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Hatred & fantasy

by [Paul Hollander](#)

A review of "The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II & the Holocaust."

Jeffrey Herf

The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust.
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reviewed by Paul Hollander

Which of the major findings of this excellent study is more disturbing: that human beings are capable of inventing and believing the kind of vicious nonsense the Nazis believed about Jews, or that such profoundly irrational beliefs can become the basis of a meticulously devised and implemented program of industrial mass murder? It is indeed the case, to say the least, that “an examination of modern political culture draws attention to the causal significance of many irrational and illusory ideological perspectives.”

It is among the Nazis’ claims to distinction that they triumphantly united political belief and action, thereby confounding modern Western convictions about the divergence between appearance and reality, prompting the pursuit of hidden meanings and motives. But the Nazis believed what they said, and did what they promised to do: to exterminate people they considered the uniquely threatening embodiments of evil.

The Nazis themselves were susceptible to the unmasking, demythologizing impulse as far as the great Jewish world conspiracy was concerned: “Nazi propagandists convinced themselves and their followers that commonsense explanations for developments were deceptive and illusory... . The truth was that a small number of unseen conspirators controlled the national and international events from the shadows.” The Nazi leaders and propagandists were “modernists ... who believed that they had discovered the real truth lurking hidden behind the scenes.” Unmasking the timeless Jewish conspiracy designed to control the entire world was the central mission of Nazi propaganda.

The Nazis also shared with Marxists (and more recently with Islamic fundamentalists) the conviction that appearances and realities diverged sharply and dramatically—the foundation of the conspiratorial mindset. These three political entities also had in common a confidence that their ideologies and beliefs would provide a solution for all the existential riddles that human beings confront, and would thereby eliminate historical contingencies and make everything fully explicable—especially injustice, suffering, and pain.

The Jewish Enemy is both a revealing, carefully documented historical study and a reminder of the timeless and astonishing human capacity for demented belief, bottomless hatred, and a correspondingly stunning readiness to act upon bizarre convictions and fantasies. At the present

time, Islamic terrorists, and especially the suicide bombers among them, come closest to the Nazi true believers, especially in regard to the obsession with identifying, exposing, and destroying evil. Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists and the Nazis also share the conviction that the evil thus identified is unique, and its human incarnations possessed of limitless and unprecedented depravity and determination to harm the innocent. For the Nazis the final solution was a world purified of Jews, for the Islamic fanatics a world without “infidels.” The parallels are especially close given the shared preoccupation with Jews as the major source of evil and corruption.

Most striking was the Nazi conviction (richly documented in this volume) that the Jews were not merely morally and physically repugnant and repositories of every despicable human trait but an imminent, mortal threat to Germany, indeed to the whole civilized world. It was this conviction that replaced traditional anti-Semitism and mutated into the radical, genocidal one that logically demanded the extermination of all Jews. Nazi propaganda played a key part in this by “transform[ing] ancient hatreds of anti-Semitism into a public justification for mass murder.” Herf rightly emphasizes the paranoid quality of these beliefs: “all Jews by virtue of their race were members of an international conspiracy waging war against Germany.”

Similarities notwithstanding, present-day Islamic definitions of evil are broader than those of the Nazis, as they include Jews, Americans, Westerners, sometimes even fellow Arabs. Another notable difference is that the uncompromising determination to link belief and behavior (culminating in joyous self-destruction) is predicated on the expectation of an abundance of otherworldly rewards. Unlike the Muslim terrorists shouting “God is Great” as they behead their victims or explode bombs in crowded marketplaces, it sufficed for the Nazis to believe that killing Jews was an essential measure of collective self-defense.

This study is also highly informative about the methods and character of Nazi propaganda. The author makes use of sources not widely used before such as the ubiquitous wall newspapers (also favored in communist states), posters and archival materials (including directives to the press about the tasks and methods of propaganda), and the diaries of Goebbels, among others. Some striking visual images of “the Jewish enemy” used in the press and posters are reproduced (remarkably similar to both Soviet anti-capitalist, anti-American propaganda and the images purveyed in Arab anti-Israeli propaganda).

The sense of victimhood was an indispensable foundation of Nazi propaganda and a major device for instilling hatred in the target audience: “the propaganda of outraged innocence and no less angry projection attained unprecedented levels of mendacity and viciousness.” It is a striking similarity between Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, and most recently Islamic terrorism, that a collective self-conception of innocent victim is prominent in each and used as legitimation for extermination, repression, political violence and terror, as the case might be. To the extent that these exceedingly violent and aggressive systems or movements succeeded in convincing themselves of their own victimhood, their violence and aggression was instantly and gratifyingly transformed into morally righteous self-defense. Victimization (impending or imaginary) legitimated everything—from gas chambers to the Gulag, show trials, and most recently the zestful and unembarrassed killing of random collections of civilians around the globe by the Islamic terrorists. The Nazis “viewed the Final Solution ... as a necessary campaign of retaliation in the context of a broader war of defense ... against international Jewry.”

There is one matter the author does not attempt settle: to what extent (if any), the dehumanizing and demonizing propaganda directed at Jews was a precondition of the Holocaust, that is to say, how important was it in motivating the “willing executioners” as distinct from their “obedience to authority” and the influence of internalized traditional anti-Semitism? Herf’s findings make clear, if more evidence is needed, that the German public was well informed about the genocidal intentions of the Nazi authorities: “Hitler and his associates told the German population on numerous occasions

that his government was following a policy of exterminating and annihilating Europe's Jews."

The most important lesson of the Holocaust, and the propaganda seeking to justify it, is that human hatreds and fantasies unrelated to either material gain or tangible group interest are capable of producing vast suffering and destruction. In the case in point, "The Nazi leadership pushed to the extreme the widespread human capacity for delusion and belief in illusions." The murder of millions of innocent people originated in these delusions.

Paul Hollander's most recent book is *The End of Commitment* (Ivan R.

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