

## A major exhibition at New York City's Museum of Jewish Heritage

# The story of Auschwitz

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"Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away," on view at New York City's Museum of Jewish Heritage through January 3, 2020, is the broadest and most inclusive exhibition ever presented in North America on the complex of concentration and extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Poland in which 1.1 million human beings were murdered by the Nazis between 1940 and 1945, part of the Holocaust that claimed the lives of 6 million Jews.

Fascism is once again a major political threat. In Germany the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)—a political party whose leadership includes out-and-out apologists for Nazism—has emerged as a major political force. The process of legitimizing Nazi crimes is underway. One of the country's most influential academics—Professor Jörg Baberowski of Humboldt University in Berlin—has publicly declared that "Hitler was not vicious." He is being vehemently defended in the media against the protests of students. The forgetting of the past is not only a German problem. Despite his grotesque exercise in historical revisionism, Professor Baberowski has recently been awarded a \$300,000 research grant by Princeton University. In this reactionary political and intellectual environment, "Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away" is extraordinary timely and requires the largest possible audience.

This history of barbarism is presented in a massive 18,000-square-foot exhibition, now in New York after having drawn hundreds of thousands of visitors in Madrid. It brings together some 700 original objects and 400 photographs, along with video footage, interviews and other materials, gathered and loaned from more than 20 institutions and museums around the world. The lenders include the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland, with its critical documentation of the Holocaust.

On view is an original Model 2 freight train car, of which 120,000 were manufactured in Germany between 1910 and 1927. This is the same model used to transport several million Jews and other victims to concentration and extermination camps. Also part of the exhibition is a section of an original barrack used for slave laborers at Auschwitz.

About 1.3 million people, the great majority Jews but also including Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, Sinti and Roma ethnic minorities and others deemed "inferior" and worthless to the German Reich, were sent to Auschwitz. More than three-quarters of those arriving were almost immediately put to death. On view in this exhibition are piles of shoes, eyeglasses, suitcases and other belongings left behind by those who perished. The comprehensiveness and immediacy bring home the enormity of the genocide.

As the title's appropriate staccato sentence fragments indicate, this is not ancient history. The horrors of the Holocaust, with which the name of Auschwitz is most infamously associated, took place in advanced capitalist Europe, and were perpetrated by one of the leading imperialist powers. Moreover, less than three-quarters of a century after the liberation of Auschwitz and the final defeat of the Hitler regime, the stench of fascism is very much present today. Nearly two decades into the 21st century, we are witnessing resurgent anti-Semitism, racism and white

supremacy, stoked by ultra-right-wing capitalist politicians like the current US president. The study and lessons of Auschwitz are critically important, 75 years after the mass murder that took place there.

The exhibition proceeds chronologically for the most part, beginning with the origin of the Jewish presence in Germany hundreds of years ago, tracing the rise of anti-Semitism and its growth in the last decades of the 19th century, followed by the enormous world-changing events of the 20th century, especially World War I, the 1917 Russian Revolution, and the emergence of the Nazi Party in the 1920s and its triumph in 1933. This set into motion the official persecution that would soon be followed by World War II and the genocide in which two-thirds of the prewar Jewish population in Europe was killed.

To its credit, the exhibition also calls attention to the considerable number of non-Jewish victims of Nazi terror. These include, aside from the more than 1 million Soviet Jews killed in mass shootings as the Nazis invaded the USSR, an estimated 5.7 million Soviet civilians, in addition to the many millions of Red Army soldiers. The non-Jewish Polish victims numbered 1.8 million.

Adolf Hitler's accession to the German chancellorship in January 1933 was quickly followed by the Reichstag Fire, the provocation that led to increasing terror, the mass arrests of Communists and other opponents of the Nazis, and the abrogation of bourgeois legality. The exhibition deals with such milestones of the Nazi persecution of the Jews as the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 and the mass terror of Kristallnacht on November 9, 1938. The exhibition also mentions the mass expulsion of the Polish Jews who lived in Germany, which began in October 1938, before Kristallnacht.

Then came the start of the Second World War, with the invasion of Poland in September 1939, followed in June 1941 by the invasion of the USSR as Hitler ripped up the non-aggression pact he had signed with Joseph Stalin almost two years earlier.

In the months following the invasion of the Soviet Union hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews, as well as Polish prisoners, fell victim to mass shootings and other killings, as the Nazis marched eastward through Byelorussia and the Ukraine, but this was only the beginning.

At the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, the Nazis adopted the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem" as their policy. Auschwitz and other extermination camps were established or expanded to carry out horrors that were qualitatively different from those at earlier concentration camps. Here mass killing was carried out with ruthless efficiency and organized on a vast scale.

The Polish town of Oświęcim was annexed after September 1939. First used as the site of a concentration camp for Poles, it was only later expanded and converted into a vast complex of extermination camps covering an area of more than 15 square miles.

The location suited the purposes of the Nazis. The town was 37 miles west of the city of Kraków, situated along railway lines into Germany, and surrounded by marshlands and forest that made escape difficult if not

impossible.

