

The Israeli state's fascist ideology and the genocide in Gaza

David North

18 December 2023

This lecture was given by World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board Chairman David North at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany on December 14, 2023.

When one arrives at Humboldt University and one comes into the entrance of the building, one sees the famous quotation from Marx, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it.” That basic invocation by Marx is one that should always guide speakers when they address a meeting. How is what they say going to contribute to changing the world?

First of all, I want to thank my comrades in the German section of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) for inviting me to lecture this evening at Humboldt University. I understand that they encountered certain problems in establishing the topic of this lecture, and they were informed that the title of my lecture could not include a reference to the ongoing genocide by the Israeli government in Gaza. Well, they have observed this rule and there is nothing in the title which references this immensely significant event. This obvious restriction on free speech is part of the efforts of the German government, the media and subservient academic institutions to forbid and discredit opposition to the crimes being carried out by the Netanyahu government.

Nevertheless, now that we have observed the restriction on the title of the lecture, I will proceed to speak about the events in Gaza. Is it possible not to?

During the last two months, the world has been witnessing the Israeli government wage a war of staggering brutality against a defenseless population. The death toll is approaching, and may exceed, 20,000. More than half of those killed are women and children. The total number of casualties is a multiple of that number. During the first six weeks of this war, Israel dropped 22,000 bombs, supplied by the United States, on Gaza. That was just in the first six weeks; a substantial period of time has passed since then. To have some sense of the scale of the assault, bear in mind that the total size of Gaza is 365 square kilometers, which is less than half the area of Berlin (891.3 square kilometers).

No section of Gaza and no segment of the Gazan population is being spared by the Israeli military forces. Hospitals, schools, libraries, refugee camps and other public buildings are being bombed. Journalists, doctors, teachers, writers and artists are being deliberately targeted. The murder of the poet Refaat Al-Ar'eer is only the most prominent of the assassinations being carried out at the instructions of the Israeli government.

This slaughter must be stopped and all those responsible for the crimes that are being committed against the Gazan population, and against all the Palestinian people living under occupation, must be held fully responsible, in accordance with the principles established at the Nuremberg Trials in 1945-46. And if I had any say in the matter, the same penalties would be applied.

The restriction placed on the title of my lecture contains an element of irony. It is almost exactly one decade ago, in February 2014, that I was physically barred by security guards, summoned by Professor of History

Jörg Baberowski, here at Humboldt, from attending a seminar that he had organized to discuss a new biography of Leon Trotsky by Professor Robert Service of Oxford University. In his announcement of the public seminar, it was stated that Service would answer questions from the attendees.

Service's biography was a shameless exercise in historical falsification. Its slanders against Trotsky were so blatant as to evoke a public protest from leading German historians, which resulted in a one-year delay in the release of the biography's German-language edition.

Among my objections to Service's biography, which were detailed in several review essays, was the British historian's explicit use of stereotypical antisemitic tropes in his denunciation of Trotsky. They included, among many other things, references to the shape of Trotsky's nose and the changing of his actual Russian first name from “Lev” to “Leiba,” a Yiddish variant of the name used exclusively by antisemitic enemies of the Jewish-born Trotsky.

As was soon to emerge, the alliance of Professors Baberowski and Service was based on a shared anti-communist political agenda. On the very day that I was barred from the Humboldt seminar, a new issue of *Der Spiegel* was published featuring a lengthy essay justifying Nazi crimes by arguing that Hitler's policies were a legitimate response to the “barbarism” of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Among those who were interviewed by *Der Spiegel* was Baberowski, who stated: “Hitler was not cruel. He didn't like to hear of the extermination of the Jews at his table.” Baberowski went on to defend the pro-Nazi views of the now deceased Professor Ernst Nolte, who was at that time Germany's leading Hitler apologist.

In the face of the outrage among Humboldt students that followed the publication of *Der Spiegel*'s essay, the administration of Humboldt University and the media stood behind Baberowski. This did not change even after a legal ruling by a German court that Baberowski can be referred to as a right-wing extremist. Baberowski enjoyed and continues to enjoy unlimited backing from Humboldt, which enabled him to appoint to the teaching staff of the Department of Eastern European Studies a certain Fabian Thunemann, whose curriculum vitae prior to his Humboldt appointment included participation in a neo-Nazi demonstration protesting the exposure of atrocities committed by the Wehrmacht during World War II.

Ten years ago, I was barred from attending a seminar at Humboldt because I intended to challenge Service's falsifications and his use of antisemitic slurs. Now the university, posturing as an irreconcilable opponent of antisemitism, forbids the inclusion of a reference to the Gaza genocide in the name of fighting antisemitism.

