

Cheney at Auschwitz: an insult to the memory of Nazism's victims

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Auschwitz “reminds us that evil is real,” US Vice President Dick Cheney declared in addressing a ceremony marking the 60th anniversary of the Nazi death camp’s liberation by troops of the Soviet Red Army.

“Men without conscience are capable of any cruelty the human mind can imagine,” the US vice president said at the commemoration. “And in every generation, free nations must maintain the will, the foresight and the strength to fight tyranny and spread the freedom that leads to peace.”

It is not necessary to invoke the horrors of Auschwitz to remind us that “evil is real.” But Cheney’s presence at the site of the greatest crime of the 20th century gave this platitude a chilling significance.

In Europe in general, and Poland in particular, Bush’s failure to attend the commemoration himself was taken as a significant slight. An even more glaring expression of Washington’s indifference apparently went unnoticed—at least by the pliant media. Sections of Cheney’s speech were lifted virtually unchanged from an address given by Bush when the US president and his wife made a quick tour of the camp a year-and-a-half ago (see: “A presidential visit to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and the Bush family fortune”).

Cheney, like Bush before him, came to Auschwitz with one purpose in mind: to twist and exploit the atrocities of Hitlerite fascism to justify Washington’s own acts of aggression and inhumanity.

For a number of reasons, this year’s ceremony has attracted greater attention—and more heads of state—than the 50th anniversary marked in 1995. On the one hand, there are great power interests involved. The commemoration of Auschwitz and repudiation of the crimes of the Third Reich have become enmeshed in the attempts to create a common political and ideological framework for the eastward extension of European integration.

There are also more human considerations. The ranks of those who survived the death camp have dwindled to a handful, and few remain of the Soviet soldiers who were stunned by the scenes of depravity and death they encountered when they liberated the camp. There is a growing realization that their entire generation is passing from the world stage.

One of the camp survivors, Franciszek Jozefiak, 80, saw his

father gassed at Auschwitz and suffered horrific torture and abuse at the hands of the Nazis. “The message today is: no more Auschwitz,” he told the Associated Press. “But the world has learned nothing so far—you see they are fighting and killing each other everywhere in the world. Today they are saying a lot because of the anniversary, but tomorrow they will forget.”

Jozefiak touched on the most compelling source of the Auschwitz anniversary’s heightened resonance today. The world confronts once again the growth of militarism, the deepening of international tensions, and an escalating attack on democratic and human rights—tendencies that found their consummate expression in the Nazi regime and its “final solution.” Though the world has entered a new millennium, the worst barbarities of the previous century seem closer to us, and a repetition of such atrocities more possible.

Cheney did not have to deliver a speech to remind his audience that those in power are capable of unspeakable cruelty; his mere presence sufficed. He is identified, perhaps more than any other world figure, with such evils.

Who is Cheney to represent the American people at Auschwitz? The US vice president is identified with the most right-wing political forces in America. In the 1980s, as a Republican congressman from Wyoming, he acted as a defender of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, voting against a resolution calling for an end to the quarter-century imprisonment of Nelson Mandela. Currying favor with homegrown racists, he likewise voted against the decision to make Martin Luther King’s birthday an official holiday.

As defense secretary in the administration of Bush the elder and in his current role as vice president, he has been the most vociferous proponent of the use of military force to achieve Washington’s global aims. He oversaw the first Persian Gulf War and acted as a principal organizer of the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, orchestrating a campaign of public deception and propaganda that had no precedent since the days of the Hitlerite “big lie.”

In between, he enriched himself as the chief executive officer of the oil industry giant Halliburton, a principal Pentagon contractor from whose war profiteering the vice president stands to reap future dividends.

Cheney’s entire political and business career strongly

suggests that if, by a twist of fate, he had grown to maturity in pre-war Germany rather than in the post-war United States, he would have found his way either into the Nazi regime or among the corporate criminals who financed the Nazis and profited off of the slave labor of concentration camp inmates.