The Auschwitz complex consisted of Camps I, II and III. Auschwitz I was built in early 1940 and used for Polish prisoners, who were subjected to forced labor, torture and murder, as the exhibition explains.

Auschwitz II-Birkenau was built in late 1941, and it was where most of the mass killings took place, with the use of Zyklon-B poison gas. After death in the gas chambers, the bodies were burned in the crematoria, at a rate that reached 10,000 a day by 1944.

The third part of the complex, Auschwitz III-Monowitz, not established until later in 1942, was the site of a slave labor camp run by the German chemical giant I.G. Farben. This part of Auschwitz became a way station for prisoners who, when they were so weakened they could no longer be put to work, were sent to Birkenau to be killed.

Life and death at the Auschwitz complex is the heart of the exhibition. Separate sections deal with the selection process (which led to the gassing of most of the new arrivals), forced labor, medical experiments, resistance and life in the camp, and the death marches in the weeks leading up to the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army in January 1945.

Those who arrived at Auschwitz had already endured unimaginable suffering, many of them coming from appalling conditions in ghettos or in other concentration camps. They had come on journeys of hundreds of miles, in railroad cars so packed that there was no place to sit, no way to relieve themselves, and for most of them no food or water. Some did not survive the trip.

About 900,000 out of 1.3 million deported to Auschwitz were put to death almost immediately after their arrival. SS doctors made decisions, sometimes within seconds. The elderly and young children, as well as young mothers and the sickest and weakest prisoners, were considered unfit for slave labor and sent to one side, to the gas chambers. They were stripped of all their clothing and belongings and told that they would be taken to showers for purposes of delousing. Many, especially as the extermination campaign continued through 1943 and 1944, had no illusions as to their fate. Other Jewish prisoners were forced to put the dead bodies, including some they recognized as family members, into the crematoria as part of the so-called *Sonderkommandos*.

A much smaller number, about 400,000, were deemed fit for work, thus surviving the first selection. While they were registered at Auschwitz, their average life expectancy was no more than weeks or a few months. They endured indescribable hunger, cold, filth and brutality, working up to 12 hours a day, subsisting on food of a quality that defies description and a quantity that made survival almost impossible. The inmates were supplied with one ragged uniform that they wore day and night. At least half of the prisoners died, either through individual executions, torture, starvation or disease. Some surviving prisoners were deported to other camps.

As the relentless advance of the Red Army made clear that Auschwitz would soon fall to the Soviet forces, in mid-January 1945 about 60,000 surviving inmates were sent on forced marches westward into Germany. Most died along the way, some shot dead by the Nazis when they fell, unable to continue or to keep pace. When the camp was liberated days later, about 7,000 severely emaciated and ill prisoners remained, many near death.

The Auschwitz Album, the name given to a unique photographic record of the process of enslavement and extermination at Auschwitz, was taken by one or two SS soldiers who were documenting their work, and many of these photos are displayed in the exhibition. The album, perhaps mislaid or mistakenly left behind by retreating Nazi forces, was discovered soon after the liberation of another camp by an 18-year-old survivor, Lilly Jacob. Consisting of 56 pages and 193 photos taken in May or June 1944, in the midst of the deportation of over 400,000 Hungarian Jews, the album depicts the disembarkation of prisoners, the selection process, and Jews on the way to the gas chamber. It shows "Kanada," the site within the camp

where all the belongings of the dead were sorted before being shipped back to Germany.

The exhibition also includes maps and other material showing the position of Auschwitz in the network of concentration and extermination camps. The dead at Auschwitz included 1 million Jews, 75,000 Poles, 14,000 Soviet prisoners of war, 21,000 Sinti and Roma. Another 925,000 perished at Treblinka, northeast of Warsaw; 434,000 were killed at Belzec, and 167,000 at Sobibor, to the southeast.

The horror of Auschwitz is given literary and artistic representation in parts of the exhibition. These include some quotations from Primo Levi (1919-1987), the Italian Jewish writer and chemist who wrote *Survival at Auschwitz*, on his own escape from death; excerpts from a video interview with German Jewish writer and intellectual Hannah Arendt (1906-1975); and paintings by Felix Nussbaum (1904-1944), the German Jewish painter who died at Auschwitz. Included in the exhibition are Nussbaum's *Fear* (1941), *Self-Portrait* (1943), and *Triumph of Death* (1944), extraordinary and moving works completed while the artist was in hiding in Brussels, where he was arrested and deported to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944.

The burning yet obvious question posed by "Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away" is why the Holocaust happened.

The murderous anti-Semitism of Hitler's National Socialists was above all in the service of anticommunism. The Nazis were a product of the 20th century. Hitler's victory was possible only because of the breakdown of world capitalism, which led in turn to World War I, the successful socialist revolution in Russia, and the crisis of the 1920s, followed by the immense suffering of the Great Depression. The German bourgeoisie, which had come face to face with the threat of socialist revolution in 1918 and 1919, turned to the Nazis as a last resort to deal with the threat posed by the working class.

