

The Left, Radical Antisemitism, and the Problem of Genocide

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The Left's historic failure to take seriously the radical, genocidal character of Nazi antisemitism risks being compounded today. The reluctance to challenge the current charge of genocide by radical Islamists against Israel manifests both a failure to understand what genocide means and allows Jews to be blamed for committing the crime they previously suffered.

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THE RADICALISM OF NAZI ANTISEMITISM

Before and during the Holocaust, no sustained effort was made on the Left to focus centrally on the radical and genocidal character of Nazi antisemitism. After the event, this failure was compounded by a temptation to see the Holocaust in purely universalist terms. Such failure in perception has not only made it harder to confront the further development of antisemitism but also, paradoxically, to respond to the recurring threat of genocide. The failure in particular to challenge the deeply misleading charge of genocide against Israel from radical Islamists has the effect of simultaneously stripping the concept of genocide of its fundamental meaning and allowing for the resurgence of antisemitic projections in which Jews become blamed for committing the very crime that they themselves previously suffered.

Much of the recent literature on Nazi antisemitism has emphasized its intensely radical character. However sensitive the Nazi elite were at different times to what their various audiences were willing to hear, there is little doubt that their beliefs about Jews were consistent and deeply held. Antisemitism was the key to their understanding of the way the world had become organized. So-called Jewish influence lay at the heart of the ideologies of democracy, liberalism, and socialism—no matter that these appeared to others to be quite different. This influence lay too at the heart of both the dominant forms of social and economic organization, capitalism and communism, no matter that these appeared to others as polar opposites. Jews were responsible as well for Germany's unexpected defeat in a world war, no matter that Germany had started it.

According to Saul Friedlander, one of the doyens of recent Holocaust historiography, this radical antisemitism is best understood as a redemptive ideology.¹ In Hitler's mind, the Jews were the source of all the fundamental problems, all the dangers that menaced not just Germany but humanity. For Jeffrey Herf,² this was also a deeply paranoid view, in which the Jews were thought to form an international conspiracy behind everything, not just destroying Germany from within (before the Nazis were able to flush them out) but on the global stage. It was this way of thinking that, according to Adam Tooze,³ explains in good measure how the Nazis understood the reasons for the behavior and decisions of their major global antagonists. It was the Jews, they believed, who stood behind not just the government of the USSR but also that of the United States, not to mention Great Britain, when Churchill insisted on fighting on—irrationally, in the mind of the Nazi elite.

It was also an upside-down view. As Peter Fritzsche⁴ has argued, the Jews were being blamed for what the Nazis were themselves actually doing or intended to do. They were blamed for starting the world war that Hitler himself in fact unleashed. They were blamed for America's coming into the war, even though it was Hitler who declared war on America. They were accused of intending to annihilate the Germans, when actually the Nazis were annihilating the Jews. And it was also, of course, a self-contradictory view. The Nazis contrived to blame Jews for both their demonic strength and their subhuman weakness. Yet such contradictions did not in any way weaken their convictions. It was a closed belief system, able to explain everything and not open to refutation.

This belief system has, however, also to be understood historically, in relation to earlier forms of antisemitism. It brought together, as Philippe Burrin has argued, a number of elements from earlier forms of antisemitism and organized them around a central organizing principle—race.⁵ This was itself to some extent a new element, though not completely. The Nazis after

1. Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007).

2. Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

3. Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction—The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

4. Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

5. Philippe Burrin, *Nazi Anti-Semitism: From Prejudice to the Holocaust* (New York: The New Press, 2005). There is a very interesting discussion of how racism reworked an existing antisemitic trope, the question of the blood libel, by David Biale, "Blood and the Discourses of Nazi Anti-Semitism," in *Varieties of Anti-*

all were not actually the first to introduce the element of racism into antisemitism. The Spanish Inquisition had already done this with the notion of *limpieza di sangre* back in the 15th century,⁶ although it can be argued that racism in the imperialist epoch has a far greater intensity and salience.⁷

But this particular racist hatred did not emerge *ex nihilo*. It drew on and incorporated other, earlier antisemitic ideas. Burrin insists that “there was an undeniable continuity . . . the Nazis reemployed more or less every anti-Jewish motif and theme available,”⁸ while Raul Hilberg long ago pointed out that “the Nazis did not discard the past, they built upon it.”⁹ Burrin argues that Nazi antisemitism brought together three elements in particular—Christian religious hostility to the Jews, nationalism, and racial pseudo-science. The first two were important because they enabled the Nazis to appeal to those who might not have been persuaded by racial antisemitism alone. Despite the tensions between Nazism and Christianity,¹⁰ many Christians colluded with the regime’s antisemitism.¹¹ And, as Helmut Walser Smith has argued, there were strong antisemitic strains in German nationalism¹² that facilitated its appeal. It was clearly not difficult for those who were enthused by the Nazi promise of national renewal to

Semitism: History, Ideology, Discourse, ed. Murray Baumgarten, Peter Kenez, and Bruce Thompson, 29-49 (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

6. For the place of this notion in the history of antisemitism, see Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism*, vol. 2, *From Mohammed to the Marranos* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). On the difficulty of drawing a hard and fast distinction between pre-modern (non-racial) antisemitism and (racist) modern antisemitism, see David Nirenberg, “Was There Race Before Modernity? The Example of ‘Jewish blood’ in Late Medieval Spain,” in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 232-264.