I recall this incident from the not-so-distant past because it exemplifies the cynicism, hypocrisy, demagoguery and unrestrained lying that drives the campaign to discredit opposition to Israel's onslaught against Gaza as “antisemitic.” The use of this slur has become a critical weapon in the efforts of Israel and its imperialist accomplices to intimidate and isolate all

those who are protesting the genocide of Palestinians.

Suddenly, and from so many surprising quarters, warriors against antisemitism have emerged. Last week, in the United States, university presidents were summoned to Washington D.C. and questioned on their failure to suppress allegedly antisemitic protests on American college campuses. Leading the inquisitorial questioning was Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, a Republican from a district in New York State. She demanded to know why the presidents of the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other major universities were tolerating calls for “genocide”—which the congresswoman identifies as any student protest that demands an end to the apartheid regime that deprives Palestinians of their democratic rights.

But what are Ms. Stefanik’s credentials as a fighter against antisemitism? She is a well-known advocate of what is known as the “Great Replacement Theory,” which claims that Jews are planning the elimination of white Christians in a plot to take over the world. In other words, she is an out-and-out antisemite, in the most classical definition of the term.

The alliance of forces from the extreme right with the Israeli regime is an international political phenomenon. As you know, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), one of whose leaders dismissed the Holocaust as nothing more than a piece of “birdshit” in history, has joined the crusade against antisemitism. And, no doubt, were he still alive, the Führer would join it.

Last December, a delegation from the Ukrainian Azov Battalion, many of whose members tattoo themselves with Nazi symbols, visited Israel to express its solidarity with the Netanyahu regime. These are not merely isolated and bizarre distortions of what is otherwise a legitimate effort to combat antisemitism. Rather, the entire campaign is based on the falsification of the historical origins and political function of antisemitism. The current campaign exemplifies a process which might be called “semantic inversion,” in which a word is utilized in a manner and within a context that is the exact opposite of its real and long-accepted meaning.

Through sheer force of repetition, amplified by all the powers at the disposal of the state and the corporate media, the meaning of a term is fundamentally altered. The intended outcome of the falsification is the degrading of popular consciousness and its ability to understand reality.

A significant example of how the term “antisemitism” is being used to falsify history, distort political reality and disorient popular consciousness is to be found in the recent speech by the silver-tongued Robert Habeck, the vice-chancellor in the present German coalition government. In a key passage, this political Tartuffe stated:

However, I am also concerned about antisemitism in parts of the political left and unfortunately also among young activists. Anti-colonialism must not lead to antisemitism.

Can anyone even begin to explain how anti-colonialism would acquire an antisemitic character? He goes on to say:

In this respect, this part of the political left should examine its arguments and distrust the great resistance narrative.

I’ll read this in German so that everyone can get the full weight of it:

Sorge macht mir aber auch der Antisemitismus in Teilen der politischen linken und zwar leider auch bei jungen Aktivistinnen

und Aktivisten. Anti-Kolonialismus darf nicht zu Antisemitismus führen.

Insofern sollte dieser Teil der politischen Linken seine Argumente prüfen und der großen Widerstand Erzählung misstrauen.

Revealed in this passage is the central purpose of the application of semantic inversion to the word *antisemitism*. A phenomenon historically associated with the political right is transformed into a central attribute of the political left. The reactionary purpose of this process of falsification was demonstrated in the destruction of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain. I am hardly an admirer of Mr. Corbyn, whose most conspicuous political trait is the absence of a backbone. But for all his opportunist sins, the allegation of antisemitism against Corbyn and his supporters in the British Labour Party is a vicious smear, concocted by his right-wing opponents to destroy him politically.

Another and even filthier example of the use of the slur is the vicious witch-hunt of Roger Waters. An artist who has devoted his life and art to the defense of human rights is being hounded in an internationally orchestrated campaign to label him an antisemite. Here in Germany, in Frankfurt and Berlin, attempts were made to have his concerts canceled. And what is the motivation for his persecution? Roger Waters defends the basic democratic rights of Palestinians and speaks out against their oppression.

The complete separation of the term “antisemitism” from its actual historical and political meaning is fully achieved in its use against those who are Jewish who have protested in their thousands against the criminal policies of the Israeli regime. A particularly vile phrase is used against them: “self-hating Jews.” The gist of this insult is that opposition by those who are Jewish to Israeli policies, and to the entire Zionist project, can only be explained as the manifestation of some sort of psychological problem, a pathological rejection of one’s own identity.

