80 years since the liberation of Lublin-Majdanek concentration camp: From Hitler's war in the East to the Holocaust

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July 23 was the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Lublin-Majdanek concentration camp in Poland. Commemorative ceremonies were held in Lublin, where a memorial to the Nazi crimes was established shortly after the liberation in 1944. In Germany, however, the date was hardly noticed by the official political establishment. There were only a few small events, including one at the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum, which commemorates the site of the capitulation of Nazi Germany in the Second World War.

This is remarkable, because it was the first major Nazi camp to be liberated by the Red Army, and that was half a year before Auschwitz. Its history shows, as historian and Holocaust researcher Stephan Lehnstaedt put it at the Berlin memorial event, "basically all aspects of occupation and the Holocaust in Eastern Europe."

In fact, the history of Majdanek is particularly revealing. It is here that the connection between Nazi Germany's war of aggression against the Soviet Union and the Holocaust, the extermination of the Jewish population, which primarily affected Poland and Eastern Europe, can be seen most directly.

What began as a prison and forced labour camp as part of the Germanisation and resettlement policy ended with the murder of around 80,000 prisoners, including over 60,000 Jews.

When Soviet soldiers and members of the Polish underground army reached the camp on the outskirts of Lublin in eastern Poland on the night of July 22-23,1944, they found a place of horror: burning barracks, demolished watchtowers, shooting pits, destroyed gas chambers, crematoria with ashes, bones, human remains and mountains of shoes of murdered people. Between all this, around a thousand prisoners in a pitiful state between life and death. The SS guards had fled the camp a few hours before their arrival, setting the buildings on fire, hastily burying corpses and transporting around a thousand prisoners to Auschwitz.

Shortly after the soldiers arrived, relatives and local residents flocked to the huge camp site. On August 6, 1944, they gathered at a memorial service in Lublin, which was also attended by international war reporters. The horrific images of the Nazi killing machine quickly spread around the world. However, the pleas of Jewish exile groups to the American and British allied forces to bomb the railway lines to Auschwitz, where the mass murders continued day after day, fell on deaf ears.

A Soviet-Polish camera team—including Stanis?aw Wohl, Aleksander Ford and Adolf Forbert, who would later found the Filmhochschule ?ód?—immediately began work on a film documentary, which was released that same year: "Vernichtungslager Majdanek—Friedhof Europas" (Majdanek Extermination Camp—Europe's Cemetery), in which original statements by survivors and captured SS guards can be heard.

On 19 August 1944, just under a month after the camp was liquidated, the initiative to establish a museum was launched. Majdanek thus became the first concentration camp memorial in Europe to begin its work during the war, in November 1944.

From the "Generalplan Ost" to "Aktion Reinhardt"

Lublin, a historic city in eastern Poland with a population of 120,000 at the time, a third being Jews, was located only about a hundred kilometres from the border with the Soviet Ukrainian Republic. After the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, it became part of the occupied General Government of Poland under the command of General Governor Hans Frank, the "Butcher of Poland" who was later executed in Nuremberg.

His right-hand man in the Lublin district was Odilo Globocnik, whom Heinrich Himmler had appointed SS and police leader of Lublin. The Austrian Nazi, former Gauleiter in Vienna, notorious for his mistreatment of Jews and personal enrichment at their expense, organised a brutal campaign of terror in the city and surrounding area immediately after the occupation.

He drove farmers from their farms and their homes, recruited paramilitary gangs of the "Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz" (German Self-Defence) from the German minority and used them for the mass executions of the so-called "Intelligenzaktion" (Intelligentsia Action) and the subsequent AB-Aktion ("Extraordinary Pacification Action"). This genocidal campaign by the German occupying power was intended to break the resistance of the Polish population and to initiate the Nazis' plans for Germanisation and resettlement. Globocnik began building forced labour camps as early as 1939, including the Lublin Lipowa camp.

Four weeks after the start of the campaign against the Soviet Union in 1941, Hitler gave the Reichsführer of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, the task of "securing the newly occupied eastern territories." He immediately travelled to Lublin and appointed Odilo Globocnik as his "representative for the establishment of SS and police bases in the new eastern territories." Lublin, with its high proportion of Jewish inhabitants, was to be the centre and was to be settled by Germans from the Reich.

To this end, the construction of the camp in the Lublin suburb of Majdan Tatarski, which later became the Majdanek camp complex, began in October 1941. Himmler initially ordered the construction of a "concentration camp for 25,000 to 50,000 prisoners to be used for workshops and buildings for the SS and police"[1], which was officially called the "prisoner-of-war camp of the Waffen-SS." It was not until 1943 that Majdanek was designated the "Lublin concentration and labour camp."

