

The Zone of Interest: Making the commandant of Auschwitz into “one of us”

Joanne Laurier
1 March 2024

Director Jonathan Glazer’s *The Zone of Interest*, adapted from Martin Amis’ 2014 novel of the same title, is a historical drama about Rudolf Höss, the Nazi commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, one of the most depraved figures in world history. In an affidavit drawn up in Nuremberg, Germany in 1946, following his arrest, Höss wrote,

I commanded Auschwitz until 1 December 1943, and estimate that at least 2,500,000 victims were executed and exterminated there by gassing and burning, and at least another half million succumbed to starvation and disease, making a total of about 3,000,000 dead.

Glazer’s film has garnered Academy Award nominations for best picture, international film, director, original screenplay and cinematography. However, in its conception and production, *The Zone of Interest* is a misguided and disoriented work, one that conceals the concrete historical circumstances that produced someone like Höss, and therefore weakens the ability of the population today to defeat and destroy the fascist menace.

Glazer, formerly involved in making music videos and commercials, has a filmography that includes *Sexy Beast* (2000) and *Under the Skin* (2013), neither of which made a favorable impression.

The “zone of interest” of the title refers to the SS-administered area surrounding the Auschwitz death camp in German-occupied southern Poland. During World War II, the SS expelled some 9,000 local residents from this 16-square-mile zone, preventing outsiders from witnessing the atrocities and isolating the prisoners from the rest of the world.

The movie opens in 1943. Höss, one of the architects of the Holocaust, played by Christian Friedel, his wife Hedwig (Sandra Hüller) and the couple’s five children live a supposedly idyllic life in a compound immediately adjacent to the camp. A wall separates their well-appointed home from the death factory. Inmates are forced laborers for the family, and luxury items are confiscated from the murdered. Hedwig’s beloved garden is fertilized with the ashes of incinerated corpses. She is affectionately dubbed “Queen of Auschwitz” by her husband.

Höss must cut short a day of fishing because human remains float in the lake. The children have a collection of gold-inlaid teeth and tease each other by mimicking the noises they hear from the horrors beyond the wall. Meanwhile, a Polish servant girl at the Höss villa sneaks out every night, hiding food at the prisoners’ work sites for them to find.

In one scene, two individuals present Höss with designs for a rotating incinerator that burns bodies more efficiently. Off-screen, the sounds of panicked screaming women and children can be heard, train engines rumble and hiss and smoke billows from Auschwitz’s crematorium.

The commandant receives word he is being promoted to deputy inspector of all concentration camps and must relocate to Oranienburg,

near Berlin. But the thought of leaving her beautiful house and garden unhinges Hedwig, and she is ultimately given permission to stay with the children in her carefully manicured paradise.

At one point, a Nazi officer bluntly announces to an administrative gathering that the “Führer has approved the deportation of Hungary’s seven hundred thousand Jews for extermination and war production where able-bodied. An agreement was reached with the new Hungarian government to begin the action immediately. They are being amassed for transportation to Auschwitz. Four trains a day, three thousand in each, twelve thousand daily...”

While *The Zone of Interest* makes some empirical points about the Holocaust, it thoroughly abstracts the monstrous Höss from his social and political history and from the rise of fascism in Germany.

The filmmakers strive to contrast the mundaneness of life in the Höss homestead with the atrocities only hinted at taking place on the other side of the wall. In other words, according to the film, “ordinary” human beings have the capacity to compartmentalize themselves to such a degree they can live “normal” lives while engaging in mass torture and murder.

How so? Because, apparently, of the “heart of darkness” within each of us. Such a fallacious, pessimistic view is a product of tremendous intellectual-moral decay. Along with everything else, it represents a throwing up of the hands in the face of the need to examine and understand the Holocaust, its causes and place in 20th century history.

Glazer views the problem as rooted in some alleged eternal, unchanging human nature.

The director told the *Guardian* that “I was really interested in making a film that went underneath that [the immediate events] to the primordial bottom of it all, which I felt was the thing in us that drives it all, the capacity for violence that we all have.” Responding to a comment about the genocide in Gaza, he added that the “sickening thing about this film is it’s timely and it’s always going to be timely until we can somehow evolve out of this cycle of violence that we perpetuate as human beings. And when will that happen? Not in our lifetime. Right now, it seems to be reversing and I’m mindful of that, too, in terms of the film and its complexity.”

Of course, the possibility of fascism and, more than that, fascist forces themselves *do* exist, in Germany, in the US and in Israel, for example, but they are not produced by abstract human nature, by the “fascist within” but by definite historical and social circumstances.

Rudolf and Hedwig Höss were vomited up trait by trait, conception by conception, by the intractable crisis of German imperialism. As Trotsky wrote about Nazism in 1933, “Everything that should have been eliminated from the national organism in the form of cultural excrement in the course of the normal development of society has now come gushing out from the throat; capitalist society is puking up the undigested barbarism. Such is the physiology of National Socialism.” This pair exemplifies this process.