This diagnosis proceeds from the complete dissolution of Judaism as a specific religious identity into the Israeli state and the nationalist ideology of Zionism. An individual’s religious affiliation—which may, in the life of one or another Jewish person, be of limited or even no special importance—is endowed with a vast metaphysical significance.

This ideological concoction is based not on history, but on biblical mythology. Indeed, the legitimacy of the Zionist project proceeds from the claim that the creation of Israel just 75 years ago marked the so-called “return” of the Jewish people after 2,000 years of exile to their ancestral home “promised” to them by God.

This mythological nonsense has no basis in historical reality. More than 350 years have passed since Spinoza demolished, in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, the claim that the Pentateuch was dictated by God to Moses. The Bible was the work of many authors. As the historian Steven Nadler, an authority on Spinoza, has explained:

Spinoza denies that Moses wrote all, or even most, of the Torah. The references in the Pentateuch to Moses in the third person; the narration of his death; and the fact that some places are called by names that they did not bear in the time of Moses all “make it clear beyond a shadow of doubt” that the writings commonly referred to as “the Five Books of Moses” were, in fact, written by someone who lived many generations after Moses.

Proceeding from his repudiation of the authority of the Bible, Spinoza further enraged the elders of Amsterdam and provoked his excommunication by denying the claim—which was central to Judaism as a

religion and Zionism as a political ideology—that Jews are a “chosen people.” As Nadler writes:

If the origins and authority of Scripture are now suspect, then so must its grand claims about the “vocation” of the Hebrews. It is “childish,” Spinoza insists, for anyone to base their happiness on the uniqueness of their gifts; in the case of the Jews, it would be the uniqueness of their being chosen among all people. The ancient Hebrews, in fact, did not surpass other nations in their wisdom or in their proximity to God. They were neither intellectually nor morally superior to other peoples.

Spinoza’s apostasy was informed by the rapid advance of science in the 17th century and rooted in philosophical materialism, and cleared the path for the most progressive and radical political tendencies. It brought down upon his head the wrath of the rabbinical enforcers of orthodoxy. The excommunication of Spinoza was proclaimed in language that was without precedent in its harshness. The excommunication read in part:

Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven.

Notwithstanding this denunciation, the name of Spinoza could not be blotted out. The influence of his heretical conceptions has persisted over centuries, contributing profoundly to the development of Enlightenment thought—including the Jewish Enlightenment known as the *Haskalah*—and its revolutionary political consequences in the 18th, 19th and even 20th centuries.

The political theology of contemporary Zionism represents the extreme counterrevolutionary antithesis and repudiation of the progressive, democratic and socialist tradition derived from Spinozist and, later, Marxist thought among generations of Jewish workers and intellectuals. Reinterpreting religious myth in the spirit of extreme national chauvinism, contemporary Zionist theology imparts to the concept of a “chosen people” a thoroughly racist and fascist character.

While it is widely acknowledged that the Israeli government is composed of parties of the extreme right, this political fact is treated as a minor detail that has no particular relation to the events of October 7 and the Israeli state’s response. Virtually no reference is to be found in political coverage of the war to the influence of an apocalyptic “Theology of Revenge,” which explicitly demands the annihilation of all enemies of Israel, on the policies of the Netanyahu government.

A central figure in the development of the “Theology of Revenge” was the late Meir Kahane. Born in Brooklyn in 1932, his father, Rabbi Charles Kahane, was a friend and associate of Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the leader of an avowedly fascist wing of the Zionist movement. Meir Kahane initially achieved public notoriety in the United States as the founder of the neo-fascist Jewish Defense League. The JDL targeted black organizations in New York, which Kahane denounced as a threat to Jews.

In 1971, Kahane relocated to Israel and founded the virulently anti-Arab Kach party. His followers in the United States remained active. The Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, became a target of the JDL in 1978 when it sought to

disrupt through a bomb attack a showing in Los Angeles of the documentary titled *The Palestinian*, that had been sponsored by the International Committee.

Kahane’s role and influence in Israel is analyzed in an essay titled “Meir Kahane and Contemporary Jewish Theology of Revenge.” Published in 2015, its authors are two Israeli scholars, Adam and Gedaliah Afterman. They explain that Kahane’s theology

centred on the claim that the State of Israel was established by God as an act of revenge against the Gentiles for their persecution of Jews, especially the systematic killing of Jews during the Holocaust.

Kahane’s Kach party called for the annexation of all territory seized by Israel in the 1967 war and the violent expulsion of the Palestinian population. Kahane was elected to the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, in 1984. The Kach party was banned from running in the 1988 elections, but its influence continued despite Kahane’s assassination during a trip to New York in 1990.