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The intention was to create a central military supply base for the network of fortified SS and police locations and industrial enterprises planned for the east, to supply the Wehrmacht (Armed Forces). Globocnik became one of the two managing directors of Ostindustrie GmbH, which operated its own SS armaments company and appropriated existing private companies.

"In effect, Globocnik was thus entrusted with the implementation of the Generalplan Ost," Stephan Lehnstaedt said in Berlin. This plan of the Nazi regime, commissioned by Himmler and developed at the Friedrich Wilhelm University, now Humboldt University, under the leadership of the agronomist and SS-Oberführer Konrad Meyer (1901-1973), was an essential basis for the Nazis' war strategy in the east.

The Generalplan Ost envisaged the expulsion of the majority of the "Slavic sub-humans"—Russians, Poles, Czechs and Ukrainians—from Eastern Europe and the enslavement of the remainder. The plan also included the extensive extermination of Jews and 30 million deaths from starvation.

The Nazis originally planned to build barracks for 250,000 prisoners on a huge site covering 516 hectares but were later forced to scale down their plans. Unlike the outright extermination camps such as Auschwitz II, also known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, or Treblinka II, crematoria with a smaller capacity were only built relatively late at Majdanek.

Initially, the prisoners were exploited to the point of exhaustion as forced labourers under miserable living conditions. The mortality rate was extremely high. Of the 76,000 Jewish forced labourers, 63,000 died—first through extermination through work and then through extermination with gas vans and in gas chambers. Inmates who were unfit for work or ill were deported to the region's specially constructed death camps, to Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka.

According to more recent findings, the inmates of Majdanek also included 35,000 Poles, among them numerous resistance fighters, as well as entire families from Belarus and Ukraine who had been deported to build SS bases, and 14,000 Soviet prisoners of war. Around 15,000 members of this group of prisoners were also murdered.

According to Stephan Lehnstaedt, the fact that there were not even more Polish victims was also due to the courageous intervention of a Jewish mathematician from the Galician city of Lviv (Lemberg), Dr Janina Mehlberg, who passed herself off as the Polish countess Janina Suchodolska and, in negotiations with the camp commandants, saved thousands of Polish prisoners, including over 2,000 farmers.

After the Wannsee Conference in 1942, at which the Nazi leadership decided upon the extermination of European Jewry, the "Aktion Reinhardt" programme was concentrated in Lublin, leading to the murder of 1.8 million Polish Jews and Roma within a year. The code name is associated with the Nazi response to the assassination of the head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA, Reich Security Main Office), Reinhard Heydrich, in Prague at the end of May 1942.

"Lublin was the centre of Aktion Reinhardt," said Lehnstaedt in an interview. "It is the place where the economic activities converge. It is where the Jews who are still needed for forced labour and exploitation are distributed. It is where the stolen goods are sorted and processed. It is from there that people are transported to other camps, and it is from there that everything is coordinated."

The forced labour in the workshops of Majdanek and its satellite camps Lublin-Lipowastraße, Budzy?, Bli?in, Trawniki and others served to supply the Wehrmacht— for example, Wehrmacht uniforms were manufactured by the company Schultz & Co., ammunition and ammunition boxes by the Deutsche Ausrüstungswerke DAW, parts for Heinkel aircraft construction and weapons by Steyr Daimler Puch.

"Aktion Erntefest"

Aktion Reinhardt was followed by Aktion Erntefest (Action Harvest Festival). This cynical code name concealed the mass shooting of all remaining Jews in occupied Poland, including forced labourers. SS Reichsführer Himmler had personally planned and ordered it in 1943, justifying it with security concerns. He was reacting to the uprisings of Jewish, Polish and Soviet prisoners that had broken out in the Warsaw Ghetto (April/May 1943), Bialystok Ghetto (August 1943) and the extermination camps Treblinka (August 1943) and Sobibor (October 1943) after the defeat of the Wehrmacht in Stalingrad.

Fearing further unrest, Himmler and Globocnik planned a mass murder of 43,000 Jewish inmates of the remaining labour camps Majdanek, Trawniki and Poniatowa at the same time on November 3-4, 1943. In the main camp of Majdanek alone, the SS shot 18,400 people in one day! To drown out the sound of the machine-gun fire and the screams of the victims, the Nazis played a gramophone loudly, blaring out classical music.

Silence after 1945

After the Second World War, the Nazi murders were mainly prosecuted by Polish-Soviet courts. Immediately after the liberation of the camp, the Soviet army command, with the support of Polish units, set up a commission of inquiry that organised an inspection of the camp and prepared the first trial in the same year against six captured SS perpetrators. It ended with death sentences. A second trial against 95 SS prisoners from 1946 to 1948 ended with seven death penalties and long prison sentences.

In West Germany, the murderers of Majdanek remained virtually unchallenged, the existence of the camp was long kept secret and has hardly been discussed to this day. It was not until ten years after the end of the Auschwitz trial, in 1975, that a six-year trial began in Düsseldorf against some mostly lower-ranking members of the SS guard team.

In 1981, the trial ended with only one life sentence for Hermine Braunsteiner-Ryan, the female camp guard, and mostly with short prison sentences or acquittals. The trial ended in a riot when a lawyer for one of the Nazi defendants loudly demanded that a surviving witness who had been forced by the warden to carry a container of Zyklon B be charged with aiding and abetting the murder.

Even today, the Federal Republic of Germany refuses to contribute financially to the Majdanek memorial in Lublin. Stephan Lehnstaedt responded to a question from the Berlin audience: "A clear no."

Except for Auschwitz, Germany also refuses to contribute financially to other memorials. And this happens with "very absurd justifications." Cornelia Pieper (Liberal Democrat, FDP), until 2013 State Secretary at the Foreign Ministry and since 2014 Consul General in Gdansk, Poland, said during the construction of a new memorial in Sobibor: "The victim nations are participating, but Germany was not there."

According to Lehnstaedt, the so-called Theresienstadt Declaration is being invoked. "And that is a masterpiece of German diplomacy, in that it states that the countries in which the memorials are located are financially responsible for them." The German government only provides subsidies for individual projects. Overall, it was focusing unilaterally on the Holocaust and on Auschwitz, Lehnstaedt complained, since this was more effective in the media.

The real reason is that German politics after 1945 never really broke with the Nazi traditions. The 80th anniversary commemoration of

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Majdanek in the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum ended a series of events on the year 1944, which included the liberation of Leningrad after the Wehrmacht's hunger blockade, the severe crimes committed by the Wehrmacht in the Ozarichi death camp and the Maly Trostenez extermination site on the outskirts of Minsk.

But these crimes against humanity do not prevent German imperialism today from pursuing its geopolitical and economic goals through war and the promotion of fascist tendencies. In Ukraine, it is supporting the war against Russia with billions of euros and is working with a regime that erects monuments to Nazi collaborators and mass murderers from the Second World War, such as Stepan Bandera and Roman Shushkevich.

Just a few days before the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Majdanek by the Soviet Red Army, a decree issued by the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) was announced, honouring leading generals and officers of the Nazi Wehrmacht as fostering "tradition" and "identification." And two weeks later, German-supplied tanks rolled over the border into Russia near Kursk.

In Gaza, the German government supports the Israeli army's genocide of the Palestinians and denounces anyone who protests against it as an "anti-Semite," including numerous Jews. In return, it receives applause from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and numerous other fascist organisations.

Official politics, its compliant media and academic lackeys twist history to justify this criminal policy. In doing so, they eliminate the Holocaust, the extermination of the Jews, from its historical context, the war of extermination against the Soviet Union. Hitler's and the Nazi leadership's "anti-Semitism" was inextricably linked to their hatred of socialism and the Soviet Union. At the centre of their aggressive war propaganda was "Jewish Bolshevism," which they held responsible for the October Revolution of 1917 and the defeat of German imperialism in the First World War.

As the American historian Stephen G. Fritz put it in 2011, "For him [Hitler], the 'right' war was always the one against the Soviet Union, because for him the fate of Germany depended on the conquest of living space (Lebensraum) and the solution of the 'Jewish question.' Both, in turn, depended on the destruction of the Soviet Union. For him, the war against 'Jewish Bolshevism' and for Lebensraum was comprehensive and of a piece."[3]

This is also the deeper reason for the almost complete annihilation of Polish Jews, who, after the October Revolution, tended to be politically left-wing, especially in the cities, and did not support the religious, Zionist minority parties. Before the Nazi invasion on 1 September 1939, the socialist and anti-Zionist General Labour Union—"The Bund"—was the strongest Jewish party in Poland. The Communist Party also had a large following among Jews.

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[1] Tomasz Kranz: "The Lublin Concentration Camp – Between Planning and Realisation." In: Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth, Christoph Dieckmann: *The Nazi Concentration Camps*. FiTb, Frankfurt 1998

[2] Elizabeth B. White, Joanna Sliwa: *The Counterfeit Countess.* Simon & Schuster 2024

[3] Fritz, Stephen G., *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*. The University Press of Kentucky. Kindle Edition

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