Seventy years since the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army

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January 27 marked the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army. Since the end of World War II, Auschwitz has become a symbol of the worst atrocities of fascism.

When the 322nd Rifle Division of the Red Army, which formed part of the 60th Army of the Ukrainian Front, arrived at the site Auschwitz-Birkenau, it found a horrifying scene. Nikolai Politanov, one of the Red Army soldiers who liberated the camp, later recalled:

> "The actual camp appeared like an untidy slaughterhouse. A pungent smell hung heavily in the air… The further we walked into the site, the stronger the smell of burnt flesh became, and dirty-black ash rained down on us from the heavens, darkening the snow… Innumerable exhausted, wretched figures with shrunken faces and bald heads were standing outside of the barracks. They didn't know that we were coming. The surprise made many of them faint. A picture that would make everyone wither away who saw it. The misery was horrifying. The ovens [of the crematoria] were still hot and some were still blazing fiercely when we approached… We were standing in a circle, everyone was silent. From the barracks more and more hungry children were emerging, reduced to skeletons and enveloped in rags. Like ants they assembled in large groups, making noise as if they were in a large school yard. With arms extended, they were waiting, begging and screaming for bread. They were whining out of despair and wiping away their tears… Only death reigned here. It smelled of it." [1]

Upon examining the camps that comprised Auschwitz, the Red Army found some 1 million pieces of clothing, 45,000 pairs of shoes and 7.7 tons of human hair from female prisoners, most of whom had been sent to the gas chambers.

Just a few days before the Red Army reached Auschwitz, the SS, having heard about the rapid advancement of the Soviet forces, had sent some 60,000 of the surviving camp inmates on what came to be known as "death marches." Only some 7,500 people remained at the camps. At least 300 had been shot dead. A systematic execution was presumably prevented only by the advance of the Red Army. After the liberation, hundreds more died from exhaustion. Some died from food that had been poisoned by the SS.

As in other extermination and concentration camps, the total number of victims of the Nazis at Auschwitz could never be clearly established. Estimates put the number of people murdered at Auschwitz at 1.1 million to 1.5 million, including at least 900,000 Jews who were gassed with Zyklon B. At least 140,000 Poles, 20,000 Romani and Sinti, 10,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and hundreds of homosexuals and Jehovah's Witnesses had been deported to Auschwitz. Several thousand of them were also gassed. Many more died from various diseases, exhaustion, torture or hunger in the forced labor camps.

Auschwitz was a vast complex of labor camps and the extermination camp (Vernichtungslager), also known as the main camp, where the gas chambers were located. The complex was located near the city O?wi?cim in southwestern Poland, which was part of the territory annexed by the Third Reich after its invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Due to the vastness of the camp system, at least four divisions of the Red Army were involved in the liberation of the camps, which together spanned over 7 kilometers. All were surrounded by barbed wire. The commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß, later called Auschwitz "the largest death factory in human history."

When plans for a concentration camp at Auschwitz were first discussed in mid-1941, the camp was conceived of as a labor camp for Soviet prisoners of war and other prisoners. However, as the Nazi war against the Soviet Union dragged on, the Nazi leadership moved toward planning the "final solution" of the Jewish question on the basis of mass extermination. The plans for Auschwitz were revised so as to turn it into a facility for the industrial-scale destruction of European Jews. Camps set up around Auschwitz continued to provide forced labor for German companies and the Nazi war effort.

The extermination camp—one of six that were located in Poland—included four gas chambers and crematoria that had been built in 1942. Each of the four facilities could kill and incinerate more than 1,000 people per day. The first attempts to gas people at Auschwitz occurred in late 1941, the victims being Soviet prisoners of war. In April or July 1942, the large-scale gassing of Jews began. Over the next two-and-a-half years, about a million people were gassed, including some 400,000 Hungarian Jews who were murdered in the space of a few weeks in the summer of 1944.

Auschwitz II, or Birkenau, was a forced labor camp where Jews deemed "fit for work" were imprisoned, as well as political prisoners, homosexuals and prisoners of war from various countries occupied by the Nazis. A special division of the camp, Section B II e, was set up for Romani. Out of the estimated 22,600 Romani deported to Auschwitz, 19,300 died of hunger, disease and Zyklon B. Overall, the Nazis and local fascists murdered up to half a million Sinti and Roma during World War II.

