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Book Reviews

GOTZ ALY AND SUSANNE HEIM. *Vordenker der Vernichtung: Auschwitz und die deutschen Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung* [Pre-thinkers of the Annihilation: Auschwitz and the German Plans for a New European Order]. (Die Zeit des Nationalismus.) Rev. ed. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch. 1993.

A BOOK AS ILL-CONCEIVED as this one ordinarily does not merit much scholarly consideration. However, books about the Holocaust are different, especially when they are written by Germans and especially when they pretend to scholarship. The books by Andreas Hillgruber and Ernst Nolte which triggered the infamous German *Historikerstreit* in 1985 are good cases in point.¹ Similarly constructed arguments about a different set of events—say, the Franco-Prussian War—would hardly have been the cause of such bitter controversy, much of it spilling over into the public arena; clearly, the Holocaust remains a potent symbol and rallying cry in current German politics. Consequently, whether fair or not, German books about the Holocaust are subjected to a special kind of scrutiny. Such books are evaluated not only for their “objective” scholarly merit—their use of evidence as well as their explanatory power—but also for the political commitment they seem to champion, often implicitly. In analyzing this intriguing, if lacking, work by Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, therefore, I will pay attention not only to what is argued explicitly but also to what remains unsaid. In this short review, I not only want to address some of the empirical and analytical flaws, but also the serious conceptual problems of this text and what I consider the dubious political impulse driving the whole argument.

The main argument can be outlined in a few paragraphs. Aly and Heim argue that Nazi death-camps represented the logical culmination of a carefully planned scheme of economic rationalizing by a group of well-placed German intellectuals. These individuals were not *völkisch* racists and ideologues but academics—economists, social theorists, statisticians, and population experts armed with modern, scientific concepts—who recognized vast opportunities within

the National Socialist regime for career advancement and practical application of theoretical concepts developed across a variety of academic disciplines.

In reconstructing Auschwitz, *the* symbol for all Nazi crimes, the authors attempt to establish a central nexus between capitalism and science. According to this conceptualization, inherently negative capitalism interacted with morally neutral science to produce virile policies couched in absolutely neutral, scientific terms. This marriage between a virile ideology and an objectifying language produced a set of policies that moved inevitably, as it were, towards the destruction of European Jews, Slavs, and others. The ability of science to convert a virulent capitalist ideology into an objectifying language enabled an increasing radicalization of Nazi policies as the distance between theoretical science and applied policy diminished with the exigencies of an expanding war. Thus, the underlying pressures of capitalism, with its overemphasis on productivity, profitability and efficiency, provided the impetus and direction for National Socialism. Human populations were treated as mere factors of the economy, to be manipulated at will for the benefit of an ultimately perfectible economy.

Relying heavily on previously unpublished or underutilized documents, Aly and Heim argue that a group of scientists, employed particularly by Hermann Göring's *Vierjahresplanbehörde* but also by other important ministries, increased its own position within the Nazi decision-making process in conjunction with Germany's successful military expansion, for a time becoming *the* dominant shaper of Nazi policies. As long as Germany was confident in its unilateral ability to militarily and politically control all of the European continent, scientists could develop grand and visionary schemes for the restructuring of European economic and social structures, certain that these conceptual ideas would be transformed into reality by German hegemony over Europe. After the German annexation of Austria on March 13, 1938, a practical experiment with far-reaching consequences—termed *Modell Wien* by the authors—was undertaken at the behest of Hermann Göring. It initiated the process of eliminating Jews in systematic fashion first from the Austrian, and then after the November *Reichskristallnacht*, the German economy. Later this process was exported in slightly altered and increasingly radicalized form to occupied Holland, the annexed General gouvernement, and other Eastern and Southeastern European provinces controlled by Germany. *Modell Wien* aimed at a variety of goals simultaneously: in the short term to help prepare Germany economically for the impending war, and in the long term to help establish new social and economic structures along more rational and productive lines throughout Europe. Finally, according to the authors, *Modell Wien* provided the conceptual framework for

the systematic elimination of Jews altogether at Auschwitz and elsewhere. With Germany's stalled offensive at the Eastern Front in the winter of 1941-1942, however, this conglomerate of intellectuals lost much of its direct influence, except insofar as the concepts it developed continued to be applied.

