

CHAPTER NINE

THE SHOAH AND MARXISM

BEHIND AND BEYOND SILENCE

Philip Spencer

Introduction: a Puzzle and a Problem

The silence of Marxism on the Holocaust presents itself in the first instance as something of a puzzle. If the Holocaust defies immediate understanding, flies in the face of our ordinary, common sense assumptions about the world, then one might expect something more of a theory which prides itself on its capacity, as Marx once said, 'to grasp things by the root' (Marx, 1975: 251). Yet, with some limited and problematic exceptions, there has been a dearth of Marxist writing on the topic. If we are concerned, as we are here, with how the Shoah can be re-presented in the twenty-first century, and with the dangers of a general surrender to silence, it may be helpful to rehearse some of the reasons for this particular instance, to explore what this has left unsaid and how it might be remedied.

Marxists have not been alone. It has to be said, in being slow to address the Nazi murder of the Jews. There was, as has often been noted, a general unwillingness to do so in many quarters for some considerable time, what Friedländer has identified as 'fifteen-twenty years of “latency”', following the war years in which there was a 'more sustained silence of intellectuals, particularly the historians' (Friedländer, 1994: 259). Historians were not alone in their silence, of course. The silence of sociologists prompted Zygmunt Bauman (1989) to write his influential work Modernity and the Holocaust, which did not, however, appear until the end of the 1980s.

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Interestingly, one of the few early exceptions noted by Friedländer to this general tendency was Adorno, whose work I discuss below. However,
Adorno’s work did not stimulate much further work, which is perhaps all the more telling, given Adorno’s own insistence that the critical test of any serious thinking is that it be measured against extremity (cited in Geras, 1998: 47). Yet it is not as if the debates that were eventually generated were in principle uninteresting to Marxists. Consider, for instance, the debate that has raged between ‘intentionalists’ and ‘structuralists’ over whether the Nazis intended all along to kill the Jews or whether the Final Solution was rather the product of a more chaotic, unplanned process. The debate over the priority to be assigned to structure or agency in the making of history, which raged for many years between Marxists, is not a million miles from these concerns. At another level, the role of state officials, planners, or the army, all of whose activities in the Nazi period have come under increasingly close scrutiny, could well have been grist to the mill of Marxists, who have insisted all along on the centrality of the repressive apparatus of the modern state.

From another angle, many Marxist historians have insisted on the necessity to adopt the standpoint of the oppressed in their writing. E. P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class (1963) is perhaps the most compelling instance of this approach. How different is this (at the broadest level of methodological principle) from the insistence of many writers that the Holocaust has first and foremost to be approached from the perspective of its victims? This is not, of course, to suggest any facile identification of subject or object (the English working class did not face annihilation at any stage). On the other hand, Marxists were amongst the first victims of the Nazis, as was memorably captured in the opening lines of Niemöller’s famous poem on the sequence of attacks. (‘First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist; then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew...’). This poem has often been invoked by Marxists in mobilising against the extreme right in post-war politics under the slogan ‘Never Again’. Yet it has not been accompanied by a focused Marxist analysis of what exactly had happened that was never to happen again. Instead, Marxists have engaged in much broader arguments about the nature and dynamics of Nazism or indeed fascism in general.

A Failure of Marxism?

In fact, as I show here, some connections have been made in all these areas by a limited number of writers who we may broadly group under the Marxist umbrella, and it is possible to begin to weave together – although only by way of quite serious critique in some cases – the elements of a Marxist understanding of the Holocaust, and to indicate that Marxists can still have something useful to say, however belated this may now be. Yet it is not possible, particularly given the lateness of the hour, to proceed
without beginning with an acknowledgement of failure, a failure that has to limit what may now be said.

This failure goes deep. It is a failure for instance of, with all due allowance, prediction. As late as 1942, for example, Franz Neumann – at that time a close associate of the Frankfurt School – could specifically and explicitly deny that extermination was what the Nazis intended. It is true, of course, that Marxists were by no means alone in this failure to predict, and it is also true that there is one remarkable exception to which I shall return. Nevertheless, given Marxism’s ambitious claims to a better, fuller, more scientific understanding of the world, its claim to be able to identify the deeper patterns, currents, and dynamics of the historical process, there ought to have been something in Marxism that would have been alert at least to the possibility of what was to befall the Jews.

Secondly, it is a failure of analysis. There has been hardly any sustained attempt to produce a Marxist account of what happened to the Jews. If we take seriously the notion that the Holocaust was an event of world-historical import, that there is a fundamental sense in which the world can never be the same again after Auschwitz, then one has to compare this silence with the relative profusion of Marxist works on other events of remotely comparable magnitude, such as for instance, the French or the Russian Revolutions.

Thirdly, it has been a failure of focus, an inability or unwillingness to look directly at the Holocaust. The turn instead to general theories of Nazism and Fascism ran more than a risk of muddying the waters. It could lead to trivialisation, a failure to distinguish in too many cases between repressive regimes of one kind and another, and genuine fascism, and between fascism and Nazism. It could also lead to a rather vulgar reductionism not unlike, as Herbert has pointed out, the way in which GDR historiography treated the extermination of the Jews as ‘something of a peripheral phenomenon – a mere “manifestation” of German imperialism’ (Herbert, 2000: 8). It may even be argued that the abstract character of this approach, which was perhaps intrinsically unable to do justice to the experience and sufferings of the Jews, facilitated the collapse of some sections of the German New Left into nationalism in the 1980s (Coulmas and Friedlinder, 1991).

Fourthly, the failure to analyse the Holocaust directly makes it less likely that Marxists will, in fact, be able to identify the portents if they appear again. The greater the degree of abstraction here, uninformed by concrete analysis or direct reflection, the greater the temptation either to see Holocausts everywhere or nowhere.

In this last connection and fifthly, the failure to look closely has, it may be argued, a defensive function which is potentially fatal to the entire socialist project. Norman Geras, whose recent work represents by far the most serious effort to think about these issues from a Marxist perspective, has made this point most sharply. He refers us to the telling observation
of a former Auschwitz survivor, Anna Paweleczynska, that there is—at least for those living in what she calls ‘the orbit of European civilization today’—a strong temptation to turn away, to protect an optimistic view of the world from the consequences of thinking about the camps. Gens then insists that a socialist philosophy worthy of being taken seriously cannot afford such a “protected” optimism, shut off against the brutal realities beyond, just by virtue of declining to look at them (Gens, 1998: 92).

