

Was Hitler anti-capitalist? Are liberals fascists? Fantasies by contemporary scholars, politicians and journalists

Von Dr. phil. Clemens Heni, 29. Dezember 2016

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October 3, 2016, the German “Re-Unification Day” was held in the Saxony capital Dresden. Dresden is infamous for the right-wing extremist Pegida movement (“Patriots against the Islamization of the Occident”). On that day, one of the most pro-Nazi and anti-establishment rallies in recent decades took place in Dresden, with hundreds of aggressive “protesters,” verbally attacking and threatening the entire political and cultural elite that had gathered in that city.

One “protester” had a sign with a Nazi Party quote from Joseph Goebbels, indicating that the Nazi movement is left and against the “bourgeois national bloc.” Goebbels, in his 1929 fiction “Michael,” promoted Nazi ideology, based on anti-Semitism and unity. Self-sacrifice was a core element for him, and he wrote, “the Jew has no understanding [for the self-sacrifice for a goal].”^[i] In his 1925 pamphlet “Nazi-Sozi”, Goebbels wrote, “Marxism will die, for nationalism to prosper.”^[ii]

After the Holocaust, many people are eager to distort German anti-Semitism. Post-colonial theory is one crucial aspect, equating colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and their *cui bono* to the senselessness of the Shoah. This Holocaust universalization is common among many people and scholars.

Others equate red and brown, like the infamous Prague Declaration, as Professor Dovid Katz from Lithuania has shown in uncounted pieces and lectures since 2008. Most recently, some people equated the horrible situation in Aleppo, Syria, to the Holocaust. Among those who did so, is the Muslim Brotherhood, like its Mahmoud Ezzat, but also the leading German-Jewish weekly Jüdische Allgemeine and its author Michael Wuliger. Leading German daily Süddeutsche Zeitung compared Stalingrad to Aleppo – Stalingrad is THE Second World War trauma for all proud ordinary German families.

Today, we can find the trope that Hitler, Stalin and Putin are equal by a leading German revisionist politician, Erika Steinbach, former head of the “Federation of Expellees,” who has not too many friends in Poland. Until the 1990s, if not later, she rejected Poland’s western border, the Oder-Neisse border. She is known for obfuscating Nazi Germany and right-wing extremism. For her, Hitler, Stalin and Putin were “socialists,” as she once tweeted. Before, Steinbach already argued that Hitler and the Nazis were “socialist” and “left.” Several scholars and authors of course rejected this absurd trope in 2012 and 2014.[iii] But Steinbach, who since 1990 is a member of Parliament (the German Bundestag) and a member of a leading body of Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union, has followers in the UK and the US, or she is following them, directly or indirectly.

Take Jonah Goldberg as an example, a senior editor at the *National Review*. In 2008, I have seen his New York Times #1 Bestseller “Liberal Fascism” at an airport bookstore in New York.[iv] Airport bookstores usually just offer a tiny amount of books, most often bestsellers. For Goldberg, Hitler was a “man of the left” as one chapter reads. Here is a quote from the promotion for the book on the cover by the publisher Doubleday, which is a company of the world leading publishing house Random House:

“The quintessential liberal fascist isn’t an SS storm

trooper; it is a female grade-school teacher with an education degree from Brown or Swarthmore."

This sounds like Breitbart News, Trump or Frontpage Magazine, but the quote is from Goldberg. This outrageous statement is a trivialization of the Shoah. It is also a typical misogynist or antifeminist trope. It indicates that misogynist ideology has a very long history in America (and around the world) and was not an invention by Donald Trump. Comparing a female liberal to the SS is not criticism of supposedly liberal anti-Zionism or the failure to deal with jihad after 9/11 – this is claptrap and male propaganda. It obfuscates intentionally what happened in Auschwitz and Sobibor in order to defame liberals. Goldberg and his followers have done huge damage to the pro-Israel and anti-Islamism camp in our post-9/11 world by distorting Nazi Germany and the Holocaust for political, extreme right-wing purposes.

For him and many of his allies the left is more or less fascist and even Hitler and the Nazi Party were leftist, despite facts and historical accuracy. There was no party more on the extreme right-wing than the NSDAP (Nazi Party) in the Weimar Republic. If Goldberg was interested in the politics of the Nazis in Weimar Germany, he could now read the doctoral dissertation by historian Susanne Wein at Free University Berlin.[v] This groundbreaking study shows the antidemocratic, anti-Semitic and anti-leftist policies of the Nazis, particularly aiming at the Social Democrats and Democrats.

Historian Brendan Simms from Cambridge in the UK is a book author, academic advisory board member of the Human Security Center in London and is President of the Henry Jackson Society in London. He argues in a similar vein than Erika Steinbach or Jonah Goldberg. For Simms, anti-Semitism was not the core of Hitler's ideology, but a result of his "anti-capitalism." [vi] In an article in *International Affairs* in March 2014, he wrote a summary of his approach.[vii] His outdated research becomes

obvious at the beginning of his article, on page three:

“Very little is certain about Hitler’s political views before he left for the war. Given his cordial childhood personal relations in Linz with the family’s Jewish doctor Eduard Bloch, whom Hitler respected—and with several Jews in Vienna—and the absence of any other contemporary evidence, it is unlikely that he was particularly anti-Semitic.”[viii]

In another piece in 2014, Simms writes:

“Adolf Hitler, for example, came to anti-Semitism via anti-capitalism, particularly of the ‘international’ Anglo-American variety, which he accused of reducing post-First World War Germany to the status of a ‘colony’. Senior figures on the Left saw the connection to anti-capitalism: the German Social Democrat leader August Bebel referred to anti-Semitism as a form of socialism, albeit ‘a socialism of fools’.”

Brendan Simms is not just a follower of the very old fashioned Great Man Theory, which dates back to the 19th century and was never ever really fascinating, as it ignores that a society is based on much more than just one person, regardless if it is someone like Hitler or not. However, Simms completely fails to understand anti-Semitism when he claims that Hitler cannot have been too much an anti-Semite prior to 1914 because of the Jewish doctor of his family. This is ridiculous, as scholarship has shown. Ignoring the entire scholarship on German anti-Semitism and Nazi anti-Semitism – take Robert Wistrich,[ix] Daniel Goldhagen,[x] Saul Friedländer,[xi] Yehuda Bauer[xii] or Jeffrey Herf[xiii] as examples who dealt extensively with the topic of Nazi anti-Semitism – Brendan Simms writes the following:

“The ‘Gemlich letter,’ which is the first surviving political text of any length by Hitler, has been picked over by generations of historians, but they have almost invariably

focused on Hitler's presentation of the Jewish problem as a racial issue – a 'racial tuberculosis of the peoples' (Rassentuberkulose der Völker) – rather than a question of mere personal distaste. They have also emphasized his belief that the Jews had been 'driving forces of the revolution' (die treibenden Kräfte der Revolution) that had laid Germany low. What has been almost entirely missed is the fact that Hitler's initial anti-Semitism was profoundly anti-capitalistic, rather than anti-communist, in origin."[xiv]

That kind of downplaying and obfuscating of anti-Semitism is remarkable. Jew-hatred and genocidal anti-Semitism as form of "personal distaste"? This is bordering to a complete denial of the genocidal dimension of anti-Semitism, the lethal obsession – for Simms just a personal distaste of Hitler?

This obfuscation of anti-Semitism might be the reason why Brendan Simms has so many fans in Germany, including daily newspapers who praised his article, like Die Welt[xv], the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung[xvi] and Der Tagesspiegel[xvii]. Simms thanks several colleagues for their advice, the best known among them is German historian Wolfram Pyta. Again, Brendan Simms wants to rewrite history and to indoctrinate his students with foolish arguments like the one, Hitler was anti-capitalist, anti-British/anti-American and then anti-Semitic:

"In short, Hitler became an enemy of the British – and probably also of their American cognates – before he became an enemy of the Jews. Indeed, he became an enemy of the Jews because of his hostility to the Anglo-American capitalist powers."[xviii]

This is not true and is again bordering to the denial of anti-Semitism as an ideology *sui generis*. Brendan Simms represents a substantial part of UK and America based conservatism and neo-conservatism that is so extremely full of hatred of the

left that they ignore scholarship and promote the most absurd theories. Downplaying of anti-Semitism as central element of German (and Hitler's) ideology is at the core of that right-wing ideology and a master example of how not to study anti-Semitism.

Brendan Simms' fantasy about England, America and capitalism being at the core of Hitler's and therefore the National Socialist movement's ideology can also be rejected if we look at the debates in the Weimar Reichstag in the 1920s. Susanne Wein has shown the importance of all kinds of anti-Semitic speech, whether open or coded, by the nationalist parties, the conservatives, the German National People Party (DNVP) and the Nazi Party itself (NSDAP). She has no blind eye on anti-Semitic speech and tendencies in some parts of the left-wing parties like the Communist Party (KPD) and the Social Democrats (SPD). She emphasizes, though, that the Nazis and DNVP, were the main enemy of Jews, democracy, and that Hitler was a man of the Far Right.[xix]

At the time, Social Democrats were considered and considered themselves as socialist, by the way. The quote from the cover of Goldberg's book indicates that he has no idea what he is talking about: the term "SS storm trooper" is a misnomer. SS storm troopers did not exist. He confuses "Sturmabteilung" (SA storm troopers) with the SS, which means "Schutzstaffel" or protection unit.

Every historian who ever studied Nazi Germany knows the difference between the SA and the SS during National Socialism. Of course this might just be a linguistic problem and Goldberg confused SA and SS – but a serious writer, let alone a historian, should not confuse the both of them, although both were of course core elements of the Nazis, before and after 1933. While the SA was imperative to kill leftists and the political enemy prior to 1933, the SS became a core opponent of the SA after 1933 and the leading organization for the Holocaust.

The SS wanted to 'protect' the Germans from 'the Jew', and Nazis indeed feared in a pathological way that "the" Jew rules the world, both capitalism and communism, and Germans and Nazis to some degree even feared that they were Jewish *inside* (!). Just read one of the leading Nazi anti-Semites, who later became an Egypt based Muslim, Johann von Leers, who wrote about the necessity to 'dejudaize Germany from within', including the mind of Nazi Germans.[xx] All this was based on a long history or extreme right-wing German and Austrian anti-Semitic and nationalistic ideology, going back to the 19th century if not before. Von Leers liked America but saw 'the Jew' behind all evil in America and Roosevelt driven by Jewish power.[xxi] So much about Goldberg's fantasy that Hitler and the Germans were driven by hatred of the West, England and America, and therefore became anti-Semitic. It is vice versa.

For those interested in a serious analysis of the origins of National Socialism, I'd like to remind you to the concept of "German Socialism." "German Socialism" was based on capitalism, private property and small business (and sometimes big German business as well, take Mercedes, Deutsche Bank, IG Farben, Krupp, Thyssen etc.) and a strong state. An essential component was anti-Semitic resentment against the international big trusts and 'finance capital' while embracing the "German worker" and in particular the German middle class and the German peasants of course. National Socialism was about capitalism, German way, based on anti-Marxism as Klaus Fritzsche has shown in 1976 in his study of the "Tat-Kreis" around Hans Zehrer.[xxii] One could also analyze the völkisch concept of socialism and anti-Roman thinking by Ernst Niekisch and his German-Protestant national revolutionaries, whose main enemy was 'the Jew' and the working class likewise.[xxiii]

In my doctoral dissertation in 2007 about today's New Right, German political culture and Henning Eichberg, a leading theorist of the New Right since the late 1960s, I myself [xxiv] dealt with the anti-Semitic ideology of Joseph

Goebbels in his Nazi pamphlet *Der Nazi-Sozi* from 1926, which was a major anti-Semitic booklet and portrayed Jews as “flea.”[xxv] Here you can find the eliminationist Nazi ideology even prior to National Socialism as a state.

As already said, Hitler grew up politically in his Vienna years prior to World War I. As book authors Friedrich Paul Heller and Anton Maegerle have shown in 1995,[xxvi] the völkisch occultism was a core element of Nazi ideology. Just think of people like Guido von List, who once buried several bottles in the form of a swastika at a place dedicated to remember the Germanic victory over the Romans in the year 9 CE (the Varus Battle).[xxvii] Capitalists like the owner of a Prague metal cooperation, Friedrich Oskar Wannieck, were members of the 1908 established Guido-von-List-Society. No meat, no alcohol and no smoking were essential components of Hitler and parts of the völkisch movement.[xxviii] Or recall Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, who founded the racist Ostara journal. Hitler himself admitted in *Mein Kampf* that he bought one of his first anti-Semitic pamphlets during his Vienna time.[xxix] Hitler was also joining meetings of the “Ordi novi templi,” which was founded by Lanz von Liebenfels in 1900. Members were not allowed to even touch Jews without using a sword.[xxx]

This gives you a first insight view of Hitler’s anti-Semitic circles, friends, allies and ideological points of departure. Before the First World War Hitler was an anti-Semite. Brendan Simms ignores scholarship in that respect, which is remarkable for a professor at Cambridge. Looking at people like Erika Steinbach or Jonah Goldberg, though, Simms indicates a trend in contemporary distortions of anti-Semitism and the rise of anti-Semitism, Hitler’s ideology and the Nazi movement.

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[i] Joseph Goebbels (1929): Michael. Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblätter, quoted after Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch (1995):

Der junge Goebbels. Erlösung und Vernichtung, Munich (Klaus Boer), 126.

[ii] Joseph Goebbels (1926)/1930: Der Nazi-Sozi. Fragen und Antworten für den Nationalsozialisten, Munich (Verlag Frz. Eher Nachf.), 23.

[iii]

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/steinbach-eklat-auf-twitter-die-nazis-waren-eine-linke-partei-a-812950.html> (accessed December 27, 2016).

[iv] Jonah Goldberg (2007): Liberal Fascism. The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning, New York: DoubleDay (Random House).

[v] Susanne Wein (2014): Antisemitismus im Reichstag. Judenfeindliche Sprache in Politik und Gesellschaft der Weimarer Republik, Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang.

[vi]

<http://www.standard.co.uk/comment/brendan-simms-antisemitism-is-an-international-threat-once-again-9087757.html> (accessed May 13, 2014).

[vii] Brendan Simms (2014): Against a 'world of enemies': the impact of the First World War on the development of Hitler's ideology, *International Affairs*, 90: 2 (2014), 317–336.

[viii] Simms 2014, 320.

[ix] Robert S. Wistrich (2016): Der antisemitische Wahn, Berlin (Edition Critic); Robert S. Wistrich (2001): Hitler and the Holocaust, New York: Modern Library Chronicles Book.

[x] Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (1996): *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York: Knopf.

[xi] Saul Friedländer (2007): *The Years of Extermination. Nazi*

Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945, New York: HarperCollins.

[xii] Yehuda Bauer (1978): *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective. The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies*, Seattle: University of Washington Press; Yehuda Bauer (2001): *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Yehuda Bauer (2010): "Remembering accurately on International Holocaust Remembrance Day," January 25, *Jerusalem Post*, <http://www.jpost.com/Features/InTheSpotlight/Article.aspx?id=166776> (accessed August 29, 2012)

[xiii] Jeffrey Herf (2006): *The Jewish Enemy. Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust*, Cambridge (MA)/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

[xiv] Simms 2014, 329–330.

[xv] Sven Felix Kellerhoff (2014): Hasste Hitler "den" Westen mehr als "die" Juden?, 14 March 2014, <http://www.welt.de/geschichte/zweiter-weltkrieg/article125813854/Hasste-Hitler-den-Westen-mehr-als-die-Juden.html> (accessed December 27, 2016). Kellerhoff insinuates, „it might time for new questions“ concerning Hitler and antisemitism: „Thomas Weber ist denn auch vorsichtig: ‚Ob sich Simms‘ Forschungsergebnisse und Hypothesen nun teilweise oder ganz bestätigen‘, schreibt er in der ‚Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung‘, sei nicht entscheidend: ‚Sie werden grundlegend und bahnbrechend die Art und Weise verändern, wie wir über Hitler denken.‘ Gut möglich, dass sich daraus ein neuer veritabler Historikerstreit entwickelt. Denn Hitler und speziell die Ursachen seines Antisemitismus sind von entscheidender Bedeutung für die Gesamtgeschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert. Eine halbe Generation nach Ian Kershaws zweibändiger Hitler-Biografie könnte es Zeit sein für neue Fragen.“

[xvi] Thomas Weber (2014): Die Quellen seines Hasses, 14 March

2014,

<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/die-quellen-seines-hasses-woher-kam-hitlers-antikapitalismus-12845914.html> (accessed December 27, 2016).

[xvii] Malte Lehming (2014): Über links, rechts, Klassen und Rassen hinweg, 14 April 2014, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/meinung/anti-amerikanismus-und-antisemitismus-ueber-links-rechts-klassen-und-rassen-hinweg/9747690.html> (accessed December 27, 2016).

[xviii] Simms 2014, 330.

[xix] Wein 2014.

[xx] Johann von Leers (1941)⁴: *Rassische Geschichtsbetrachtung. Was muß der Lehrer davon wissen*, Langensalza/Berlin/Leipzig: Verlag von Julius Beltz.

[xxi] Johann von Leers (1942)³: *Kräfte hinter Roosevelt*, Berlin: Theodor Fritsch Verlag (first edition 1940).

[xxii] Klaus Fritzsche (1976): *Politische Romantik und Gegenrevolution. Fluchtwege in der Krise der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft: Das Beispiel des ‚Tat‘-Kreises*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

[xxiii] Michael Pittwald (2002): Ernst Niekisch. *Völkischer Sozialismus, nationale Revolution, deutsches Endimperium*, Cologne: PapyRossa.

[xxiv] Clemens Heni (2007): *Salonfähigkeit der Neuen Rechten. ‚Nationale Identität‘, Antisemitismus und Antiamerikanismus in der politischen Kultur der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1970–2005: Henning Eichberg als Exempel*, Marburg: Tectum, 135–150.

[xxv] Joseph Goebbels (1930): *Der Nazi-Sozi. Fragen und*

Antworten für den Nationalsozialisten, Munich: Frz. Eher Nachf. (first edition 1926).

[xxvi] Friedrich Paul Heller/Anton Maegerle (1995): THULE. Vom völkischen Okkultismus bis zur Neuen Rechten, Stuttgart: Schmetterling.

[xxvii] Heller/Maegerle 1995, 20.

[xxviii] Heller/Maegerle 1995, 20.

[xxix] Heller/Maegerle 1995, 22–23.

[xxx] Heller/Maegerle 1995, 23–26.

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