7. See Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York: The New Press, 2003), chapter 2.

8. Philippe Burrin, *Nazi Anti-Semitism: From Prejudice to the Holocaust* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 92.

9. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 5.

10. As Uriel Tal has carefully explained, Nazism drew on both Christian antisemitism in various ways and (as a pseudo-religion itself) attacked Christianity as a Jewish product, while also drawing on pagan roots for both purposes. See “Religious and Anti-Religious Roots of Modern Anti-Semitism,” in *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 2004).

11. Robert Michael, *Holy Hatred: Christianity, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2006).

12. Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race Across the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

endorse the exclusion of Jews from the nation.¹³

None of this can be adopted to an eternalist view of antisemitism, let alone to suggest invariance. Instead, it is to point to the significance of earlier forms of antisemitism as the *radicalism* of the Nazi version. The Nazis would not have been able to develop a more radical antisemitism had they not had these earlier, powerful motifs to work upon. And it was more radical in one critical respect; it was genocidal. It was no longer or not only about exclusion or expulsion from particular places but about elimination from humanity itself. Antisemitism had been radicalized into a genocidal ideology.¹⁴

THE LEFT AND NAZI ANTISEMITISM

It is striking that no significant left-wing organization or theorist before or during the Holocaust appears to have grasped the radical, genocidal character of Nazi antisemitism as it was being developed.¹⁵ While they did provide some opposition (albeit a divided and consequently ineffective one) to the rise of the Nazis, neither of the two major Marxist organizations of the time, the Social Democratic Party or the Communist Party, grappled directly with Nazi antisemitism. As Jeffrey Herf has argued, “The persecution of the Jews . . . played only a minor role in communist thinking about the resistance.”¹⁶ Only one leading figure in the Party, Paul Merker, made any serious effort to think about what was happening to the Jews, and he was marginalized at the time and punished afterward for his efforts.¹⁷ The

13. See both Fritzsche, *Life*, and his earlier *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

14. This radicalization was famously captured by Hilberg as a sentence that became progressively shorter over the centuries: from “You shall not live among us as Jews” (signaling the intent to convert Jews from their supposedly misguided beliefs) to “You shall not live among us” (signaling ghettoization or expulsion) to “You shall not live” (signaling annihilation). *Destruction*, 5.

15. I have discussed this failure more fully in “Marxism and the Shoah—Behind and Beyond Silence,” in *Re-Presenting the Shoah for the 21st Century*, ed. Ronit Lentin (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004), 158-178.

16. Jeffrey Herf, “German Communism, the Discourse of ‘anti-Fascist’ Resistance and the Jewish Catastrophe,” in *Resistance in the Third Reich*, ed. Michael Geyer and John W. Boyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 262.

17. Merker was in fact arrested in 1950 as an American agent and jailed for eight years. See Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). This marginalization is effectively (if perhaps unintentionally) confirmed by Allan Merson in his major history of communist resistance, which manages to refer to the Jews only three

German Socialists did not take Nazi antisemitism much more seriously.¹⁸ They sought generally to downplay its significance, fearing it might alienate some of their supporters or even members; in addition, they did not attack Nazi antisemitism directly as the Nazis came to power. They then refused to make it a central issue in underground activity or in their anti-Nazi propaganda, as David Bankier has shown.¹⁹

This was not merely a political failure that could be explained away on pragmatic grounds. It was also a theoretical failure: the independent Marxist theoreticians of the Frankfurt School (several of whom were Jewish) also did not take seriously the genocidal character of Nazi antisemitism. As late as 1942 (that is, when the Final Solution was well under way and more than a million had already been murdered), Franz Neumann, the School's expert on Nazism, insisted that the Nazis "will . . . never allow a complete extermination of the Jews."²⁰ Antisemitism was, in his view, "only the means to the attainment of the ultimate objective, the destruction of free institutions, beliefs and groups"²¹; it was not fundamental to the Nazi project. One could "represent National Socialism without attributing to the Jewish problem a central role."²²

They were not, of course, alone in this. There was a widespread blindness about Nazi goals among other social theorists at the time,²³ and a considerable reluctance even in Jewish communal organizations to appreciate what the Nazis had in mind. For Raul Hilberg, this failure was rooted in the Jewish experience of earlier forms of antisemitism and the various strate-

times in some 300 pages. See his *Communist Resistance in Nazi Germany* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985).

18. See Donald Niewyk, *Socialist, Anti-Semite and Jew—German Social Democracy Confronts the Problem of Anti-Semitism, 1918-1933* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971). Peter Pulzer argues that opposition to antisemitism had never been unanimous or unambiguous throughout the party's history. See his *Jews in German Politics—the Political History of a Minority, 1848-1933* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

19. David Bankier, "German Social Democrats and the Jewish Question," in *Probing the Depths of German Anti-Semitism: German Society and the Persecution of the Jews 1933-1941*, ed. David Bankier (Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), 521.