Auschwitz III, or Monowitz, also known as the Buna camp, was set up on territory owned by the German company IG Farben, then the largest chemical trust in the world. The company itself called this branch of its activities "IG Auschwitz." The camp was built in late 1941 by forced laborers and opened in 1942. At its peak, it employed some 11,000 slave workers. In total, some 35,000 inmates worked there. At least 25,000 died from hunger, disease or exhaustion.

Other major German companies such as Krupp and Siemens built factories near Auschwitz. Most of them were producing for the German war effort. In total, there were 45 satellite camps with prisoner populations ranging from several dozen to several thousand.

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The victims of Auschwitz were deported to the camp in cattle cars from all across Europe. Conditions in the cattle cars were so bad—there was no food, no water, no hygienic facilities—that many hundreds of the deportees died on their way to Auschwitz.

Upon their arrival, the deportees were forced onto the so-called ramp for selection: Nazi doctors and SS personnel selected those who, in their opinion, were “fit for work” and those who were “not fit for work.” The latter included elderly people, pregnant women and mothers, children, and the sick. Those who were considered “fit for work” were sent to the labor camps. The others were sent to the gas chambers.

Exceptions were made for some women who were either forced into prostitution, made to work for the SS, or used for medical experiments. Those selected for either forced labor or medical experiments received a tattoo with a number on the right forearm. The number served to identify them in the camp.

In general, most of those who survived Auschwitz did so by working directly or indirectly for the SS or Gestapo or serving in other capacities as skilled laborers. The great majority of children who survived were victims of medical experiments. The most notorious experiments were undertaken by Dr. Josef Mengele, who specialized in cruel experiments on twins, most of which ended in the painful deaths of his victims.

There was no aspect of the destruction of these hundreds of thousands of people that was not utilized in some way by German industry. Before being deported, the Jews had been robbed of all their belongings, residences, shops and savings by the German state, which handed over Jewish property to companies and banks.

The Zyklon B for the gas chambers of Auschwitz and other extermination camps was delivered by the company Degesch, a subsidiary of the chemical and metal company Degussa and IG Farben. After the mass murder, the ashes of the gassed were used for the building of roads. Gold teeth were plucked from the ashes of the dead and processed by German companies.

During the war, Degussa, for example, processed at least 5 tons of fine gold and 100 tons of fine silver that had been stolen from Jews in the ghettos and concentration camps. Degussa reaped a gross profit of around 2 million Reichsmarks from this. [2] The clothes and hair of the dead were also collected by the SS and usually sold to companies. There were cases where companies produced lampshades from the skin of murdered prisoners.

By the end of the war in May 1945, some 6 million European Jews had been murdered in the Nazi genocide. Of these, almost every sixth Jew was gassed at Auschwitz. The Jewish communities of Poland—which was the largest in Europe, with a population of 3.3 to 3.5 million—Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, Germany, France, Greece, Hungary, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Yugoslavia were all but extinguished, and with them a culture that had helped shape European civilization for centuries.

A few tens of thousands survived the concentration camps. Many thousands more survived in hiding. However, most Jews who survived the Holocaust had fled to the Soviet Union. After the partition of Poland between Hitler and Stalin in 1939 and the Nazi invasion of the country, hundreds of thousands of Jews fled to Soviet Poland and further into the USSR. Many of them were later deported by the NKVD as Polish citizens to Siberia or Central Asia. Altogether, an estimated 300,000 of all Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust had relocated to the USSR.

The Jewish tragedy did not end with the war, since the socio-economic and political roots of ant-Semitism had not been removed. Numerous anti-Semitic pogroms targeting Holocaust survivors occurred during the civil war in Poland until at least late 1946. Most notoriously, a house harboring survivors of the Shoah was blown up in the summer of 1945, killing 16 people.

This was followed by the Kielce pogrom of July 1946, which left at least 42 Jews dead and 40 more wounded. Anti-Semites, often allied to the anti-Communist camp that was supported by American and British imperialism, also attacked trains arriving from the Soviet Union and carrying Jewish survivors back to Poland. Altogether, several hundred Jews were killed in 1944-46 by Polish anti-Semites.

