

THE HISTORY BEHIND THE HOLOCAUST



Socialist Labor Party of America
P.O. Box 218
Mountain View, CA 94042-0218
www.slp.org

PREFACE

On April 22, 1993, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum officially opened as a memorial to the millions of Jews, Gypsies, political dissidents, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals and others who were either systematically tortured and murdered in the most fiendish manner imaginable, or otherwise suffered the cruel agonies, outrageous indecencies and demoniac indignities that Hitler and his diabolical crew imposed upon them during the 13 years of terror in which they held sway. The museum was chartered by Congress more than a decade ago, created on land donated by the federal government and built with funds donated by tens of thousands.

Some saw the museum as a chronicle of "man's descent into darkness and the indifference to evil that marked the era."

Others declared it to be "a commitment to the eternal values which must shape our future."

Still others saw it as a "meaningful testament" to this nation's "values and ideas."

And a two-page spread in *The New York Times* declared that the memorial was "a museum of the American people—who are building this national memorial to ensure that all who come after us understand that the Holocaust is not ancient history but that it happened in our world...to people just like us...and that it has a far-reaching impact on international political decisions our nation must make today, as well as on the personal, moral and ethical decisions which each of us must make every day of our lives."

The sorrow and grief of most who marked the event was without doubt deep, sincere and painful. The nightmarish memories many of them carried not only of relatives and friends lost to the monstrous Nazi regime, but also of the personal mental anguish and physical torture they suffered, once more came to the surface for painful remembrance. And the despair of many was intensified by the knowledge that recent polls revealed that as many as "a third of Americans are open to the possibility that the Holocaust, Nazi Germany's extermination of 6 million Jews, never happened. . . ." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, April 20, 1993)

One thing stood out. As with past reminders of the Holocaust, neither the contents of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, nor the dedica-

Preface

tion ceremonies, nor the various speeches and media reports did anything to explain how or why Nazism arose and what it represented.

The stark pictures and sometimes eloquent descriptions of the suffering, the misery, the anguish, the cruelty, the human bravery, the heroic efforts of many victims to maintain their human dignity, while understandable, did nothing to reveal for the present generations the more important facts and truths about the roots of Hitler, Nazism, fascism and all their related evils. None of those facts and truths are reported to be included somehow, somewhere in the museum. Certainly none were included in the tributes, in the retrospects, in the endless superficial analyses, in the intended historical summaries as reported in the media.

In themselves, the horrors depicted, the terrible memories revived, the unspeakable crimes verbally reenacted, the articles of torture and death displayed or described, the terror relived, the anger reawakened do not add one whit of explanation about the social soil in which the seeds of the brutal totalitarian state monster that engulfed Germany were germinated, nurtured and brought to full-flower by Hitler and his depraved crew of political gangsters.

Similarly, in 1978, the National Broadcasting Company aired a four-part television series entitled “Holocaust.” Though it consisted largely of sensationalist soap opera, the series purported to be a serious, candid and accurate analysis of fascist Germany in the 1930s. In fact, however, “Holocaust” was a superficial and otherwise woefully deficient account of that tragic period. Though it focused the attention of tens of millions of people the world over on the horrors of Nazism, the series did nothing to explain how and why fascism rose to power. Indeed, the absence of such an explanation tended only to reinforce the ahistorical view that the cause of Nazism lies in the moral failings of human beings.

In an effort to provide the crucial explanations and historical lessons “Holocaust” left out, *The History Behind the Holocaust* was published in the *Weekly People* in May 1978. Written from a Marxist perspective, the analysis clarifies the economic and political developments that made fascism possible in Germany. Even more, the analysis demonstrates that fascism is an outgrowth of the social crises bred by capitalism and that a repeat of the Nazi horrors of the 1930s—or worse—is all too possible if capitalism is allowed to continue to exist.

The growth of neofascist elements; the increase in anti-Semitic acts; the wave of racist violence directed against blacks, Hispanics, and other ethnic and racial minorities; these and other manifestations of right-

The History Behind the Holocaust

wing extremism demonstrate clearly that the seeds of a fascist revival have already been sown in this country by the disintegrating fabric of capitalist society. It is the need of working people to combat this threat—not merely the need to understand the events of a past era—that give the following material continuing relevance and importance.

