Boris Romanchenko, 96-year-old concentration camp survivor, killed in Kharkiv bombing

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A Russian bombing raid on Kharkiv (Kharkov) killed Boris Romanchenko, a 96-year-old survivor of four Nazi concentration camps. According to his granddaughter, both his apartment and his body were completely burned up because of the attack. He was laid to rest in Kharkiv on March 24.

Romanchenko is now one of an estimated 1,081 civilians who have been killed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine just over a month ago.

Along with the estimated 42,000 survivors of Nazism who are still alive in Ukraine, Romanchenko had gone through the most traumatic experiences of the 20th century. Now, they are caught up again in the midst of yet another horrific war. The majority of them are too weak and sick to go and seek safety in bomb shelters. Romanchenko himself had not left his apartment for many months even prior to the outbreak of war, fearing infection with COVID-19.

Romanchenko was born into a peasant family in East Ukraine, in the Chernigov region, then already part of the Soviet Union. His family narrowly survived the horrific famine of 1932-33, brought about by Stalin's criminal forced collectivization policy.

On June 22, 1941, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, quickly overrunning large parts of what are now Belarus, the Baltics and Ukraine. Over the next four years, the Nazi war would result in the death of an estimated 27 million Soviet citizens. Among them were at least 5 million Ukrainians, including almost 1.5 million Ukrainian Jews.

In 1942, as a 16-year-old, Romanchenko was deported as a forced laborer by the Nazis to Dortmund in Germany to work in a coal mine. He later recalled, "They [the Nazis] put together lists of all boys and men from 16 to 60 years old and gradually sent everyone to Germany so that they wouldn't join the partisan movement."

These mass deportations were aimed both at breaking the growing resistance of the population and addressing the dramatic labor shortage in the German war economy. In Germany, they were forced to perform slave labor for the Nazi war economy either directly for German companies or in concentration camps, which were often affiliated either with the army or a specific German business. At its peak in 1944, this gigantic slave labor machinery encompassed, according to contemporary estimates, 8.5 million workers from all over occupied Europe (roughly a quarter of the total workforce).

Between 3 million and 5.5 million people, including many underage youth like Romanchenko, were brought to Germany from the occupied territories of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe — the vast majority of them from the Reichskommissariat Ukraine. They were derogatorily called "Ostarbeiter" ("Eastern workers").

Days after Romanchenko's arrival in Dortmund, an accident at the mine that killed one worker provoked sufficient chaos for Romanchenko and a few others to take the initiative and try to flee. However, they were caught and, as punishment, sent to concentration camps.

Romanchenko was initially sent to Buchenwald in January 1943. He later described his experiences at Buchenwald, "The crematoriums were working off an increased load [of bodies] because the nourishment was so poor. They only gave enough so that people could somehow move around. By then, I was only weighing 34.5 kilograms."

Attempts to flee or resist were punished harshly. "The most horrific incident was when they hanged 80 people, they had found explosives on them and [after killing them] the SS-guards turned their bodies face-up and we had to walk by and look at them."

From Buchenwald, he was transferred to Peenemünde concentration camp, which was affiliated with the German Army Weapon's Office (Heereswaffenamt). Here, concentration camp inmates like Romanchenko were forced to work on the Nazi program to produce V-2 missiles.

After a few months, he was transferred yet again, to the camp Dora-Mittelbau (also known as Nordhausen), which was part of a massive concentration camp complex in central Germany that was also primarily used for the Nazis' V-2 missile program. At Dora-Mittelbau, most prisoners had to perform heavy labor underground, deprived not only of adequate food but also of daylight, making it one of the concentration camps with the highest mortality. (Between 12,000 and 20,000 inmates are estimated to have died there during the war.)

Just before the end of the war, in March 1945, Romanchenko was transferred one more time, to the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. Upon its liberation by British and American troops, Romanchenko, now 19 years old, weighed a mere 39 kilograms (about 86 lbs).

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After the war, he first worked for the Soviet military administration and then signed up for service in the Red Army, which had played the principal role in liberating Europe from Nazism. He was stationed in East Germany until 1950.

