

No, the Nazis Were Not Socialists

BY SCOTT SEHON

The idea that the Nazis were socialists is transparently absurd. Unfortunately, it's also an idea that prominent figures on the Right like Sen. Rand Paul have taken up. So let's all say it together now: no, the Nazis were not socialists. **They were, in fact, committed anti-socialists.**

Nazi flags in Hitler's Germany. (Wikimedia Commons)



Our new issue, “After Bernie,” is out now. Our questions are simple: what did Bernie accomplish, why did he fail, what is his legacy, and how should we continue the struggle for democratic socialism?

“As an online discussion grows longer,” states Godwin’s Law, “the probability of a comparison

involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one.” When it comes to attacking democratic socialists, you might hope that this tactic would be limited to shouting matches on Twitter.

But no. Senator Rand Paul (R-KY), in his 2019 book *The Case Against Socialism*, declares, “Hitler was a Socialist.”

It’s tempting to just roll your eyes and move on. But the idea that Nazis were socialists infects the thoughts of many otherwise reasonable people, so it is good to know exactly how to respond. The short version: no, Nazis were not socialists.

Ignorance or Mendacity?

Senator Paul begins by ridiculing the Left for denying that the Nazis were socialists: “So, despite the Nazis literally having ‘socialist’ in their name —

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the National Socialist German Workers' Party — the left has made a concerted effort to label Nazis as 'far-right-wingers.'"

Paul's argument here goes from the undeniable premise that the Nazis had "socialist" as part of their name to the conclusion that the Nazis were, in fact, socialists. For that inference to work, Paul needs an intermediate premise like the following: *If an organization has an adjective in their name, then the organization is correctly described by that adjective.*

But if Senator Paul really believed this, then he would be forced to conclude that communist East Germany and present-day North Korea count as democracies, for the *German Democratic Republic* and the *Democratic People's Republic of North Korea* both have the adjective "Democratic" as part of their name. I don't think he believes this.

Senator Paul then points to three other pieces of evidence. First, Paul quotes the twenty-five-point plan the fledgling Nazi Party produced in 1920. He starts with this point: "We demand the nationalisation of all (previous) associated industries (trusts). (*The essence of socialism — state ownership of the means of production.*)"

The italicized words after that point are Paul's own words that he added as commentary, suggesting that the Nazis were advocating expansive state ownership of the means of production. But a more direct translation of the original German would be, "We demand the nationalization of all previously socialized (trust) companies."

So, rather than the nationalization of all companies, the document only talks about certain sorts of trusts, without being very explicit concerning the nature or extent of these entities. It is hard to say exactly what the Nazis had in mind here, but it was not a call for extensive state ownership of the means of production.

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The last item quoted by Paul is number seventeen of the twenty-five points, and it *seems* to be the most explicitly socialist: “We demand a land reform suitable to our needs, provision of a law for the free expropriation of land for the purposes of public utility, abolition of taxes on land and prevention of all speculation in land.”

However, in a document signed by Hitler himself, the Nazis explicitly added an explanatory point in 1930. Still well before they achieved power, this disclaimer states the core of the Nazi position (emphasis in original; the translation is mine):

In the face of dishonest interpretations of Point 17 by opponents of the party, the following statement is necessary: Since the NSDAP **stands on the basis of private property**, it is self-evident that the phrase “free expropriation” only refers to the creation of legal possibility of expropriating, when necessary, land that has been acquired in **unjust** ways or is not being administered in accord with the interests of the common good. Accordingly, this is primarily directed against Jewish property speculation companies.

When the Nazis talked about expropriation, they meant taking property belonging *to Jews*; they were quite in favor of private property for others.

Quite possibly, Senator Paul was simply ignorant of this crucial addendum to the text. Or perhaps he did know of it, knew it undermined his basic argument, but just chose not to mention it.

Senator Paul’s second piece of evidence appears to originate from a meme that was passed around conservative circles a few years ago featuring a picture of Hitler with an alleged quotation beginning with “We are socialists...” A snopes.com fact check on the meme quickly deemed it to

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be false, in part on the grounds that the quote was not from Hitler at all, but from Gregor Strasser.

Paul understands this much, but he still uses the same text from the meme and says: “Likewise, the Nazi Gregory Strasser spoke of his fellow Nazis thus: ‘We are socialists. We are enemies, mortal enemies, of the present capitalist economic system with its exploitation of the economically weak, with its injustice in wages, with its immoral evaluation of individuals according to wealth and money instead of responsibility and achievement, and we are determined under all circumstances to abolish this system!’”

But as the snopes.com post further notes, Gregor Strasser is a peculiar Nazi to quote on this or any point.

Strasser was indeed a Nazi, with thoroughly reprehensible nationalistic and anti-semitic views that he mixed with some traditionally left-leaning economic ideas. And he was a high-ranking one, running both the party’s propaganda department and its day-to-day operations for a time.

But whatever left-leaning ideas he had were, by the late 1920s, thoroughly rejected by Hitler. Strasser resigned from any position of authority within the party by the end of 1932, before the Nazis came to power in 1933, and he was literally murdered by the Nazis in the “Night of the Long Knives” in early 1934, when Hitler had hundreds of political opponents extrajudicially executed – including, crucially, Strasser’s entire wing of the party.

If the best Senator Paul can do to represent the Nazis as socialist is to quote a Nazi whose views got him and others like him kicked out of the party and murdered – and whose reactionary views are regarded as completely despicable by every single major current of socialists today – then he is not doing very well.

