

Never blame the left

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from National Review, 1995-Dec-31, by George Watson:

The Left is perceived as kind and caring, despite its extensive history of promoting genocide.

When it comes to handing out blame, it is widely assumed that the Right is wicked and the Left incompetent. Or rather, you sometimes begin to feel, any given policy must have been Right if it was wicked, Left if it was incompetent.

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To give an example: I happened recently in Vienna to pass a restaurant that was advertising Jewish food, with two armed policemen standing outside. They were there, one of them explained to me, to guard against right wing radical extremists. There had been no violence against the restaurant then, and I believe there has been none since. But racism, and especially anti-Semitism, is wicked, so it must be right-wing.

That is fairly astounding, when you think about it. The truth is that in modern Europe, genocide has been exclusively a socialist idea, ever since Engels proclaimed it in Marx's journal the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in January-February 1849. Ever since then everyone who has advocated genocide has called himself a socialist, without exception.

The Left has a lot to hide. In the 1890s, for example, French socialists dissociated themselves from the Dreyfus affair, and in January 1898 the French Socialist Party issued a manifesto that called it a power struggle within the ruling classes, and warned the workers against taking sides in the matter. Dreyfus's supporters were Jewish capitalists, they argued, eager to clear themselves of financial scandals. A few years later, in 1902, H. G. Wells in *Anticipations* repeated the Marxist demand for genocide, but with variations, since the book is a blueprint for a socialist utopia that would be exclusively white.

A generation later Bernard Shaw, another socialist, in a preface to his play *On the Rocks* (1933), called on scientists to devise a painless way of killing large multitudes of people, especially the idle and the incurable, which is where Hitler's

program began six years later. In a letter to his fellow socialist Beatrice Webb (February 6, 1938) Shaw remarked of Hitler's program to exterminate the Jews that ``we ought to tackle the Jewish question," which means admitting ``the right of States to make eugenic experiments by weeding out any strains that they think undesirable." His only proviso was that it should be done humanely.

Ethnic cleansing was an essential part of the socialist program before Hitler had taken any action in the matter. The Left, for a century, was proud of its ruthlessness, and scornful of the delicacy of its opponents. ``You can't make an omelette," Beatrice Webb once told a visitor who had seen cattle cars full of starving people in the Soviet Unions, ``without breaking eggs."

There is abundant evidence, what is more, that the Nazi leaders believed they were socialists and that anti-Nazi socialists often accepted that claim. In *Mein Kampf* (1926) Hitler accepted that National Socialism was a derivative of Marxism. The point was more bluntly made in private conversations. ``The whole of National Socialism is based on Marx," he told Hermann Rauschning. Rauschning later reported the remark in *Hitler Speaks* (1939), but by that time the world was at war and too busy to pay much attention to it. Goebbels too thought himself a socialist. Five days before the German invasion of the Soviet Union, in June 1941, he confided in his diary that ``real socialism" would be established in that country after a Nazi victory, in place of Bolshevism and Czarism.

The evidence that Nazism was part of the socialist tradition continues to accumulate, even if it makes no headlines. In 1978 Otto Wagener's *Hitler: Memoirs of a Confidant* appeared in its original German. Wagener was a lifelong Nazi who had died in 1971. His recollections of Hitler's conversations had been composed from notes in a British prisoner-of-war camp, and they represent Hitler as an extreme socialist utopian, anti-Jewish because ``the Jew is not a socialist." Nor are Communists--``basically they are not socialistic, since they create mere herds, as in the Soviet Union, without individual life." The real task, Hitler told Wagener, was to realize the socialist dream that mankind over the centuries had forgotten, to liberate labor, and to displace the role of capital. That sounds like a program for the Left, and many parties called socialist have believed in less.

Hitler's allegiance, even before such sources were known, was acknowledged by socialists outside Germany. Julian Huxley, for example, the pro-Soviet British biologist who later became director-general of UNESCO, accepted Hitler's claim to be a socialist in the early 1930s, though without enthusiasm (indeed, with marked embarrassment).

Hitler's program demanded central economic planning, which was at the heart of the socialist cause; and genocide, in the 1930s, was well known to be an aspect of the socialist tradition and of no other. There was, and is, no conservative or liberal tradition of racial extermination. The Nazis, what is more, could call on socialist practice as well as socialist theory when they invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 and

began their exterminatory program. That is documented by Rudolf Hoess in his memoir *Kommandant in Auschwitz* (1958). Detailed reports of the Soviet camp system were circulated to Nazi camp commandants as a model to emulate and an example to follow.

Soviet exterminations under Lenin and Stalin may have totaled 25 to 30 million, which (if the estimate is accepted) would represent about three times the Nazi total of nine million. That seems to matter very little now. My Austrian policeman was still certain that racism is right-wing. As are a lot of people. After a recent bomb outrage against a synagogue in Lübeck, the German press instantly assumed, before anyone was charged with the crime, that the Right was to blame. The fact that there is no non-socialist tradition of genocide in Europe has not even been noticed.

That is an impressive act of suppression. The Left may have lost the political battle, almost everywhere in the world. But it does not seem to have lost the battle of ideas. In intellectual circles, at least, it is still believed that racism and the Left do not mix.

Why is this? How has the evidence of socialist genocide, how has Hitler's acknowledgement of his debt to Marx, been so efficiently suppressed?

The answer, I suspect, lies in the nature of political commitment. Political knowledge is not like botany or physics, and commitment is not usually made by examining evidence. When socialism was fashionable I used to ask those who believed in it why they thought public ownership would favor the poor. What struck me about their responses was not just that they did not know but that they did not think they were under any obligation to know. But if they had really cared about poverty they would have demanded an answer before they signed up, and would have gone on demanding an answer until they got one. In other words, they were hardly interested in solving poverty. What really interested them was looking and sounding as if they did.

When Marxism was fashionable, similarly, I used to ask Marxists what book by Marx or Engels they had read all the way through, and watch them look shifty and change the subject. Or, for a change, I might ask them what they thought of Engels's 1849 program of racial extermination, and watch them lose their temper. Politics, for lots of people, is not evidence based. It is more like showing off a new dress or a new suit.

There are three motives, broadly speaking, for political commitment, of which the third is admirable. I shall leave it till last.

The first is self-definition. You call yourself Left or Right, that is, as a way of proclaiming to the world and to yourself that you are a certain sort of person--kind and caring if you are Left, competent and realistic if you are Right. The reasons for these associations of ideas are far older than our century and matter now only to

historians, and even they would usually prefer not to be asked about them. It might be worrying if anyone did. The line between the efficient and the inefficient, after all, is nothing like as simple as the line between the private and the public, and not all public enterprise is caring: Auschwitz was public enterprise. Never mind. If you want to look caring, you will not ask such questions, and if anybody does it is always possible to change the subject.

The second motive is a sense of community. You choose a political side because the people you know, or would like to know, are already there, and you would like them to be like you. There was a time when, in university life, you would not be accepted unless you were Left, and it took enormous courage in that age to speak out on campus against Soviet or Chinese exterminations. That view is not yet dead. There are still those on both sides of the Atlantic who move, and intend to go on moving, in circles that think anti-Americanism a sufficient substitute for connected thought.

The third motive is instrumental. You can hold a political view with the admirable purpose of achieving something specific like constitutional change or a balanced budget, and support those who support it, whatever their party color. A moment's reflection suggests that this is rare. It is hard work, for one thing. It seldom attracts admiration, for another, though it often should. And it is not always easy to believe that this will work. Much more agreeable, on the whole, to use politics as a way of defining yourself or of making and keeping friends.

The Left got away with its crimes, I suggest, because those who form opinion had their own reasons for looking in another direction. They wanted to see themselves in a certain light and to keep the good opinion of the people whose friendship they valued. They had no wish to look at evidence, and they were adept at pretending, when it was produced, that it did not mean what it said. I remember once, in a controversy in a British journal, being told that Marx, Wells, and Shaw were being whimsical and nothing more when they committed socialists to mass-murder. Couldn't I take a joke? Evidence is seldom as inconvenient as that in the physical sciences, and scientists do not enjoy such convenient excuses for dismissal as whimsy or irony. Most critical theory, in our times, has been a way of pretending that evidence does not, and perhaps cannot, be taken literally.

The effects of that mood are still visible. The history of socialism, above all, is studiously neglected and even, in some aspects, simply taboo. What we need now is a serious and unblinking study of socialism, of what it said and what it did: one that does not judge the evidence; one that is brave enough to tell it as it was.

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