The fascists utilized social demagoguery, posing as the enemy of both big business and above all of communism, to whip sections of the lower middle class into a frenzy against the socialist movement. Extreme nationalism and naked terror were used to suppress the class struggle and smash the democratic rights of the working class, in the interests of German imperialism. The Jews, as elsewhere, provided a useful and effective scapegoat.

The Nazis would not have been able to take power and smash the workers' movement, however, if not for the crisis of leadership of the proletariat. The October Revolution in Russia was only the opening shot of the world socialist revolution, but the revolution had been isolated, leading to the growth of the nationalist bureaucracy headed by Stalin. The millions-strong German working class, whose mass Social Democratic Party had been founded nearly 60 years earlier in close collaboration with Marx and Engels themselves, was trapped between the reformism of the SPD traitors, who had abandoned the principles of socialist internationalism, and the treachery of Stalinism, which was then in the final stages of betraying the 1917 Revolution, converting the Communist International into the servant of the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy in Moscow.

Almost none of this history finds its way into the exhibition on Auschwitz. There are a few brief mentions of Hitler's anticommunism, but not of the struggle for socialism and of the mass workers' movement. The organizers of the exhibition, in showcasing prominent Jews whom they associate with "modernity," go so far as to label the founder of scientific socialism, Karl Marx, merely a "political philosopher," while Rosa Luxemburg, the towering Polish-German Marxist and leader of the revolutionary wing of the German SPD who was assassinated along with Karl Liebknecht in January 1919, is called simply a "political activist"!

There is a similar misrepresentation of history in the section of the exhibition dealing with Jewish responses to the growth of anti-Semitism. The various answers, provided in some detail, include religious orthodoxy, emigration, conversion to Christianity, Zionism, and the Bund,

a Jewish social democratic organization that was formed in a split from Lenin's Bolsheviks in 1903. There is no mention of the organized socialist movement and the prominent role of Jews within it. Marx and Luxemburg, as mentioned above, are listed as Jewish figures but not as socialists. Why does the turn of millions of Jews toward socialism and communism not merit a reference, while conversion does? The exhibition goes out of its way to discount and delegitimize the common struggle of workers of all religions and ethnic backgrounds. Although it was the socialists and communists who fought Hitler despite the treachery of their own leaders, the exhibition quite falsely declares that "only the Zionists were intellectually prepared."

The Museum of Jewish Heritage reflects the outlook of the American Jewish establishment and that of the political establishment as a whole. They are neither willing nor able to explain the Holocaust. They will not acknowledge that it was the outcome of the mortal crisis of capitalism, an event that could only have taken place after the emergence of rival imperialist powers at the turn of the 20th century. The crisis led to the first world war of its kind, and then, in the absence of revolutionary working-class leadership, to the victory of the Nazis and the second global slaughter in the space of a single generation. World War II, as the exhibition reminds us, saw 80 million lose their lives, about 4 percent of the world's population at that time.

The organizers of the Auschwitz exhibition see war and Holocaust as inexplicable, or as the outcome of what the exhibition refers to as "the singular face of human evil." Visitors are told that extreme nationalism, xenophobia, racial and religious scapegoating and intolerance led to Nazi barbarism, but there is little or no attempt to explain where these ideas came from, whose interests they served, and how they can be defeated and prevented from leading to new wars and mass murder.

The glaring but not unexpected weaknesses in "Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away" do not negate the importance of the materials that are presented, particularly the history of the complex itself—how it was built and how it operated, with details provided in many cases by the testimony of those who survived.

The weaknesses are no small matter, however, in an exhibition that reminds us of murderous anti-Semitism "not long ago." The use of fascistic rhetoric and the attempts to encourage the formation of fascist movements today are not fundamentally the products of Donald Trump or of any individual figure. They are rooted in the objective economic crisis, which has seen no economic improvement for the working class, but rather steadily increasing inequality, since the financial crash of 2008, and for which every section of the capitalist class and its political establishment is responsible.

The Auschwitz exhibition reminds visitors of the shameful experience in 1939 of the *St. Louis*, the ship packed with European refugees from Nazism that was turned away by the Cuban government in Havana harbor, and then refused entry by the US authorities as it desperately made its way up the coast of Florida. The ship was forced to return to Europe, and many of its passengers later perished in the Holocaust, some of them in Auschwitz itself.

Today, with a record number of 70.8 million refugees around the world, the issue of migrants desperately fleeing political persecution and the threat of death is back, and every political representative of the capitalist ruling classes in Europe, Australia and North America is reprising the criminal indifference and hostility of their counterparts in the 20th century. This underscores the fundamental lesson of a study of Auschwitz: The choice before humanity is that between socialism and barbarism, and it is necessary to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership before decaying capitalism plunges the world back into world war and genocide again.

*The author also recommends:*

Seventy years since the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army

[16 February 2015]

A critical review of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*

[17 April 1997]



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