Does this mean that we should write off any possibility of thinking about the Holocaust from a Marxist perspective? I want to argue here that if we can acknowledge these failures and draw some important conclusions from them, it is still possible to do so, although perhaps in a rather different spirit than one may be accustomed to from this quarter. Before doing so, however, it may be helpful to consider why it might have been so difficult for Marxists hitherto to think about the Holocaust directly.

Difficulties and Barriers

We may begin with the term ‘Holocaust’ itself. This term, derived from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, referring to sacrifices offered to God, may be freighted with theological significance, a feature which has led many to seek to substitute the Hebrew term ‘Shehit’—signifying catastrophe. Marxists may then have had some difficulty with a term used for so long, since they would be unable (not that they are alone in this) to accept any understanding of an event in human history which takes its meaning from its relationship to a God of any sort (see also the introduction in this regard).

The term ‘Shehit’, on the other hand, points to another set of difficulties, relating to the Jewish identity of the vast majority of the victims. At the very least, the treatment of Jewish identity has been problematic for Marxists, ever since one of Marx’s earliest and in other respects most brilliant works, The Essay on the Jewish Question (Marx, 1975), however insightful on some of the most fundamental issues of political theory, the relationship between politics and society, the nature of rights and so forth, contains some shocking formulations which are not difficult to construe as frankly antisemitic. Thereafter, as Enzo Traverso (1994) has demonstrated in a magisterial survey, Marxists have had repeated difficulty in coming to terms with the persistence of Jewish identity, in registering adequately its varied and complex forms. By and large Marxists have been tempted into more or less crude and inaccurate forms of economic reductionism, whilst assuming that any distinct Jewish identity would disappear through assimilation (not a view always taken of other national identities). This assimilationist problematic was widely adopted, perhaps particularly by Jewish Marxists, so much so that it can be argued it prevented them especially from paying any particular attention to antisemitism.
It is, for instance, striking how members of the Frankfurt School were so slow in recognising the force and scope of Nazi antisemitism. As late as 1942, Franz Neumann insisted in *Judenmedizin*, his major work on the Nazi regime (Neumann, 1942), that 'the German people are the least antisemitic of all'. As Martin Jay, who cites this remark as an illustration of a 'general blindness' on the part of such thinkers, has pointed out, it is noticeable how insistently they clung to such views in the face of mounting evidence, before, during, and after the event (Jay, 1973: 32).

Conversely, it may be that the destruction of so many Jewish Marxists by the Nazis – to which Traverso (1994) has also drawn our attention, arguing that it also marked a turning point in Marxism – may have created a further barrier to understanding. The attention of Marxists, for better or worse, does appear to have shifted away from the Europe where the Holocaust took place to other parts of the world (justifiably or not) and fastened in particular to regimes that emerged out of the struggle against Western imperialism, although quite how much genuine Marxism there was then, in either the eye of the beholder or beheld, is a moot point.

Perhaps more seriously, the consolidation of Stalinism, a further feature of the post-Nazi period, may also have acted as an impediment. Stalinism had, of course, a thoroughly catastrophic effect on Marxism as a set of ideas, vulgarising and distorting it beyond recognition, and discrediting it for generations by associating it with the practices and interests of the ruling class in the Soviet Union. At the same time, it was impossible for any serious Marxist analyses of the Holocaust to develop in the Stalinist states, as such analyses – however well-intentioned – could only be formulated within the Stalinist framework, and be expressed, or suppressed, only if they fitted the particular needs of those ruling elites at any given time. As Zvi Gitelman noted, accounts of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, for instance, were typically either 'glossed over, suppressed, or universalised' (Gitelman, 1990: 32).

Universalisation meant, amongst other things, not highlighting the particular fate of the Jews for fear that this would somehow diminish the wider significance of Nazism, or privilege the sufferings of the Jews over others, with the often implied connotation that this would somehow play into the hands of Zionists.

A related problem has to do with the relationship between the Nazi war against the Jews and the German working class. There may be a temptation on the Left to universalise the Holocaust on the grounds that emphasis on the German context, that the Nazis came to power in Germany, and used the power, resources and expertise of the German state, and that it was German Nazis who were the prime movers in the Holocaust, runs the risk of – inversely – racialising the debate. Indeed, distinct echoes of this can be found in the recent debate sparked off by the publication of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1997). This could be taken to imply that the German people as a whole
were guilty, thus impugning those many Germans, especially on the left and in working-class organisations, who were not Nazis, who opposed the Nazis, and who had no responsibility at all for the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Yet there is some evidence that many workers did support the Nazis and that many 'ordinary' Germans, including workers, did take part in the atrocities, notably as members of the Wehrmacht, whose close collusion with the regime, and with the SS in particular, has now been abundantly documented. If an adequate Marxist account were to be developed, it would need to be able to acknowledge and explain these unpalatable facts, rather than evade them by adopting an over-generalised approach in which capitalism is the only target, and capitalists the only villains.

Some of the assumptions implicit in reasoning of this kind are diametrically reductionist, presuming that one can read off political beliefs, loyalties and commitments from class positions (themselves rather vulgarised). Such assumptions ignore the possibility that beliefs can change over time, not necessarily for the better, that the struggle between classes can go both ways, and - as I argue below - that a massive epochal defeat for the Left can lead to consequences that may be far worse than many Marxists may have ever been prepared to contemplate.

For there is in Marxism a fundamental optimism about the meaning and ultimate direction of human history, which, important though it is for motivating action in the here and now, may at the deepest level also be incapacitating at times. Amongst the many central ideas that Marx took over from Hegel is a profound sense that history is not, to borrow from Shakespeare, 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' That the Holocaust proves once and for all that this is the case has agitated a number of thinkers, perhaps most obviously theologians. Neither the passage of time, nor the findings of detailed research have made this argument any weaker, as is made clear in a fine essay by Omer Bartov, which uses Macbeth's speech, from which these lines come, to frame a searching survey of some deeply troubling recent literature by both historians and survivors, from Christopher Browning to Primo Levi. Bartov's grim conclusion is that 'humanity ... having once played the Devil's game, is now doomed to play it over and over again, in an endless variety of locations and forms. For the moral of the idiot's tale is that murder is already in our midst' (Bartov, 1996: 113).

