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Holocaust

1990: “Material, social and ideological preconditions for the Nazi genocide”

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

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1. What made the Holocaust possible - a unique event in history so far - was first of all a biological variant of an ultraracist ideology, an extreme form of Social Darwinism. According to this doctrine there existed 'subhuman races' (Untermenschen), whose extermination was justified and even essential. For those who upheld this ideology, Jews were 'vermin to be wiped out', Blacks are 'apes', 'the only good Indian is a dead Indian', and so forth. The doctrine of extreme biological racism does not fall from the sky. It has a material basis in socio-economic and political practices that treated particular human groups in such an inhuman way that the need for an ideological justification - an ideology of dehumanization - and for a 'neutralization' of the perpetrators' guilty consciences and feelings of individual guilt (see Himmler's speech of 6 October 1943) arises almost necessarily.

2. The Nazis' systematic dehumanization of the Jews is not an isolated phenomenon in history. Comparable phenomena arose in respect to slaves in Antiquity, midwives ('witches') during the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, the American Indians, Blacks sold into slavery, and so forth. Victims of these phenomena can be counted by the millions, including women and children. If none of these massacres attained a systematic, wholesale character equal to that of the Holocaust, it is not because the killers were more 'humane' or merciful than the Nazis. It is because their resources as well as their socio-economic and political plans were more limited.

3. It is not true that the Nazis' extermination plans were meant exclusively for the Jews. A comparable proportion of the Gypsies was also exterminated. In the longer term, the Nazis wanted to exterminate a hundred million people in central and eastern Europe, above all Slavs. If the extermination began with the Jews, this was due in part to the demented faith of Hitler and some of his lieutenants in the 'world Jewish conspiracy', but also in part to a more practical reason. Before being exterminated, the slaves had to work (thus minister of justice' Thierack: 'Tod durch Arbeit'). Rightly or wrongly, the Nazis believed that the Jews would be less docile, less easily reduced to the slavery of completely resigned illiterates, than the other 'inferior races'. This meant in their minds that the Jews had to be killed (including by working them to death) inside camps, not in still partly 'open' villages and towns (which was the fate foreseen for the Russians, Poles, Ruthenians, Ukrainians, and others, each of which was to be exterminated in turn).

4. The doctrine of Jewish racial inferiority ('subhumanity') is linked in the minds of the most fanatical contemporary anti-semites to the myth of the 'international Jewish conspiracy' to seize power on a world scale and 'suck the blood' of all peoples. The joint instruments of this conspiracy are supposedly big speculative (banking) capital, Marxist socialism (later Bolshevism), Freemasonry, and even the Jesuits! This myth was not of German, but rather of Russian origin (the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a fabrication by the Tsarist Okhrana (secret police)). At the end of the nineteenth century it was much more widespread in France, Britain, Austria, Hungary and Poland than in Germany strictly speaking. The Ukrainian chief Petliura, responsible for pogroms that killed more than 100,000 Jews in relatively little time, was devoted to this myth. There is no reason for us to doubt that he was capable of conceiving and carrying out the Holocaust if he had had the necessary material and technical means.

5. The doctrine of biological racism can be seen in a much broader context: the rise of anti-humanist, anti-progressive, anti-egalitarian, anti emancipatory doctrines, which openly celebrated the most extreme and

systematic violence against whole human groups ('the enemy') and spread widely towards the end of the nineteenth century. It seems incontestable to us that the launching of (and to a lesser extent the preparations for) the First World War was the decisive turning point in this regard. Without the First World War, Hitler and Nazism as a mass phenomenon would have been inconceivable. Without the launching of the Second World War, Auschwitz would have been impossible. Yet the crisis of humanism and of civilization that began with the First World War can in fact hardly be separated from the phenomenon of the crisis of imperialism, whose early manifestations under colonialism are rightly linked to the birth of biological racist doctrines among some of the colonists (remember the signs: 'Dogs and Natives Not Allowed').

