

Nazism, big business and the working class: Historical experience and political lessons

20 October 2025

On October 16, 2025, the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) hosted a webinar examining the historical relationship between Nazism, big business and the working class—a discussion with urgent contemporary relevance.

The discussion was chaired by David North, chairperson of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS and of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States. He was joined by three distinguished historians: David Abraham, professor emeritus of law at the University of Miami and author of *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis*; Jacques Pauwels, Canadian historian and author of *Big Business and Hitler*; and Mario Kessler, senior fellow at the Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam, Germany, whose scholarship focuses on the German Communist Party and European labor movements.

The webinar opened with North recounting the vicious academic campaign that destroyed Abraham's career as a historian in the 1980s. After publishing his Marxist analysis of how conflicts within German capitalism facilitated Hitler's rise, Abraham faced attacks from conservative historians Gerald Feldman and Henry Ashby Turner, who accused him of fraud. Abraham explained that the attack stemmed from "ideological animus, personal pique, and intellectual know-nothingism."

In the discussion, Jacques Pauwels attacked the claim that Hitler's rise was accidental or unconnected to capitalist interests. "Hitler's so-called capture of power was merely a transfer or surrender of power," he stated. "Without the financial and other support of industry and finance, in other words, big business, the rest of the German power elite, Hitler could never have risen to supremacy." Pauwels described fascism as "the stick of capitalism, not to be used at all times, but certainly always ready behind the door."

Mario Kessler addressed Hitler's mobilization of the middle classes while preventing their left-wing radicalization toward socialism. He noted that the Nazi Party "never succeeded in making consistent inroads into the working class" and "never achieved an absolute majority of the votes" in any Weimar election. Hitler's function was to "collect the votes of the unemployed people, the resentment of all who considered themselves losers of what was called the system." Kessler stressed that "before Hitler and the German fascists could annihilate the Jews, they had to destroy the German and European labor movement."

Pauwels demolished the myth that Hitler improved workers' living conditions, documenting how "the German workers' real wages fell dramatically under Nazi rule while corporate profits soared." He revealed that work accidents and illnesses increased from 930,000 cases in 1933 to 2.2 million in 1939, calling Nazi policy "a high profit, low wage kind of policy." The first concentration camp at Dachau was established not primarily for Jews but because "regular prisons were full of political prisoners, mostly social democrats and communists."

The discussion then turned to contemporary parallels. North drew explicit connections between Weimar's collapse and America's current trajectory under the fascistic Trump administration, noting gold's rise from \$35 per ounce in 1971 to over \$4,000 today as an "objective indication of a real crisis of the American economic system." Abraham described the emerging alliance of "old right-wingers in the fossil fuel industry" with "anarcho-libertarians" from Silicon Valley, noting that Peter Thiel recently gave lectures invoking Carl Schmitt, the Nazi legal theorist, while identifying workers, leftists, minorities, and environmentalists as civilization's "blockage," which Abraham described as "a kind of new Judeo-

Bolsheviks.”

North posed a critical question: “Do objective conditions create the possibility for a revolutionary orientation? Is fascism inevitable?” He argued that the same contradictions driving reaction also create revolutionary potential, citing how World War I produced both catastrophe and the October Revolution.

Christoph Vandreier, chairman of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei in Germany, addressed the rehabilitation of Hitler and the Nazis within German academia. He described how historian Jörg Baberowski declared in *Der Spiegel* that “Hitler was not cruel” and “was not a psychopath,” claiming the Holocaust “was not essentially different from shootings during the civil war in Russia.” Vandreier noted that “Baberowski was supported by almost the entire academia in Germany” and that such positions “are part of the mainstream” today, coinciding with Germany’s trillion-euro rearmament program.

The historians agreed that the struggle against historical falsification is inseparable from political struggle. Pauwels emphasized that “history is subversive” and that “the powers that be don’t really want us to know how we got into this trouble.” Abraham noted a modest revival of political economy studies after decades in which “the right captured Washington, the left captured the English department.”

North concluded by emphasizing the persistence of the same fundamental contradictions: “We are not only talking about the past, but we’re really discussing the present. The same issues, the same social forces are present today.” He predicted an “explosive turn by the working class and the most advanced sections of young people and workers toward Marxism, which is the only theoretical framework for which one can understand objective reality and on that basis build a revolutionary movement.”

Links to purchase literature from Mehring Books:

- Jacques Pauwels: *Big Business and Hitler*
 - Christoph Vandreier: *Why Are They Back? Historical Falsification, Political Conspiracy, and the Return of Fascism in Germany*
 - SEP Pamphlet: *Trump’s Fascist Conspiracy and How to Fight It: A Socialist Strategy*
 - David North: *Sounding the Alarm: Socialism Against War, May Day Speeches 2014-2024*
 - Leon Trotsky: *The Struggle Against Fascism in*

Germany

- Leon Trotsky: *Fascism: What It Is and How to Fight It*



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact