

From Eichmann to bin Laden, the more things change, the more they stay the same



by Lev Tsitrin

To mark the Holocaust memorial day, the *New York Times* [published a "guest essay"](#) by the son of a videographer who was blacklisted in America for being a socialist and who in 1961 recorded, for live broadcast, the trial of Adolf Eichmann.

What fascinated me in what I thought would be a predictably gruesome Holocaust story was a totally unexpected passage: "my father was plagued by the question of how fascism had risen in the first place, how educated and progressive working classes had left their unions to fall into the lock step of a militarized, authoritarian regime. It was a question that the West all but ignored. With the end of World War II, the prospect of justice for war criminals quickly dissolved, replaced by the need to build the postwar alliance against

Communism. Leaders and thinkers were occupied with rearming for a nuclear future and rooting out leftists, the trend that had made my father unemployable.”

This struck me because the same need to act according to politics of the moment, rather than engage in analysis of the root causes of a problem was also manifest in the wake of another man-made tragedy, the attack of 9/11. In his address to the nation, President Bush blamed a metaphysical force of “evil” for what happened – and left it at that. The press and the academe followed suit, refusing to dig any deeper.

Reading the essay left me feeling that 2023 in America is just like 1961 in Israel. In 1961, “He thought that he might use the trial to gather social scientists for a discussion of how fascism took root. During preproduction for the broadcast, he began to cast around for an Israeli institution that could host it. He said he asked a former classmate who was editor of a major Israeli newspaper, but they were not interested. Another outlet, the Israeli equivalent of the BBC, said they were not the place for it. A prestigious university couldn’t see the relevance. As the trial began and his production ramped up, he had to let the idea drop.”

(To be perfectly honest, the explanation he offered struck me as somewhat conspiratorial. “Though he did not know it at the time, these institutions showed no interest in the sources of fascism because the trial was not a trial of fascism. Instead, it was an opportunity for Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Agency to rebrand the Zionist movement. ... It helped point to Israel as the safe haven for the persecuted, with “never again!” as their rallying cry.” Much more likely, there was a feeling that, Germany agreeing to pay reparations that helped Israel industrialize and get out of its economic malaise, there was no need to “rock the boat” by revisiting systemic flaws in human nature – a discussion that could easily devolve into seeking flaws of German nature – which for great many reasons (one of which being that there was nothing peculiarly German

about Nazism – Stalin’s Communism was hardly any better) was not a right path to pursue. Dealing with individual perpetrators was a perfectly sufficient remedy – all the more that without the individual perpetrators there would not have been the Holocaust. Of course, to a socialist the argument that human malice was a sufficient explanation for Nazism and the Holocaust couldn’t make any sense; in any good Marxist’s mind, humanity is propelled by social laws that are as inexorable as the laws of nature, and human history cannot be seen as the mere sum of personal ambitions and actions of those in power (or, for that matter, of those out of it who feel that they’ve been cheated by those in it). Hence, the essay regretfully stated, “Without meaning to, my father helped to reinforce the emotional aspect of the trial and in so doing weaken its political implications. ... His brilliant coverage individualized Eichmann and steered viewers away from a more historical view. The work of studying fascism could not compete with the satisfaction of blaming a villain and imagining that the problems could be solved with his sentencing.”)

Though I am no socialist (I am sure that no ex-Soviet is) and do not subscribe to Marx’s “historical forces” theory, I have to admit that the very same can be said of the present-day superficiality of our treatment of Islamist terrorism – which is not even a thing of the past, and for that reason alone cannot be treated as purely academic. One would think that, Islamist terrorism being a clear and present danger, looking for its causes should occupy the thought of politicians, of the press, of academics, of the think tanks and NGOs, helping to dislodge regimes like those of Afghan Taliban or of Iranian ayatollahs, and rooting out the seemingly countless non-state terror groups like Al Qaeda, ISIS, al Shebab and all too many others. Yet, they are not analyzing the root causes of Islamist terror, which are no more on the agenda of the press, academe, and politicians in 2023 than were the origins of Nazism in 1961 – with the difference that, Nazism having been

thoroughly defeated by then, the subject was indeed purely academic, but it is not so with today's Islamism.

I tried to give my answer. The root cause of Islamist terrorism is that Islamists illegitimately treat Islam as truth, instead of treating it as a mere hypothesis (and one of many, for that matter). Islamists are dead-sure and cock-sure that God talked to Mohammed – because Mohammed said that God talked to him. Such reasoning is plainly wrong because any two-step communication between three parties is inherently unreliable, and no one can possibly know whether Mohammed was speaking truth or not. The end result of Islamists' illegitimate self-assurance is that, religiously speaking, Islamism is idol-worship, the idol being worshiped by an Islamist is his own self's non-existent ability to know whether Koran is God's word. Islamism causes idolatrous self-delusion, which in turn causes terrorism – which happens when the ilk of bin Laden and Mohammed Atta conclude that by ramming plains full of people into tall buildings full of people they fulfill God's will. Simply put, Islamist terrorism results from idolatrous self-deception. That is all there is to it.

I found no takers for this view, however. Just as in 1961, the press does not want to know, the academe does not want to know, the politicians do not want to know. I can only guess that, as it was in 1961, their reasons are political (and therefore, “politically correct”) – “don't rock the boat”!

I fully understand the frustration of the videographer who tried to turn the Eichmann trial into the trial of Nazism – because I am just as frustrated that I cannot turn examination of Islamist terrorism into a public examination of Islamism. As everyone knows, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Politics is just too strong a force for sanity to break through.

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Its Rationale And Folly"