20. Franz L. Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933-1944* (London: Gollanz, 1942).

21. *Ibid.*, 551.

22. Cited in Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 184.

23. See Jacob Katz, "Was the Holocaust Predictable?," in *The Holocaust as Historical Experience*, ed. Yehuda Bauer and Nathan Rotenstreich (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981).

gies Jews had adopted before to deal with attacks on them, none of which would work with the Nazis.

It is easy, we know, to be wise after the event. There were real barriers to understanding in this case, which derive to some extent from what was radical about Nazi antisemitism. The extermination of the Jews could not be understood in utilitarian terms, as Hannah Arendt was one of the first to point out²⁴; it was, in an important sense, as Dan Diner has argued, counter-rational.²⁵ But, above all, the genocidal dimension was new. As Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassen put it some time ago, “Even veteran anti-Semites found it hard to imagine that the Nazi regime seriously intended to make the Jewish people extinct.”²⁶

THE QUESTION OF INTENT

The question of genocidal intent was for a long time, of course, the subject of often sharply polarized debate in Holocaust historiography, between “intentionalists” and their functionalist critics, although this debate has died down to some extent in recent years. For many on Left, the idea that the Holocaust was the end result of an original, deliberate, calculated intent to annihilate a whole people might seem to go against the grain. Any such argument assigns, it may be felt, too much primacy to ideas, at the expense of material circumstance. Ideas do not exist in a vacuum; people come to embrace particular kinds of ideas because of the circumstances in which they find themselves and the difficulties they face. The more acute the problems, the greater the risk of extreme violence. And the problems the Nazis faced concerned more than just the Jews. They arose from a project that was not primarily focused on the Jews but on conquest, annexation, and empire.²⁷ Not to position the Holocaust in this recognizable context is to run the risk of taking it out of history altogether and to assign the Nazis a demonic power that is both historically and morally untenable. The Nazis,

24. The phenomenon of the extermination camps could “no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives”; “the incredibility of the horrors is closely bound up with their economic uselessness . . . carried to the point of non-utility.” See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976), ix, 445.

25. See Dan Diner, “Historical Understanding and Counterrationality: The Judenrat as Epistemological Vantage,” in *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

26. Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassen, *The History and Sociology of Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 324.

27. See, for example, Mark Mazower’s recent wide-ranging study, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (London: Penguin, 2008).

and *a fortiori* the Germans, were human beings “like us,” capable in the right circumstances of inflicting extreme violence on others. And this violence was not confined to the Jews. The reverse side of demonizing Hitler, the Nazis, and the Germans is to single out the Jews, to privilege their suffering, ignoring the violence that was meted out to others at the same time and indeed both before and after the Holocaust. We need then to focus on the universal significance of the Holocaust and be alert to the repetition of such violence against any group and not remain fixated on the Jews.

Arguments of this kind, at any rate, seem to have played an important role in shaping and structuring much of what has passed for left-wing thinking about the Holocaust—not that there has been a great deal of it. It took a long time for any major historian or social theorist of the Left to focus on the Holocaust, although the Left was not unique in this. As Saul Friedlander has noted, “15-20 years of ‘latency’ followed the war in regard to talking or writing about the Shoah,” years in which there was a “more sustained silence of intellectuals, particularly the historians.”²⁸ It was only in the 1960s, as part of a generational revolt that probed into continuities and connections between the Nazi past and the liberal-capitalist present, that there developed any sustained interest in Nazism from the burgeoning New Left.²⁹ But even then, like their forebears of the old Left in the 1930s, the question of antisemitism was not a prime concern but rather what Nazism shared with other fascist regimes and how it was connected to other forms of capitalist rule.

It was not until the appearance in at the end of the 1980s of Arno Mayer’s *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken*³⁰ that there was any sustained effort from the Left to think directly about the annihilation of the Jews. But Mayer as well was eager to treat antisemitism as essentially of secondary importance, a side effect in many ways of a much more fundamental conflict between Right and Left in a great continental civil war. The mass murder was, in his view, part of a much wider and prolonged violence, likened to the Thirty Years’ War between Catholics and Protestants in Europe in the 17th century. The violence that was meted out to the Jews was thus both geographically and historically contextualized and contained. It could be

28. Saul Friedlander, “Trauma, Memory and Transference,” in *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. G. Hartman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 259.

29. In the communist East, historians were inevitably constrained by a Stalinist frame of reference, which made it very difficult to contribute much of substance, as Ian Kershaw has noted: “In the GDR . . . down to the upheavals of 1989 few important works specifically on the Holocaust appeared.” *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 4th ed. (London: Hodder, 2000), 95.

30. London: Verso 1990.

explained specifically in terms of frustration as the Nazis realized they were facing a catastrophic and terminal defeat at the hands of their main enemy, the Soviet Union.

