



The Germans: Absent Nationality and the Holocaust (Heritage, Society and National Identity in the European Union)

Yehuda Cohen

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President of Israel Shimon Peres, in a speech to the German Bundestag on 27 January 2010, convened to mark Holocaust Day, voiced an often-repeated enigma that continues to trouble humanity over a half a century after the Holocaust: “The question still remains today why did the Nazis see in the existence of Jews a great and immediate danger? What induced them to invest in the killing machine such extensive resources? What motivated the Nazis to continue operating with such determination to the very end, even though their defeat had already appeared on the horizon? . . . The Nazi rabid hatred cannot be solely defined as ‘anti-Semitic’ . . . It does not fully explain the burning, murderous, beastly drive that motivated the Nazi regime, and their obsessive resolve to annihilate the Jews.” A possible answer to this enigma is provided by Yehuda Cohen. Why were the Germans of all people the perpetrators of the Holocaust? This examination of in-group identity issues and the essence and unique development of Germans’ national identity has direct relevance for those who seek an answer to this question. The answer lies in a ‘triangle’ of the fateful encounter of Germans and their problematic historical development, Nazi race theory, and the success of German Jewry. The author focuses on weaknesses in German identity which led to the attraction of a blood-based race theory as a national ethos – a narrative of German racial superiority which was invalidated by the very presence and prominence of Jews in German culture and society. Eliminating this ‘affront’ was an existential issue for Germans that impelled a Judenrein Europe – whether by expulsion or extermination. Such a linkage has been overlooked because scholars have concentrated on the Holocaust as a Jewish experience, with anti-Semitism being deemed primarily responsible. But as this new interpretation of the historical circumstances forcefully indicates, it was the German national experience that was the prime mover in the Holocaust enterprise. . . . In elucidating fundamental differences between anti-Semitism and race-theory, ethnicity and nationhood, and Nazi race theory and other manifestations of European racism, Yehuda Cohen brings to the surface underlying reasons for the phenomenal attraction of Germans to race theory. Covering new ground, comparison of the pattern of German development with the path taken by other nationalities reveals German-specific motifs that weakened German national development – first and foremost the lack of an ancient national all-German heritage. This and other under-researched facets of the German experience prevented German-speaking people from forming a shared national identity. With the exception of the Nazi period, Germans have never been a nation, only an ethnicity. Only a German (Nazi) race theory provided Germans with an assumed history and vision of Oneness around which an Aryan national ethos very briefly coalesced into a genuine shared national identity. . . . In conclusion, the author sets out how the European Union’s vision of an overarching ‘European nationality’ provides a constructive solution for Germans’ identity conflicts: it is a framework that also, ironically, supports an innate German drive to dominate the European sphere, albeit now through economic clout – a dominance never achieved by Bismarck or Hitler.

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