Primo Levi's growing pessimism was in part informed by the passing of time, and echoes an early response by the great Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher when he suggested that later generations may understand even less than we do now. For Deutscher, the Holocaust seemed a 'huge and ominous mystery', which could only 'baffle and terrify mankind' (Deutscher, 1966: 163-4). Yet Deutscher was by no means ignorant of the capacity of human beings to inflict terrible cruelty on each other. He was, after all, the biographer of Stalin, and wholly aware of the scale of atroci-
ties that had been committed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Deutscher’s unusually modest, even humble, stance before the Holocaust stands in quite stark contrast to what, to borrow Enzo Traverso’s term, we might call the ‘epistemological arrogance’ that sometimes affects Marxists. This can flow from the otherwise laudable effort of Marxists to accept what Lukacs (1971) once identified as the central feature of Marxism, the concept of totality. However, important this project may be in other areas, there seems to be a real and inescapable difficulty in any attempt to fit the Holocaust into some wider, overarching whole, given the sense – upon which so many witnesses and writers have insisted – that something fundamental shifted here, something irrevocable occurred, some fundamental boundary was crossed. At the very least, there is a problem of tone, a difficulty in thinking in this mode without conveying – however unintended this may be – a sense of smugness, of false assurance, of an understanding that has not fully engaged with the suffering of the victims. It is, perhaps, some such sense of inappropriateness which lies at the heart, for instance, of Elie Wiesel’s desperate ‘plea for the dead’, for them to be left alone with their inability to know, with their questions rather than answers (Wiesel, 2000).

It is, however, more than a problem of tone. There is also at a deeper level a sense in which Marxism’s ambition to articulate an explanation of this totalising sort cannot be pursued without doing some kind of violence to the memory and perception of the survivors. Something like this is argued, though not just, or even primarily, in relation to Marxism, by Saul Friedländer in his discussion of trauma and memory and its significance for the historian of the Holocaust. Reflecting on the extreme difficulty survivors have had in coming to terms with their experience on the absence of themes of redemption, of signs of resolution, he suggests that this has implications also for historians, who must try to come to some understanding, but ‘without giving in to the temptation of closure’ (Friedländer, 1994: 261).

The implications of this for Marxism are surely quite profound, that there has to be some scaling down of ambition, some humility, before what Friedländer calls the ‘excess’ of the Shoah, a recognition that while some things may be said, others may not, that while Marxism may shed some light, it cannot hope to illuminate all corners or aspects of this reality. If it is to do so, however, there has to be some critical reckoning with the limitations of what has so far been said, and it is to this that I now turn.

The Frankfurt School: Antisemitism and the Dialectic of Enlightenment

Probably the first serious effort by Marxists to think about the Holocaust was made by the two leading figures in the Frankfurt School, Adorno and
Horkheimer. Prior to the Holocaust, although many of its members were Jews, the analysis of antisemitism was, as Enzo Traverso (1994) has shown, weak and - given the School's wide-ranging interests in culture, and especially psychoanalysis - oddly restricted within a somewhat crude and economistic frame of reference. It also suffered from a recurring tendency to take refuge in abstractions. As late as 1939, Horkheimer was writing - in his essay on The Jews and Europe - that 'whenever does not wish to speak of capitalism should keep quiet about fascism', whilst he himself advanced the rather crude argument that antisemitism had to be understood in terms of the transition from one stage of capitalism to another, from market to state capitalism. 'The Jews', he wrote, 'are supplanted as agents of circulation, for the modern economic structure eliminates the entire sphere of commerce' (cited in Traverso, 1994: 200). Leaving aside the exaggerations of this argument in economic terms, it leaves a lot to be desired in terms of its understanding of the scale and intensity of Nazi antisemitism. It is, as Dan Diner (2000) suggested, a rather utilitarian interpretation, treating the Nazi attack on the Jews as instrumental, and characterised by a certain smugness of tone.

In collaboration with Adorno, however, Horkheimer subsequently adopted a more profound approach. In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, although it still contains elements of this economistic reasoning, they opened up a potentially new level of understanding by calling upon psychoanalysis, and in particular the notion of projection to account for the violent irrationality in Nazi hatred for the Jews (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1975, especially section VI, and pp. 167-195).

Although they still did not take fully seriously the fact that it was the Jews who were the object of this hatred, arguing - not always consistently - that it could not be anybody, they did crucially emphasise that it was the issue of difference, posed by the presence of the Jews in the nation state, which was central to the unfolding of the dialectic of enlightenment itself: 'The existence and way of life of the Jews throws into question the generality to which they do not conform' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973: 169). At the same time, the move away from, or beyond, a reductionist economism, drawing in particular upon insights from another body of knowledge (psychoanalysis) shows a more open approach, indicating that Marxism alone does not have all the answers. Although the overall tone of the piece is not exactly one of humility, it is striking, as Dan Diner (2000) has pointed out, how after this essay, and, in his view, as the enormity of the Holocaust began to sink in, Horkheimer - but the same goes for Adorno - retreated into aphorisms, eschewing any direct effort at sustained generalisation.

After this, little effort seems to have been made by Marxists to build on Horkheimer and Adorno's work. To some extent, this may have been due to the fact that these thinkers were progressively moving away from Marxism themselves. Although there are valuable elements in their later
work which may be built on, there is no mistaking that \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} involves a rejection of key Marxist ideas, in its pessimism and abandonment of any lingering belief in either the historic potential of the working-class or the possibility, let alone the necessity, of a link between theory and practice. In the eyes of many commentators, it is the problematic relationship of humanity to nature – a relationship in which Marxism is itself implicated – rather than relations between classes, which is increasingly the focus of their concerns. This may be to underestimate the extent to which the shift in their thinking was driven by a recognition of the significance of the Holocaust, the need to register – as Horkheimer put it to Adorno – that ‘antisemitism today really marks the local point of injustice, and our physiognomy must turn to the world where it shows its most horrible face’ (cited in Rabinbach, 2000: 54).18

Traverso, in particular, has suggested that the Holocaust was pivotal in this shift. ‘It is the Utopia of an emancipated world that seems after Auschwitz to have been banished or everlastingly tarnished for the Frankfurt School. Having recognised the fracture of civilization that took place at Auschwitz, the Frankfurt School’s members from that time on seemed to see it as irreversible. Auschwitz had in their eyes put an end to the historical dialectic based on class struggle and brought to light a negative dialectic of domination’ (Traverso, 1999: 49-50).