Mayer's work was produced (as for a long time its sole work on the subject) by the influential British publishing house Verso, which was also associated with another prominent Left writer, the veteran Trotskyist Ernest Mandel, who also turned his attention to this topic after a gap of nearly four decades.³¹ (Mandel had in the meantime had written, also for Verso, a book on the Second World War, which managed to devote only a few paragraphs to the Holocaust at all³²). In a set of condensed theses,³³ Mandel also laid stress on the issue of the wider context, this time inter-imperialist rivalry, and emphasized that the Jews were only the first group to be targeted for genocide. Had the Nazis had been victorious, there would have been many more victims. Attention therefore needs to be turned not so much to the Jews but to all the others the Nazis also killed and were planning to kill.

This universalizing approach has gathered force on the Left in recent years, as a number of writers have sought to locate the Holocaust in the still broader context of imperialist violence, stretching back to the conquest of the New World.³⁴ From this perspective, what happened to the Jews was terrible, but so too was what happened to many others, not just at the time but before and since. What we need is to think much more broadly and generally. We need to think not so much about the Holocaust, not so much about antisemitism, and not so much about Jews but about genocide, about racism, and about all its victims.

These arguments are not trivial or unimportant. They are persuasive in many ways because they seem to fit with a certain common sense, both historically and morally. They invite us to think about the Holocaust as we think about other historical events, to connect it to the kinds of processes and developments with which we are familiar, and to broaden our horizons and sympathies from a too narrow and limiting preoccupation with "just"

31. There is a very incisive discussion of the development of Mandel's thinking (and its limitations) in Norman Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference* (London: Verso 1998).

32. Ernest Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War* (London: Verso, 1986)

33. Ernest Mandel, "Prémises Matérielles, Sociales et Idéologiques du Génocide Nazi," in *Le Marxisme d'Ernest Mandel*, ed. G. Achcar (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999). The theses were first formulated in 1988.

34. See, for example, the important collection edited by Dirk Moses (a major contributor to this line of thought), *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008).

the Jews. But there are some latent problems with this approach, some with perhaps surprising and paradoxical consequences.

It has, to begin with, no self-reflective aspect, no awareness that earlier efforts to think about this issue from the Left have been profoundly inadequate. There is no recognition that exactly what had occurred had been dismissed as a possibility both before it took place and while it was taking place. And, to the limited extent that Nazi antisemitism is now seen as important, it is assumed that the Nazis entirely replaced one kind of antisemitism with another. Nazi antisemitism is then typically seen only as part of a much more widespread form of racism, directed against many other peoples, not only and no longer centrally targeting Jews.

But Nazi antisemitism was not only racism. It was radical, incorporating earlier forms of antisemitism and reworking them, in a new framework, into a genocidal ideology. This genocidal ideology was itself radical. The aim was to kill all the Jews, wherever and whenever the Nazis could find them. It was in this sense a global project, not merely a German or a European one. Thus, the aim was not just to oppress the Jews, or to exploit them, or to force them out from a particular area, or to steal their goods or their resources or their property, but to murder them all. This became an overriding priority, to be pursued increasingly obsessively, at the expense of all other projects, even winning the war or saving what could be saved of the German nation-state.

If this was not demonic, it does nevertheless need to be thought about in terms of the history of morality, or rather, as Berel Lang has argued, in terms of the history of evil. For, as Lang has asserted, the Nazi elite clearly knew that what they were doing constituted a radical departure.³⁵ They went to considerable lengths to conceal what they were doing and planned what they were doing with considerable care. They engaged in a deliberate and sustained policy of dehumanization, stripping the Jews of their humanity in order to make them appear subhuman. Lang's conclusion is itself radical. For him, it is that, contrary to a whole tradition in Western philosophy going back to Plato, in which it is believed that "no one does evil willingly," the case of genocide here "comes as close any act of which humanity has experienced to exemplifying the statement of Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*—'Evil be thou my good.'"³⁶

Lang is not alone in seeing the question in such terms. Hannah Arendt also saw this, both in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* and later in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, even though she appeared to characterize that evil differently,

35. Berel Lang, "The Knowledge of Evil and Good," in *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

36. Berel Lang, "Intending Genocide," in *Act and Idea*, 29.

first as “radical” then as “banal.”³⁷ What was critical was that the Nazis sought to play God, to arrogate to themselves who should and should not constitute humanity—and this was why she thought Eichmann should hang.³⁸

The Holocaust then was the event that brought the question of genocide into a very clear focus. The Nazis *did* want to eliminate a whole people off the face of the earth, and this was (albeit belatedly) understood. The Holocaust was followed by the Genocide Convention, which was a response to what the Nazis had revealed was now possible in the modern world. This is not to say that mass killing is a wholly new phenomenon. It is perfectly possible to argue that genocide can be traced back to the ancient world, to Sparta and Rome, if not before.³⁹ But as Roger Smith has argued, it is “not that the word is new, the crime ancient, so much as the crime is new, the phenomenon ancient.”⁴⁰ There is a profound sense in which the Holocaust, as it were, lit up the sky, made the question unavoidable, as it was clear that the Nazis did intend to annihilate the Jews. There was no law that covered this crime, as Raphael Lemkin had realized during the 1930s, as he reflected on what had happened to the Armenians but especially as he became more and more preoccupied with what might now happen to the Jews.⁴¹ As his worst fears were realized, he repeatedly pressed the newly

37. Richard Bernstein, however, has argued that these two conceptions are not in fact contradictory. See his *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

38. “Just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people . . . we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, why you must hang.” *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking, 1965), 279.