Anti-Semitism continued to persist in West Germany, where the Nazi economic, political and intellectual elites, with very few exceptions, were allowed to continue their careers. In the Soviet Union, the Stalinist bureaucracy, returning to the worst traditions of Great Russian chauvinism, whipped up anti-Semitism in the anti-Jewish purges of the late 1940s and 1950s.

Most holocaust survivors fled to Israel, which was founded in 1948, or the United States, with many settling down only in the 1950s after many years of flight and persecution. The Israeli state, based on the reactionary Zionist conception that a Jewish nation-state would be the salvation of the Jewish people, has been almost perpetually at war since the first days of its existence.

Those who survived remained marked for the rest of their lives. Many were later to commit suicide. It took most Holocaust survivors decades before they could speak or write about the hell they had endured. This was not only because of the terrible trauma they had suffered. After the restabilization of capitalism in the immediate post-war period, and in the reactionary political climate of the Cold War, many of the worst crimes of the Nazis were covered up (not only in Western Germany).

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, now 89, who, together with her sister, survived Auschwitz, said in a recent interview:

> “After our liberation, [my sister] Renate and I thought that the world would now change. But in the following years, hardly anyone asked us any questions, no one wanted to know anything. After Auschwitz came the great silence.” [3]

Only a tiny fraction of the estimated 7,000 SS and Gestapo personnel who worked at Auschwitz were ever tried. Those who were tried often received ridiculously mild sentences ranging from 1 to 4 years imprisonment.

The first and most comprehensive trial took place in Poland shortly after the war, in 1947. Rudolf Höß, the commandant of Auschwitz, was sentenced to death by hanging. So were 20 other leading Auschwitz personnel. Twelve others received sentences of 15 years or life in prison.

In Germany, Auschwitz, like most other crimes of the Nazi regime, was barely discussed until the 1960s. At the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial of 1963-1965, brought about above all by the efforts of the social democratic lawyer Fritz Bauer against massive resistance from the state apparatus, hundreds of victims of Auschwitz for the first time spoke publicly about their martyrdom. [4] On trial were 22 Gestapo members, SS officers, Nazi doctors and other camp personnel. Most of them had led a peaceful life in post-war Germany, having resumed successful careers after 1945, up until the beginning of the trial.

Among them were Robert Mulka, vice-commandant of Auschwitz, and Wilhelm Boger, a member of the camp Gestapo. Mulka was sentenced to 14 years, the court having argued that his “willingness to murder” Jews could not be proven. He was released in 1967 and died one year later.

Wilhelm Boger, inventor of the “Boger-swing,” one of the most vicious instruments of torture at Auschwitz, was sentenced to life imprisonment and died in prison in 1977.

Dr. Josef Mengele, whose name has become synonymous with the worst crimes of doctors serving the Nazi regime, was never tried. He enjoyed protection from the German secret service, the BND, throughout the post-war period and died in exile in 1979. As a rule, German courts not only imposed mild sentences on Nazi war criminals, if they imposed any

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sentences at all, they also bullied surviving witnesses.

The firms that were involved in and profited from the crimes committed at Auschwitz were barely touched. The board of directors of Degussa, the majority of whom were convinced Nazis, resumed their careers after 1945 as if nothing had happened. Alfred Krupp and ten of his leading managers were sentenced to 12 years in prison at the Nuremberg Trials, but were released in 1952 after just four years behind bars.

The management of IG Farben, the company most closely associated with the crimes at Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps, fared even better. Of 23 managers put on trial in 1947, only ten were found guilty. The last IG Farben manager was released from prison in 1951. Almost all of them soon found posts in the management of leading West German companies. Today, successor companies of IG Farben such as BASF and Bayer rank among the most profitable and largest in the world.

Auschwitz, as a symbol of the most horrific crimes of the 20th century, remains a central trauma of the working class. It would be difficult to think of a name more closely associated with the Holocaust, and it is equally difficult to think of any catastrophe, next to the Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, that has caused more historical pessimism than the barbaric persecution and annihilation of European Jewry. It was not least of all because of Auschwitz that the intellectual climate after 1945 was permeated with deep pessimism about the capacity of the working class to carry out a revolution and do away with the horrors of imperialism.