\textbf{Götz Aly and the Political Economy of the Final Solution}

After Adorno and Horkheimer, there was then a prolonged silence, a long period in which Marxists wrote about a huge range of topics, but not the Holocaust. When we come to consider the much more recent work of Götz Aly, we are dealing with an altogether narrower focus and one, unlike that of Horkheimer and Adorno, much more firmly located within the concerns of mainstream Holocaust historiography. Aly is concerned with the role of core sections of the state apparatus, the bureaucrats, planners and technical experts who drew up policies that led to mass murder. These policies, in Aly’s view, are at the heart of a political economy of the Final Solution, and are to do with demographic social engineering, the movement and extermination of populations in the light of calculations about the allocation of resources and concerns about productivity.

Aly sees his work as located within the structuralist framework adopted by writers such as Mann, who have argued strongly that there was no master plan to exterminate the Jews, but that the Final Solution was rather the product of a cumulative radicalisation in which interests competed with each other in a chaotic, polycratic structure. Ideology, it is argued, did not play a significant role in this process, which was driven by technocrats making proposals and implementing them in a context in which, as he puts it, the Nazis had ‘backed themselves into a dead-end ...
they had created facts on the ground that they were at no point able to control (Aly, 1999: 258). What is then important is to understand how it was that middle-level bureaucrats could come up with solutions of this kind, how it was that 'common state bureaucratic procedures were applicable to the so-called "Final Solution of the Jewish Question"' (Aly, 2000: 52).

Aly provides considerable amounts of evidence to support his argument that these technocrats played a major role in the Holocaust. At one level, his argument, that it was a modern state machine and its functionaries who were indispensable to the Holocaust, is quite compelling. It can be used, alongside the work of Omer Bartov on the Wehrmacht, for instance, to highlight the concrete ways in which the apparatus and personnel of the German state collaborated extensively with their Nazi political masters. At the same time, it suggests that in some senses there was a kind of rationality to the Holocaust, a link between it and other, especially economic policies. At this level it shows how, pursuing their work within a given frame of reference, state planners, technocrats and bureaucrats can plan and implement murderous policies in a way that is in most disturbing respects not incongruent with their 'normal' activity.

However, the argument is carried much too far, as a number of critics have pointed out. It overstates the role of the middle-level bureaucrats, who were not, after all, the ultimate authors of the project to annihilate the Jews, terrible and significant though their detailed work was in carrying this project out. The orders after all, as Yehuda Bauer reminds us, came from Berlin, and the motivation was not so much bureaucratic as ideological (Bauer, 2001: 91). In ignoring ideology, Aly ends up treating the arguments of these 'subalterns', as Dan Diner calls them, far too seriously (Diner, 2000: 140). The argument about the economic rationality of these policies confuses rationality with rationalisations, treating the latter as causes in their own right (Burleigh, 1996). It runs the considerable risk of ignoring the fundamental irrationality of the Holocaust, both in terms of ends and means, and in terms of the ends themselves. In trying to analyse the rationality of the process from within the state machine, as it were, it loses sight of the irrationality of the whole project, its madness and insanity.

Arno Mayer and the Importance of Anti-Bolshevism

This is the focus, on the other hand, of Arno Mayer's work, Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? (Mayer, 1990), whose appearance in the late 1980s caused considerable controversy. Mayer challenges what he sees as the Cold War blinkers of dominant accounts, and seeks to locate what he insists on calling a 'Judeocide' (rather than a Holocaust) in its historical context, within a period of generalised crisis of the social order which
involved a fierce struggle between the forces of Right and Left – Nazism and Bolshevism. At the heart of Mayer’s account is the insistence on a close link between the Nazi struggle against Bolshevism, and the onslaught against the Jews. The mass murders began in the East, where the battle between Left and Right was fought to its climax. The Nazis did not intend to murder the Jews, but were driven to do so out of frustration and rage, above all as they began to suffer defeat at the hands of their mortal enemies, the Bolsheviks. Having sought to expel the Jews from the territory they controlled, they found themselves now with far more Jews as a result of their annexations in the East, with vast swaths of territory where there were also large numbers of Jews. Initially ‘at a loss as to where to direct the Jewish exodus’, as he puts it, they first hit upon the idea of sending them to Madagascar (Mayer, 1990: 195). When this fell through, and the tide began to turn decisively against them, they lashed out in a fury at the Jews under their control.

Mayer does manage to convey some sense of wildness and madness in the attack on the Jews, and his emphasis on the link between Nazi hatred for Bolshevism and antisemitism focuses on something that is often underplayed in the literature (see Streit, 1994: 103, on the link between what he calls ‘primary antisemitism’ and ‘extreme anti-Bolshevism’). He analyses with some effect the alliance between other forces on the Right and the Nazis, and the collusion of the old élite with the Nazis, an alliance and a collusion that was grounded in a deep and abiding fear of the Left. However, there are some serious problems with his interpretation, which threaten to obscure these insights.

Mayer is driven in part by the need to locate the murder of the Jews in history and to relate it to the general crisis of the period in which it took place. His analogy is with the general crisis of the seventeenth century and the Thirty Years War, in which terrible atrocities also took place. In focusing so heavily on the war between the Nazi regime and the Soviet Union, however, he runs the risk of over-contextualising the murders, and making them too contingent on the fortunes of war in the East. As a number of critics have pointed out, this raises the question of what would have happened to the Jews had the Nazis been victorious. Does this mean that they would have survived, that they would not have been murdered (Roth, 1990)? In fact, as Browning (1994) has shown, the murders began before the tide had turned, and were arguably not so much a product of frustration and defeat, as generated in an atmosphere of euphoria and triumph, as the German armies swept all before them. It makes rather more sense to think of the initial defeat of the Soviet Union as having removed the last barriers that prevented the Nazis giving full vent to their mad hatred of the Jews and putting in motion the energy and resources, not only of violent deranged individual killers, or groups of killers, but also of the apparatus of a modern, bureaucratic state. It is essential after all to consider not only the fury, but also, as Vincent Recora notes (1992), the
calm, dispassionate and efficient way in which the mass killing was done (as for instance in the case of the organisation of railway timetables required to transport millions across Europe to their deaths).