39. For a recent and magisterial survey of the history of genocide, see Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

40. Roger Smith, “State Powers and Genocidal Intent,” in *Studies in Comparative Genocide*, ed. L. Chorbajian and G. Shirinian (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 1999), 9.

41. There has been a recent effort, which may be seen as part of the universalizing approach under discussion here, to argue that Lemkin’s concern was not with the Jews but with a much wider phenomenon, with genocides committed by Western imperialist states over several centuries. See, for example, the special issue of the *Journal for Genocide Research* 7, no. 4 (2005), edited by Dan Stone and Jurgen Zimmerer. It is certainly the case that Lemkin began by thinking about the Armenians and not the Jews, and that his concerns and sympathies went beyond these cases. But it is also the case that what drove him was a growing anxiety about what might (and did) happen above all to the Jews. He saw the Holocaust as the radical case that made the need for a law against genocide overwhelming.

constituted international community, in the form of the United Nations, to adopt his concept of genocide and to create a law to deal with it.⁴² The convention was ratified in 1948 (24 hours before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and was then in some ways the founding document of the postwar international order. It defined this crime specifically in terms of intent, and demanded a response from humanity itself, to prevent or halt genocide and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Genocide is not the same as other crimes. It is not the same, for example, as a war crime, since it can be committed in a time of peace as well as in a time of war. It is a crime, the greatest crime, against humanity itself. It is what William Schabas has rightly called the “crime of crimes.”⁴³ It is not a charge to be thrown around lightly.

THE CHARGE OF GENOCIDE AGAINST ISRAEL

But this is what now seems increasingly to be happening in ways that reveal some problems with an understanding of the Holocaust that fails to address not only the central role of radical antisemitism in that catastrophe but also its legacy. The charge of genocide is now increasingly being made against members of the group who were the victims of the very case of mass killing that forced the need for the concept of genocide in the first place. It is Israel above all that is now being said to be the main perpetrator of genocide today, against the Palestinians.

Now, it can be argued that there is no reason in principle why victims of genocide are not themselves capable of committing that crime themselves. Being the victim of a crime does not itself make anyone or any group any better or worse than others. Our sympathy and concern for victims does not require us to turn them into saints. One might even argue the contrary: that brutalization damages human beings and makes them far less likely to behave well, but rather the reverse. There is even a new literature emerging suggesting that there is a whole category of “subaltern genocide,” which is needed to capture cases of this kind, cases in which the oppressed take revenge on their tormentors.⁴⁴ But the category cannot encompass this

42. For a gripping account of Lemkin’s efforts, see Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (London: Flamingo, 2003). See also the recent biography by John Cooper, *Raphael Lemkin and the Struggle for the Genocide Convention* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2008).

43. William Schabas, *Genocide in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

44. See, for instance, the collection edited by Nicholas Robins and Adam Jones, *Genocides by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). This work is very illuminating in many

charge, which is so inaccurate and disproportionate that it calls for an explanation (at least in part) in terms of the continuing history of antisemitism.

It is not, of course, a completely new charge. It emerged in the Arab world, as Meir Litvak and Esther Webman have shown in a pioneering study of the topic, as part of a set of Arab responses to the Holocaust,⁴⁵ ranging from denial (“the most pervasive theme”⁴⁶) to a wish that Hitler had “finished the job,” to blaming the Jews for having provoked the Germans in the first place and/or for collaborating with them, to equating Zionism and racism, to equating the Naqba with the Holocaust. It has always been disturbing that sections of the Left have colluded with such arguments. The case of the endorsement of Holocaust denial by the French Far Left publishing house La Vieille Taupe caused something of a scandal in the 1990s,⁴⁷ as had the American Trotskyist Lenni Brenner’s earlier effort to accuse Zionists of collaborating with Nazis.⁴⁸ But these were marginal efforts, taken up only by small groups on the Far Left, with little wider resonance.