NATHAN KARP

May 1993

1. HOW NAZISM ROSE TO POWER

How did it happen?

Undoubtedly that question was raised in the minds of many of the 120 million people reported to have seen some part of NBC's series, "Holocaust." Though the four-part special was a shallow piece of historical fiction, the massive impact of television was nevertheless able to focus the attention of tens of millions of people on the unspeakable crimes of Nazi genocide. Considering the usual mind-deadening fare served up on TV, this in itself gave the series some redeeming features.

But the series barely offered a clue about how this horror came to pass. The rise of the fascists to power in Germany in the 1930s is taken as an accomplished fact when the story begins. Fascist terror is already being unleashed against a defenseless population. The Nazi apparatus is securely entrenched and its opposition defeated, though there is no explanation as to how this came about.

This is no small omission in a work that pretends to be an account of how 6 million Jews were systematically murdered by the state; especially one being circulated by the National Council of Churches to countless schools as "the definitive film on the Holocaust." In reality, such treatment reflects the inability of the liberal authors of the project to make any sense at all of the events they depict.

It's true that there is a philosophical and moral dimension to the horror of genocide that is beyond the grasp of strictly rational analysis (not to mention beyond the grasp of NBC-TV). But to prepare a popular treatment of Nazism for mass distribution without the slightest measure of historical or social insight is almost a crime in its own right. One hundred twenty million Americans were shocked by the horrors of Germany in the '30s without ever being confronted with the question: Why did Nazism arise and what did it represent?

The few references in the script to the sources of Nazism were almost unbelievably trivial. The most savage reaction the world has seen was presented primarily as a consequence of selfish careerists, prodding wives, passive victims and above all, the moral depravity of random individuals. This last, in particular, is the most common liberal theme on the Holocaust. It attempts to analyze the Nazi period in terms of

The History Behind the Holocaust

morality, guilt, good vs. evil, etc. But such a view is hopelessly incapable of explaining concretely how Hitler and his party rose to state power.

The Nazi reaction was the outcome of a social catastrophe, not just the sum total of individual moral failures and tragedies. Yet there is not a social force or a class battle to be seen in the entire NBC series. While Nazism calls up for consideration every important social question and historic possibility of our century, NBC reduced it to the level of a morality play (and a bad one at that).

This is a gross disservice to Hitler's victims, who will have died in vain if they left behind no firmer lessons than those of moral abstractions and no deeper understanding than sympathy for their fate. The implications of the Holocaust are more immediate and concrete.

Racist theories and fascist movements exist in embryo in every capitalist country in the world. They exist in this country today. What's of decisive importance in examining the Holocaust is not the psychology of these groups, or the personalities of their leaders, or even the individual responses of their potential victims. What's important, above all, is to understand the conditions which allow fascist groups to escape their fate as marginal sects and "fanatics" and to assume hold on governments and terrorize whole societies.

Two things combined to open the door for Hitler's National Socialist Party: the total collapse of the German economy and the historic defeat of the most powerful labor movement in Europe. It's these factors, more than anything else, that hold the key to comprehending the reign of fascism.

Under the impetus of the Russian Revolution and the Kaiser's defeat in World War I, Germany had passed through its own cycle of revolution and counterrevolution in the postwar years. But by the late '20s, German capitalism was relatively healthy. According to Nora Levin, whose book on the period is also called *The Holocaust*, "In the late '20s, Germany enjoyed an interval of astonishing prosperity, and was, indeed, the most prosperous country in western Europe. New homes, schools, parks, public buildings, and hospitals were built and provided employment." World trade and foreign loans considerably expanded economic activity.

Though the Weimar parliamentary republic which replaced the rule of the Kaiser never took deep root, the political situation was comparatively stable. The German Social Democracy (SD), the historic party of Marx and Engels, was at peak strength. It stood at the head of both the Reichstag (the Parliament) and the German labor movement. In May 1928, it outdrew all other parties by far, getting over 9 million votes. Its

How Nazism Rose to Power

party organizations could claim over 900,000 members and its affiliated trade unions organized some 5 million workers in all the major industrial centers. (Julius Braunthal, *History of the International, 1914–1943*)

At the same time, the German Communist Party (CP) commanded the votes of another 3 million German workers. It had well over 100,000 members and, like the SD, a widely read press. Though the Social Democrats dominated the unions and the CP had relatively little strength in most large factories, it nevertheless represented a formidable force. Together the two parties which rested on workers' support drew about 40 percent of the vote and could mobilize the overwhelming majority of the German proletariat.

