

The meaning of the Holocaust

Tue, 04/08/1992 - 22:00

The Sunday Times's serialisation of the Goebbels Diaries, edited by Nazi David Irving, has brought the ideas of the Holocaust revisionists back into the news. Richard Brenner looks at the attempts of fascists to re-write history, and assesses the importance and meaning of the Holocaust for socialists and oppressed minorities today.

In tune with the forward march of anti-semitism, fascism and the far right in Europe, the malign theories of the Holocaust revisionist 'historians' are back in the public eye.

The affair of the Goebbels' Diaries has highlighted the numerous and sustained attempts by fascist and far-right propagandists to deny that one of Nazism's greatest crimes—the systematic extermination of six million Jews—was ever known to the leader of the Third Reich, or indeed ever happened at all.

Only cynical fascist leaders or the most naïve and desperate of their followers can seriously doubt the historical fact of the Holocaust. Documentary and film records, the direct testimony of thousands of camp survivors and the absence of any serious challenge from non-Nazi historians all speak for themselves.

David Irving is the main representative of 'respectable' Holocaust revisionism in Britain.

Relative

Even today every Jewish family of European origin can tell of at least one relative or friend who perished in the mass extermination programme of the Nazis. The scale of the slaughter was as immense as it was unconcealable. Nearly 6 million people, 67% of all European Jewry, were annihilated: among them 250,000 at the death camp of Sobibor, 800,000 at Treblinka, 1,380,000 at Majdanek, 2,000,000 at Auschwitz.

Suffering beyond belief was inflicted upon Jewish communities: herded into ghettos, starved and beaten, forced to work as slaves and not just to die in concentration camps but to operate the camps as well.

It is precisely the enormity of this inhumanity that makes it necessary to introduce the history of the Holocaust to new generations of workers: not just as an abstraction, a list of millions dead, but as reality within the living memory of many surviving victims and butchers alike.

Denial that the Holocaust ever occurred is the theme of numerous fascist tracts such as Richard Verrall's notorious 'Did Six Million Really Die?'. Such material would be laughable were it not so perverse and politically dangerous.

But the Nazi apologists have a fall back position: Irving's persistent claim that Hitler himself was unaware of the genocide.

In rejecting and exposing the lies of the Holocaust revisionists, revolutionary socialists must also expose the arguments of liberal bourgeois anti-fascism.

Those who reject the idea that genocidal racism is inherent in modern capitalism must advance some other explanation. They argue that the Holocaust was simply the result of the insanity of one man, or even the product of some genetic predisposition to savagery inherent in the German nation.

This is rubbish.

As we have pointed out before (see *The Holocaust* by Mike Evans WP 132, July 1990), Nazi genocide must be understood as the result of two related factors: the rise of fascism in Germany and the imperialist war aims of German imperialism.

The Nazis utilised anti-semitism, an ideology with deep roots in German and central European society, as a key means of winning the support of the backward lumpen-proletarian, lower middle class and peasant masses.

Anti-semitism, with its purported opposition to 'Jewish capital' and its theory of a conspiracy stretching from financiers such as the Rothschilds through to the socialist ideas of the Jew Karl Marx, was justly described by the early Marxists as the 'socialism of fools'.

Through anti-semitism the Nazis directed the frustration and anger of petty bourgeois, of small businessmen and traders facing capitalist competition, of small farmers ensnared in debt to the banks, against a single and conspicuous section of the bourgeoisie. Anti-semitism was used to provide an alternative explanation to socialism for the exploitation and misery of capitalism.

Vicious anti-Jewish discrimination, pogroms and expropriations of Jewish property followed. As German imperialism pressed eastwards in search of markets and resources, mass deportations and population transfers were inevitable. The invasion of Russia in 1941 brought with it plans no longer simply to drive the Jews east but to exterminate them behind the lines of the Wehrmacht as it advanced.

Nationalist

This was to be the sop fed to the nationalist leaders of the non-Jewish peoples Nazism wanted to dominate: at least they too would have someone to victimise.

Finally, as the state-run capitalism of wartime Germany approached the limits of its dynamism whole sectors of monopoly capital—such as the chemicals giant IG Farben—were forced to rely on the slave labour of Jewish prisoners and other deportees from the conquered countries.

Was the Holocaust unique? Certainly as an act of imperialist barbarism it remains unparalleled to this day both in the scale of the planned attempt at liquidation of an entire people, and as an act of policy carried out by a modern, 'civilised' capitalist nation state.

But it is not the only example of attempted national extermination. The millions of African slaves who died as a result of the slave trade, the genocide of the Armenians at the hands of the Turks in 1913, the attempt by the Nazis to eliminate Romanies and gays, Stalin's mass murder and deportation of 'unreliable nationalities' during the war: all indicate that genocide as a state policy has not been restricted to Jewish victims.

Jews today rightly maintain the memory of the Holocaust and fiercely resist attempts to write it out of history. This is essential to prevent its recurrence, particularly at a time when anti-semitic material and demagoguery is resurfacing with a vengeance across Eastern Europe and the former USSR.

But there is nothing to be gained from denying other victims of national or racial oppression the right to

refer to the horrors of the Holocaust in the same breath as their own plight as some, such as some delegates to NUS conferences, have done from time to time.

Far from detracting from the specificity and horror of the Holocaust, still less fostering anti-semitism, attempts by black people, the nationally oppressed, or any other victims of violence and oppression to point to the lessons of the Holocaust are justified and welcome.

For despite the unparalleled scale of the Holocaust, the Jewish people are not the unique victims of oppression or genocidal violence. Anti-semitism, fascism, racism and state genocide will only be defeated by the unity of the exploited and the oppressed.

The development of Jewish nationalism (Zionism) and thus Israeli chauvinism contribute nothing to the fight against anti-semitism in Russia and Eastern Europe, except to counsel Jews to flee to the supposed safety of Israel. But the maintenance of a Jewish nation state at the expense of the rights of another nation?the Palestinians?can only lead to more war, racism and mass murder.

The real lesson of the Holocaust is that all oppressed peoples and the entire socialist and working class movement must forge an unbreakable unity in the fight to liquidate fascism wherever it raises its head, and that humankind will be condemned to unending cycles of reaction, national strife, oppression, genocide and war until the rapacious imperialist system is destroyed once and for all.

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