



Enzo Traverso. *The Origins of Nazi Violence.* New York and London: New Press, 2003. vi + 200 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56584-788-0.



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Nazism as the Laboratory of the West

Enzo Traverso's provocative essay, *The Origins of Nazi Violence*, locates the Holocaust in the material conditions and mental frameworks of the West that made the Jewish genocide possible (p. 6). Principally taking issue with Ernst Nolte, Francois Furet, and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, who, albeit by different means, place Nazi crimes outside Western history, Traverso argues that Nazism's uniqueness lay in its lethal synthesis of the West's various forms of violence (p. 150), or more specifically, its regimes of discipline and punishment; its imperialism; industrialized death and total war; its scientifically grounded racism; and finally its anti-Semitism and counter revolution. Traverso draws from the insights of Marxism generally and the Frankfurt School specifically, as well as Edward Said, Michel Foucault, and Hannah Arendt to place the Judeocide in a wider context than that of the history of anti-Semitism (p. 5). The Shoah, he suggests, was a logical outcome of Western pathologies, which the Third Reich combined and actualized.

Traverso opens by zeroing in on the products of the French and Industrial Revolutions, the guillotine, the prison, and the factory, including the abattoir. The guil-

lotine serialized killing, transformed the executioner into a bureaucratic employee relieved of ethical responsibility, and de-sanctified capital punishment. While embodying the Enlightenment's hope of redemption, the prison, organized according to military standards, subjected prisoners to rigid discipline and constant surveillance, and transformed them into captive labor. Although factories, unlike prisons, employed free workers, they too adopted disciplinary and hierarchical practices, serializing and segmenting production, while alienating and dehumanizing workers. The abattoir, the methodical, mass-produced death factory for animals, became a cultural reference point for the systematic destruction of human beings. Taken together, key institutions of the dual revolutions introduced modes of violence that featured moral indifference, bureaucratic efficiency, and the militarized mobilization of labor in which work grew increasingly meaningless to the worker. Industrialization encouraged the spread of European settlers throughout the globe and especially the conquest of Africa, wherein the mission to civilize through progress presupposed its other, the primitive, dark-skinned savage whose bleak future Darwinism and eugenics foreordained. The ex-

tion of inferior races, as much the result of administrative rationality as spontaneity, received its justification in the view that the savages would soon depart the earth as a matter of course, unable to adapt to a superior civilization and undeserving of normative ethical considerations. The belief that expansion would alleviate overpopulation, a crucial element in empire building, was not unique to Nazism. Moreover, imperialism introduced another ingredient to the Western exercise of power, conquest, ethnic cleansing, and extermination as the route to regeneration.

Finally, the mass conscripted armies of proletarianized soldiers, interventionist economies, and anonymous death of World War I derived from industrial and disciplinary techniques already in place and from imperialist practices: total war, that is, the elimination of the distinction between combatant and civilian, the racialized demonization of the enemy, concentration camps, and genocide. Yet the consequences of the war, particularly the Bolshevik Revolution, crystallized into the moment when Nazism came to the fore. In addition to creating a climate that spawned a recognizably fascist philosophy of death in which warfare and extermination became ends in themselves, the war's aftermath witnessed a populist counter-revolution, most powerfully expressed in Nazism, which co-mingled anti-Bolshevism, anti-Semitism, radical nationalism, and imperial expansion. Yet rather than promote a teleological version of European modernity with Auschwitz as its conclusion, Traverso is at pains to state that, although Nazi violence emerged from certain common bases of Western culture, Auschwitz does not represent the fundamental essence of the West (p. 150).

Using Arendt's distinction between origins as opposed to causes, as well as Foucault's genealogy, the author maintains that while Auschwitz illuminates its own past, the past cannot be linked to Auschwitz as straightforward cause and effect. Thus, Traverso stresses the uniqueness of Nazism even as he analyzes its Western roots. The death camps of the Third Reich embraced the worst aspects of factories, abattoirs, and prisons, combining purposeless and humiliating work, assembly-line murder, and the evaporation of morality, the glue of human connection. Nazi *Lebensraum* took inspiration from British imperialism and the brutality of white settlers against Native Americans. Against Nolte, Traverso forcefully argues that imperialism was the real model for Nazi violence, not Bolshevism. But, he continues, the fusion of anti-Bolshevism and anti-Semitism that followed World War I occurred with special vigor in Ger-

many, which, to a degree not previously seen, biologized both. Despite the prevalence of anti-Jewish hatred in the West, only the Nazis joined the crusading spirit of Christian anti-Judaism with a biologically extreme anti-Semitism to produce mass murder on an unprecedented scale. Unlike previous colonial racism, the Nazi regime did not see the Jew as too primitive to avoid extinction, but rather as the enemy of civilization that it had to actively eradicate with every available technological, bureaucratic, and military means. In fact, concludes Traverso, the Nazi regime sought not merely to conquer territories but to Germanize them by remodeling the human race. Thus, if Germany did not deviate from a putatively liberal democratic West, à la Goldhagen and other adherents of the German *Sonderweg*, it became the laboratory of the West, having synthesized nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, anti-Bolshevism, antihumanism, and counter-Enlightenment feeling, all of which existed elsewhere in Europe but which either remained muted or never entered into toxic combination (p. 148).

One must admire Traverso's ambitious synthesis of theory and recent scholarship, which results in a coherent and effective effort to place Nazism in its European context without sacrificing its distinctiveness. Rather than understand Nazism as simply an expression of modern bureaucratic and scientific rationality, he is sufficiently sensitive to its political and social context as to appreciate its counter-revolutionary core. By placing the Final Solution at the center of Nazi imperialism, furthermore, Traverso's recognition of the bond between anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism highlights the moment at which a centuries-old hatred became genocidal without reducing Nazism to the history of anti-Semitism. Traverso's effective discussion, finally, of the link between antisocialism and racism in the bourgeois dread of the dangerous classes, which emerged by the late-nineteenth century, begins to explain how the racism so mercilessly applied to native populations overseas and urban insurgencies in Europe, such as the Paris Commune, could be reconfigured to assault the Jews later.

Nevertheless, Traverso is less successful in explaining why fascism at its most virulently racist emerged in Germany rather than elsewhere. Traverso indicates that only in Germany did anti-Semitism become the central component of fascism, yet he does not develop his brief reference to the visibility of the revolutionary Jew after 1918. Eugenics, he notes, fell on especially fertile soil in Germany, yet his insistence that eugenics was a Western preoccupation as well begs some elaboration as to how

Germany came to occupy a class by itself. If class racism helps to explain the historical pedigree of Jewish Bolshevism, why then did the Third Reich seek to redeem workers but destroy the Jews? Why did the Nazi regime pursue *Lebensraum* in the east first, rather than the recovery and expansion of its overseas empire when the German imperial imagination, which incorporated both *Lebensraum* and *Weltpolitik*, set Germany apart from other European imperialist powers? Why, finally, did National Socialism synthesize the worst aspects of Western civilizations while other nations did not? Admittedly, the author's main objective is to stress Nazism's Western lineage against some tenacious historical conceptions. Yet as brilliantly as the author succeeds in accomplishing that goal, and as obvious as the answers to my questions could well be, Traverso leaves us wishing for a reconstruction of German specificity without the baggage of past teleologies.

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