By contrast, Hitler's National Socialists were a marginal element. They drew about 800,000 votes and, more significantly, were organizationally and politically without any mass social base. Even on the right, the majority of support went to the party of big business, the People's Party, and to the stronghold of the landowners, the National Party.

Within two years, the entire situation was transformed. The prosperity of world capitalism collapsed into international depression. The German economy was devastated. By 1930, 3 million workers were unemployed. Thousands of businesses went bankrupt, and the German middle classes were ruined. As agricultural prices dropped, the small and middle peasants were also destroyed. The entire economic foundation of German society came unhinged.

It was this total collapse of capitalism that provided Nazism with the social base and political climate it needed to grow. This crisis created the millions of ruined petty bourgeois, shopkeepers and peasants who, facing disaster, were receptive to Nazi promises of German regeneration and to propaganda about "Jewish communists" and "Jewish financiers" as the source of their hardships.

At the same time, German nationalism, which had been fanned by Germany's defeat and humiliation at the hands of the imperialist allies in World War I, but which had ebbed somewhat during the economic upturn, again became a major propaganda force. The economic crisis was blamed on the foreign powers who had tied German capitalism to the world market and whose system was now crumbling. The Nazis vowed to reverse the provisions of the Versailles Treaty, which had imposed severe reparations payments on Germany and dismantled its military forces.

The ruined middle classes rallied to this appeal. It was these layers that provided the bulk of the 6.5 million votes the Nazis drew in 1930

The History Behind the Holocaust

(an 800 percent increase in two years). The other rightist parties were abandoned in droves.

Still, even in the early '30s, the combined strength of the workers' movement far outmatched that of the Nazis. The total vote of the Social Democrats and Communists in the 1930 elections was twice that of the Nazis. (In fact, two years later, when Hitler finally rose to executive power, the combined vote of the CP and the SD was still one-and-a-half million more than that of the National Socialists.)

As the ruling party throughout much of Germany, the Social Democratic Party formally controlled large segments of the police. It also had a defense network that was supposed to unite all its many supporters, unions, local organizations, etc., into an "Iron Front." In July of 1932, the Iron Front claimed 3 million members, including a special elite military force of 400,000 men (the *Schufo*).

As for the CP, it was growing rapidly. Most of the unemployed turned to the seemingly more radical Communists. Its vote had grown almost equal to that of the Social Democrats and it had hundreds of thousands of disciplined, trained members.

In order for fascism to triumph, it had to pulverize this organized strength of the working class. The most basic interests of the workers placed them in irreconcilable opposition to the fascists, who had sworn to destroy all their freedoms and organizations. By all appearances, socialist ideas and aims had made their greatest inroads in Europe among the German proletariat. Working-class solutions to the problems caused by the capitalist collapse were in direct conflict with the Nazi aims of rebuilding the German empire. In fact, warnings of a "Bolshevik uprising" were a central part of the Nazi propaganda arsenal and fear of such a revolution drew countless numbers to its ranks.

The result was the sharpest possible polarization of class forces. On the one side stood the working class, whose real interests lay in a defense of democracy and in a revolutionary socialist resolution of the economic crisis. On the other side were the Nazis, mobilizing the enraged and fearful masses of the ruined petty bourgeoisie on a program of rabid nationalism and anti-Semitic racism.

But there was one additional element of crucial importance to the victory of the National Socialists—the forging of an alliance between the Nazis and the top German capitalists. Though the Nazis always had some rich right-wing backers, it was the cementing of the partnership between Hitler and the German capitalist class in the early '30s that ultimately allowed him to vie successfully for power. The petty bourgeoisie provided Nazism with its popular base, and the most debased

How Nazism Rose to Power

elements of society (the “lumpenproletariat”) supplied the shock troops. But it was the top German capitalists, recognizing in Nazism the only force that could defend capitalism against the strength of the proletariat, who supplied Hitler with his decisive support.