At the same time, it is important not to give any credence to the notion that the Soviet Union under Stalin was a barrier to mass murder. In defining the struggle as one between Left and Right – which in many ways it was, one should not fall into the trap of minimising the scale of Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union. This is not in any way to give credence to the absurd and disgraceful arguments of those such as Nolte (1985), who have pretended that the conduct of the Nazis and the Werhrmacht on the Eastern front was an understandable reaction to some primitivist ‘Asiatic deed’; a defensive move borne out of fear of what the barbaric Russians would do to the Germans if they won. In fact, if there is such a danger, it lies in Mayer’s over-contextualisation, which, as has been noted, is uncomfortably close in structure to the accounts proffered on the revisionist Right (Bartov, 1997: 175). Rather, it is to leave more open the possibility of taking seriously the idea of socialism or barbarism put forward by classical Marxists, notably by Rosa Luxemburg, to which I will return.

**Ernest Mandel and the Destructive Tendencies of Capitalism and Imperialism**

Few have been as insistent on the need to hold on to Marxism in this respect – in the face of the man-made disasters of the twentieth century – as Ernest Mandel, whose occasional writings have been the most explicitly and rigorously Marxist of all the writers discussed so far. Although there was a very long gap between his earlier writings on the Holocaust and his later ones – some forty years, as Traverso (1999) notes – Mandel’s summary of his position represents a condensation of thinking that is both wide-ranging and ambitious (Mandel, 1999). In a set of quite dense theses, Mandel argued that the Holocaust was the ultimate expression of the destructive tendencies of bourgeois society, tendencies whose roots lay in colonialism and imperialism. Beginning by noting the importance of racist ideology, Mandel went on to identify a range of factors and features that, as a Marxist, he regarded as essential for an understanding of the Holocaust. Some of these recapitulate earlier insights, to do for instance with the role of the state and its functionaries, but he insisted too on the importance of the general crisis of the social and economic order of capitalism, and the virulently reactionary nature of the German Right, which was ready to accept Hitler. At another level, Mandel was able to see – in a way that Aly, for instance, does not seem to – the contradiction between the partial rationality of the operation and the overall irrationality of the whole project, an expression of the deeper, still irrationality of capitalism.
There are, however, some real difficulties with Mandel’s approach. To begin with, he seems compelled to insist that what happened to the Jews was, in important respects, not distinct, that the dehumanisation of the Jews is ‘only’ different by virtue of the means and socio-economic designs of the Nazis. Yet these designs had a real, specific, character and logic, which targeted the Jews in particular ways. Mandel argues that the Nazis had the same fate in store for millions of others, and that the reason the Jews came first was in part that the Nazis feared that they would somehow be less ‘docile’ than the others. However, whatever plans the Nazis had for others, and recognising that many, many others, including Roma, and Slavs, were murdered in large numbers, the fact is that there were singular and critical features to the Nazi attack on the Jews.

This is not to suggest any privileging of Jewish suffering, but rather that it is important to be able to see clearly what was specific here, and not to subsume the Holocaust in a framework that is over-generalised. As Norman Geras has noted, there is a serious imbalance in Mandel between the stress he lays on contextualisation and comparability – slavery, Nazi euthanasia, the Nazi treatment and plans for Roma and Slavs, Hiroshima – and his much briefer reference to the unprecedented character of the Holocaust (Geras, 1998: 147-8).

This may be linked to another set of problems, identified in Mandel’s approach by Enzo Traverso, to do with the role of ideology and anti-Semitism in particular. As Traverso has pointed out, Mandel does not distinguish between concentration camps and extermination camps, some of which were devoted exclusively to killing the Jews. Anti-Semitism was central to a level which Mandel seems unwilling to grasp (Traverso, 1999: 59).6

**Enzo Traverso – Auschwitz as a Paradigm**

Traverso’s own contribution to the Marxist literature on the Holocaust has undoubtedly taken it to a qualitatively new level, providing us with a number of critical elements which can begin to take us beyond the historic silence with which I began. He focuses centrally on Auschwitz, as ‘a symbol, metaphor and synthesis … an authentic problematic crux [which] links the concentration and extermination camps to the whole of German society and to Nazi rule’. Auschwitz poses a major challenge to Marxism, as it was a ‘genuine civilizational break, which tore up the fabric of elementary human solidarity which human existence on the planet had until then been based on’ (Traverso, 1999: 8-9). It requires Marxists to abandon what he claims has been a hitherto largely linear conception of progress, in order to cope with the reality that barbarism lies at the heart of modernity.

Traverso’s argument is compelling and both congruent with and dependent on many of the findings of non-Marxist historians. He raises
some searching questions for Marxists, refusing to take refuge in abstractions or evasions, and confronting some hard and difficult problems. He recognises fully the centrality of antisemitism, acknowledging its deep roots, but also the qualitative change in the shift from Christian to Nazi hatred of the Jews. He acknowledges the force of the intentionalist position (that the Nazis did intend to kill the Jews), but links this to an awareness that the Final Solution would have been impossible without the war. At the same time, he does not fall into the trap of contingent contextualisation, insisting that Auschwitz has to be understood in a deeper framework, one which reveals modern civilization itself to be intimately involved.

In this sense, his argument may be seen to be a kind of Marxist echo of Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Where Bauman (1989: 118) sees the Holocaust as a ‘window’ through which one can view critical features of modernity, Traverso (1999: 74) sees Auschwitz as a ‘paradigm’. Where Bauman focuses on the role of the bureaucracy, Traverso sees the technocratic elite. Indeed, at the end of his book, Bauman refers specifically to the one Marxist thinker (Walter Benjamin) to whom Traverso turns for inspiration (Bauman, 1989: 212). In his famous *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin (1999) insisted that history should be seen as a ‘single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage’, that revolution (a tiger’s leap into the dark) is necessary to stop humanity’s march towards disaster. In this Messianic conception, history is viewed from the standpoint of the oppressed, and revolution becomes an act of redemption that alone can make any sense of the sufferings of the past.

