

Is History “Bunk”? “Big Business and Hitler”

Epilogue of Jacques R. Pauwels, ‘Big Business and Hitler’, forthcoming, James Lorimer, Toronto, fall 2017

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“History is bunk” is what Henry Ford proclaimed one day. What he meant by that is that he did not bother to read history books, and that he found studying and writing history a waste of time. And he undoubtedly also felt that history was dangerous because it may enable the public to find out how huge fortunes, like his own, are amassed: all too often by trickery, fraud, crime and war. It is for the same reason that Ford arranged for masses of his firm’s documents to be shredded, so that they disappeared into the infamous “memory hole” mentioned by Orwell in 1984.

Ford would certainly not have liked the type of history featured in this book. And one may assume that the great majority of owners, shareholders and managers of American, German and other corporations and banks whose role was critically examined here would not be fond of this type of history. That is why they do not encourage people to study history or even to spend much time reading history books — and why they would certainly not want people to read critical books like this one, studies in which the links between big business and fascism are brought to light. At the same time, they do their best to recommend other books to the reading public, books in which the rise of Hitler and the function of fascism are explained in an entirely different fashion, in which the collaboration of German and American corporations and banks with the Nazis is not mentioned at all or, if this happens to be impossible, is interpreted benevolently and ultimately whitewashed. How do they manage to do this?

In the Western world, there is freedom of speech, and everybody is entitled to speak her or his mind. However, in this respect some people are freer than others; these are those who have enough money to arrange for their views to be written down (by themselves or by others), published as articles and books, and widely diffused. (In return for payment, Facebook can likewise arrange for your views to reach a wide audience.) Most of us do not have the kind of money needed to do this, but the ladies and gentlemen of big business certainly do. The rich speak with a louder voice. As the saying goes: “Money talks.” Industrialists and bankers have the money needed to cause books to be written on themes such as the life of the enterprise’s founder, the growth of the company, and its role during the war. This kind of work is performed by carefully selected authors, on whose understanding and sympathy the corporations and banks can count; and these authors know what is expected of them in return for a generous honorarium.

In such books, potentially disagreeable topics are therefore not normally raised; such opuses may be qualified as “antiseptic.” In the official — or “authorized” — histories of US

corporations, for example, there is hardly ever any talk at all about the role of their subsidiaries in Germany in the 1930s and during the war. When such themes come to the attention of the public in one way or another — for example, because the lawsuits brought in the 1990s against some American corporations by former slave labourers — specialized historians are hired to function as advocates. They explain that the German branch plants of the firms involved had been forced by the Nazis to manufacture war materiel and to employ slaves, that by the time of Pearl Harbor, at the latest, the head offices in the United States had lost all control over their subsidiaries and had no clue what was going on there.

As an example, one can cite the antiseptic studies produced by Simon Reich and Henry Ashby Turner on behalf of Ford and General Motors, respectively. A similar task has been accomplished in Germany by other well-paid court historians of the corporations and banks, on behalf of firms such as Volkswagen, Krupp, Allianz, Daimler-Benz, Deutsche Bank, Degussa, Dresdner Bank, Flick and Bertelsmann. An American historian has written that in most cases these kinds of studies amount to a mere “whitewash.”

It is not a coincidence that such authors find it easy to have their work adopted by a big and prestigious publishing house. The overwhelming majority of American and German publishers are gigantic enterprises and are therefore bona fide members of big business, or are owned by holdings of which corporations and banks own most shares. The manuscripts of critical studies — critical, that is, of big business — are virtually always turned down by these publishers. Conversely, books in which delicate topics, such as corporate collusion with fascists, are carefully avoided or benevolently explained, do find favour with big publishers and are prominently displayed for weeks on end in the windows of the big bookshops that often are subsidiaries or associates of big publishers and/or their corporate owners. Critical studies are generally hard, if not impossible, to find in the big bookstores.

“Never heard of this book,” says the friendly clerk, kindly adding to this intrinsically negative comment that “it can be ordered for you.” In the United States, it often happens that publishers must pay the big bookstores to have their books displayed prominently, in the window or on the table featuring new publications. The major publishing houses linked to big business, which publish uncritical works by the tens of thousands, have enough money to make these payments; small publishers, on the other hand, that publish critical studies in limited runs, cannot afford to pay for this privilege.