In 1933, the German banker Kurt von Schroder helped promote the coalition between the Nazis and the National Party which Hitler rode to governmental power. In the same year an agreement was struck whereby “German business interests would take over the debts of the Nazi party.” (Levin) Top capitalists like Krupp and Farben gave millions to Hitler’s cause. Their resources funded the storm troopers, the massive propaganda drives and the successful march to power.

Theoretically, the Nazis had railed against “capitalism” and even incorporated “socialist” rhetoric into some of their propaganda. But these harangues were, on the one hand, nationalist attacks on the liberal bourgeois powers of Europe and, on the other, appeals to the petty bourgeoisie and peasants who felt crushed by the social layers above them. In practice, they had no substance. The Nazis posed no basic threat to the rights of capitalist property, and German bankers and industrialists understood this completely. In forming a partnership with Hitler’s party, the German ruling class was confirming that fascism, in essence, is the last line of capitalist defense against the possibility of working-class revolution.

2. DEFEAT OF THE GERMAN WORKING CLASS

In the years before Hitler seized and consolidated power, the working class was the one force in Germany that had the potential to stop him.

Numerically, the working class made up over 50 percent of the population and its conditions of work, urban concentration and high level of organization made it far and away the most cohesive social group. It was the only force whose social weight and revolutionary potential could match the dynamism of the Nazi movement. And it was the only class that carried within it the seeds of an alternative, socialist resolution of the terminal crisis gripping German capitalism.

Had the German proletariat succeeded, the genocide of the Jews and perhaps even World War II would not have occurred. But instead it suffered an historic and catastrophic defeat. Though the sources of this defeat are complex, a decisive factor was the split between the Communist and Social Democratic wings of the labor movement and the role played by each. This, more than anything else, blocked the road to socialism and crippled the life-and-death struggle against the fascist threat.

For decades, the German Social Democracy (SD) had been the largest socialist party in Europe, tracing back to Marx and Engels. It was the acknowledged representative of the mass of German workers, drawing most of their votes and heading most of their trade unions and other organizations.

But by the 1930s, the SD had long since become a reformist party. It was committed to a gradual, step-by-step evolution from capitalism to socialism, within the strictly legal bounds of a parliamentary republic. It sought to avoid a revolutionary crisis and a class confrontation at all costs, believing instead that socialism would slowly engulf capitalist society as the numerical size and electoral strength of the working class expanded.

These reformist ideas germinated within the Second International for years, but they first manifested themselves sharply in World War I. In an historic turn away from revolutionary struggle, the Social Democrats supported the German ruling class in its war efforts. They adopted a policy of national class collaboration, instead of class struggle, which gradually came to dominate every area of their activity.

Defeat of the German Working Class

After Germany was defeated and the Kaiser was deposed, the Social Democrats followed the logic of their reformist road by assuming major responsibility for managing the Weimar Republic. This role as a governing party in a capitalist state brought the SD into immediate confrontation with large segments of the German working class, who in the wake of the war and the Russian Revolution were approaching the threshold of revolution. In the winter of 1918–1919, workers' and soldiers' councils were formed throughout many parts of Germany and socialist revolution presented itself as a practical possibility.

The Social Democrats' response to the crisis betrayed the classic social democratic attitudes toward the state and toward revolution. Instead of viewing the parliamentary republic as a form of capitalist rule to be supplanted by a revolutionary workers' government based on council-type organs, the SD was committed to defending the Weimar forms. It saw the parliamentary system as the only legitimate means of effecting the transition to socialism and viewed attacks on parliamentary institutions as attacks on democracy itself. Moreover, it did not consider the army, police and other organs of the state to be arms of capitalist rule, but essentially neutral bodies that would obey whoever won the last election.

In practice, this led the SD to smash all attempts to raise the workers' councils to the level of governing bodies that would replace the bourgeois parliament. It agreed to let the Kaiser's defeated generals organize unemployed ex-soldiers into the "Free Corps" for the specific purpose of putting down revolution. Not only were these bodies responsible for the murder of revolutionary leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, but it was the same Free Corps—organized under the SD against workers' revolution—which later became the nucleus of Adolf Hitler's storm troopers.

