

## *Utopia or Auschwitz* by Hans Kundnani

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Kundnani's work offers a comprehensive review of the multifaceted relationship between Germany's student movement and the historical experience of the Holocaust. Each chapter of *Utopia or Auschwitz* outlines a specific aspect of this relationship, from the pre-student movement era to major political decisions made by the government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in the late 1990s, as well as covering developments thereafter. It is an ambitious project that engages with a topic that will be debated, to use the author's words, 'in all sorts of paradoxical ways' in the near future.

The fundamental premise of the work is that, despite its anti-fascist rhetoric, Germany's student movement paved the way for nationalist and anti-Semitic currents. To understand this process and the complex overlapping of the subjects, Kundnani turns first to the reductionist reception of the Frankfurt School (p.25-28) by student activists. As he argues, the theoretical frameworks that the sociologists Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas provided were exploited to justify an increasingly radical political practice that none of these theorists supported (p.58). Here, Kundnani scrutinises the process of severance which resulted in the student movement's theoretical renunciation of its previous pronounced support of Israel

and describes clearly how many left-wing activists gradually started to equate fascism with liberal democracy.

The core chapters concentrating on the developments in the 1970s and 1980s emphasise the omnipresent influence of the Holocaust experience on the post-war generation. Kundnani plausibly emphasises the impact of *Judenknax* (the idea that the political consciousness of Germans is to an irrational extent influenced by the experience of the Holocaust) on many leftists that further radicalised their position towards what they considered to be Israel's imperialism and aimed to ultimately break with Germany's history. This argument has been further developed by Jens Benicke (2010). Thus, the theoretical links between the concepts of the 'urban guerrilla' and what ended in the kidnapping and hijacking incidents of 1977 known as the 'German Autumn' are well-documented in this book.

Having discussed the major developments of the 'red decade' between 1967 and 1977, Kundnani proceeds to investigate the consequences of this Brechtian *Lehrstück* (i.e. a learning play to agitate for the transition to a socialist society, p.133) by focussing on the individual developments of two protagonists, namely Joschka Fischer and Horst Mahler. Both were prominent figures during the 'red decade' but developed in different directions. Fischer's political career in the Green party is primarily described as an outcome of the 'shock of Entebbe' (the freeing of hostages at Entebbe Airport in the course of which Palestine activists killed Israeli citizens, p.226) that he suffered in 1976 and the subsequent insight that any revolutionary struggle would lead to a political cul-de-sac. The question of national identity was back on Fischer's agenda and only a few years later his

idea of resistance had changed: 'it had once meant overthrowing the West German state; now it meant defending it' (p.198). Kundnani argues that this resulted in Fischer becoming a 'thoroughgoing constitutional patriot' (p.188) who accepted the idea of *Westanbindung* (i.e. integration into the US-led political, economic and military system) as a guarantee that the Federal Republic had broken with the chauvinist tradition of the German past. Additionally, the influence of Habermas' philosophy on Fischer's development is thoroughly analysed.

To further outline the ambivalent outcome of the 1968 generation, the author uses the development of Horst Mahler as a mirror image to Joschka Fischer. The idea is stressed that Mahler's neo-Nazi ideology had antecedents in the student movement, which is described as latently anti-Semitic. In opposition to Fischer, Mahler is portrayed as being in theoretical resistance to Habermas' body of theory, whom he saw as the 'key architect of Germany's ongoing identity crisis' (p.225). By analysing the opposite extremes of the spectrum of political positions taken by former student activists the author emphasises the complex theoretical and practical output of the anti-authoritarian movement. In fact, the argument that both Fischer and Mahler, albeit in different ways, had betrayed the ideas of 1968 is convincing. Above all, the chapters 'Power' and 'A War Against the Past' set the work apart from existing literature.

Overall, the arguments presented in this book are coherent, if a little uncritical in places. For example, even though Kundnani stresses the ambivalent relationship of the 1968 generation with the Nazi heritage, he does not adequately reflect on the historical forms of appearance of this relationship by challenging the sources he refers

to. This, among other things, results in the tendency to equate legitimate criticism that protagonists of the student movement articulated regarding Israel's policy in the aftermath of the Six Day War in 1967 as 'anti-Semitic' or 'anti-Zionist' (p.91-94). Here a clear delineation of qualified criticism and practised anti-Semitism of the student movement would have been beneficial. In addition, the importance Kundnani gives to the experience of the Holocaust for the formation of a German identity – especially among former student activists – is, in places, exaggerated. In my opinion, this reductionism neglects other facets that were arguably more important to the majority of student activists, e.g. the question of justice, critique of capitalistic society. Furthermore, I was not convinced by Kundnani's idea that the nationalist current of the student movement represented by Rudi Dutschke found its way through the peace movement into the politics of Chancellor Schröder, i.e. his decision not to enter the Iraq war. The same can be said about the thought that Mahler's rhetoric was merely 'a desire for reconciliation with his parents' (p.226). His central conclusion that 'the 1968 generation both intensified Germany's engagement with the Nazi past and drew a line under it' (p.308) is nonetheless persuasive whilst encouraging further necessary discussions.

In summary, the detailed account of the work and the author's engaging style offer thought-provoking impulses which will reach a wide range of English-speaking readers with an interest in modern German history and the long-lasting influence of the Holocaust on political thought and activism in Germany. The author's journalist background and its accompanying clear language and extensive interview sources will be appreciated by a general

readership; however, the book will also be of importance to academic readers.

### **Bibliography**

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