The Bush administration is not the Third Reich and Cheney is not a Nazi, but the parallels between the course upon which German imperialism embarked in the 1930s and the one taken today by the government in Washington are real and have profound objective roots. With his invocation to “fight tyranny and spread the freedom that leads to peace,” Cheney used the Auschwitz commemoration to echo the threat of global US military aggression advanced by Bush in his inauguration address a week earlier.

The US vice president’s presence in Poland was bound up with the continuation of this aggression. One of primary objectives of his visit was to dissuade the Polish government from moving ahead with plans to begin withdrawing its 2,400 troops from Iraq, the only numerically significant contingent outside of the US and British occupation forces.

There is a grim irony in Cheney’s use of Auschwitz as a stage for promoting such a strategy.

When the surviving leadership of the Nazi regime was brought before an international war crimes tribunal at Nuremberg, the principal charge against them was conspiring to wage aggressive war. The ruling that sentenced the Nazi leaders to hang declared the waging of aggressive war to be “essentially an evil thing.” The launching of such a war, it said, “is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

Thus, in the view of the prosecution, the atrocities carried out by the Nazis—Auschwitz and the murder of 6 million European Jews, the destruction of the German workers’ movement, the liquidation of all political opposition—flowed from the fundamental policy of aggressive war.

In his closing statement to the tribunal, the lead prosecutor, US Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, dismissed a key justification given by the Nazi defendants for their crimes. “Some of the defendants argue that the wars were not aggressive and were only intended to protect Germany against some eventual danger from the ‘menace of communism,’ which was something of an obsession with many Nazis.”

Substitute the word “terrorism” for “communism,” and you have the basic justification given by Bush, Cheney and company for their policy of preventive war. Should they be brought to trial for the war crimes they have committed against Iraq, the prosecution would have only to cite Jackson’s words to establish the applicability of the Nuremberg principle to their case.

US imperialism’s policy of aggressive war has yet to produce killing on the scale of Auschwitz, but in resurrecting this criminal strategy it has opened the door to such atrocities.

While it has not erected gas chambers and crematoriums, Washington has embarked on the construction and running of a growing international network of concentration camps, including Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, and Abu Ghraib in Iraq. It has legitimized both torture and assassination, while claiming the right to indefinitely imprison citizens and non-citizens alike without charges or trial.

This turn in American policy, like the rise of European fascism in the 1930s, has its ultimate source in profound and insoluble contradictions of the world capitalist system. Faced with the loss of its undisputed economic and political hegemony, US imperialism has embraced aggressive war as the principal means for reasserting its domination of the world’s markets and sources of raw materials, above all oil.

This drive will inevitably assume an increasingly destructive character and, sooner rather than later, provoke countermeasures by America’s imperialist rivals. This is the climate in which Auschwitz looms not merely as a historical reminder of abstract “evil,” but as a grim and urgent warning of what capitalism in crisis is capable of inflicting upon humanity.

In his arguments before the Nuremberg tribunal, Robert Jackson declared: “It is not necessary among the ruins of this ancient and beautiful city, with untold members of its civilian inhabitants still buried in its rubble, to argue the proposition that to start or wage an aggressive war has the moral qualities of the worst of crimes. The refuge of the defendants can be only their hope that international law will lag so far behind the moral sense of mankind that conduct which is crime in the moral sense must be regarded as innocent in law...”

In the face of 100,000 or more dead in Iraq, and with Fallujah and major portions of other Iraqi cities in rubble, there can be no question that Bush, Cheney and others in the current US administration stand guilty of this “worst of crimes.” Yet the US vice president’s ability to deliver his obscene speech at Auschwitz condemning “evil” and “cruelty” make it clear that today the “moral sense of mankind” finds no reflection in international law. Only the emergence of an independent and socialist political movement of the working class can create the conditions for bringing these war criminals to justice.



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