From a strict Catholic, middle class family, his father a former army

officer in colonial German East Africa, Höss volunteered for the German army in 1916 and served in the Middle East during World War I. In 1920, he joined the East Prussian Free Corps (Freikorps), the proto-fascist force, and took part in the suppression of “disturbances” in Latvia and in quelling workers who were staging a revolt in the Ruhr. The Baltic region was a hotbed of anti-communism and extreme right-wing ideology in the wake of the Russian Revolution.

It was through the Freikorps, in early 1922, that Höss was first introduced to Hitler. By this time, he was a virulent enemy of Bolshevism, a fanatical German nationalist and a hater of Jews insofar as they were identified with Marxism and internationalism. In 1923, he was involved—on the order of future Nazi leader Martin Bormann—in the savage beating death of a teacher, believed to have tipped off occupying French forces about sabotage efforts by Albert Schlageter and sentenced to 10 years in prison, only five of which he served.

In 1934, Höss became part of the SS and soon attached to the Nazi paramilitary organization at the Dachau concentration camp. On August 1, 1938, he was named as adjutant of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp until his appointment as commandant of the newly built Auschwitz camp in early 1940. Höss converted Auschwitz into an extermination camp and installed gas chambers and crematoria that were capable of killing 2,000 people every hour. “Counting corpses with the cool dedication of a trained bookkeeper, he went home each night to the loving embrace of his own family who lived on the camp grounds. Watching millions of innocent human beings dissolve in the gas chambers, burn in the crematoriums and their teeth melt into gold bars, Höss wrote poetry about the beauty of Auschwitz,” according to the Jewish Virtual Library.

Auschwitz became the killing center where the largest numbers of European Jews were murdered. By mid-1942, mass gassing of Jews using Zyklon-B began at Auschwitz, where extermination was conducted on an industrial scale with 2.5-3.5 million persons eventually killed through gassing, starvation, disease, hanging and shooting.

In late 1943, Höss was appointed chief inspector of the concentration camps and worked hard to improve the “efficiency” of the other extermination centers. He performed his job so well that he was commended in a 1944 SS report that called him “a true pioneer in this area because of his new ideas and educational methods.”

As for Hedwig Höss, who went unpunished, she matched her husband in her antisemitism and barbaric enthusiasm for the “Final Solution.” Stanislaw Dubiel, a Pole who worked as the family’s gardener, in testimony provided after the war, reported that Hedwig “believed that [Jews] all must disappear from the surface of the earth, and that someday the time would come even for English Jews.”

These are the individuals Glazer proposes to stand in for average human beings with the average “capacity for violence.” References to the “banality of evil,” an over-used phrase, cannot be made into a substitute for the concrete examination of historical processes.

As David North explained in his essay on Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1997), to those who hold such views,

there is nothing of great importance to be gained from a study of the economic foundations, class structure and political struggles of European and German society prior to the advent of the Third Reich.

At best, North went on,

such a scientific-materialist approach will offer nothing more than background information about the incidental social setting in

which the forces of human evil, lodged deep in man’s soul or psyche, gained ascendancy, as they inevitably must, over the restraining moral influences of civilization.

Moreover, *The Zone of Interest*’s provenance is unsavory to the utmost, based as it is on a work by a vicious anti-communist, British author Martin Amis. In its June 2023 obituary of Amis, the WSWS pointed out his filthy role in accusing the British left of “‘rampant’ affinity with Hezbollah, for example, asserting that hostility to Israel is the only real expression of racism.”

Amis’s claims,

fed into a broader smear campaign asserting that the “left” was deeply antisemitic, intended as a defense of the crimes perpetrated against the Palestinians by the State of Israel and as a means of denigrating socialism and relativising and apologizing for the fascist right.

Glazer’s views about the “fascist in all of us” bring him into line with a definite trend in postmodernist thinking. Director of the pro-CIA *Zero Dark Thirty* Kathryn Bigelow once explained how French semiotician and Columbia University Professor Sylvère Lotringer would assert “that in the 1960s you think of the enemy as outside yourself, in other words a police officer, the government, the system, but that that’s not really the case at all, fascism is very insidious, we reproduce it all the time.” (WSWS, 2012)

Variations of these ignorant, gloomy conceptions, presented as “radical” and “deep-going,” pervade pseudo-left circles. It is no accident that *Jacobin* magazine praises *The Zone of Interest* and insists that “if you’re serious about film as well as the evocation of how we tend to live in a common state of proximity to human atrocity, hurry out to see *The Zone of Interest* while it’s still in theaters. The big screen and the cavernous darkness and your undivided attention are necessary to the experience.”

The reactionary nostrums are belied by the present political situation and the mass, global revulsion at Israeli genocide in Gaza, against which tens of millions have protested. Glazer’s view that nothing can be done until the population purifies itself deflects attention from the concrete circumstances that give rise to fascism and other horrible crimes—decaying capitalism—and the movements, parties and individuals responsible. It works in opposition to mobilizing and energizing people against these filthy forces, and lulls them to sleep.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact