ever-greater US confrontation with the Soviet Union, including the sphere of influence it established following World War II in Eastern Europe. "Developments in the European countries to the east of that line bear the unmistakable imprint of an alien hand," he stated.

The aid figures Marshall then outlined were thus essentially connected to the geopolitical strategy of American imperialism. The attempt to rebuild Europe under the aegis of the American government and big business was also aimed at ensuring a market for US products.

The same week as Marshall's speech, the French army chief and former head of the bourgeois opposition to the collaborationist Vichy regime, Charles de Gaulle, called for an alliance of the US, France and Britain against the Soviet Union. Asked if this conflict could lead to World War III, he replied: "It would be crazy not to look facts in the face and not to keep our eyes open to realities. A new war is a possibility. It is only a possibility, but we must face that possibility and prepare for it."

100 years ago: Soviet power enters its fifth year

On November 7, 1922, the Russian Revolution celebrated its fifth anniversary, dating from October 26 (old style, November 7 new style) 1917, that overthrew the capitalist Provisional Government and put power into the hands of a workers and peasants' government for the first time in history.

The Russian Revolution had immediately stopped Russian participation in the slaughter of World War I, had declared the rights

of the national minorities, including Ukraine, to self-determination, had given the land to the peasants and turned over control of the factories and workshops to the working class. By 1918 the major industries, banks, energy, and communications companies had been nationalized and by 1921 a central economic planning agency had been created.

The first workers state survived only by the determination of the working class and the leadership of the Communist Party against seemingly impossible odds. The imperialist powers immediately occupied Soviet territory, and the Soviet republic was forced to relinquish large areas to German imperialism in the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

Counterrevolution raised its head everywhere, led not only by former tsarist officers and officials, but by the populist and Menshevik parties. The Allied imperialist navies imposed a blockade and imperialist governments sent armies from 14 countries to occupy Soviet territory. By 1919 a brutal civil war began in earnest on six fronts, with the reactionary forces led by former tsarist generals. By 1922 these had been defeated by the Red Army, founded and led by Leon Trotsky. The revolution had inspired the founding of the Third, Communist, International, which had developed Communist parties around the world to lead the working class everywhere to power.

Official celebrations took place in Moscow and Petrograd, not only commemorating the revolution but also welcoming international delegates to the opening session of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. James P. Cannon, a delegate of the American Communist Party to the Congress and future leader of the Trotskyist movement, described the scene:

I never saw before such an outpouring of people, nor such enthusiasm. The parade commenced at 11 o'clock in the morning. Hour after hour we saw them come in wide streams across the square. The afternoon wore away and turned to dusk. It was six o'clock and we grew tired of standing and had to leave, and still the workers of Petrograd were coming by the thousands, carrying their revolutionary banners and singing the Internationale. All the workers of Petrograd marched that day to show their solidarity with the international proletariat and to prove to us that they still believe in the revolution they made five years before.



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