In any event, there was a period in the 1990s when a number of writers began to argue that the Arab cause was not being helped in any way by such morally obnoxious and self-contradictory claims. Admirable and courageous in many ways, this “new Arab discourse” was nevertheless not, according to Litvak and Webman, driven by any noticeable desire to know more about the Holocaust as such; instead, it seems to have been driven by

respects but it does contain one extraordinary essay that risks throwing the whole enterprise overboard. Jones suggests in his own contributing chapter that this category includes the case of some survivors of the Holocaust (led by the legendary partisan Abba Kovner), who sought after the war to wreak what he calls a genocidal revenge on the Nazis, and seriously contemplated poisoning the entire German population. But, as Dina Porat has shown in her detailed and exemplary discussion of this episode, not only did they have no resources whatever to do so, they were specifically prevented from getting them by the Haganah, which saw such a project as both immoral and entirely counter to the interests of surviving Jews and the state of Israel they were trying to build. See Porat, *The Fall of a Sparrow: The Life and Times of Abba Kovner* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), especially chapter 12). So, far from this being a case of “subaltern” genocide, it demonstrates that a victim group, indeed precisely this victim group, was utterly opposed to genocide.

45. Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, *From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

46. Litvak and Webman, 191.

47. See Alain Finkielkraut, *The Future of a Negation: Reflections on the Question of Genocide* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

48. Lenni Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators: A Reappraisal* (London: Croom Helm, 1983).

more political motives, using Arab recognition of the Holocaust as a basis for a call for mutual recognition. If Arabs would recognize the Holocaust, Israelis should then also recognize the Naqba.

This argument was always vulnerable to the criticism that it could be made to appear as if the Holocaust and the Naqba were identical injustices in a kind of flattening universalization (to follow Yehuda Bauer's argument), in which the Holocaust came to stand for all evil without any discrimination between different kinds of crime.⁴⁹ The Holocaust could even then be turned against the Jews themselves. After all, if the Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis, others suffered before them and alongside them and after them, so why not even at their hands? But what appeared on the surface then as an attractive universalizing of the Holocaust continued at some level to ignore what was actually central to the Holocaust itself—that it was a genocide committed by radical antisemites against Jews.

Those on the Left attracted by the apparent universalism of this approach may well have feared that to continue to focus on antisemitism would detract from the universal significance of the Holocaust. But, as Robert Fine has recently argued, this omission derives from a false polarization. "Reference to the particularity of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust . . . does not subvert the universal; it substantiates it." As Hannah Arendt observed, there is no contradiction in principle between treating the Holocaust as a Jewish question and as a question of universal significance; "the physical extermination of the Jewish people was a crime against humanity perpetrated on the body of the Jewish people, and only the choice of victims, not the nature of the crime, could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism."⁵⁰

These problems were swept under the carpet to some extent by a new turn, in which the call was no longer for mutual recognition of injustice, but for Israel itself to be charged with genocide, past and especially present, a call made with increasing insistence in the context of the revival of the Intifada at the start of the millennium, the Lebanon War of 2006, and especially after the Gaza war of 2009. Now it was no longer a question of mutual recognition, of an asserted equivalence between the Holocaust and the Naqba. The Holocaust, though still invoked (but only in its flattened

49. Yehuda Bauer, "Whose Holocaust?," *Midstream*, 26, no. 9, cited in Litvak and Webman, 325. More specifically, on the need to discriminate between different kinds of murder, see also Bauer's *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

50. Robert Fine, "Fighting with Phantoms: A Contribution to the Debate on Anti-Semitism in Europe," *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43, no. 5: 472. The quote from Arendt comes from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 269.

universal form), had essentially been replaced by what Israel was supposed to be doing to the Palestinians and indeed to Muslims more generally. In this turn, the Holocaust had not only lost its distinctively Jewish character but, receding into the past, had been replaced by a purportedly new genocide, which now demanded all attention.

The driving force for this charge is largely a radical Islamist one, from groups such as Hamas, from Hizbollah, and from its supporters in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is not an accident. It is not just that radical Islamists have never really moved from a denialist position, as Litvak and Webman have shown⁵¹; it is that the charge of genocide only makes “sense” within a framework that owes much of its structure to the continuing history of antisemitism. For the antisemitism of radical Islamists has, like Nazism before it, drawn upon an existing reservoir of antisemitic ideas, integrating and reworking them. Just as Nazi antisemitism was not only racist, though that was its dominant element, so radical Islamist antisemitism is not only religious, though that is *its* dominant element.

The charge of genocide plays an important part in this structure, not least because it is based on claims that can, without much difficulty, be shown to be without foundation in relation to what the Genocide Convention specifies⁵²; there is no evidence of an intent on the part of the Israeli state to annihilate the Palestinians as a group. Even if one were to attempt to read genocidal intent back into the consequences of Israel’s actions, the Palestinian population has not shrunk but grown. Palestinian children have not (as was the case with aboriginal children in Australia, for example) been taken away from their families and brought up as Israelis.

Similarly, there is no meaningful comparison between Gaza and the

51. Litvak and Webman, 365.

52. There is an important argument that the convention itself is too narrow and restrictive. This has long been argued in respect of political groups, although that is not the central issue in respect of this charge. (But see on this Caroline Fournet, *The Crime of Destruction and the Law of Genocide: Their Impact on Collective Memory*, Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007). There has also been an argument that Israel has committed “politicide.” See, for example, Baruch Kimmerling, *Politicide: Ariel Sharon’s War Against the Palestinians*, 2003, not coincidentally also published by Verso. A more sustained and credible argument against a restrictive understanding of the concept of genocide (rather than the convention, which is my focus here) has been advanced by Martin Shaw, who is rightly anxious not to allow the euphemism of “ethnic cleansing” further traction. See his *What Is Genocide?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). For a defense of the need for a restricted concept, see William Schabas, who nevertheless (and again rightly) points to the way in which the legal concept has subsequently been developed by courts: “What Is Genocide? What Are the Gaps in the Convention? How to Prevent Genocide?,” *Politorbis* 47, no. 2 (2009).