Romanchenko returned to Soviet Ukraine at age 24, became an engineer and worked for an enterprise involved in the production of agricultural technology. For the past decades, Romanchenko has played an active role in keeping alive public memory of the horrors of Nazism. He was the Ukrainian representative at the memorial site of Buchenwald-Dora, and frequently spoke on television about his experiences, wearing both his concentration camp inmate uniform and medals of the Red Army. He did whatever he could to prevent the horrors of war and fascism from reoccurring.

His killing in a bombing raid now has provoked justified outrage and horror among millions, who sense that all the unresolved questions of the 20th century—war, fascism and dictatorship—are reemerging with full force. It is a stark testimony to the criminal character of the war waged by the Putin regime in Ukraine.

While the Kremlin, exploiting the well-grounded fears of another world war and fascism in the Russian population, seeks to portray its invasion as a continuation of the struggle of the Red Army against Nazi Germany in World War II, it is, in reality, a war waged by a capitalist oligarchy that has emerged from the destruction of the very gains of the October Revolution that the Soviet masses defended against fascism.

Besieged by imperialism, the Putin regime has launched the invasion in a desperate and reckless way to defend its national interests and somehow reach a deal with imperialism. In Russia itself, the Putin regime turns ever more aggressively to political repression and the promotion of far-right nationalism and militarism, as masses of workers are being driven into destitution by the economic sanctions.

Not only are the aims of the war reactionary. By its very nature and the methods with which it is fought, the war serves to disorient, divide and confuse workers not only in Russia and Ukraine but worldwide.

The horrific death of Romanchenko is a case in point.

Since news broke of his killing, the imperialist powers and the Zelensky government have sought to exploit the legitimate anger about Romanchenko's death for the most sinister purposes. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky used it to plead, yet again, for even greater NATO intervention in the conflict, an act that directly threatens a third world war.

He called the killing an example of "Russian fascism" that was supposedly worse "than Hitler" —who was responsible for the industrial murder of 6 million European Jews and tens of millions of European workers. Zelensky made these statements as his own government relies on neo-Nazi forces like the Azov Battalion, which openly glorify the Nazi movement and Ukrainian Nazi collaborators, to fight against the Russian army with NATO weapons. At the same time, far-right paramilitary and vigilante units are running run amok across Ukraine, terrorizing the population.

But nowhere did the cynical attempt to exploit Romanchenko's death for imperialist war aims strike as sinister a note as in Germany, where the parliament held a minute of silence for Romanchenko. It is a parliament that includes representatives from the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD), whose head, Alexander Gauland, has publicly ridiculed the crimes of Nazism as "bird shit," and it is a parliament that just passed a record €100-billion-euro war budget, tripling Germany's defense spending—something that not even Hitler dared to try after coming to power in 1933.

The long-prepared resurgence of German militarism has been accompanied by a systematic whitewashing of the crimes of Nazism, most notably by Humboldt University's Jörg Baberowski, who claimed back in 2014 that "Hitler was not vicious." He has received state backing ever since. Unless stopped by the working class, the consequences of the volcanic reeruption of German imperialism will outstrip even the horrors of Nazism in World War II.

Workers must reject with contempt these attempts to exploit Romanchenko's death to further imperialist war preparations against Russia. As criminal and reactionary as Putin's war in Ukraine is, the comparisons with Hitler and Nazi Germany are false. They ultimately minimize the scale of the crimes of fascism and can only work to desensitize and disorient workers at the very moment when fascist forces are being built up and armed all over the world—with Ukraine now the center stage of this process.

Above all else, workers must understand the death of Romanchenko as a sober reminder that the 20th century has remained, indeed, unfinished. Contrary to the claims of the bourgeois pundits in the 1990s, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and destruction of the remaining gains of the 1917 socialist revolution in Russia did not mark "the end of history." On the contrary. Thirty years later, capitalism is again in the process of plunging humanity into a disaster. "Socialism or barbarism," as the great Marxist Rosa Luxemburg posed it, is raised more sharply than ever before.

The only way to appropriately commemorate Romanchenko is through the struggle to build a socialist movement in the international working class that is determined to put an end to imperialist war, fascism, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

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