Rupert Murdoch (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

It is also hardly coincidental that antiseptic studies such as those of Simon Reich and Henry Ashby Turner attract the attention of the media and are generally presented and discussed most favourably in reviews published in newspapers and magazines. Not only in the United States, but also in Germany and virtually everywhere else in the Western world, the bulk of these periodicals are owned by some corporation or some media mogul like Rupert Murdoch; and when they are not, they are certainly financially dependent on revenues generated by advertising, which flow mostly from large enterprises such as automobile manufacturers and Coca-Cola. A periodical may keep, but also lose, the business of these advertisers on account of the books it chooses to review and how they are evaluated. Is it surprising that antiseptic opuses benefit from favourable reviews and are often praised to the sky, while critical studies tend to be mercilessly cut down (although, in keeping with the adage that negative publicity is better than no publicity at all, they are mostly simply ignored)? Our media are supposedly independent, and they are undoubtedly totally independent from the general public, but they are unquestionably very much dependent on big business, and this dependence jeopardizes their objectivity.

Much the same can be said about television. The majority of stations are owned by corporations, or depend on the advertising largesse, and therefore goodwill, of corporations for their survival. Stepping on corporate toes is therefore strictly verboten. In the war documentaries that are frequently aired on TV, the role of US firms as suppliers of weaponry to Nazi Germany is never mentioned. Authors of critical studies, in which such unpleasant historical realities are brought up, never make an appearance on the traditionally small, but now increasingly large, screen. In contrast, authors of antiseptic studies are implored to come to the studio to present their work to the viewers, to join panels of mostly like-minded experts in discussions of historical problems, and thus to acquire fame and achieve best-seller status. Moreover, only corporations (and some rich individuals) can afford the luxury of paying for expensive TV commercials. They frequently exploit this advantage to offer the spectators some historical knowledge, carefully selected and “massaged” historical knowledge, naturally. In 2004, for example, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Allied landings in Normandy — generally, though wrongly, depicted as the great turning point of the Second World War — American TV spectators were bombarded with commercials paid by General Motors, in which attention was drawn to the firm’s role as purveyor of war materiel to the Allies. That General Motors simultaneously supplied the Nazis with all sorts of equipment was of course not mentioned at all. In the United States it is thus generally known that General Motors functioned as an “arsenal of democracy,” while virtually no one is aware that the corporation also functioned as an “arsenal of Nazi dictatorship.” Indeed, money talks.

In the academic world, things are no different. Especially in the United States, but also elsewhere, universities have become increasingly financially dependent on the largesse of corporations, on the financial patronage of big business. In many prestigious American institutions of higher learning, facilities such as libraries and football stadiums are financed entirely or partly by corporations, and so are professorships, including prestigious history chairs. Can it be expected that such universities could ever install personalities into those chairs who are not known to be friendly, or at least understanding, with regard to big business? Can it be expected that the learned academics who are privileged to occupy these chairs might one day squeeze out of their pens studies that are genuinely critical with respect to the role of US (or German) big business in the Third Reich? From other history professors, whose position is not directly financed by some corporation, it is likewise more realistic to expect self-censorship than genuine objectivity, since the university in its

entirety is all too often financially dependent on the goodwill of one or more big enterprises. As an example, one may cite the case of a famous American specialist in the history of the Third Reich who, some years ago, published a book of more than one thousand pages on the Second World War without mentioning General Motors and Opel, or Ford and its Ford-Werke, even once. This is perfectly understandable if one realizes that this professor enjoyed a fine career at a major university in Michigan, where the financial fortunes of such institutions have traditionally depended at least partly on the largesse of the big automobile manufacturers based in Detroit, Dearborn and other cities of that state. Money talks, but it also imposes silence.