This effort to rethink Marxism in the light of Auschwitz and through the prism of Benjamin’s redemptive version of historical materialism is, however, not without its difficulties. As with Bauman’s argument, it is difficult to see why, if modernity is the problem, the Holocaust has not happened elsewhere, or why other modern societies have not experienced Holocausets (Bauer, 2001).

It may also be objected that Traverso overstates the centrality of the linear conception of progress to Marxism. There is also the problem that Benjamin’s Marxism is almost self-avowedly utopian, to a point at which it invites a deep pessimism. As Alex Callinicos has pointed out, ‘it makes revolution so discontinuous with the ordinary sequence of events as to be unthinkable’ (Callinicos, 1989: 81–2). It also invites the suggestion that nothing, short of some messianic eruption, could have been done to stop the Holocaust then or, perhaps, again.

**Socialism or Barbarism?**

It is not the case that either Luxemburg or Trotsky were unaware of the possibility of something catastrophic happening. In his critique of Mandel,
Norman Geras (1998) has drawn attention to what he calls the ‘astonishing fact’ that in late 1938, Trotsky did appear to predict something of what was to happen. Trotsky’s precise words were ‘It is possible to imagine without difficulty what awaits the Jews at the mere outbreak of the future world war. But even without war, the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the physical extermination of the Jews’ (Trotzky, 1970: 24; cited in Geras, 1998: 138. Emphasis in the original).

Much earlier, in the early stages of the First World War, Rosa Luxemburg had argued that European civilization was already regressing into barbarism. Recalling the slogan, first proposed by Engels, that ‘capitalist society faces a dilemma: either an advance to socialism or a reversion to barbarism,’ she identified quite clearly what the latter was beginning to mean: ‘the triumph of imperialism and the destruction of all culture and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery’ (Luxemburg, 1970: 269). She also noted, in this same piece, that the barbarism was not new to modernity, but was being reimported into Europe from where it had been first practised, on the objects of European colonialism, an argument that Hannah Arendt was later to make considerable use of her pioneering analysis of Nazi terror and antisemitism (Arendt, 1966).^8

Now this is not to imply that either Trotsky or Luxemburg were magically far-sighted. Geras indeed insists that it is not Trotsky’s Marxism that enabled him to sense such possibilities, but rather his literary imagination, and that it is an error to think that Mandel (a disciple of Trotsky) should have followed, or have been able to follow Trotsky’s direction. It is also the case, as Traverso points out, that it is all too easy to repeat Luxemburg’s invocation of socialism or barbarism as a slogan, an ‘evasive, disorienting smokescreen’ (Traverso, 1999: 20). Nevertheless, they both did catch something here upon which Marxists may reasonably reflect. What were the links? Was it simply rhetoric on Luxemburg’s part that connected the First World War to barbarism? Why would another war, or another bout of reaction lead to the extermination of the Jews?

One way of approaching these questions is to think again about the link between antisemitism and anti-Marxism/anti-Bolshevism in the Nazi imagination. This is not to suggest that all Jews were Marxists or vice-versa, which is an absurdity (although it is noticeable how many Jews were active and leading figures on the Left). Nor is it to suggest that anti-Marxism came before antisemitism. It clearly did not. Anti-Bolshevism, as Kershaw and Levin have pointed out, ‘was a later insertion into an already present, virulent, latent genocide anti-Jewish myth’ (Kershaw and Levin, 1997: 7). Saul Friedländer’s compelling analysis of the Nazis’ ‘redemptive antisemitism’ shows that anti-Bolshevism derived from antisemitism, not the other way round (Friedländer, 1997: 98).

Nevertheless, the two were closely entwined from very early on. Antisemitism, as Friedländer has shown, resurfaced in German political
Life as a response on the Right to the growth of the Left in 1912. The revolutionary upheaval of 1918-19 — in which Jews such as Luxemburg, Léviné and Eisner were prominent — fused nationalist resentment with hatred of the Left. "Both the Jews and the Left were seen as internationalists, undermining the unity and strength of the nation." The Marxist movement was seen as an international conspiracy, whilst the Jews were seen to have no fixed attachments to the nation, moving back and forth across the globe. Both provoked an intense rage in those brutalised by the barbarism of the war. Insofar as the first world war was, as Luxemburg argued, already a return to barbarism, it laid the groundwork for a further spiral in the minds of those already deranged by it and obsessed with the desire to wreak revenge on those who had, in their imagination, cheated them of their spoils.

This amalgam was not merely ideological or rhetorical. The Nazis targeted both the Left and the Jews. One consequence, it may be suggested, was that, having destroyed the Left, they were free at a number of levels to attack the Jews. They used their anti-Marxism initially to forge alliances with other forces on the German Right. With the subsequent destruction of its leadership and organisation, the labour movement was then defenceless and, perhaps more importantly, demoralised, incapable of offering organised resistance, particularly after 1935-6, when most resisters had been arrested and imprisoned (Ludike, 1999).

To put it another way, the effects of the struggle between Left and Right — that is, a historic defeat for the Left — left society at the mercy of the Nazi state. In this sense, a Marxist awareness of the significance of the class struggle can be used to illuminate the exposed position that the Jews found themselves in, as the measures against them were radicalised. There were no significant intermediary bodies — what might now be called ‘civil society’ — in the way of the Nazi State. When the Nazis experienced what Browning (1994) has called the ‘euphoria of victory’ on the international, as well as the national front, they were free to pursue their hatreds to the end.

If a Marxist approach is not capable of explaining adequately why these hatreds existed in the first place — and here the Frankfurt School’s turn to psychoanalysis for instance may be helpful — it can nevertheless make some contribution to explaining how these hatreds were articulated, and under what circumstances they could be given free, or free, rein, and to analysing some of the mechanisms which were then essential to their pursuit.