The general line promoted by historians and politicians is that the crimes committed at Auschwitz are, in the final analysis, inexplicable. This position can lead only to despair about the fate of humanity. If the monstrous crimes committed at Auschwitz are inexplicable, then nothing can be learnt from them. And if nothing can be learnt from them, a repetition of Auschwitz cannot be prevented.

Underlying this argument lies an approach that looks at Auschwitz and the crimes of fascism outside of the context of the class struggle in the first half of the 20th century and the history of the labor movement. Auschwitz cannot be understood apart from the tragedy of the German and international communist movement in the 1920s and 1930s and the struggle of the Trotskyists against Stalinism. Auschwitz weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living because it was not prevented by the European working class and the roots of this failure have to this day not been comprehended by masses of people.

This question is all the more urgent since the threat of a third world war, provoked by the imperialist powers' reckless provocations against both Russia and China, is growing every day. To the extent that the socio-economic and political roots of Auschwitz, and fascism more generally, have been obscured, the bourgeoisie, not least of all in Germany, has tried to use the horrors of Nazism to ideologically justify new crimes of imperialism, above all by placing the blame for the Holocaust on the working class. (See: German president uses Auschwitz commemoration to justify militarism).

In reality, the genocide of European Jewry was the outcome of the decay of the capitalist system. As the Polish-Belgian Trotskyist Abraham Léon, who was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944, explained:

> "The highly tragic situation of Judaism in our epoch is explained by the extreme precariousness of its social and economic position. The first to be eliminated by decaying feudalism, the Jews were also the first to be rejected by the convulsions of dying capitalism. The Jewish masses find themselves wedged between the anvil of decaying feudalism and the hammer of rotting capitalism." [5]

The salvation of the Jewish people thus depended upon the working class overthrowing capitalism. For the fascist movements, anti-Semitism served as a means of mobilizing layers of the petty-bourgeoisie against the socialist working class movement. The bogeyman of the "Jewish Bolshevik" played an important role in the Holocaust and the ideology of both the Nazis and their local fascist collaborators in Eastern Europe.

However, the Holocaust was not an inevitable outcome of the death agony of the world capitalist system. The rise of Hitler to power, and all the subsequent crimes of fascism, would not have been possible without the devastating role played by Stalinism, which prevented the working class from taking power.

The German Communist Party (KPD), instead of fighting for a united front of communist workers and those still under the influence of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to fight jointly against the threat of Nazism and prepare for a socialist revolution in Germany, split and politically paralyzed the German working class with a policy that designated the "social fascist" SPD as the main enemy of the communist movement.

This policy was dictated by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, which had emerged under conditions of the international isolation of the first workers' state. On the basis of the revisionist program of "socialism in one country," the Stalinist bureaucracy developed an opportunist, zig-zag line for the entire Third International (Comintern), which led to numerous defeats of the international working class in the 1920s and 1930s. In Germany, it paved the way for the Nazis to smash the organized labor movement, which numbered some 6 million workers and constituted the only force capable of defeating fascism.

Drawing the necessary conclusions from the historic defeat of the German working class, and the fact that the Comintern was unable to even discuss the disaster in the ensuing months, Trotsky issued the call to build a new, Fourth International. The Comintern had become an instrument to advance the social interests not of the working class, but of the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

The crimes of Stalinism didn't end there, however. The Stalinist bureaucracy reacted to the mounting threat of fascism in Europe, which from the very beginning put war against the Soviet Union on the agenda, by turning toward an alliance with bourgeois parties, ostensibly to defend bourgeois democracy against fascism. The workers who were drawn into revolutionary struggles in France and, in particular, Spain were now subordinated to Popular Fronts, with the communist parties entering into alliances with the national bourgeoisies.

Thus, a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system, which would have repulsed the fascist menace in so-called "democratic" Europe and undermined Hitler in Germany itself, was prevented.

Simultaneously, the Stalinist bureaucracy unleashed the terror in the Soviet Union, targeting all genuine communists and socialists. Virtually the entire leadership of the October 1917 Revolution, plus some 30,000 Trotskyists and the most experienced generals and commanders of the Red Army, were murdered by Stalin's hangmen.