There is much truth in Karl Marx's famous aphorism that capitalists, the owners of the means of economic production, also control the means of intellectual production. Today's owners and managers of the American and international corporations, successors to those who collaborated with Nazi Germany, do indeed dispose of intellectual means at all levels — from simple newspaper articles, through popular television documentaries, to learned studies — that allow them to dissimulate or to rationalize this collaboration and to keep the public from paying much attention, or attaching much importance, to the relatively few historians who critically investigate this corporate collaboration.



Adolf Hitler

Each individual enterprise — in the United States, in Germany and elsewhere — has of course done everything in its power to obfuscate its very own collusion with the Nazi regime. But big business has also collectively sought to hide the fact that, in all Western countries, corporations and banks supported fascist movements, and that in Germany and elsewhere they helped to bring fascist dictators to power, collaborated closely with the Nazis and other fascist regimes, and profited handsomely from the armament programs, crimes and wars of these regimes — and primarily the Hitler regime. It is in the interest of big business to obfuscate the true nature of Nazism and the other forms of fascism, to prevent the public from realizing that fascism was a manifestation of capitalism, quite capable of making a comeback some day. In this respect, too, it proved useful to construct antiseptic history in order to pre-empt critical history.

Here is a short, and far from complete, overview of the main types of antiseptic history of Nazism.

First, there is what has been called the “gangster theory” of Nazism and of fascism in general. According to this “theory,” all fascists, but above all Hitler, were gangsters of a sort, that is, detestable personalities who suddenly descended, from a socioeconomic

vacuum, onto the stage of history in order to tragically but mysteriously grab power in Germany, gratuitously commit all sorts of terrible crimes, and unleash a world war so they could rule the entire world. They represented “evil.” Fortunately, they were opposed, and finally defeated, by the unified forces of “good” led by — who else? — Uncle Sam. In other words: Nazism was the handiwork of arch-evil individuals, specifically Hitler, a modern-day Attila the Hun, assisted by a coterie of other equally villainous individuals, such as Goebbels, Göring, Himmler and the rest. In this scenario, clearly, all other Germans stand innocent — including the powerful industrialists and bankers who, in reality, contributed to bringing Hitler to power.

The book that first described things in this fashion and which, for this reason, turned out to be hugely successful, was the Hitler biography written by Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, first published in London in 1952. This opus inspired countless other “psycho-biographies” and “psycho-historical” studies of the other presumably psychotic, paranoid and otherwise deranged personalities who allegedly fathered fascism. According to this historiographic approach, fascism had absolutely nothing to do with social problems and economic systems. The 1970s were the golden age of the psycho-history of Nazism and fascism. However, to the question of how it had been possible, in a country as highly civilized as Germany, for a psychopathic monster such as Hitler to come to power, this type of historiography was never able to produce an answer.



Portrait photo of Georg Ludwig von Trapp in his naval uniform (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Another genre of history had the advantage that it did provide a clear answer to this question, an answer that violated the historical truth but was music to the ears of the industrialists and bankers who were keen to obfuscate their — or their predecessors’ — connections with Hitler and the other fascists: “little” or “ordinary” Germans had brought Hitler — himself a “little” German and a “socialist,” to boot — to power by massively joining his movement and voting for him. All the misery brought on by Nazism was thus the fault of the people itself, a German people that had viewed Hitler as a natural leader, of the “socialism” in which ordinary Germans had stupidly believed, and even of democracy, because it was allegedly via universal suffrage (and proportional representation) that Hitler had come to power. This historically very incorrect scenario was — and continues to be — actively promoted because it conveniently implies that Germany’s elite, the industrialists and bankers as well as aristocratic landowners and others, did not join Hitler’s party, at least not in significant numbers, and did not vote for it. Not only articles, books and TV programs have reflected this view, but even Hollywood productions such as the universally praised and hugely successful 1960s blockbuster *The Sound of Music* have done so. In this film, the male hero, Baron von Trapp, and his aristocratic friends do not hide their disdain for the vulgar Nazis; conversely, Nazism is shown to appeal to their plebeian compatriots in an Austria that has just been annexed by Nazi Germany. As we have seen, the historical reality was diametrically opposed to this script.