It was in opposition to the reformist counterrevolution of the SD that the German Communist Party arose. Yet while this development initially reflected genuinely revolutionary currents in the German proletariat, the German CP was soon swallowed up in the Third International and became an instrument of Moscow. In the early '20s it went through a complicated period of splits, internal struggles and abortive uprisings. But the major result, which determined its later policies in relation to fascism, was that the CP ceased to be an independent representative of a wing of the German working class and became a tool of Soviet policy and a creature of Stalin.

After the early '20s, the postwar tide of revolutionary upheavals receded. In the decade prior to Hitler's triumph, the German Social

The History Behind the Holocaust

Democracy flourished and became the most successful reformist workers' party in history. It pioneered reform programs in virtually every area: unemployment insurance, compulsory health care, welfare for the poor, etc. These improvements undeniably reflected the size and strength of the workers' movement and its ability to wrest concessions from the German ruling classes. But they also came in exchange for the SD's containment of the class struggle within the confines of capitalism and the parliamentary system.

Politically, the SD stood totally inside the Weimar Republic, which it sought to preserve by forming government coalitions with the liberal bourgeois parties. Economically, it sought to reform the capitalist economy and impose a reformist perspective on its affiliated trade unions. In fact, the SD was the first to introduce an extensive system of compulsory arbitration to mediate the class struggle in the interests of compromise.

This whole strategy, however, was dependent on a relative capitalist stability and prosperity to prevent class tensions from sharpening and breaking the binds of compromise. Like most reformists, the Social Democrats believed that the age of capitalist crisis had passed and that the future, gradual transition to socialism would take place on the smooth terrain of ever-expanding productive forces and steady social progress.

The global capitalist collapse of the late '20s shattered this social democratic perspective completely. It also exploded the political climate which alone had made it feasible, since the sharpened class antagonisms of a system in crisis could not be contained and compromised by normal parliamentary means.

The capitalist response to the crisis was fascism, aptly described in the past as the "iron hoop around the collapsing barrel of capitalism." With class collaboration no longer tenable, economically or politically, the German ruling class turned to the fascist movement as a weapon to smash the strength of the working class and hold its system together through naked state terror. Though the Nazis rose on the popular support of the middle classes, they ultimately served—and became dependent on—the interests of the big German capitalists.

The rise of fascism in the midst of capitalist collapse posed massive new problems for the workers' movement. The situation demanded a complex effort to unite the working class and all its potential allies in a struggle directed both against the fascist threat and toward a socialist revolution.

Yet in the years leading up to Hitler's victory, the two main parties of

Defeat of the German Working Class

the workers' movement, the CP and the SD, clung to policies that were basically extensions of past mistakes and misconceptions. The SD, completely unable to break out of its cringing reformism and legalism, stuck with a disastrous strategy of compromise that led the workers to one capitulation and defeat after another. At the same time, the CP put into practice hopelessly contradictory and ultimately suicidal orders from Moscow, which had less to do with the pressing problems of the German proletariat than with the immediate interests of Joseph Stalin.

Building on its reformist past, the SD saw the best protection against fascism in a defense of the institutions of the Weimar Republic, rather than in the organization and social struggle of the working class. It was convinced that as long as the "democratic state" existed, fascism would be prevented from seizing power. This strategy ruled out any preparation for revolution and rested on compromise with the "democratic parties" of the bourgeoisie to defend the government. It also meant that a united front with the CP was ruled out, since such a combination implied taking "the Bolshevik road."

Above all else, the SD wanted to avoid revolution and the risk of civil war which, in defeatist fashion, it insisted the workers must lose. It hoped instead to prop up capitalism and ride out the crisis until the tide of fascism ebbed and the gradual march to socialism could be resumed under the peaceful, legal banner of the Social Democracy. Thus, the SD adopted a policy of "toleration" toward the rise of reaction.

This policy of toleration in effect committed the SD to passivity and political paralysis. Having ruled out the option of revolutionary, extra-parliamentary struggle against the capitalist state, the SD no longer posed any threat or any alternative to the rightist drift of events. As the pressure of the crisis moved the succeeding Weimar governments of the early '30s further and further to the right, the SD had no option but to continue offering them support. Serious opposition from the large SD would have led to the collapse of the government and possibly the onset of a right-wing coup, followed by civil war or some other combination of prerevolutionary developments, which is precisely what the SD wanted to avoid.