There may, however, be an important corollary of this argument. If the barbarism that ensued is made possible if it is not caused by epochal defeat, then this has implications in turn for what may be possible on, as it were, the other side of the equation. Here, it may be argued, the difficulty that Marxists have had in thinking about what barbarism means, may be instructive, in terms of what may or may not be possible. At this
point, the invocation of the slogan 'socialism or barbarism' may well become meaningless, since, if barbarism is taking place, then socialism is, by definition, impossible in the here and now, or perhaps in the foreseeable — but not permanently fixed — future. To invoke socialism in these circumstances as the alternative to barbarism is to ignore the reality that barbarism has itself been made possible by the destruction of generalised solidarity, for instance in the forms, however limited, of the organisations of the Left.

In the absence of such organisations, and the generalised demoralisation that flourished in their place, however, this is not to deny that some elements of solidarity between human beings could or can survive. Rather than abstractly invoking socialism, the issue is to reflect on the evidence of such solidarity, and its implications for life in the face of, and after barbarism.

Norman Geras and the Duty of Mutual Aid

While a full consideration of these issues is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to note the sustained effort by Norman Geras to think through these issues in his *Contract of Mutual Indifference*, and in particular, his argument that, in the light of what we now know after the Holocaust, there is 'a shadow [which] stretches across the vision of the heart of the socialist project' (Geras, 1998: 113).

Geras follows Traverso in accepting that it is necessary to break with any lingering linear conception of progress. We have to recognise the enormity of the evil committed by the Nazis but also the fact that these were other human beings, in history, many of them men and women who 'were not for the most part psychopaths [but] ordinary people' (Geras, 1998:97). This goes both for many — if not all — of the perpetrators, and also the bystanders. The conclusion that Geras draws is, that socialists have to operate with a conception of human nature, in which there is both a capacity for great evil, as well as good. The socialist project is perhaps best thought of in terms of an ongoing struggle – 'an enduring battle – an open process' – to remove evils where possible, and to limit the capacity to do evil. Geras describes this as 'a limited notion of progress and of socialist utopia' (Geras, 1998: 112).

At the same time — the other side of the coin, as it were — Geras insists on the evidence for good, the capacity actually displayed by some human beings to bring aid and comfort to those hunted by the Nazis. The significance of the impressive range of acts of human decency in the face of the Holocaust, evidence not only of heroism but also of simpler, more 'ordinary' virtues, is also stressed by Tzvetan Todorov (2000). Both Geras and Todorov note that it is difficult to categorise in advance the people who gave such help. Such people did not subscribe to what Geras has identi-
tied as the 'contract of mutual indifference', but rather carried out what he
defines as the 'duty to bring aid'. This, he argues, can provide the basis for
an ethics, and a politics, which can be formulated as an appropriate
response to the shadow cast by the Holocaust. It breaks with the indiffere-
ce that made the Holocaust possible, and which caused much anguish
both to the victims – that 'normal life' went on as before whilst the killing
was carried out – and to the survivors, haunted by the sense that nothing
had changed. The duty to bring aid is, critically, mutual. It carries with it,
precisely in the way in which indifference does not, the right to expect
such aid from others in similar circumstances. It is both realistic – in the
sense that it is derived from the observation of actual behaviour, and
demanding – in the sense that such behaviour, if widely practiced, would
make a great deal of actual difference.

Before concluding, it may be worth noting one feature of the argument
which has some particular salience here. For Geras makes clear that this
duty to bring aid cannot be meaningfully confined within national bound-
aries. The sense of moral community implied here, the sense of moral
compassion that he invokes, has to be universal, rooted in an idea of com-
mon humanity, which cuts across, transcends national boundaries, and is,
it may be suggested, a core element of Marxism itself.

If so, Geras's argument represents a major advance in Marxist thinking
about the Holocaust inasmuch as it provides a way of asserting some
meaningful socialist project in its aftermath, drawing a conclusion, not of
despair but of a continued, albeit chastened, intent. It shows that it is pos-
sible for Marxists not to turn their gaze away from the Holocaust, but to
reflect soberly upon it, and move on. If we connect it with the insights that
can be gained from the other writers discussed, it may then be possible for
Marxism to play some part in the re-presentation of the Shoah in the
twenty-first century.

Marxism and the Re-presentation of the Shoah

It will have to be a Marxism articulated in a different, less ambitious tone,
open – as were Adorno and Horkheimer many years ago – to other
insights and forms of knowledge. It must accept, as they did then, and as
Traverso has done more recently, the centrality of antisemitism to the
Shoah, whilst being able to link it to an understanding of the importance
of internationalism, both as a principle and as a key, not the only one, for
understanding some dynamics in Nazism. It can, in particular, highlight
the link between the Nazis' antisemitism and their anti-Marxism, and the
implications of the destruction of the Left – the outcome of a bitter strug-
gle between Left and Right, and between the classes – for the isolation
of the Jews, and the way in which this gave free rein to the Nazis' pursuit. It
can help us see how an unrestricted state apparatus can then in such par-
ticular circumstances develop an apparently 'rational' agenda (as Aly has done) in pursuit of insane, but unbri elled aims. It can integrate into its representation a sense of the wider political, social and economic context — as, in their different ways, Mayer and Mandel have done — in which the Nazis triumphed, and how, in their euphoria, they set about their killing. In not flinching then from what happened, it can — as, following Benjamin, Traverse has done — face the Shoah as a catastrophe, which can nevertheless be thought about — following Trotsky and Luxemburg — as an unprecedented barbarism, facilitated by the smashing of socialism. In its aftermath, and recognising that some boundary has now been crossed, it can nevertheless begin to pick up — following Ceras — the threads of socialist thought, to point again, as Marxists have always sought to do, but in perhaps a more sober and open way, to a freer and more just society.