Even today, many, if not most, residents of the United States and elsewhere in the Western world believe that Hitler was elected by a majority of the German people. A fairly recent

version of this false view of Nazism is that of the German journalist Götz Aly who, in a book entitled 'Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus' (Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2007), claims that the Third Reich truly coddled the "little" Germans. It is hardly surprising that Aly's book received a lot of attention and praise in the German media — and above all in the flagship periodical of Germany's big business, the magazine Der Spiegel. (Neither is it surprising that its English edition appeared soon after in New York.)

The other side of the coin of the theory that Germany's ordinary people brought Hitler to power, and profited from his policies, is the notion that Germany's patricians, including industrialist and bankers, did not help Hitler to come to power, did not collaborate with his regime or did so only when coerced, did not profit from whatever collaboration they were forced into, and opposed Hitler's war and his crimes. Books, documentaries and films that present things in this light count on the benevolent attention of the media, magazines and television stations.

Henry Ashby Turner was offered a chair at Harvard and was widely hailed as the supreme authority in the field of industry and fascism because had managed, despite massive amounts of evidence to the contrary, to find Germany's capitalists not guilty of the charge that they had supported Hitler and helped him to come to power. And the movie Schindler's List was universally praised to the sky because it suggested that the collaboration of a German industrialist with the SS was an exceptional phenomenon — which it was not — and that it yielded positive results in the form of hundreds of saved lives — while in reality the collaboration of German industrialists with the Nazis cost the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions. A more recent Hollywood production, Valkyrie, was also predestined to achieve great success, because the film suggested that high-ranking Wehrmacht officers — like industrialists and bankers, pillars of the German establishment — were opposed to Hitler. In reality, these men only turned against Hitler when, after the defeat at Stalingrad, it was suddenly obvious that he might drag them with him into his ruin. By eliminating Hitler, they actually hoped to save some of the gains Hitler had pocketed on behalf of Germany, preferably in the form of territory in Eastern Europe, and possibly in some sort of anti-Soviet military alliance with the Western Allies.

Yet another historical approach that can count on a benevolent reception from the media is the theory that all Germans enthusiastically supported Hitler during his rise to power, in his crimes, and in his war, simply because they were all incurable anti-Semites like Hitler himself. This theory, proposed in 1996 by Daniel Goldhagen in a book entitled Hitler's Willing Executioners, was not only intrinsically racist, but also hopelessly untenable. It was racist, first of all, because, as David North has emphasized in an excellent review of this book, Goldhagen "repl[ies] to the Nazi specter of *der ewige Jude*, the eternal Jew, as the relentless enemy of the German people [with] the specter of *der ewige Deutsche*, the eternal German, the relentless and unchanging enemy of the Jewish people." It is very well known that countless Germans, first of all the social democrats and the communists, abhorred and fought Nazism from the start. And we know that even numerous Germans who did support Hitler, for example Schacht, were not anti-Semites. The authoritative historian of the Holocaust, Raul Hilberg, has come to the conclusion that Goldhagen is "totally wrong about everything, totally wrong, exceptionally wrong." However, the advantage of Goldhagen's theory, at least from the viewpoint of big business, not only German but also American big business, is that it diverts attention from the role of Germany's industrialists and bankers in Hitler's ascent, from their collaboration with his regime, and from their

contributions to his war and his crimes. Indeed, if all Germans were guilty, no specific group — or no specific class — of Germans, was guiltier than another, and industrialists and bankers were therefore no more guilty than Bavarian farmers or Baltic fishermen. Thus, we can explain the success of Goldhagen's book, which is devoid of any real merits and which, according to some authoritative academics, should not even been approved as a doctoral dissertation, which is what it was in its embryonic stage. It also explains why Goldhagen was even called upon by Harvard University to dispense his erroneous views of Nazism there as history professor.

Henry Ford may not have been entirely wrong when he proclaimed history to be "bunk." The kind of history that we have just described, the type of history that covers up the historical truth about fascism in general and Nazism in particular, the kind of history that finds favour with the media because it finds favour with big business, the kind of history that even Henry Ford would have liked because it does say a word about his anti-Semitism and his cordial and profitable collaboration with Nazi Germany, that kind of history is indeed nothing other than "bunk."

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