In August 1939, in an act that expressed the unbridled cynicism of the Kremlin bureaucracy and its contempt for the international working class, Stalin reversed course and signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler, paving the way for the Nazi invasion of Poland nine days later and disorienting and demoralizing socialists all over the world.

This opportunist and politically criminal policy, carried out by those to whom masses of advanced workers still looked for leadership, paralyzed the international labor movement in the 1930s in the face of fascism and the threat of a second world war.

The crimes of Stalinism, however, do not diminish the historic achievements of the Red Army, which had been largely built by Leon Trotsky in 1918. The Red Army liberated most of Europe from fascism in 1944-1945. The role of the Red Army in World War II was a confirmation of the profoundly progressive character of the Russian Revolution out of

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which the Red Army emerged. As the *Fourth International* wrote in August 1941:

> "The October revolution is demonstrating once again to the world the unprecedented power and resources lodged in it. Seven weeks of the Soviet-Nazi war bring still another overwhelming proof of how correct Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks were in leading the Russian masses in 1917 to the conquest of power and the building of the first workers' state in history.
>
> "The present war is the second struggle of the Soviet Union against imperialist attack and internal counter-revolution. (…)
>
> "Today these… economic successes, gained by the Soviet masses on the foundations established by October, are manifesting themselves on the battlefront. Thus, under the most adverse conditions, debilitated by Stalinism, completely exposed to the full striking power of German militarism under conditions most advantageous to the latter, the strangled revolution is showing to the whole world that it still lives on." [6]

Claims such as those recently put forward by Polish Foreign Minister Grzegorz Schetyna, who, on the eve of the official commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, said it was not the Red Army that liberated the camp, must be rejected as reactionary lies, which serve to promote anti-communism and the current imperialist war preparations against Russia. (See: The 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz).

In fact, it was precisely the Red Army's heroic struggle against fascism that constituted the main basis for the Soviet Union and the Stalinist parties regaining some of their prestige in the post-war period, not least in Germany and Poland, despite the Kremlin's monstrous betrayals of the 1930s and those of the immediate post-war period.

If humanity is once again faced with the danger of fascism and world war, principal responsibility lies with Stalinism, which has disoriented the international working class for decades, murdering its most experienced leaders and sabotaging countless struggles with its opportunist and counterrevolutionary policies. In 1989-91, the Stalinist bureaucracy completed its historic betrayal by working to destroy the deformed workers' states in Eastern Europe and then dissolving the Soviet Union itself, restoring capitalism in these regions and opening them up to imperialist plunder.

The 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, under conditions of a renewed drive to world war, raises fundamental political questions. Without the dominance of national opportunism in the workers' movement, and, above all, the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union, Auschwitz would not have been possible.

In the final analysis, the horrors of fascism were the price the Jewish people and workers internationally paid for the betrayals carried out by the bureaucratic leaderships of the workers' movement. Workers and youth must draw the lessons of Auschwitz by studying the history of the Trotskyist movement and building the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership of the international working class.

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Notes:

[1] Nikolai Politanow: „Wir trauten unseren Augen nicht." ["We didn't believe our eyes."] Spiegel Online, 26 January 2008. http://www.spiegel.de/einestages/holocaust-a-949074.html. Translation by the author.

[2] Peter Hayes: Die Verstrickung der Degussa in das NS-System [The involvement of Degussa in the NS system], in: Jürgen Lillteicher (ed.): *Profiteure des NS-Systems? Deutsche Unternehmen und das "Dritte Reich"* [*Profiteers of the NS-system? German Companies and the "Third Reich"*], Berlin 2006, p. 36.

[3] „Die Auschwitz Protokolle. Gespräch mit Anita-Lasker Wallfisch" [„The Auschwitz protocols. Conversation with Anita-Lasker Wallfisch"], in: *Der Spiegel*, Nr. 5 (24.01.2015), p. 60. Translation by the author.

[4] The German audio recordings and written transcriptions of the testimony can be found at http://auschwitz-prozess.de/.

[5] Abraham Léon: *The Jewish Question. A Marxist Interpretation* (1940). https://www.marxists.org/subject/jewish/leon/ch7.htm

[6] John G. Wright: "The Soviet Union at War," in: *Fourth International*, Vol.2 No.7 (August 1941). https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/wright/1941/08/su-war.htm

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