The Aftermans’ essay summarizes the three fundamental pillars of Kahane’s theory of revenge.

First:

The people of Israel are a collective mythical being ontologically rooted in divinity, that together with God faced a mythical enemy from its early days. This mythical enemy, “Amalek,” is embodied in different actual enemies throughout Jewish history, and the various persecutions and ordeals the Jews have suffered throughout history are manifestations of the same mythical struggle. Furthermore, there is an ontological difference between the mythical nation of Israel and the Gentiles, especially Israel’s enemies. The ontological difference between the Jewish and Gentile soul overrides the Jewish principle that all of humanity was created in the image of God. The belief that Gentiles are inferior and embody the demonic powers of history justifies acts of deadly violence and revenge.

Second:

...Thus, the argument proceeds, the people of Israel are religiously obliged to use all means possible to take revenge against their mutual enemies and to rehabilitate their mutual pride and status. Whether or not they realize it, the Palestinians and other forces fighting Israel are part of a mythical, religious battle that seeks the destruction of the people of Israel and its God. These factors permit the use of any and all measures to overcome the enemies.

Third:

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, shortly after the Holocaust, must serve one purpose: to facilitate redemptive revenge against the Gentiles. The establishment of the modern Jewish state in the historical land of Israel is an instrument for activating the redemptive process, rather than a result or a sign of

such a process.

Summing up the three pillars, the Aftermans explain that

...Kahane argues that carrying out vengeance against the metaphysical enemy “Amalek” (hostile Gentiles) is fundamental to saving God and his people, both of whom almost ceased to exist as a result of the Holocaust. The establishment of the Jewish state, with its institutionalized power and military might, should, in Kahane’s view, be placed at the service of redemption-bound revenge. Kahane goes so far as to justify acts of vengeance even against innocent people by arguing that they belong to the mythical enemy that must be eradicated as a condition for the redemption of Israel and its God. In his view, the loss of innocent lives, if necessary, is a justifiable sacrifice.

Kahane interpreted the doctrine of the “chosen people” as a comprehensive repudiation of all association with traditional Western values. He wrote in his book, *Or Ha’Raayon*:

This is a Jewish state. It bows in front of Judaism and does not contradict it. It acts in accordance with Jewish values and Jewish commandments even if these contradict international law and diplomacy, even if they contrast the normal Western and democratic lifestyle; this is so even if this puts its interests under risk and threatens to isolate it from the civilized gentiles. ... The duty of Judaism is to be separate, unique, different and chosen. This is the role of the Jewish people and their instrument, the State ... We have no part in the standard values of the nations. Assimilation does not begin with mixed marriages, but in copying and adopting foreign values, alien and non-Jewish concepts and ideas.

Kahane’s theory of revenge was identified in Hebrew as the concept of what he called *Kiddush Hashem*. He wrote:

A Jewish fist in the face of an astonished gentile world that had not seen it for two millennia, this is *Kiddush Hashem*. Jewish dominion over the Christian holy places while the Church that sucked our blood vomits its rage and frustration, this is *Kiddush Hashem*.

Actually, notwithstanding its semi-deranged invocation of a supposedly unique Jewish philosophy, Kahane’s *Kiddush Hashem* can be described as a Hebrew-language variant of the philosophy of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, the main difference being that Kahane’s hate-filled and racist diatribe was written in Hebrew from right to left rather than from left to right.

Kahane’s influence persisted after his assassination in the increasingly right-wing political environment of Israel. On February 25, 1994, one of Kahane’s students, Baruch Goldstein, murdered 29 Palestinians and wounded another 150 in an attack on a Mosque in Hebron. This crime was praised by Kahane’s followers, including the extremely influential Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, who proclaimed that the mass murder carried out by Goldstein was an act of *Kiddush Hashem*.

Now what does this have to do with today? Itamar Ben-Gvir, the leader of the xenophobic Otzmah Yehudet party, is now the Minister of National Security in Netanyahu’s coalition government. He was a member of the Kach party before it was outlawed. He remains an outspoken defender of the fascist theology and politics of Meir Kahane. This past April, Ben-Gvir, flanked by a security detail provided by the office of the prime minister, delivered a speech in which he praised both Kahane and Baruch Goldstein.

The invocation of Kahane’s doctrine of revenge by Israeli leaders has become increasingly common since the war began. Last month, Netanyahu declared in a public speech, “You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible. And we do remember.” The implications of Netanyahu’s reference to Amalek was made explicit in a statement by Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant: “We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly. We will eliminate everything—they will regret it.” Many statements of an identical character have been made by Israeli leaders since the beginning of the war, and these statements have been actualized in the genocidal actions of the Israeli government and military.