This may not constitute anything like a total explanation, and will need to be complemented by insights and forms of knowledge drawn from elsewhere. In that sense, it requires some revision of the ambition and characteristic tone of Marxist thinking. It may nevertheless help by highlighting aspects of the process, to do in particular with the issue of internationalism; with the relationship between anti-Semitism and anti-Marxism; with the significance of the crushing of the Left; with the role of the state apparatus; with the importance of the wider political, social and economic context and its eventual transformation; and with the longer-term significance of resistance to barbarism encapsulated in the bringing of aid. If any of these may also be highlighted by others, it is nevertheless the case that for each and all of them, Marxists may legitimately claim some particular awareness and therefore be able to make some useful contribution to the project of re-presenting the Shoah in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. The particular silence of English and American historians is discussed by Lucy Dawidowicz (1981, chapter two). The more prolonged silence of French historians was only broken by Americans, such as Michael Marrus, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet has noted (1996: 144–6). Although German historians were a bit quicker off the mark, their work has been marked by a tendency to study the Holocaust from the perspective of German perpetrators, as Ulrich Herbert has pointed out, rather than that of the victims (Herbert, 2000: 4–17).

2. There are different versions of this poem with different orders of victims. However, Communists and Jews, or vice-versa, always come early in the list.


4. According to Neumann, 'the internal political value of Antisemitism will, therefore, never allow a complete extermination of the Jews'. Cited in Traverso, 1999: 49.

5. Bauman has made a similar point in relation to sociology, drawing on Henry
Feingold’s (1983) explicit comparison of the Holocaust with the French Revolution, amongst other events, as a central historical event which has changed the course of subsequent history (Bauman, 1989: 85).

6. See Ascher (1980) for the fate of one particular work, the so-called ‘Black Book’, compiled on Nazi atrocities by the Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg (when the alliance between the Soviet Union and the West was at its height) and then almost completely destroyed by order in Soviet publishing houses when the Stalinist ‘line’ turned. For a wider essay on the inadequacies of Soviet historiography in this regard, see Davidowicz (1981), chapter 4.

7. See for instance the critique of Goldhagen in the second edition of Christopher Browning’s Ordinary Men (a response to Goldhagen’s initial critique of his own work). For surveys of the debates, see Shanksley (1990) and Hey (2000).

8. On the role of the Wehrmacht, see Bartov (2000) and Streit (1985). On the support given by German workers to the Nazis, see Mühleberger (1992). On the role of workers as accomplices as well as victims of Nazism, see Ludicke (1999).

9. Macbeth, Act V Scene V.

10. Only in this context which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a totality, can knowledge of the facts hope to become knowledge of reality’ (Lukács, 1971: 8).

11. Anti-Semitism is, they argued, ‘part of an interchangeable programme ... the fascist leaders could just as easily replace the anti-Semitic plank in their programme by some other just as workers can be moved from one thinly rationalised production center to another’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973: 207).

12. Peone argues, quite persuasively, that ‘Elements of Anti-Semitism’ is the essay towards which Diderot’s Enlightenment as a whole has been directed. For anti-Semitism forms a precise instance, perhaps the primary exhibit, of the actual return of enlightened civilization to barbarism’ (Peone, 1992: 166).

13. Adorno himself went so far as to suggest that ‘that which we were used to seeing in terms of the proletariat has today shifted with terrible intensity to the Jews’ (cited in Rabinbach, 2000: 55).

14. Diner implicitly links the utilitarianism of Aly’s approach with the utilitarianism of Horkheimer’s initial efforts.

15. Traverso’s (1999) conclusion is that this points to serious weaknesses in classical Marxism, to do with its failure to deal with non-class forms of oppression — national, racial, religious or sexual.

16. See the discussion in Bauer 2001: 75. Michael Freeman (1995) has also argued that Bauman ignores the fact that genocides predicate modernity and that modernity also furnishes the tools for a moral critique of genocide itself. A more polemical version of this argument may be found in Birleson 1990, esp. pp. 40–44.

17. Although Arendt was not a Marxist, there are clear signs of the influence of Lukács on her thought. The significance of imperialism for Arendt in explaining the violence of totalitarianism and its assault on the rights of man is discussed by Seyla Benhabib (1996: 75–6). As Arendt argued, the Jews were the direct targets of this assault.

18. See Friedlander (1997: 75 and 95). The Freikorps, who used to attack the Spartacists in January 1919, are often seen as forerunners of the Nazis. The significance of these events is argued, for instance, by Arendt (1968).

19. According to Hitler, ‘the greatest obstacle to the rapprochement of the workers to the national Volk community are his internationalist leaders and ideology’, whilst only the Jew has succeeded in alienating this social ideal from the national by its falsification to Marxism’ (cited in Barkai, 1994: 44–45).

20. Bauman draws attention to modernity’s driving concern with boundaries,
especially national ones, and the threat posed by what he calls the ‘conceptual Jew’, located across and straddling so many desperately erected and invented barricades (Bauman, 1989: 40–41). Arendt too understands anti-Semitism in connection with problems generated by modern nationalism, particularly the contradiction between the principle that the rights of men are universal, and the reality that they are only guaranteed by nation-states, a contradiction which put the Jews in an extremely vulnerable position (Arendt, 1966: 230).

21. Burleigh revealingly describes the Freikorps as ‘still spurring for blood or incapable of psychological adjustment . . . driven by a sense of isolation and personal betrayal’ welcomed by an ideology in which ‘Nietzschean vitalism and individualism was transmuted into the amoral celebration of sheer brutality’ (Burleigh, 2000: 36).

22. Kershaw’s summary of the debates on working-class resistance to the Nazis is that it is now generally agreed that by the late 1930s, the working-class had been ‘neutralised, contained, resigned, demoralised, at best only partially integrated – but neither rebellious, nor posing a serious threat to the regime’ (Kershaw, 1988: 156).

23. Parallel may be drawn here with the (obviously non-Marxist) argument advanced by Bauman who argues that the destruction of communal organisations left a void to be filled by forces which seek to deny the state monopoly of coercion to impose a new order . . . the radical blow was delivered to the . . . non-propertied classes, and to the working-class above all. There is then ‘no limit to the ambition and self-confidence’ of state planners (Bauman, 1989: 115). Bauman’s argument is, of course, much more wide-ranging, and designed to apply to modernity in general, and to the emergence of both the Nazi and Soviet states, as totalitarian, in particular.

24. See the discussion in Geras (1998: 137). Such internationalism may also be inferred from Geras’s mild critique of Todorov (Geras, 1998: 67).

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RE-PRESENTING THE SHOAH FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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