Simply put, the SD was committed to preserving a capitalist government when the capitalist class was moving headlong toward fascism. The illusion that parliamentary forms were a defense against this fascist trend succeeded in disarming the largest party of the German working class.

The SD clung to this position even as the republic itself was sliced away. In the early '30s, each new government, from Bruening to Von

The History Behind the Holocaust

Papen to Hitler, narrowed the scope of constitutional guarantees, increased rule by executive decree and made a mockery of Parliament. Yet the SD convinced itself—and millions of its followers—that as long as elections were held and the Reichstag existed, fascism could not triumph.

Theoretically the SD promised to use its forces and its authority in government to act “when necessary.” For example, as the Nazis grew in strength, the Prussian SD police chief Carl Severing told his followers, “Rest assured that I shall mobilize the Reichsbanner [the SD defense network] as auxiliary police and arm them when the hour of danger comes.” But these words proved to be empty as the Nazis marched to power.

In contrast to the Social Democracy, the Communist Party superficially appeared to begin from the exact opposite starting point. It called for uncompromising struggle against the various Weimar regimes and revolution on the Bolshevik model. But any understanding of CP policy during this time must begin where it was made—in Moscow.

The late '20s and early '30s were the time of the so-called “third period” designated by the Communist International. This third period was supposedly a new era of crisis and revolution following the stability of the mid-20s. But it was less an independent analysis of the world situation than a reflection of the particular pressures at work on Stalin and the ruling faction in the CP of the Soviet Union.

The extreme “leftism” of the third period was a product of Stalin’s interest in projecting a superrevolutionary image at the time. It had its roots in Stalin’s fight against the supposedly “right wing” Bukharin faction in the Soviet CP and his rapid turn toward forced collectivization of the Russian peasantry. Added to this was the impact of Chiang Kai-shek’s slaughter of the Chinese Communist forces in 1927, a slaughter brought about in large measure by the previous “moderate” policies of the Moscow International.

All this combined to make the various CPs adopt an intense verbal radicalism and sectarianism. By the mid-30s the entire third period analysis would be junked and Stalin would again be pushing CPs toward “moderation” and cooperation with bourgeois parties in various “popular fronts.” But the official line during the test of truth for the German proletariat committed the German CP to third-period policies and all their consequences.

In Germany, the third period meant the CP refused to seek any common struggle with the Social Democratic organizations. Along with the reformism of the SD leaders, this helped to deepen the split in the work-

Defeat of the German Working Class

ing class. Instead of fighting to close the ranks of the proletariat, the CP attacked the SD as the “main enemy” of the workers and directed all its energies against SD leaders, even to the point of downplaying the fascist threat and making common cause with the Nazis.

This policy was rationalized with the theory of “social fascism,” which held that the Social Democrats were “fascists in disguise.” The CP’s position wasn’t simply that the SD policies would fail to stop fascism, but that the SD itself was in fact “the left wing of fascism.” The corollaries to this formula were that any defense of the democratic aspects of the republic was unimportant, and that the working class might have to pass through an era of fascism in order to get to revolutionary consciousness.

This “theory” was a signpost to disaster. Instead of clarifying the relationship of forces at work, it hopelessly confused them. Nor was a party that could not tell the difference between reformist workers’ organizations and the fascist movement one to inspire confidence. Least of all could it appeal to the mass of German workers, still tied to the Social Democratic organizations, by denouncing their movement as fascist.

Moreover, the CP typically did not even apply its “revolutionary line” with any consistency. While it proclaimed a “class against class” slogan to fight the SD, it attempted to appeal to the middle classes by promising a “peoples’ revolution” and catering to German nationalism.

Finally, the CP functioned in its usual bureaucratic fashion. Instead of giving voice to the most pressing demands of the masses of workers, the German CP virtually ordered German workers to line up behind it before anything could be accomplished.