In the midst of the crimes being committed by the Israeli regime, there is no greater and more insidious lie than the claim that opposition to Zionism is, and must be, antisemitic. This is a lie that is refuted by the long history of pre-1948 opposition to Zionism among countless thousands of Jewish workers and intellectuals, spanning several generations, who rejected the myth-based call for a return to Palestine.

The opposition to Zionism was expressed with the greatest political clarity by the socialist movement, which identified and denounced the politically reactionary character of the perspective of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. It was understood that this project was a colonialist enterprise, which could only be achieved in alliance with imperialism and at the expense of the Palestinian Arab population that had lived in the territory for 2,000 years.

More over, in their struggle against traditional religious persecution and the emergence, beginning in the late 19th century, of political antisemitism, the great mass of Jews sought to achieve political and social equality within the countries in which they lived. That was of profound truth especially in Germany. They wished to be part of the mass movement against oppression. For the most politically conscious section of Jewish youth, workers and intellectuals, this striving led to active involvement in the socialist movement.

The present-day claim that Zionism is the necessary and genuine expression of Jewish identity has no basis in history. Moreover, the persistence of democratic convictions and a sympathy for the oppressed rooted in the experience of antisemitic prejudice and persecution finds expression in the large number of Jewish youth who have been involved in demonstrations opposing the Israeli onslaught against the Gazans.

Despite all the propaganda, the images of the mass killing of defenseless Palestinians cannot help but evoke historical and familial recollections of the fate of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis. Thus, the war against the Gazan people evokes not only a sense of solidarity with the victims of Israeli atrocities, but also a deep anger against the exploitation of the tragedy of the Holocaust to justify the war.

Of course, the Zionists and their apologists will claim that all that I have said is simply evidence of my deeply rooted antisemitism, which they claim—as I have already explained—is a prejudice widely held within the socialist movement. The more left an individual, the more emphatic his or her opposition to capitalism and imperialism, the more irreconcilable their opposition to the Jewish state and, therefore, their antisemitism.

This allegation is as absurd as it is politically reactionary. Having been involved in the socialist movement for more than a half century, I really do not have any personal obligation to answer the claim that I and my comrades in the Trotskyist movement are antisemites. As the saying goes,

my record speaks for itself.

But, unfortunately, that is not generally true. The accusation of antisemitism requires the ignoring and distortion of a given individual's political record.

So I will, for the first time, respond to the accusation, by adding to my well-known public political record information relating to my personal background. Now having reached a somewhat more advanced age, just a little more than a year away from what will be my 75th birthday, I think the time has come to do this. I do not do so because it will have any effect on the slanderers, but because there are elements of my personal experience that may resonate with a younger generation and encourage them to intensify their struggle in defense of the Palestinians and against all forms of oppression.

The dominant factor in the development of all individuals is the social and political environment of their time, conditioned at the most fundamental level by the prevailing socioeconomic structures of the societies into which they were born. The personalities of human beings are shaped by what Marx referred to as "an ensemble of social relations." But these social relations are refracted through personal experiences, both one's own and those transmitted through family, friends, teachers, acquaintances, and so on.

I am a first generation American, born in 1950. The location of my birth—in fact, my existence—was determined by the events that had led to the Second World War, which had ended only four and a half years earlier. Both my parents had fled Europe to escape the Nazi persecution of the Jews. My mother, Beatrice, was born in Wilmersdorf on December 18, 1913—the exact same day Herbert Frahm, aka Willy Brandt, was born. The apartment building in which she was born, located on Konstanzer Strasse, still stands. Her father—my grandfather—occupied a significant position in the cultural life of Berlin. His name was Ignatz Waghalter. Born in Warsaw in 1881 into a very poor family of musicians, Waghalter made his way to Berlin at the age of 17 with the intention of receiving a proper musical education.

My grandfather was the 15th of 20 children. Of those 20 children, 13 died in childhood, four in one day during the typhus epidemic of 1888. Of the 20 children, seven survived—four boys and three girls. My grandfather, from his earliest years, exhibited immense musical talent. By the age of six, he was already performing in the Warsaw circus. At the age of eight, he wrote and composed a revolutionary anthem that was so popular that a search began by the police to discover the name and identity of the insurrectionary musician. They were quite shocked when they discovered that it was an eight-year-old. The Waghalter family had deep roots in the revolutionary democratic struggle of the Polish people. In fact, I recently discovered in a library a revolutionary march written by my grandfather's grandfather that had been composed in 1848.

