

Hitlers Volksstaat

Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus

G.Aly

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*Wer von den Vorteilen für die Millionen einfacher Deutschen nicht reden will, der sollte vom Nationalsozialismus und vom Holocaust schweigen.*¹

Those are the concluding words of Aly's book. His main thesis is that instead of viewing the spectacle of the twelve years of the thousand year Reich as a mesmerized nation expressing the darkest desires of its populace under a mad leader for anti-semitism and world conquest, one should view it as a social contract in which a shaky leadership buttressed by the services of an excellent army and an eminently competent bureaucracy promised the great majority of German citizens a life in material contentment. It is easy to be anachronistic. The Neo-Nazi movements of today express puerile phantasies of racial superiority, whose infantile message can but touch a deluded fringe and thus have no significant political impact whatsoever. The National Socialists that came to power in the thirties, although obviously not devoid of such delusions in their leadership, presented a far more congenial, and hence insidious, picture; and rather than mainly offering phantasies of vapid glory, held out a populist egalitarian promise of equal opportunities and material well-being, which then as now touch deep strands in the popular and unreflective electorate. The roots of the Thousand years Reich should not be sought before the First World War, argues the author, in particular they do not reflect a particular German national character. Aly notes correctly (pace Goldhagen and other popular demonizers) that historically anti-semitism has not been more prevalent in Germany than in neighbouring countries, rather on the contrary. To which one can add that the military tradition in Germanic history is considerably weaker than in many other European countries, France being an obvious example. Aly is of the opinion that the professed Socialist element in its ideology as well as denotation should be taken seriously. Although National Socialism was a sworn enemy to Bolshevism (which perhaps more than anything else contributed to its electoral success) it shared many features with Communism, particular those that appeal to the sensibilities of the masses² and for whose favours it was in intense competition. The Nazi movement was indeed radical, it was the movement of youthful vigour intent to sweep away the old society, and as such dynamic and appealing to the young³. This illustrates how misleading it is to speak about a political spectrum from left to right once you go beyond the political

¹ Those who do not want to speak of the advantages to millions of plain Germans, should keep silent on Nationalsozialismus and the Holocaust

² I recall that Hitler is reputed to have remarked that it is much easier to make a Nazist out of a Communist than out of a Social Democrat

³ It is hard to avoid the suspicion that much of the radical fervour of the generation of 68 would forty years earlier have expressed itself differently

mainstream. It was of course a reaction against the humiliation of the First World War, but perhaps more of a reaction against the Weimar Republic and its perceived moral and financial degeneracy. It is not to be denied that it vented its hostility on the Jew but also on the Capitalist, and to many the distinction certainly was blurred. It celebrated traditional family values, enacted laws of environmental protection, raged against the inequities of classes arguing for equal opportunities (of course qualified by intrinsic ability, a qualification absent in modern egalitarian rhetorics). According to Aly many of the features that nowadays are inevitable components of a well-fare state, like paid vacations and its corollary of mass-tourism, were pioneered by the Nazis. The Nazi state was not a totalitarian state oppressing its population (with the obvious exceptions of the intermittent individual disenter and targeted minorities) in fact it exercised much less control than its DDR-successor⁴. On the contrary it gave its military and bureaucracy a wide latitude within the confines imposed by the vague visions provided by the political leadership. The German army, far down into its ranks, exhibited an independance and initiative, not matched by its allied opponents; and the German bureaucracy aptly translated vague directives into workable procedures. In fact it is still a mystery how decent, often highly cultured individuals so readily prostituted their intelligence, expertise and devotion to work in order to service criminals. It is in the long run utterly unfruitful to vent your indignation against characters like Hitler, Gring, Goebbels and their ilk who are beyond our ken; much more to the point to ponder issues of civilian courage and piecemeal moral choices whose accumulation makes possible the unspeakable. Left to their own devices the Nazi leadership would quickly have foundered on self-contradictions. Thus the author makes the right choice in speaking about Germans not Nazis in his documentation of plunder that constitute the main theme of the book. Hitlers professed union with his 'Volk' was always very tenuous, and deep down he knew it. Far for him to ever risk to demand the Blood, Sweat and Tears that Churchill asked of his, he kept on the continued bribery to the end. And to the very end they were pampered. As a contemporary witness reports, with rosy cheeks and plump with well-fed contentment they looked upon the material devastation around them with curious indifference. It was after all a matter of 'Sieg oder Untergang' (maybe both) and to most people the twelve years were like a daze⁵ whose unreality made it possible to discard as a bad dream. This might be why, that unlike the case of say Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, the experience did amazingly leave no deep scars, but enabled in record time out of its ashes an exemplary republic, both in matters of democracy and material well-being, to arise.

As noted above, the book is a documentation of plunder, because as always someone has in the end to pay. If the majority of the Germans were blessed with only marginal taxes and generous benefits, making the life on the homefront materially more affluent during war than peace, the fiscal gap had to be filled elsewhere. It is true that War always include plunder, in fact wars, although in recent years ostensible fought for the sake of Peace, traditionally have been motivated by plunder. It has been something of a truism that an invading army should feed off the ground, and when this is not possible (as say with

⁴ Borne out, among other things, by statistics as regards to internal police forces

⁵ according to Klemperer, one of the few documented eye-witness accounts from within, it was like going to the movies

the Napoleonic invasion of Russia), problems of logistics quickly become insurmountable and more often than not lead to disaster. In which way was German plunder more extensive than what you would expect in a war, especially in a war of conquest? The Swedish writers Jan Myrdal and Sven Lindquist have simply noted that what made the antics of Hitler so shocking was his importation of standard Colonial practices on European soil, directed against fellow white Europeans rather than dark Natives.

Aly presents an impressive amount of statistical information ferreted out through diligent searches among incomplete not to say fragmented sources. In fact the authors indignation is directed at how much of the relevant sources have been wantonly destroyed and at the indifference of subsequent German administrations to take full responsibility for the plunder of their predecessor. As usual it is much easier to take moral responsibility than financial, the latter involve tangible consequences, the former offers the exalted rewards of contrition. But Aly here acts as an historian as a fact-finder in the Rankian tradition; statistics by itself proves little if nothing. For numbers to come alive they need to be compared, added, manipulated, used to suggest hypothesis and exploited to confirm such. With a few exceptions, Aly does nothing of that sort, hence the larger part of the book becomes singularly tedious to read. What does it mean that Germany then and there exerted so many billions ⁶ of Reichsmark⁷? Likewise he spends many a pages elaborating the fact that the German soldiers transmitted packages with butter and coffee by post to their families at home, and went on shopping sprees returning on leaves fully loaded. In the general context of rape and pillage this seems marginal, but maybe it is not? A quantitative analysis is anyway lacking. But some comparisons are made, and they are very stark and telling. In the First World War the German army captured 1.3 million Russian prisoners of war. Around five percent of those died, a substantial part, one surmises out of war-wounds. In the Second World War 3.3 million Soviet prisoners were captured, out of which 60 percent perished, most of them out of hunger and active ill-treatment. This indicates the abyss between a civilized army respecting its enemies and a ruthless one. It is worth noting that during the First World War the German population was starving at home, while in the Second it was living in opulence. As is well-known the war in the west was very different from the war in the east. In the west plunder was done in a civilized manner, more often than not abetted by local authorities. A special currency, RKK (Reichkreditkasse)-notes, only convertible to local currencies, was created and employed. In this way, indicated but not completely explained, after all Aly is not out to write an economic study, the illusion was created that Germany was after all paying its way, while it in fact was subtly exporting an inflation, safe-guarding its own currency. (Once again an illustration of bureaucratic financial expertise in action). In the east pillage was more brutal. As Gring said, if there are people to hunger, they should not be Germans; and victuals were transferred back to the Reich causing widespread local famines. The German armies did not bother to conquer the big cities, it was enough to starve them out as with Leningrad. It is often remarked that Stalin caused more deaths than Hitler, that might be true, but is ultimately irrelevant. Had Hitler been allowed to perservere, it is not unlikely

⁶ milliards 10^9 in European usage

⁷ Aly sets a conversion rate of 10 euros to the Reichmark, which is a useful rule of thumb, but is fraught as all conversions between temporally separated currencies with a collection of arbitraries

that the Slaves would have suffered the same fate as the Jews out of the same principle of expediency. When people are robbed and left completely destitute what are to be done with them?

The extermination of the Jews is nowadays considered as the key-fact of the Second World War, something around which everything else orbits. There is still no clear consensus among historians whether the ultimate solution, at least in the form it took, was pre-ordained from the start, or whether it was done out of expediency. My own opinion verges to the latter, based on the understanding that the Nazi leadership really never had any precise plans and understanding of what they were really up to, except the sustained seizure of power for its own sake. The robbery of the Jews did in the end only amount to perhaps five percent of the total robbery. This might be seen as marginal, and hence as unnecessary. In fact it is tempting to speculate that without the persecution of the Jews, the German war effort might have been even more succesful, both from the support it would have gained from a minority as patriotic as the rest and from the active interference in the effort itself, the tracking and transportation of Jews involved. Aly has no truck with such speculations, which he does not even formulate. He concedes that the figures may be marginal, but in all expenditures, it is the crucial ones, those laid at the top of the regular ones, that cause most agony. The divesture of Jewish wealth came in very handy. On one hand it might seem ridiculous to assert that the Ali Baba bags stuffed with extorted jewellery, coins and gold fillings would assist the German war effort; but those riches, virtual as they may appear and also never directly benefiting German authorities, were used to buttress local currencies, saving them from collapse, and thus sustaining continued German draining of resources in an orderly and effective way, be it in occupied or to it allied countries. Thus everyone in the German lands benefited from the riches stolen from the Jews, just like we in western countries benefit from low-wages and child labour in our indulgence in cheap consumer goods without giving it much thought or allowing it to sully our enjoyments of the same.

July 30, 2005 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se