Warsaw Ghetto. The Nazis had not withdrawn from Warsaw, leaving it in the hands of a group committed to the destruction of Germany. They forced more and more Jews into the ghetto, many of them from far away, in conditions deliberately and consciously designed to starve people to death. They transported large numbers to extermination camps and then killed those who remained. There were no Jews left inside the ghetto after the Nazis had destroyed it, as they destroyed all the other ghettos, whether or not there was any resistance. Whatever the number of casualties inside Gaza, whether civilian or armed, it is clearly not the case that the population has been annihilated. There are, moreover, no slave-labor camps nor are there any extermination camps there or anywhere else in Israel/Palestine.

It is therefore puzzling to see how, particularly on the Left, such an unsubstantiated charge has gone unchallenged on such a serious question. The extent of this silence has gone beyond what Anthony Julius has elsewhere described as a new form of “fellow-travelling” on the Left.⁵³ It suggests something deeper, a common sense in which the question of genocide has lost its specific meaning, and in which the question of genocidal ideology has all but disappeared.

None of this is to justify *a priori* in any way the conduct of Israeli troops in either of these conflicts, or to exculpate them in advance from the charge of war crimes. (And war crimes are quite specifically not the same thing as the crime of genocide; otherwise, there would have been no need for a genocide convention). Such charges require, as they always do, to be investigated and punished as such, if proven (though it should be noted that even the strongly debated Goldstone report claims that there have been war crimes on both sides). Nor is it to justify the conditions in which the inhabitants of Gaza are trapped, nor to make any claims one way or the other about who is responsible for these conditions, about whether responsibility lies with the Israelis, who have withdrawn, or with the movement, Hamas, which has taken over within Gaza. It is simply to deal with the question of the charge of genocide, which cannot be substantiated.

But this charge is not an accident. It is located within a structure that shares a number of characteristics with Nazi antisemitism, from which it has borrowed several elements, even if it has added new ones. It is, to begin with, in an important sense, an *inverted* picture of reality. Just as the Nazis projected onto the Jews what they were themselves doing or intending to do, so the charge that is Jews who intend to commit genocide inverts an actual genocidal discourse from radical Islamists (including some of the

53. Anthony Julius, “The Company They Keep; Anti-Semitism’s Fellow Travellers,” *Z-word*, July 2008. www.z-word.com/z-word-essays/the-company-they-keep%253a-antisemitism%2527s-fellow.travellers.html.

present leaders of Iran) in relation to the large numbers of Jews who happen to live in Israel.⁵⁴ Second, it is also a picture of reality in which Jews (in organizing and implementing this genocide) are engaged in a vast conspiracy, not just to subvert and destroy Islam (as in the Nazi imagination they had sought to subvert and destroy Germany) but to control the world, through their control over states, international finance and the media⁵⁵; third, it is part of a world view that sees Jews as responsible (beyond even this genocide) for all the evils and maladies that afflict the Moslem world (as they were before for those that afflicted Germany); fourth, it is part of a world view that sees Jews as responsible for all the evils and maladies of the modern world itself, including the ideas and legacies of the French and Russian revolutions, also loathed by the Nazis; and fifth, it is a self-contradictory view, as in the Nazi case, since the Jews are also here too a historically a despised and weak minority, which makes it difficult to see how they could have obtained or be able to exercise such satanic power, and to carry out the genocide itself.

This is not to argue that antisemitism is central to the world view of radical Islamists, although it can be argued that this is indeed the case, that it has become again what Volkov argued that it was in the prelude to the Nazi era, the decisive “cultural code” that defines and reveals fundamental political positions and cultural orientations.⁵⁶ Nor is to argue that the only

54. How possible it is to turn this discourse into action is, of course, hotly debated. But the discourse itself needs to be acknowledged. See for example, Kenneth L. Marcus, “Iran’s Nuclear Anti-Zionism Is Genocidal, Not Political,” *In Focus Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (2009); and Irwin Cotler, “Global Antisemitism: Assault on Human Rights,” *Yale Initiative for the Interdisciplinary Study of Anti-Semitism*, Working Paper no. 3.

55. See Robert Wistrich, “The Old and New Anti-Semitism,” in *Those Who Forget the Past: The Question of Anti-Semitism*, ed. Ron Rosenbaum (New York: Random House, 2004).