My grandfather wanted to obtain a genuine education. He didn't want to be just an itinerant musician, he wanted to go to the musical capital of the world—Berlin—and learn how to become a serious composer. He was smuggled across the border in 1897 without any money. He endured great hardship, but eventually came to the attention of the great violinist and friend of Brahms, Joseph Joachim. Upon the recommendation of Joachim, my grandfather was admitted to the Akademie der Künste. In 1902, his Sonata for Violin and Piano was awarded the coveted Mendelssohn Prize. Two years later, Ignatz's younger brother Wladyslaw, who had followed him to Berlin, was awarded the same prize for his achievements as a violinist.

Following his graduation, Ignatz obtained a post as a conductor at the Komische Oper. An appointment to the Essen Opera house followed several years later. But the decisive turning point in his musical career came in 1912, when he was appointed first conductor at the newly constructed Deutsches Opernhaus on Bismarck Strasse in Charlottenburg, known today as the Deutsche Oper. Of course, the original building was

destroyed in the course of the Second World War and rebuilt, though it's located on the same street today. Wladyslaw Waghalter was appointed concertmaster of the new opera house, which opened on November 7, 1912 with a performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Despite vocal opposition from antisemites and numerous death threats, Ignatz Waghalter conducted the premier performance.

For the next 10 years, my grandfather maintained his position as first conductor at the Deutsches Opernhaus. Three of his operas, *Mandragola*, *Jugend* and *Sataniel*, had their premier at the opera house. Waghalter was known for his championing of the operas of Giacomo Puccini, whose music had been previously dismissed by a musical establishment obsessed with Richard Wagner. Waghalter conducted the German premier of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* [*Das Mädchen aus dem goldenen Westen*] in March 1913, with Puccini in attendance. It was a triumph that established Puccini's reputation as a great master in Germany.

Throughout his lengthy tenure at the Deutsches Opernhaus, Waghalter had to contend with both anti-Polish and antisemitic prejudice. Though he himself did not observe any religious rituals or attend synagogue, Waghalter refused—in contrast to many other Jewish-born conductors—to convert to Christianity. The thought of changing one's religion for the purpose of advancing one's career, thereby adapting to antisemitic prejudice, was abhorrent to him.

In 1914, upon the outbreak of World War I, Waghalter was forbidden to conduct because he had been born in the Russian Empire, with which Imperial Germany was at war. Protests by the opera-loving public of Charlottenburg led to his reinstatement.

Waghalter remained at the Deutsches Opernhaus until 1923, when it went bankrupt in the midst of the catastrophic inflationary crisis. He spent a year in the United States as head of the New York State Symphony Orchestra. He then returned to Germany, where he was appointed musical director of the film company, Ufa. But he was unable to return to the Städtische Oper, as the reorganized and reopened Deutsches Opernhaus was then known.

The coming to power of Hitler effectively ended his career, and that of his brother, as musicians in Germany. My mother, not yet 20, had a premonition that the Third Reich would cost Jews not only their careers, but also their lives. Beatrice urged her parents to leave Germany before it became impossible to escape. They followed her advice and left Germany, traveling first to Czechoslovakia and then to Austria.

My mother, a highly gifted musician, remained in Germany. She joined the Jüdische Kultur Bund, where she performed as a singer at private homes of Jews throughout Germany. In 1937, she obtained a visa to enter the United States. She managed to secure entry visas for her parents. My grandparents arrived in New York in May 1937. Within days of arriving, Ignatz initiated a project of historic significance, the creation of the first classical music orchestra composed of African American musicians.

This radical project encountered bitter opposition in the racist environment of the time. Waghalter frequently invited black musicians to rehearse at his apartment. This resulted in the circulation of a petition, signed by virtually all the white residents of the apartment building, demanding Waghalter's eviction if he continued this practice.

My grandfather was interviewed by the African American newspaper of Baltimore. He expressed the convictions that had inspired his creation of the symphony orchestra, stating, "Music, the strongest citadel of universal democracy, knows neither color, creed nor nationality."

Despite Waghalter's immense efforts, the reactionary environment made it impossible to sustain the orchestra. During the final decade of his life, Waghalter became increasingly isolated. He lost contact with his family. Only after the war did he learn that his brother Wladyslaw—who had not been able to leave Germany—died suddenly in 1940 after a visit to Gestapo headquarters. His wife and one daughter perished in Auschwitz in 1943. In fact, on Brandenburgerstrasse 49, the location and address of my

great uncle Wladyslaw, you can see Stolpersteine in which the life and death of Wladyslaw and his family are memorialized.