In other words, though the SD and CP had seemingly opposite perspectives, both were totally incapable of mapping a strategy against fascism. The SD conciliated the rise of reaction and ruled out revolutionary struggle against it. The CP’s sectarian warfare against the SD came at the expense of working-class unity and effective preparation for either revolutionary struggle or antifascist resistance.

The last three years leading up to Hitler’s installation as chancellor in January 1933 were marked by one manifestation after another of these suicidal policies.

In 1930, the first elections after the economic collapse showed an 800 percent rise in the Nazi vote to 6.5 million. But the CP was so preoccupied with its electoral gains against the SD that party leaders declared: “The only victor in the September elections is the Communist Party.”

In 1931, the CP endorsed a Nazi referendum against the regional Prussian government headed by the SD. Though the referendum lost, it

The History Behind the Holocaust

marked a new stage in the Nazi advance and reflected the CP's willingness to place itself, de facto, in the Nazi camp.

That same year, the CP paper *Rhote Fhane*, the largest Communist Party paper outside the U.S.S.R., declared that "Germany was already living under fascist rule," and "Hitler could not make matters worse than they were."

In February 1932, CP chief Ernst Thaelmann warned against an "opportunist exaggeration of Hitler fascism." He added, "It has been said that our chief enemy is fascism. Such a view contains within itself great danger, because it bolsters up Social Democracy." A few months later, he asserted, "Germany will of course not go fascist—our electoral victories are a guarantee of this...the irresistible advance of communism is a guarantee of this."

In the summer of 1932, the right wing staged a coup against the Prussian SD government which was a harbinger of things to come on a national level. Despite its earlier promises, the SD put up no resistance. The SD leadership adopted a resolution unanimously pledging "not to abandon the legal principles of the constitution whatever might happen." The CP, which was pleased to see the SD defeated, likewise put up no resistance. One day after the Prussian coup, Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels wrote: "The Reds are beaten. Their organizations are putting up no resistance...the Reds have missed their chance and it will not come again."

On January 30, 1933, Hitler was named chancellor. Despite the Nazi victory, the workers at this point were not yet defeated. The Social Democratic historian Jules Braunthal paints this vivid picture of their "will to resist":

"On the afternoon and evening of January 30 spontaneous and violent mass demonstrations of workers took place in German cities. Delegations from factories and delegations of area officials of the (SD) party from all parts of the country arrived on the same day in Berlin in expectation of battle orders, and during the same evening, a joint conference of executives of the General Federation of Trade Unions, the Social Democratic Party...the leaders of the Reichsbanner and the Iron Front decided in principle to go into action against Hitler.

"While battle-signals were awaited from the party and trade union central committees, feverish preparations were under way. Workers in the factories were told to be ready for a general strike and they armed themselves as best they could....In February 1933, the German workers were more prepared for battle than they had ever been since November 1918. They waited impatiently for the order to go into action."

Defeat of the German Working Class

The orders never came. The Social Democratic leaders met and concluded that since Hitler had followed the “path of the constitution,” his was “a lawful constitutional government.” To the masses of workers waiting to rise against Hitler’s regime, the SD paper *Vorwärts* declared, “The Social Democrats stand foursquare on the ground of the constitution and of legality. It will not be the first to forsake this ground.” In this manner, the German Social Democracy surrendered without a fight to the reign of fascism and led the German workers into the arms of Nazi terror. For fear of risking “civil war,” the SD ensured that the proletariat would suffer all of its consequences without any chance of victory.

The CP, in line with its leftist policy, did call for a general strike in response to Hitler’s inauguration. But the call drew no response, not even from its own members. This was partly because, while the CP had grown, its overwhelming strength was among the unemployed. It had relatively few members in the large urban factories. The last trade union elections held gave the CP less than 5 percent of the vote compared to the SD’s 73 percent.

The other contributing factor was the CP’s general lack of credibility, especially among the mass of SD workers, who would not respond to CP appeals. While this was an inevitable fruit of the CP’s theory and practice in the preceding years, the party blamed the workers for failing to follow its orders. In response to Hitler’s ascendancy the CP declared that “careful examination of the overall situation showed that in February and March 1933, the conditions were not yet ripe for a victorious proletarian revolution. . . . One of the basic conditions for successful insurrection was not yet present: the [CP] had not yet captured the majority of the workers. Millions of workers were still under the spell of social-fascism.” This was the excuse the CP used for its own failure to arouse the workers and for its decision not to put up further resistance.