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Again we have the same two possibilities with respect to the Senator: either he did not take five minutes to find out who Strasser was, or he decided to sweep that information under the rug – perhaps thinking that socialists would be too lazy to check.

Paul's third source for his claim that Hitler is a socialist is an article in the *Independent* by George Watson. Watson bases his claims almost entirely on some things that Hitler allegedly said to his one-time advisor Otto Wagener.

Wagener's recollections were posthumously published in German in 1978 in a book with a title that translates as *Hitler up Close: Notes from a Confidant 1929–1932*. Why only to 1932? Because Wagener was soon thereafter removed from his position of authority and was even detained in the Night of the Long Knives. Wagener wrote the text while a prisoner of war in 1946.

Wagener reports that Hitler said he saw the whole of National Socialism as based on Marx. That's an odd claim on the part of Wagener, given the document I noted above signed by Hitler, according to which **the Nazi Party "stands on the basis of private property"** – not a characteristically Marxist idea.

More generally, if the best evidence we have for the Nazi government being socialist are a few scattered comments that Hitler allegedly made in private, before taking power, and to someone who was drummed out of the party, then this is rather weak evidence indeed.

By comparison, suppose that there was a book published in the 1990s by someone claiming that Ronald Reagan had said privately in 1977 that his core ideas were based on the writings of Trotsky, but that the author of this book was driven out of the Republican Party in early 1981 and played no further role in Reagan's administration. Would we take that as

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decisive evidence — or as any evidence at all — that Reagan's presidency in the eighties was Trotskyist?

The Opposite of Socialism

Instead of relying on what they supposedly said, let's look at what the Nazis *did* while in power.

For starters, the Nazis took the eighty-one duly elected members of parliament from the German Communist Party and imprisoned them in Nazi-run concentration camps. The Nazis also arrested twenty-six of the hundred-and-twenty elected Social Democrats.

This was not mere spite — by keeping these representatives from being present in the German Parliament, the Nazis were able to pass the Enabling Act, which essentially gave Hitler dictatorial power, for it was only these left-wing parties that dared oppose Hitler.

Once they had absolute power, if the Nazis were really socialists you might expect them to, well, act like socialists. In particular, the classic defining feature of a socialism is collective ownership of the means of production. **Did the Nazis increase collective ownership by nationalizing private resources? No. In fact, they did the opposite.**

In a 2010 article in the *Economic History Review*, Germà Bel reports that “the Nazi government in 1930s Germany implemented a large-scale privatization policy” that involved selling off “public ownership in several state-owned firms” that operated in the sectors of “steel, mining, banking, shipyard, ship-lines, and railways.”

Senator Paul admits that there was little direct collective ownership under the Nazis, but he claims that “industries were privately owned in name only.” He says: “State control over industry was so complete that, in reality, owners were essentially stripped of private control of their

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property.” As evidence for this claim, Paul seems to quote the mid-century economist Ludwig von Mises:

Under national socialism there was, as Mises put it, “a superficial system of private ownership ... [sic] but the Nazis exerted unlimited, central control of all economic decisions.” With profit and production dictated by the state, industry worked the same as if the government had confiscated all the means of production, making economic prediction and calculation impossible.

I say that Senator Paul *seems* to quote Mises because the source of the words between the quotation marks is far from clear. The only footnote in Paul’s paragraph is to an article by Chris Calton posted on the Mises Institute web page, and the first six words of the quote, “a superficial system of private ownership,” are actually just from Calton, with no suggestion that Mises said them.

It gets worse. The rest of the alleged quote, claiming that “the Nazis exerted unlimited, central control of all economic decisions,” is nowhere to be found anywhere in the Calton article, nor in the Mises book to which Calton refers in his article. A Google search turns up those words only in Rand Paul’s own book.

It turns out that Paul’s most clear assertion about Nazi control of the economy was, apparently, just something that the senator made up and falsely attributed to Ludwig von Mises.

More informed sources provide a different picture. Although authority was highly centralized in Nazi Germany, this control was by no means as expansive as Senator Paul claims. In an article in the *Journal of Economic History*, Christoph Buchheim and Jonas Scherner write: “The notion that private firm property during the Third Reich had been preserved only in a

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nominal sense and that in reality there was almost nothing left of the autonomy of enterprises as economic actors is severely flawed.”

Buchheim and Scherner go on to note that German businesses, even those related to war production, “still had ample scope to follow their own production plans.” Moreover, “freedom of contract was respected,” and “even with respect to its own war- and autarky-related investment projects, the state normally did not use power in order to secure the unconditional support of industry.”

The authors conclude that “the economies of Germany and the Western Allies still were quite similar, as they all were basically capitalist.”

An Empty Slur, Not a Serious Claim

Why do conservatives like Senator Paul keep repeating the claim that the Nazis were socialists? The obvious motivation is simply to slur those who defend socialism, and there is no greater slur than to associate someone with Hitler.

But rather than offer any serious arguments for the claim, Senator Paul offers shoddy reasoning, sweeps aside inconvenient facts, and apparently even makes up quotes. Or perhaps he would just say that he is trying to present “alternative facts” about Nazi Germany.

In an ironic twist, Senator Paul claims in an earlier chapter that socialist governments must rely on a “propaganda ministry” to distract people with false claims. I can’t think of a more apt description of his own book.