6. The Holocaust did not only have ideological roots. It would have been impossible without a given set of material and technical means. This was an industrial extermination project, not a do-it-yourself one. This is all that distinguished it from traditional pogroms. It required mass production of Zyklon-B gas, gas chambers, pipes, crematoria, barracks, and massive reliance on railways, on a scale that would have been unattainable in the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth century, not to speak of earlier epochs (unless the project was carried out over decades or even several centuries). In this sense the Holocaust was also (not only, but also) a product of modern industry that has increasingly escaped from any control by human or humanist reason, i.e. of modern capitalist industry driven onwards by more and more intense competition that has gotten out of control. It is the most extreme example to date of a typical combination of perfected partial rationality and global irrationality, pushed to its limit: a combination characteristic of bourgeois society.

7. Alongside the ideological and material/technical preconditions for the Holocaust, we must also consider its socio-political preconditions. Carrying out the Holocaust required participation, with different degrees of active or passive complicity, by several million people: in the first place undoubtedly by executioners, organizers and camp guards, but also by statesmen, bankers, industrialists, high-ranking civil servants, army officers, diplomats, lawyers, professors, doctors, along with the 'foot-soldiers': petty functionaries, 'ordinary prison' guards, railway workers, and so forth.

A careful examination of this mass of several million accomplices would divide them by nationality, with the Germans strictly speaking doubtless making up no more than 50 to 60 per cent of the total. It would also divide them according to the degree of their irrationality, with psychopaths and fanatics in the minority, though certainly a substantial minority. But the majority acted out of habits of obedience, routine or calculation (the silence of church hierarchies falls into this last category), if not out of cowardice (the risks of individual disobedience being considered greater than the risks of complicity in inhuman acts).

One of the factors that allowed the Holocaust to happen was of an ethical order, or if you like has to do with the motivation of behaviour. It took a particular turn of mind: the Holocaust was also the result, not just of the inclination to accept, celebrate, or even worship massive violence, but of the acceptance of the doctrine that the state has the right to require individuals to do things from which they should recoil, and in their hearts do recoil, from the point of view of the fundamental rules of ethics.

According to this doctrine, it is better to submit to the state's authority in every case than to 'undermine political authority'. The extreme consequences of this doctrine have proven the absurdity of the conservatives' (including Aristotle's and Goethe's) classic thesis: that the 'disorder' brought about by rebelling against injustice would always lead to still more injustice. There could hardly be a worse injustice than Auschwitz. Faced with massive injustice, resistance and revolt - including individual resistance, but above all collective resistance and revolt - are not only a right but a duty, which overrides any *raison d'Etat*. This is the main lesson of the Holocaust.

8. Minorities with fanatical, extremist and inhuman views, i.e. pathological minorities and individuals, have existed and still exist in virtually all countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not to speak of earlier centuries. But they constitute a marginal phenomenon, with minimal political influence. They were certainly marginal in Germany in the period from 1848 to 1914.

In order for such individuals to get a response from millions of people, a deep social crisis is necessary (as Marxists we would say: a deep socio-economic crisis, a deep crisis of the mode of production, and a deep crisis of the power structures). In order for such individuals to have a short-term chance of gaining power, still more for them actually to take power, there must be a correlation of social forces that makes this possible: weakening of the traditional workers' movement (and to a lesser extent of traditional bourgeois liberalism); strengthening of the most aggressive layers of the wealthy classes; despair among the middle classes; considerable increase in the number of declassed people, and so on. The crisis of the Weimar Republic and the 1929-34 economic crisis evidently created these conditions in Germany in 1932-33.

9. The peculiarities of German history; the specific nature of the 'bloc in power' after the German unification of 1871; the particular weight of the Prussian junkers and their militarist tradition within this bloc; the relative weakness of a liberal-humanist tradition compared with other countries (due to the defeat of the 1848 revolution); the evident disproportion between Germany's flourishing industry and finance capital on the one hand and its limited share in the division of spheres of influence on a world scale on the other hand: all this made German imperialism more aggressive in the period from 1890 to 1945 than its main rivals. In the eyes of much of the German 'elite' in this epoch, the struggle for world domination would take place by way of war and militarism. The empire that Germany was to conquer - the equivalent of Britain's 'Empire of India' - lay in central and eastern Europe (later to be extended from this base to the Middle East, Africa, South America and so on). This explains why much of the German ruling classes were prepared to accept Hitler, without fully realizing where this would lead them (though as early as 30 June 1934 it was clear to anyone who wasn't blind that the man was prepared to tread underfoot the most elementary principles of morals and the rule of law, in fact that he was a ruthless murderer).