Fortunately, one daughter of Wladyslaw, Yolanda, managed to escape. She made it to South America, lived in Peru, where she became first violinist in the Lima Symphony Orchestra, and her son Carlos, my second cousin, now lives in New Orleans, and we have been close friends for most of our adult lives. Ignatz's brother Joseph died in the Warsaw Ghetto. Two of the three sisters also perished in Poland. Only his oldest brother, the great Polish cellist Henryk Waghalter, managed to survive the war. My grandfather died suddenly in New York at the age of 68 in April 1949.

During his brief exile in Czechoslovakia in 1935-36, my grandfather wrote a brief memoir, which concludes with a statement of his ideals as an artist. He recognized that the Nazis represented a mortal threat to the Jews, but he expressed the conviction that the criminals of the Third Reich would not emerge victorious over the ethical and moral commitment of the Jewish people to justice. Waghalter acknowledged that he did not yet know where he would be able to find refuge. And so he ended his memoir with the words:

Wherever it may be, I wish to serve art and humanity in accordance with the words of Moses, "You were freed from slavery in order to serve your brothers."

Clearly, my grandfather's conception of Jewish ethics was very different from that which prevails in the Netanyahu government and the present-day Zionist state. He would be appalled and horrified if he knew what was being done in the name of the Jewish people. There could be no greater slander, no greater gift to the real antisemites, than to associate the Jewish people with the crimes that are being presently committed each day against the oppressed Palestinian people.

The story of my grandfather's life and its relation to the catastrophe that had overwhelmed European Jewry was a constant topic of discussion in my childhood home. My grandmother, Ignatz's widow, whom we called Omi, lived with us. I spent countless hours in her room, where she told me of life in Berlin, the friendships with so many great artists, being pinched on her backside by Giacomo Puccini, all the friends she knew, the writers, and even scientists, including Albert Einstein, who frequently visited the apartment on Konstanzerstrasse, where he enjoyed playing his violin as part of a string quartet. The apartment residents did not object.

The stories of my grandmother were supplemented by those told by my mother, who had enjoyed an especially close relationship with her father. Most of the stories were told in German, which enjoyed equal status with English in our home.

At least on the street where I lived, this was not unusual. Many of our neighbors were refugees: Dr. Jakobius, Frau London, Frau Spitzer, Frau Rehfisch, Walter and Uschi Bergen, Dr. Hartmann and Dr. Gutfeld. There were others whose names I do not remember, but it was as if a substantial portion of Charlottenburg had been reassembled in a New York City suburb. And then there were the many friends who lived in other parts of the city but were frequent visitors: Greta Westman, Dela Schleger and Kurt Stern.

So many of the discussions describing life in Berlin led to the phrase: "Und dann kam Hitler." Then came Hitler. That was the event that changed everything. And this, in my young mind, led to so many questions. "How did Hitler come?" "Why did Hitler come?" "Did anyone, before 1933, see him coming?" "When did my grandparents and mother first hear of Hitler and realize that he might come?" And, finally, the most important question of all, "Why didn't people stop Hitler from coming?"

This was a question for which no one I knew had any fully formed and convincing answers. But there were certain elements of the answers that I received at home that were helpful. First, the Nazis were clearly identified as a right-wing movement. The dividing line, therefore, in my family between good and evil had not been between German and Jew, but between left and right. This division, my mother insisted, existed not only in Germany, but throughout the world, and, of course, within the United States. She would occasionally look at some American politicians and she would say, "*Ich traue nicht dieser Bande*" ("I don't trust this gang.")

My mother was especially emphatic on this point. She hated fascism. When she noticed or encountered certain exceptionally objectionable social and political attitudes, she was inclined to describe the offending individual as "ein echter Fascist," a real fascist.

She was certainly aware of the existence of antisemitism in Germany prior to Hitler. She encountered such tendencies even before Hitler began to come, among teachers at her school. But she often made the point about these tendencies, that she would never have believed, and did not believe, that they would develop inevitably into mass murder. She did not believe in such an inevitability. Moreover, she never expressed a trace of hatred or bitterness towards Germans. She was proud that her command of the German language had not diminished even 60 years after her flight from Germany.

It would take many years before I could find a politically convincing answer that explained how fascism had come to power in Germany. Like many of my generation, I passed through the experience of the Civil Rights movement, the ghetto uprisings and the Vietnam War. The explosive events of the 1960s stimulated my study of history, and encouraged the tendency to situate contemporary events in a broader temporal framework. Moreover, anger over the never-ending Vietnam War and steadily increasing disillusionment with the Democratic Party and American liberalism impelled me further toward socialism. This process led finally toward my initial discovery, in the autumn of 1969, of the writings of Leon Trotsky.