The capitulation of the workers’ organizations to Hitler’s election opened the last door to the Nazi terror. Within two months of Hitler’s inauguration, all demonstrations were banned, all workers’ papers shut down.

On February 27, the Nazis staged the Reichstag fire and blamed the Communists. Working-class militants were carried away to concentration camps in the name of “preventive detention.” This included CP and SD representatives of Parliament who were arrested to assure Hitler a majority. Storm troopers occupied SD offices throughout Germany.

Incredibly enough, even the crushing of the German labor movement by Nazi terror did not cause a policy change or reassessment on the part of either party. From March to June, both clung to the same course.

The History Behind the Holocaust

On April 1, the Central Committee of the Moscow International announced that “the political line and the organizational policy followed by the Central Committee of the German Communist Party up to and during Hitler’s coup was perfectly correct.” Elsewhere it declared, “The current calm after the victory of fascism is only temporary. Inevitably, despite fascist terrorism, the revolutionary tide in Germany will grow...The establishment of an open fascist dictatorship, which is destroying all democratic illusions among the masses and freeing them from the influence of the Social Democrats, will speed up Germany’s progress towards the proletarian revolution.”

The SD’s continued conciliation of Hitler’s regime was, if anything, more incredible. It was much less prepared organizationally for any underground resistance and sought to compromise with Hitler to save its legal status. As his comrades were being carried off to prison, SD leader Otto Wels declared in Parliament his acceptance of Nazi rule “as a fact” and appealed to Hitler to “govern according to the text and spirit of the constitution.”

The SD actually expelled its Berlin youth organization for preparing illegal resistance to Hitler’s regime. It also resigned from the Socialist and Labor (Second) International when the body’s executive board denounced Hitler. Finally, on May 1, the Social Democratic trade union leaders agreed to march with the Nazis on the international workers’ holiday, renamed “National Labor Day” by the fascists. The next day their union offices were occupied by storm troopers and effectively dismantled. By June, the Social Democratic Party, already in ruins, was formally outlawed.

CONCLUSION

This is some of the history that NBC left out of its “definitive film on the Holocaust.” Yet the fact that Hitler could only have come to power over the corpse of the German labor movement is essential to understanding the origin and class nature of fascism, and how the Nazis were able to unleash their genocidal atrocities against European Jews. Nazism wasn’t simply the product of “a people gone mad,” it was the naked terror of a ruling class bent on the survival of its system. It was directed first of all against the one class in society capable of leading an alternative, revolutionary path out of the capitalist collapse—the proletariat.

It was only when the organizations, papers, parties and capacity for action of this class were smashed that the Nazis were able to put their genocidal hatred of the Jews into practice. Only when this was accomplished could they merge their terrorist bands with the full power of the state apparatus. The vicious and deeply rooted anti-Semitism which historically existed in Europe, and in Germany in particular, undoubtedly aided the Nazis, just as the vicious antiblack racism in the United States would work to the advantage of a fascist movement here. But it was the defeat of the working class that allowed racist terror to have full reign.

The real political and social meaning of the Holocaust cannot be found by focusing only on the agony of its victims. Horrible as it is, the Holocaust is only one notch on capitalism’s unmatched record of barbarism in the 20th century. Two global wars, numberless smaller ones, famine, depression, state terror, and more, have systematically taken the lives of countless numbers of victims of all races, nationalities and religions. They are the price of preserving a dying world order. Decades ago, revolutionaries summed up the choices facing humanity in the phrase: socialism or barbarism? Catastrophes like the Holocaust show what capitalist barbarism in the 20th century looks like.

In the early 1900s, Daniel De Leon noted that “wherever a revolution is pending and for whatever reason is not accomplished, reaction is the alternative.” His maxim finds its most brutal confirmation in the Germany of the 1930s. If the lessons of that history are not learned, and

The History Behind the Holocaust

the last quarter of the 20th century does not see the proletariat bury world capitalism and usher in socialism, there is every reason to fear that the horrors of the Holocaust may be repeated and eclipsed.