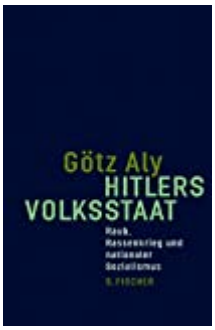
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Götz Aly. *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus.* Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2005. 445 S. EUR 22.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-10-000420-8.

Reviewed by Natan Sznaider (The Academic College of Tel-Aviv-Yaffo, Israel)

Published on H-German (May, 2005)

National-Socialism as National Socialism: A Dictatorship of Benefits

At first it might seem like a puzzle, how such a daunting historical tome could make such a stir. GÃÂ¶tz Aly loves archives, and he loves numbers, and it shows. Open this book almost anywhere and you will find a wriggling mass of figures, calculations and primary source citations. So how does a book like this end up featured on the evening news and reviewed in every serious newspaper in Germany? The answer is that for the German public, this is not a history book at all. Rather, history serves as a smoke screen here, hiding in plain sight more important points than calculations about how the Nazi regime financed its war efforts through the plunder of its occupied territories, at the same time raising the standard of living of the German ethnic community via robbed Jewish goods. The brouhaha has erupted because, underneath all the numbers, readers find a unique argument that Germans have seemingly been waiting to hear for sixty years. Just as they always suspected, every one of them was guilty–but not of hating the Jews. It turns out what they were guilty of was of giving into their baser instincts and robbing the Jews. For Aly, this judgment makes the Germans–if anything–even more guilty; such greed makes the crime more base. But in terms of the German public, exoneration of the crime of racism is a dream come true.

According to Aly, the Germans did not hate the Jews more than any other Europeans. There was no *Sonderweg*. Germany was a "normal" country. People have tried to make this argument intermittently for years. But it always immediately runs into an obvious problem: why did the Holocaust happen there and nowhere else? Aly thinks he finally has the answer to that question–a brutally simple one. He says that Nazi Germany was an ethnically based, social-democratic state. It followed the same logic as all other such states–it simply took it farther. It provided better benefits for the population than any German state before it. It introduced child allowances for the first time. It gave retired people access to subsidized health care for the first time. Soldiers made good money and could send home the goodies they plundered and robbed at the sites of battle and murder. And in general, ethnic Germans lived better than they ever had before. Ordinary Germans supported the Nazi state because it gave them the best life they ever had.

Of course, non-ethnic Germans lived worse, to put it

mildly. But, Aly argues, what is that condition but the logic of the ethnically homogenous welfare state carried out to its logical conclusion? European welfare states have always been based on ethnic solidarity. Political scientists have long suggested that this solidarity, this sense of being a "we," appears to be a precondition for a state that truly provides for individual security, in which people are willing to pay high taxes on their income in return for the government providing for all their needs. But the converse of ethnic solidarity is lack of solidarity with everyone outside the ethnic group. People do not necessarily hate outsiders–they just do not really care what happens to them. And if the authorities ratchet up this dynamic in all directions–if the state provides substantially more benefits in return for an even more enthusiastic solidarity–the flip side is an even greater separation from the people outside the charmed circle.

Pointing off this tradeoff, in a nutshell, is Aly's argument–except with a giant extra twist. Aly postulates a direct connection between the increased standard of living of the Germans and the persecution and murder of the Jews, because for Aly, the Nazi state was a plunder state. It stole from the Jews and redistributed that wealth among the Germans. And that is the point of all those figures and calculations: to document and make visible what Aly argues was a massive and causally significant transfer of wealth. For Aly, this transfer of wealth explains why the Germans went along with the Holocaust. They were bought off.

The two main empirical prongs of this argument are both inherently interesting, and the amount of work Aly has put into documenting them, means that future historians will be forced to take them seriously. The first point he devotes himself to establishing is that Germans really were substantially better off under the Nazis than they ever were before. Aly takes the socialism in National Socialism very seriously and tries single-handedly to resuscitate, refine, and update an argument that has rather fallen into disuse in recent years.

The second point he works hard to establish is that the plunder of Jews and occupied territories was more substantial, systematic and significant to the regime than anyone before has realized. In addition, he argues that the benefits of this plunder were spread extremely broadly. His studies of how stolen goods were systematically distributed at cut-rate prices may make many a German reader think twice about his grandparents' furnishings. Almost every single German profited from the murderous racism. Even if *Opa* was no Nazi, Aly claims, he still did not oppose the regime because he did not want to rock the gravy boat.

Despite the weightiness of the numbers, however, it is perfectly possible to accept the empirical conclusions–which take up most of the book–and dissent from the theoretical framework in which Aly would like to place them. Aly is one of the last representatives of what used to be one of the dominant traditions in historiography, materialism. People within this tradition think that the only satisfying historical explanation is one that finally rests on material interests. Mere ideologies–like racism–can be terrible, but they cannot finally be causes. They are rather things that are caused.

Nowadays this conviction that ideas cannot cause things is a decidedly minority viewpoint, but it has a noble lineage to which Aly nicely alludes on the last page of this book: "He who will not speak about the advantages of millions of simple Germans should keep silent about National Socialism and the Holocaust." This aphorism plays on a famous sentence that Horkheimer wrote in 1939: "He who will not speak about capitalism should keep silent about fascism too."[1] Even though Horkheimer moved away from this statement after the war (and rather famously joined the rest of the Frankfurt school in taking the role of ideology in fascism very seriously), it remained the touchstone for an entire generation of German Leftists.

Aly both continues and expands upon this tradition. For him, it is not "capital" that is the problem, but rather the mass of German "consumers," every one of whom personally profited from fascism. Aly renovates this tradition by entirely changing its focus, away from the big capitalist profiteers and onto the mass of ordinary Germans. His book is a restructuring of the intentionalist school of historiography with a materialist bent. Mass murder is transformed into mass armed robbery, and dictatorship becomes a dictatorship of benefits. The end result is a remarkable meeting of opposites: it is all the fault of "ordinary Germans"–but they are just the same as everybody else. They are not racist. Just greedy. They responded to the same incentives that everyone else did. There were just more of them. Clearly, the idea that Nazi Germany was no more racist than any other country is on its face absurd. If that were the case, the term "racism" would have no meaning at all. Considering this fact can leave the reader no choice but consider Aly's book a noble failure.

For those of us who do think that anti-Jewish racism played a constituent role in the Holocaust, however,

there is really nothing in this book to challenge that belief. Aly does not really argue against it. He just dismisses it as an explanation without giving it serious consideration. He seems to believe that the plunder argument is sufficient to explain the Holocaust all by itself, and that it will be clear to the reader that no other explanation is necessary. But racism and interest are not mutually exclusive. Southern American slave owners definitely benefited from slavery. Does pointing that out absolve them from racism? Or does the willingness to enslave another race–the precondition for profit–depend on racism in the first place? I would say it does. And this relationship works similarly with the willingness to murder people and take their goods. Murder and theft are crimes in all moral codes. If economic incentive alone were enough to make us cross that line, it would happen a lot more often. And if it were so easy for ethnically homogenous welfare states to turn into murdering plunder states simply by following out their own inner logic, it would have happened a lot more often–or at least more than once.

But that said, nothing prevents those of us who study the Holocaust from the victims' point of view from learning a lot from Aly. We may come away with very different conclusions than the ones that are getting the German public excited about this book. But it will not be the first time for that either.

Note

[1]. Max Horkheimer, "Die Juden in Europa," in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1985-), 4: pp. 308f.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: Natan Sznaider. Review of Aly, Götz, *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10527

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.