Both the liberal-humanist tendency and the conservative militarist tendency were present among each of the bourgeois classes of Europe, the US and Japan from 1885-90 on. The difference is that the latter tendency remained in a minority in France and Britain, while it became the majority tendency in Germany and Japan (in the US the two tendencies have been in equilibrium since 1940). This difference can be explained not by ethnic factors but by historical specificities.

10. If we see the Holocaust as the ultimate expression so far of the destructive tendencies existing in bourgeois society, tendencies whose roots lie deep in colonialism and imperialism, we can call attention to other tendencies going in the same direction, most notably in the development of the arms race (nuclear war, biological and chemical warfare, so-called 'conventional' weapons more powerful than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and so forth). A nuclear war, or even a 'conventional' world war without prior dismantling of nuclear power plants, would be worse than the Holocaust. The overall irrationality of preparations for such a war is already perceptible in the language used. When they speak of 'limiting the costs' of a nuclear war, this amounts to trying to commit suicide, to destroy the whole human race, 'at the lowest possible cost'. What do 'costs' have to do with suicide?

11. This interpretation of the Holocaust is in no way meant to relativize the Nazis' crimes against humanity, which are the worst crimes in history, rich as it is in horrors. The interpretation has its specific scientific value. Those who reject it must demonstrate that it is mistaken on the basis of the facts, their correlation and interconnection. This is a debate among historians, sociologists, economists, political scientists and moral philosophers. A scientific thesis (hypothesis) can only be refuted with scientific arguments, not with extra-scientific arguments.

Nonetheless, far from being in any way a concession to the Nazis or German militarists, or even to the German 'elite', this interpretation of the Holocaust also has a subjective function. It is also useful and necessary from the point of view of the interests of the human race. It enables us to avoid the intellectual and moral risks inherent in the contrary thesis, according to which the Holocaust is beyond all rational explanation and is incomprehensible. This obscurantist standpoint is to a large extent a posthumous triumph for Nazi doctrine. For if a patch of history is irrational and totally incomprehensible, that means that humanity itself is also irrational and incomprehensible. Then the evil empire is 'in all of us'. That is a scarcely indirect if not hypocritical way of saying that the fault is not Hitler's, nor the Nazis', nor that of those who allowed them to conquer and wield power, but everybody's, which means nobody's in particular.

For our part, we prefer to observe what the historical truth was: that far from 'all being guilty', men and women everywhere, including in Germany, chose one of two camps. The criminals and their accomplices behaved differently from those who resisted. The Amsterdam workers who went on strike to protest against the first anti-Jewish decrees were not the same as the SS. The Danish resistance which saved practically all of the country's Jews was not the same as the quislings. The majority of the Italian people (a 'band of dishonest liars', as Eichmann said with a cynicism that verged on the grotesque), who made it possible to save most of the Italian Jews, was not the same as the Croatian Ustashe. The soldiers of the Red Army who liberated Auschwitz were not the same as those who created the gas chambers. Between these two camps there were, to be sure, intermediate situations and behaviours. But the two camps' existence is empirically verifiable. By explaining the causes of the Holocaust in a rational way, we explain at the same time the difference between these behaviours.

12. Our interpretation of the Holocaust also has a practical, political function. It allows us to escape from practical impotence, and from the feeling of powerlessness in face of the risks of the phenomenon's recurring. We say deliberately that the Holocaust has been the apogee of crimes against humanity so far. But there is no guarantee that this apogee will not be equalled or even surpassed in the future. To deny this a priori strikes us as irrational and politically irresponsible. As Bertolt Brecht said, 'The womb from which this monster emerged is still fertile.'

In order to struggle better against neofascism and biological racism today, we have to understand the nature of fascism yesterday. Scientific knowledge is also a weapon the human race needs to fight and survive, not a purely academic exercise. Refusing to use this weapon means facilitating the arrival of new would-be mass murderers; it means allowing them to commit fresh crimes. Explaining the causes of fascism and the Holocaust means strengthening our capacity for rejection, indignation, hostility, total and unshakeable opposition, resistance and revolt, against the ever-possible re-emergence of fascism and other dehumanizing doctrines and practices. This is a basic, indispensable work of political and moral hygiene.

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