

## A new look at Nazi plunder

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### **Adam Tooze reviews Hitler's Beneficiaries: How The Nazis Bought The German People by Götz Aly tr by Jefferson Chase**

Sixty years on and Germany's struggle to come to terms with its Nazi past continues to provoke controversy. In recent years Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Willy Sebald and Joerg Friedrich's polemics against Allied carpet bombing and, most recently, the argument over how to tell the horrific stories of the millions of Germans expelled from Eastern Europe in 1945 have all aroused heated debate both in Germany and abroad.

The latest sensation is Götz Aly's *Hitler's Beneficiaries*, which on its publication in Germany in 2005 caused weeks of argument in the media.

Aly is the enfant terrible of modern German history. One of the most consistently original and provocative historians of the Nazi regime, he is an outlaw among Germany's academic fiefdoms, with a relentless passion for obscure hitherto unnoticed files and an astonishing eye for detail.

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All of these talents are amply on display in this book but so too is another feature of Aly's intellectual personality, namely his contorted, highly politicised approach to history.

Aly is an embittered survivor of the radical Left of the 1970s, whose vision of the world has not mellowed with age. He has a well-earned reputation as a relentless critic of capitalist economic logic and its capacity

for dehumanising violence. But he is no less sharp in his polemics against the welfare state and the dual temptations of lazy self-serving materialism and technocratic totalitarianism that lurk in that direction.

In Aly's jaundiced view, the Germans were not Hitler's willing executioners. In fact, they displayed little real enthusiasm for Nazi ideology. They were desperate, narrow-minded people driven to distraction by the economic turmoil of hyperinflation and depression.

What they wanted was security, prosperity and a lessening of the manifest inequalities that fostered so much resentment in Weimar Germany.

And that is precisely what Hitler's Nazi regime delivered: a form of German socialism prioritising full employment, low inflation, progressive income taxes, child benefits and generous pensions for soldiers' families.

But as always, Aly is not merely making a historical point. By showing that the German *Sozialstaat* was really a product of Hitler, not of Bismarck, Aly is poking his finger into the open wound that is the German welfare state of today. The small-minded culture of dependence and entitlement that is widely seen as bedeviling the Federal Republic originated, Aly argues, in the Third Reich.

And his polemic is relentless. The Nazi welfare state may have been redistributive, but the primary burden of paying for mass loyalty fell, according to Aly, not on wealthy Germans but on Nazism's victims - first on the Jewish minority in Germany and Austria and then on the entire population of occupied Europe.

Plunder and spoliation have of course been on the charge sheet against Nazi Germany ever since the Nuremberg Trials. However, Aly takes the argument further. It was not just the German state that benefited from the occupation of most of Europe, but the rank and file.

As Aly reveals, Hitler personally intervened to ensure that the German railway system provided the maximum possible baggage allowance to soldiers repatriating their plunder. Field post offices worked overtime to convey packages of butter and sausages, obtained God knows how, around the 1,000-year Reich.

On a more harrowing note, Aly shows for the first time how in Berlin and Vienna and then in Paris, the Hague, Bratislava, Bucharest, Sofia, Athens and Salonika the Jewish population of Europe was made to pay for its own extermination. Household possessions, gold, jewellery and financial assets were seized and sold off to the local gentile population with the proceeds flowing into the coffers of the Reich.

As late as July 1944, the Jewish populations of the holiday islands of Rhodes and Kos, two of the last groups to be deported to Auschwitz, were relieved of three plump sacks of jewellery, enough to sustain the German garrison for a few more violent months of occupation.

It is this kind of hard-won insight into the day-to-day workings of Nazi power that one expects from Aly. However, it is when he tries to pull the various strands of his argument together that he comes unstuck.

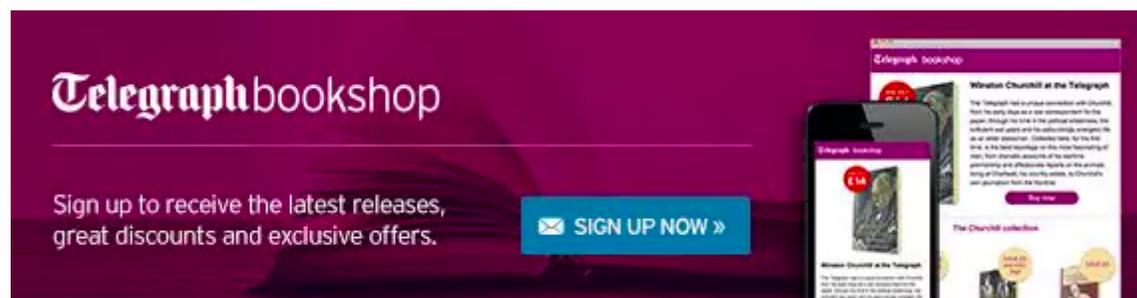
What Aly wants to show is that the mass of ordinary 'low and middle-income Germans' had, in fact, to bear only a small fraction, perhaps as little as 10 per cent, of the costs of Hitler's wars. By contrast, higher-income Germans sustained 20 per cent of the burden and 'foreigners, forced labourers and Jews were compelled to cover 70 per cent of the funds consumed every day by Germany during the war'.

If this were even approximately true it would require us to rethink the entire history of the regime. It would imply that the war required virtually no significant material sacrifice from the German population and it might make plausible Aly's vision of the Germans as politically disinterested profiteers.

But, as 18 months of sustained criticism in the German language media have revealed, Aly's calculation is profoundly flawed. In fact, at least two thirds of the burden of the war was born by the Germans themselves, much of it falling on the working class, whose standard of living was significantly lower than that of their counterparts in Britain.

Aly's account of the microeconomics of exploitation and plunder is fascinating in its own right. But it does not succeed in overthrowing the established picture of the Nazi regime as a highly effective mobilising dictatorship that was able to sustain its struggle to the bitter end because at least a large minority of the population was unshakeably committed to the cause.

If that kind of militarist fanaticism has been thoroughly exorcised from contemporary Germany, in favour of a more mundane preoccupation with working-time directives, pension contributions and plum spots on the sun-loungers, then there is surely little to regret in that.

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