56. Shulamit Volkov, “Antisemitism as a Cultural Code: Reflections on the History and Historiography of Anti-Semitism,” in “Imperial Germany,” *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 23, no. 1 (1978): 25-46. Volkov has often returned to this theme, not just in her recent effort to explain why German Jews (including her own father) were so slow to realize the threat they faced, but also why the Left has failed to challenge antisemitism to the point, in her view, of allowing it to re-enter its own ideological framework. For the former, see her *Germans, Jews, and Anti-Semites: Trials in Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); for the latter—which might itself help explain the contemporary collusion of some on the Left with radical Islam on this issue—see her remarkably prescient “Western Anti-Semitism Today—An Evaluation,” in *Present-Day Anti-Semitism*, ed. Yehuda Bauer (Jerusalem: Vidal Sassoon Centre for the Study of Anti-Semitism, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1988).

materials or antecedents for this worldview are to be found in Nazism. Some of these arguments can certainly be traced back to (or perhaps more accurately be brought together with) antisemitic ideas located in interpretations of Islam (sometimes dubbed fundamentalist⁵⁷) in which Jews were seen as inferior, untrustworthy, disloyal, and dangerous in various ways.⁵⁸ Nor is to argue that the dominant organizing element is the same. It is not racist (at least not overtly), since in principle Jews can be converted to Islam—although the use of terms such as pigs and apes to describe Jews does not suggest a complete break here from a Nazi depiction of them as rats and vermin. It is self-consciously religious, though it is not a version of Islam that a vast majority of Muslims would accept. But it is nevertheless a religious antisemitism, which incorporates crucial aspects of Nazi antisemitism and without which the charge of genocide now would have much less force.

As Matthias Kuntzel⁵⁹ and Jeffrey Herf⁶⁰ have argued in recent years, this radical Islamist antisemitism is connected to Nazi antisemitism through clearly identified channels and mechanisms. They have pointed to the important collaboration between the leaders of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and the Nazi state, but even more so between the Mufti and Hitler, who, as Kuntzel has argued, “in the course of the Second World War developed into by far the most committed supporter of National Socialism in the Arab and Islamic world.”⁶¹ And it was through the Brotherhood and through the Mufti that these ideas were reworked into the antisemitism of contemporary radical Islamists, an antisemitism whose own radicalism draws upon an antisemitism already radicalized and transformed into a genocidal ideology by the Nazis.

57. The use of this term has been persuasively criticized by Yehuda Bauer in his discussion of Islamist antisemitism, “Problems of Contemporary Anti-Semitism,” in Baumgarten, *Varieties*; see especially 319-321.

58. There are a number of general discussions of the antisemitism of radical Islamists. As well as Bauer and Wistrich (in many ways a pioneer in the field), see also the relevant chapters in Walter Laqueur, *The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism—From Ancient Times to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Pierre-Andre Taguieff, *Rising from the Muck—The New Anti-Semitism in Europe* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2004).

59. Matthias Kuntzel, *Jihad and Jew-Hatred* (New York: Telos Press, 2007).

60. Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

61. Kuntzel, 34.

TAKING GENOCIDAL DISCOURSE SERIOUSLY

There has to date been very little response to this from the Left, for reasons that are arguably rooted in past weaknesses and silences. Many on the Left, judging by their silence on the issue, seem to find it difficult to take this new form of genocidal antisemitism seriously now. It may be much easier to think about it, as the Left did in the 1930s, not as a central issue but as a secondary one, as an effect of something else, as a superficial phenomenon, as a means to another end, as a temporary phenomenon that will pass.

This would be a serious mistake, which would compound previous errors of judgment and understanding. It would mean not taking genocide seriously again. If the charge of genocide can be allowed to go unchallenged against Israel, whatever the other rights and wrongs of the Middle East conflict, it means that the Left would have not understood what genocide is and what it requires: a genocidal ideology and a genocidal intent that derives from that ideology. For if the Holocaust holds any lessons, one of them is that when people adopt and express genocidal ideas, they need to be taken seriously. As one of the leading contemporary historians of the Holocaust, Omer Bartov, has observed, “We still do not seem to have learned a simple crucial lesson that Hitler taught us more definitively than anyone else in history: some people, some regimes, some ideologies, some political programs, and, yes, some religious groups, must be taken at their word. Some people mean what they say, and say what they will do, and do what they said. When they say they will kill you, they will kill you.”⁶²

If Bartov is right, then the Left’s historic failure to take the genocidal threat of Nazi antisemitism seriously—urgently—needs addressing. Those who do not take radical antisemitism seriously as a genocidal ideology may end up not being able to take *any* genocidal ideology seriously. They may then, in what is perhaps a final and most striking paradox, given the Left’s historic and admirable universalist sympathies, not be able to respond effectively to the threat of genocide when it recurs, as it must, to Jews—or to anyone else.⁶³

62. Omer Bartov, “He Meant What He Said,” *The New Republic*, January 29, 2004.

63. The deafening silence (though not only on the Left) to recent genocides in Darfur and Sri Lanka are perhaps the clearest signs of this present danger. The contrast between the attention accorded to these two cases of mass killing and that accorded to the Gaza war is, in this context, particularly ominous.

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