I immersed myself in the study of his available writings: his monumental *History of the Russian Revolution*, his autobiography *My Life, The New Course, Lessons of October*, and *The Revolution Betrayed*. All of these works served as the foundation of my decision to join the Trotskyist movement. But the volume that had the greatest impact upon me was a collection of Trotsky's writings devoted to the struggle against the rise of the Nazis to power between 1930 and 1933.

During those critical years, Trotsky lived in exile on the island of Prinkipo, off the coast of Istanbul. He had been exiled there by the Stalinist regime. Nearly 2,000 miles away from Germany, he followed the events that were unfolding. His articles, the warnings he made of the danger posed by Hitler and the Nazi party, are unequalled in political literature.

Trotsky not only explained the nature of fascism—its class basis and essential function as an instrument of political terror against the socialist and working class movement—but he also explained how the Nazis could be defeated. He exposed the policies of the Stalinist Communist Party, of the so-called Third Period, which declared that Social Democracy and fascism were identical. He countered this bankrupt ultra-left policy with a call for a united front of all the working class parties to defeat the Nazi threat. His warnings were ignored. Stalinism, as well as the betrayals of Social Democracy, made possible the victory of the Nazis.

But Hitler's rise to power and the ensuing catastrophe of World War II and the Holocaust were not inevitable. They were the outcome of the political betrayals of the reformist and Stalinist leaderships of the working class. To understand that, to understand what fascism was—and, when I think back on it, realizing that I was growing up only a few decades after this all had happened—had upon me a profound effect. Realizing that there must never again be fascism, and coming to understand that it was

possible to defeat this political horror, one was obligated to become active in the socialist movement, and particularly in that political organization which had correctly analyzed and provided an answer to the greatest threat that humanity confronted.

Trotsky rooted the rise of fascism not in the German psyche, but in the historical crisis of capitalism and the nation-state system. Hitler and the fascist regime represented, in the final analysis, the desperate attempt of German capitalism to find a solution, through war and mass murder, to the restraints imposed upon it by the existing nation-state system. It was compelled to “reorganize Europe.” But this was not an exclusively German problem. The crisis imposed upon American imperialism an even greater challenge, in which it is engaged today: the task of reorganizing the world.

In subsequent writings, written after Hitler had come to power, Trotsky warned that fascism and the outbreak of World War II would confront European Jewry with the danger of extermination. The danger, he wrote, could not be averted by Zionism, which advanced a national solution to a problem rooted in the global contradictions of the capitalist system.

Following the victory of the Nazis, Trotsky insisted that the fate of the Jews was more than ever bound up with the fate of socialism. He wrote, in a letter dated January 28, 1934:

The entire Jewish historical fate being what it is, the Jewish question is an international one. It cannot be solved through “socialism in a separate country.” Under the circumstances of the present vile and detestable anti-Semitic persecutions and pogroms, the Jewish workers can and should derive revolutionary pride from the knowledge that the fate of the Jewish people can only be solved through the full and final victory of the proletariat.

This perspective has been vindicated by history. Those who claim that the founding of Israel was a political triumph have a peculiar idea of what a political triumph consists of. The creation of a state that is founded on the blatant theft of other people’s land, that denies on a purely racist basis the basic democratic rights that should be afforded to all citizens, that sanctifies hate and revenge as a basis of state policy, that systematically conditions its own citizens to kill and torment the people it has stolen from, and which has turned the country into the most hated in the world—this can hardly be described as a “political triumph.” It is a political degradation.

The ongoing war, for all its horrors, has made one significant political contribution. It has awakened the youth. It has opened the eyes of the world. It has exposed the Zionist regime and its imperialist accomplices for the criminals they are. It has set into motion a tidal wave of outrage that is sweeping across the world and will sweep across those responsible for this genocide.

But the great challenge that confronts our movement is to imbue the outrage with a revolutionary socialist program that can unify the global working class in a common struggle against imperialist barbarism. Our movement and only our movement is equipped to meet this challenge. It embodies a vast political history and a vast political experience that spans now an entire century. There is no other party which can bring to bear, in a crisis such as that which we now face, an understanding of its dynamic and a perspective to intervene in the situation and change it in the interests of the working class.

So while this lecture was not a formal report on the centenary of Trotskyism, apart from present day events, I hope that it has contributed to your understanding of what the Trotskyist movement is and its relationship to the present-day struggles which we confront.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact