

Brenner on the Nazi massacre

Gerry Ben-Noah, SO 199, 4.10.84

DENIAL of the holocaust has become the stock-in-trade of the far right in Europe and the USA, from Richard 'Harewood's' "Did Six Million Really Die?" to Arthur Butz's "The Hoax of the Century". That pro-Nazi should seek to excuse their heroes of one of the greatest crimes in history can hardly be surprising.

What is remarkable, however, is the recent emergence of a "left-wing" version of holocaust revisionism.

At the most extreme, a French Trotskyist defends Robert Faurisson's right to deny the existence of gas chambers and extermination camps. More often, though, the "left" revisionists do not deny that the holocaust happened: they merely argue for a redistribution of responsibility for the tragedy. They suggest that the Nazis were not solely to blame for the disaster that befell the Jewish people. Zionism, too, must share the guilt.

Now, in fact, various Zionist leaders *did* calculate that anti-semites would for their own reasons collaborate with them. They understood that there was logical common ground between Zionism and anti-semitism — old-fashioned, central-European, pre-Nazi Christian anti-semitism — in that both rejected assimilation.

Zionism was generated by anti-semitism. Then once embarked on their project of removing the Jews to Palestine, out of reach of the anti-semites, the Zionist leaders made hard-headed calculations and assessments of the world they lived in, seeking to find ways of realising their programme.

Thus Zionist leaders had discussions with ministers of the viciously anti-semitic Tzarist government, with Von Plehve, for example.

In the same way the Zionists have allied in succession with Turkish, British and then US imperialism. Brutal realism and

cynical real-politik in the service of their central goal of creating the Jewish state has always characterised the central leadership of the Zionist movement. It has led to shameful episodes and unsavoury contacts.

The realpolitik of the Zionist leaders — together with a slowness to realise that older strains of anti-semitism had evolved into the lethal, genocidal Nazi variant, with which there could be no accommodation — may well have helped blunt the response of European Jews to Nazism.

Identify

But to go on from this tragic confusion to identify Zionism and anti-semitism, to place the moral or political responsibility — or any share of it — on the Zionist Jews for Hitler's holocaust of European Jewry — that is hysterically and obscenely stupid.

Yet that is what the new revisionism — at its sharpest when it stops playing with hollow, abstract logical identification between Zionism and anti-semitism and bases itself on the historical facts — concludes and now proclaims to the world.

It is important to recognise that, whilst holocaust revisionism is absolutely central to the ideology of the far right, "left" revisionism remains — so far — a marginal and aberrant belief within the socialist movement.

Until now, it has been propagated only by scattered articles in the "Workers Revolutionary Party" press, or by quaintly-titled pamphlets such as Tony Greenstein's "Zionism: Anti-semitism's Twin in Jewish Garg".

Until now, it has *looked* like the work of cranks.

Until now, Lenni Brenner, "left" revisionism's newest recruit is a Jew, whose books have all the appearance of serious works of history and are

published (expensively) by commercial publishers.

Both the books argue, with apparent authority, that Zionists did not fight back against anti-semitism because they were in sympathy with it. According to Brenner, the Zionists saw anti-semites as nationalists like themselves, with a common objective in the removal of the Jews from Europe and a similar evaluation of the intrinsic worth of diaspora Jewry.

Where does one begin to review work like this? The revisionists of the right have shown how easy it is to contest and even subvert what had seemed unassailable historical facts. For, of course, very little history can survive scepticism of this kind, based on the rejection of any evidence one does not like.

Now Brenner does not, by and large, engage in this kind of revisionism. Brenner's unique contribution to historical revision lies in the *sense* he makes of events.

Most of the events he refers to are real and publicly known. They have been described before by pro-Zionist writers, notably Hannah Arendt in "Eichmann in Jerusalem". (This is not to say that a sizeable catalogue of inaccuracies and contradictions within the Brenner *corpus* could not be assembled — but such an exercise would miss the point).

Congruence

Brenner's "theory" of Zionist-Nazi congruence rests upon two sets of phenomena: the actions of individual collaborators who were Zionists, and the policies of Zionist organisations which, for him, were lacking in anti-Nazi resolution.

With the benefit of hindsight it is, of course, easy to see that many Zionists underestimated the Nazis. They thought the new anti-semitism would be like the old; brutal, humiliating and dangerous for individual Jews.

They could not and did not conceive of the annihilation that was to come. Thus, their strategy was based on a series of assumptions about the immediate prospects for Europe's Jews which was horribly wrong.

Inner logic

To move from this tragic confusion, however, to the suggestion that they were unconcerned about the fate of those Jews is absurd. To argue that they were therefore in sympathy with the Nazis is bizarre.

It would be foolish to deny that there were Zionists who collaborated. So, no doubt, did some Communists, Bundists and liberals. In the nightmare world of Nazi Europe many people did bad things to save their own lives or those of people they loved.

For Brenner, though, these individual acts of collaboration are expressions of the inner logic of Zionism. Individual or collective acts of anti-fascist resistance by Zionists on the other hand, are dismissed as merely historical accidents, exceptions that in some unexplained way prove the rule.

It would be trivially easy to write a similar account of the "inner logic" of capitalist democracy, or of Marxism, which proved to this standard their affinity with Nazism. Such accounts have little to do with serious history.

Brenner claims to be opposed to Jewish, Arab and every other kind of nationalism. Perhaps he is so far from nationalism that he does not feel the need to avoid racial slurs, which he sprinkles throughout his writing. Thus, the inter-war Palestinian Arab leadership were not only "a parasitic upper class" but also "classic levantines" (*Iron Wall* p.57); and the Palestinian Arabs as a whole had a "low level of culture" (*ibid* p.65). As for the Jews:

"...the old Jewish slums were notoriously filthy: 'Two Jews and one cheese make three smells' was an old Polish proverb. Karl Marx was only being matter-of-fact when he remarked that 'The Jews of Poland are the smariest of all races'". (*ibid* p.11).

For a self-proclaimed socialist to repeat anti-semitic Polish proverbs as matters of fact is simply incredible. Such remarks are frequent in Brenner and range from the paranoid: the suggestion that rich Jews control the US Democratic Party and thus American foreign policy — to the merely unpleasant — Agudat Israel demanding from the Likud "their pound of flesh" (p.207) as the price for parliamentary support.

There is, then, a curious ambivalence in Brenner's writing. He censures Zionism for despising Jews and on the other hand he clearly despises them himself. Similarly, he characterises the Zionist-Revisionists as near-fascists, and cites quotes from anti-revisionist Zionists to establish this. But he also argues that the Revisionists were the most authentic Zionists, closest to the inner logic of the movement.

Therefore, the opposition of the Labour Zionists to Revisionism, of which good use is made in proving the latter to be reactionaries, is then dismissed as either bad faith or false consciousness. Either Labour's disagreements with Jabotinsky's followers were entirely tactical, a contest over who should control the colonialist venture — or the left simply did not appreciate, as Brenner can appreciate, that they were really just logical Zionist-Revisionists.

For a Marxist, Brenner places enormous weight on his own ability to critically examine other people's psyches across the years. (This ability is not restricted to the minds of Labour Zionists; Brenner also "shows" that Betar was Fascist by reference to the mental states of a

hypothetical "average Betari" (*ZAD*, p.114).

Psychoanalysis

We are also offered a psychoanalysis of Jabotinsky:

"...there was nothing ambiguous about Jabotinsky's oral fixation...he hated mathematics and was always undisciplined as a student: the infallible signs of oral fixation...He had other stigmata of the fixation...he became hopelessly addicted to detective stories and westerns." (*Iron Wall*, p.6).

This is the sort of thing that gets psychoanalysis a bad name. It reveals, too, that underneath the glossy covers Brenner's work is every bit as crankish as former attempts to construct a "socialist" version of historical revisionism.

Why, then, has it any credibility? A comment by Isaac Deutscher offers a clue:

"The anti-Zionist urged the Jews to trust their gentile environment, to help the 'progressive forces' in that environment...and so hope that those forces would effectively defend the Jews against anti-semitism...The Zionists on the other hand dwelt on the deepseated hatred of non-Jews and urged the Jews to trust their future to nobody except their own state. In this controversy Zionism has scored a terrible victory, one which it could neither wish nor expect." (*The Non-Jewish Jew*, p.91).

Brenner, like most socialists, wishes that this victory had not happened. But instead of thinking seriously about what kind of socialist strategy could win the Jews away from Zionism, he constructs a fantasy-world in which the Zionists did wish for and expect the holocaust, and in which the most fanatical Jewish nationalists were, in reality, ardent anti-semites.

All of this would undoubtedly be an interesting case-study for psychoanalysts. Marxists would be better off by turning to Nathan Weinstock's *Zionism: False Messiah*.