Thus the "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem" was but a subset of these scientists' larger goal of reordering *all* of European society according to some artificially conceived "population optimum" and "maximum efficiency." The authors maintain that the German war plans against the Soviet Union—which included strategies of systematic starvation of millions of Soviet civilians (the Germans planned on twenty to thirty million such deaths, and even calculated the savings this would bring in terms of "unwasted" ammunition!)—were fundamentally similar to the systematic murder of millions of European Jews in extermination camps. The Nazi's Jewish policies were only the first of many attempts at manipulating the composition of Europe's population. The annihilation of the Jews only *appears* to have occupied a special place in Nazi policy because it had been achieved most completely by the conclusion of the war. In reality, the idea of restructuring the population of Europe had already been applied by 1939 in the *Aktion T₄* against handicapped and mentally ill patients, and it also dominated the plans for the invasion of the Soviet Union. The elimination of European Jews was undertaken earlier than other similar projects because of the relative ease of carrying out such a policy in a racially charged social environment in which the politically weak Jewish population, already a convenient scapegoat for all kinds of social evils, was highly vulnerable.

Jews, then, were annihilated as part of the imperative of eliminating those sectors of the community deemed *economically* unproductive. The systematic murder of millions of Jews was thus not due to racial hatred, but to an attempt to artificially create an economically efficient population structure. "Population" had become the most fungible *economic* factor guiding Nazi policies. The Holocaust that victimized millions of innocent Europeans was therefore but the logical culmination of a modern capitalist system unrestrained by external, moral forces. The Nazi-state and its political/racial ideology at best facilitated, but did not cause, this Holocaust by introducing a new moral regime. Racial argumentation used to define the legal and civic status of Jews served only to legitimize the bigger goals of economic rationalization. The cruel logic of modern capitalism, rather than the irrational hate of bigotry, determined that "excess" populations had to be eliminated altogether.

Aly's and Heim's argument, though repeated throughout the thick volume with the conviction of believers, is weak on a number of counts and fails to convince. Their study falls prey to a problematic conceptualization from the

very start: it sets up a stark but false dichotomy between fanatical, racist Nazi ideologues on the one hand, and objective, neutral scientists on the other. According to the authors, these scientists acted only on the basis of the results of disinterested scholarly investigations and certainly had no interest in a specific political ideology. Thus, Aly and Heim gloss over the fact that many of these “abstract” thinkers actually served in significant political positions, including commanders of ghettos and governors of provinces. This argument does not hold for a variety of other reasons. First, the theoretical model of science as a neutral entity, independent of socio-political context and ideology is questionable—and not only in this particular instance. Second, it should have been obvious to the authors that these specialists constituted a highly (self-)selective group: none of its members would have been able to achieve any position of importance within the tightly controlled Nazi-state *unless* they practiced a certain kind of science, predicated first and foremost on the officially accepted race-ideology. The very fact that these scientists achieved important positions indicates their amenability to party doctrine; scientists who expressed even the slightest reservations—not to speak of Jewish, gay, or communist scientists—were quickly purged. It is impossible and misleading to divorce these scientists from their environment. Third, science is not monolithic; it usually offers more than one way to solve a particular problem. However, Aly and Heim naively suggest a seemingly magical unity of these scientists across a variety of *competing* academic disciplines without contemplating the possibility that dissent, considered a political offense, was suppressed. Even so, some plans surely had to have been offered which were then rejected; that is, the *political* elite had to finally select one policy from among many. Indeed, the authors discuss competing plans for the Lodz-ghetto economy but then fail to explain how such a diversity of opinion was possible in such a remarkably united group. The notion of an independent cadre of scientists capable of introducing a completely new approach to the “Jewish problem” is thus problematic. Such a notion of scientific independence is particularly puzzling in light of the role of the sciences, especially physical anthropology, in legitimating racist ideologies.

Another problem stems from the authors’ reliance on materials almost exclusively Nazi and technocratic in nature. Aly and Heim repeat the language used by these specialists without qualification, failing to properly evaluate the interesting material they have uncovered. They simply take for granted the scientists’ language reducing the worth of human beings to their “productivity” or “unproductivity,” even though Aly and Heim themselves note the prevalent use of euphemisms among the various levels of the Nazi bureaucracy. The authors here fail to consider the social context of linguistic valuation, in which race,

ideology, power politics, and science coexist, variously in competition and cooperation with each others' authority. This interrelationship has to be acknowledged. Just because scientists and academics employed a peculiar, seemingly innocent jargon should not veil of what they actually spoke. A "translated," neutral terminology may extend the meaning of the original concept, enabling a more systematic approach of classifying, defining, and handling these concepts. Nevertheless, the original referent—racial ideology, in this particular case—remains firmly entrenched. In the Nazi state, the economic reconfiguration of society along "productive" and "unproductive" lines was inconceivable without the racial underpinnings of "superior" and "inferior" groups.

Aly and Heim thus fail to grasp the integral connection between passage of anti-Jewish legislation to help purify the Aryan race and policies justified according to economic productivity standards alone. Each policy re-enforces the racial notion of natural inferiority. If economic benefits do accrue for the non-Jewish population from specific policies, this does not challenge the fundamental purpose, the *racial* imperative, of eliminating the Jewish presence altogether. A race-based policy which also brings unambiguous short-term economic benefits to the non-Jewish population only *confirms* the race ideology on which it is based. Racial chauvinism includes within it the notion that the inferior group is inferior in every way, including economically. Stating the economic "unproductivity" of the Jews really refers to their racial inferiority. This is manifest particularly in light of the development of the Jews' status of "unproductivity" in German-occupied Europe. This status, and the poverty that came with it, was forcibly assigned through racial policies which deprived Jews of economic opportunities, and was not somehow a native character trait of the Jews. The economic terminology only made sense *after* the Jews had been artificially re-created along those lines.

The authors' failure to recognize the fundamental relationship between racial and economic motivations is clearly related to a teleology in the study apparent not only in the content but also in the language and style of the work. The authors read history backwards: they assume a continuity among a variety of capitalist/fascist/imperialist/colonialist regimes, one of which is the National Socialist, another of which is the Federal Republic. That this belief guides the authors' argument is borne out by the attempt to link these two German regimes through a series of highly suggestive "perpetrator-biographies" separated from the main text by boxed inserts. The emphasis on structural equivalencies between a variety of regimes lies at the base of the authors' decision to concentrate on a "planning intelligentsia" aware to a high degree of ultimate imperial-

ist ambitions. Politicians, acutely unaware of their own goals of bringing about a modern society, are apparently peripheral to the Nazi phenomenon and not worthy of study.

This teleology blinds the authors to readings of their evidence which contradict the kind of Marxist model of history to which they subscribe. This manifests itself in the interpretation of details. The authors reduce all phenomena associated with the Nazi state to economic imperatives though other motivations indubitably played a role in the (successful) implementation of policies: power politics, terror and fear, psychological or sociological reasons, religion. Documents are simply not as unambiguous as the authors claim. Racial ideology is frequently mixed with scientific language. To maintain their argument, Aly and Heim need to make special efforts to highlight those few documents which are purely technical in nature and contain no reference at all to anti-semitism or race. This amounts to negative evidence which, without more explicit proof, is simply not convincing.

Aly and Heim claim that many orders were purposely given orally or destroyed. However, this seems to contradict the basic premise of their work: that Nazis could murder without a guilty conscience because of the objectifying language of science which converted the "murder of human beings" into the "rationalizing of economic factors." If Nazi policies were so entangled within a scientific discourse, how did they recognize that this was *not* normative and had to be hidden? Rather, these scientists, many of whom were socialized during pre-Nazi Weimar years, fully recognized that they served a new ideology that their neutralizing language and euphemisms could *not* adequately hide, even to themselves, and that they were perpetrating morally charged acts in developing plans that called for the elimination of millions of people. This same characterization seems applicable to Aly and Heim themselves: though they use the historical apparatus, they seem to serve a particular political agenda, namely, to illustrate an "objectively" perceivable historical continuity between the fascist states of the Nazis and the Federal Republic. Finally, whether the authors intend this or not, by furnishing such a structural and "rational" explanation for the Holocaust they are doing much more than presenting an innocent new interpretation. Indeed, by historicizing murder within a certain essence of modernization, they seem to remove any particularity and thus any kind of individual culpability from the Holocaust. Both the human victims and the human perpetrators are conveniently forgotten as mere byproducts of larger forces.

Aly's and Heim's argument furthermore fails to provide any non-circumstantial evidence that directly links the scientists' plans with the actual decisions made at the political level, regarding either the military strategy in the

East or the decisions to implement *Aktion T₄* and the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question." Thus, whether these academics' theories were really transformed into reality remains unclear. It is just as likely that these scientists developed their conceptual models after the policies had already been implemented on the political level, or at least suggested as viable *political* options as a kind of public legitimation of the regime's policies. In fact, Aly and Heim ignore the political decision-making process entirely even though final decisions were certainly decreed by a *political* and not a technocratic elite. In their hurry to establish a new paradigm for the study of the Holocaust, Aly and Heim simply do not integrate the new information they have unearthed about this class of scientists with other central factors. None of the documents provide convincing evidence that economics was ever more than a tool of legitimization for policies implemented by the political elite, albeit with the expert advice of consultants and specialists. It remains unsubstantiated that these scientists had real influence on the decisions of the political elite, and, if indeed there was some influence, whether theoretical considerations routinely overrode ideological motivations.

Scholars have frequently noted that there was considerable infighting among the Nazi political elite; Aly and Heim do not pay this much heed. They feel justified in isolating Göring as the central organizing, though not political (he was second in-command of the Third Reich) figure for implementing policies along rational economic lines after the unruly mobs of the *Reichskristallnacht* of 9 November 1938 destroyed large amounts of property and wealth subject to state confiscation. Aly and Heim are correct in pointing out that at this juncture Göring declared the Jewish problem as "a comprehensively economic problem" and asked his staff at the *Vierjahresplanbehörde*, experts and academics in various fields, to coordinate policies to achieve Jewish exclusion from the German economy as part of their function to prepare Germany economically for the impending war. However, they downplay the role of other ministries and Hitler himself in this decision, and treat this "economic" classification as the only viable option put forward at this time. In fact, Jews were targeted in a variety of ways simultaneously, with racial laws in particular being continuously sharpened. Aly and Heim are certainly justified in suggesting that the Nazis tried to gain economic advantages for the Reich at the expense of the Jews. However, it was the supposed racial inferiority of the Jews that made such economic exploitation feasible in the first place, not the economic reasoning that justified racial discrimination. When Aly and Heim argue that the Jews were economically "unproductive" they are simply repeating Nazi racial slogans. Economic inferiority of the Jews was enforced by the Nazis to substantiate their more fundamental racial claims.

Aly's and Heim's attempt to tie together a number of seemingly discordant elements into a single explanatory framework is interesting, but it is executed with a striking naiveté. They begin with the solid insight that the confluence of the German expectation of complete victory in 1941 and the official decision to proceed with mass murder in the same year was not accidental. From this, however, they jump to the dubious conclusion that the *Aktion T₄* and the planned starvation of Soviets, as well as the Jewish exterminations, are not differentiable. They want to subsume each of these events into a coherent, rational framework (as if mass murder can ever be truly "coherent") even though one action is specifically combined with war aims (Soviets), while another targets one's own civilians not directly affected by war (*Aktion T₄*), and the third requires that massive energies be expended to organize the transportation from throughout Europe to specifically designated places for no other reason than murder (Jews).

The authors' insight that the elimination of the Jews from the Austrian economy shared certain conceptual and structural similarities with the physical elimination of the Jews in the crematoria of Auschwitz is suggestive but not fully thought out. Despite certain structural similarities that might be detected, specific connections still need to be shown and particular dissimilarities noted. Thus it required a specific decision to systematically kill Jews, even after many Jews had already died during the rounding-up processes and through the planned malnutrition in the ghettos. There exists a qualitative difference conceptually—regardless of the language in which it is couched, explained, or justified—between, to use Aly's and Heim's language, an economic measure which hopes to *reduce* costs by shortening rations and a measure which will *eliminate* this economic factor entirely through murder. Even the politicians at the Wannsee Conference knew that they had come upon a solution which was fundamentally new in its unambiguous finality: they proudly called it the *Final Solution*.

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NOTES

1. For a cogent analysis of the German historians' debate, see Peter Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate* (Boston, 1990), esp. the editor's introduction.