

80 years after the liberation of Auschwitz: Imperialist barbarism returns

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Eighty years ago, on 27 January 1945, the Soviet Red Army liberated the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. The soldiers were presented with an indescribable scene of horror. Auschwitz, the German name for the small town of Oświęcim in southern Poland, came to epitomise crimes beyond the scope of human imagination.

The Nazi regime murdered between 1.1 and 1.5 million people in the Auschwitz camp complex during the Second World War. Ninety per cent of them were Jews, but Poles, Sinti and Roma as well as Soviet prisoners of war were also killed.

What makes Auschwitz so terrible is not only the gigantic number of murder victims, but also the cold-blooded efficiency with which tens of thousands of SS members, state officials and business leaders worked together to make the mass murder possible. Never before had the apparatus of a modern industrialised state been used so systematically to carry out genocide.

Municipal officials in Germany and the Nazi-occupied territories identified the murder victims as Jews, the police rounded them up, and the railway transported them in freight cars like cattle to Auschwitz. There they were selected at the ramp. Those who were unable to work at heavy labour—mainly children, women and the elderly—were herded into the gas chambers, killed and their bodies burned. In the three months from May to July 1944 alone, around 400,000 Jews from Hungary died in this way in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Those able to work had to labour in the camp itself or for German companies until they died of hunger and exhaustion or were driven into the gas chambers themselves. Some were forced to die as guinea pigs in medical experiments. German companies, such as IG Farben, built factories specifically for this purpose in the huge Auschwitz complex, which comprised three main camps and 50 subcamps. The Nazis endeavoured to squeeze every last ounce of profit out of the victims. Even their hair and gold teeth were utilised for commercial gain.

Auschwitz was just one of many German extermination camps. Millions more people were shot on the spot or murdered in other bestial ways as the German troops advanced through Poland and the USSR.

Only a few of those responsible for the mass murder were held accountable for their actions. In Eastern Europe, in particular, which was under Soviet control after the war, trials were held, some of which led to death sentences. In Nuremberg in 1945-46, the wartime Allies held 13 trials of leading representatives of the Nazi regime. However, the result remained modest, with 24 death sentences and 118 prison sentences, which were reduced in length soon afterwards. The main significance of the Nuremberg Trials lay in the fact that they set new standards in international law.

Business leaders who had supported the Nazis and profited from forced labour also stood trial in Nuremberg. They only received short prison sentences, which served primarily for their own protection. They were allowed to keep most of the assets they had acquired through robbery and mass murder and were even allowed to run their companies from prison. To this day, the fortunes of many German billionaire families can be traced back to the complicity of their parents and grandparents with the Nazi regime.

With the beginning of the Cold War, the prosecution of Nazi perpetrators in the West was largely discontinued. Military officers, secret police agents, judges, senior civil servants, professors and business leaders were declared “de-Nazified” and returned to their old posts. The Chancellery, where the important personnel decisions were made, was headed by Hans Globke, co-author and elaborator of the Nuremberg Race Laws.

The first Auschwitz trial in Germany did not take place until 1963, 18 years after Soviet troops put an end to the mass killing there. This was mainly due to the tireless efforts of the chief prosecutor in the state of Hesse, Fritz Bauer, who had to fight against countless obstacles and personal attacks. Here, too, the number of convictions remained low. However, the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials had great educational value. They opened the eyes of the younger generation that had grown up after the war and contributed significantly to their radicalisation and to the mass protests of 1968-69.

In the 1970s, the confrontation with the Nazi regime also found its way into schools. Many old Nazis had by then retired and been replaced by younger teachers who had been influenced by the 1968 movement. The slogan “Never again!” was deeply engraved in the consciousness of a generation, without them understanding exactly what had led to the catastrophe. But the vast majority were convinced that such a crime against humanity must not and could not be repeated.

Eighty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, this is no longer the case. Genocide, the persecution and killing of entire populations because of their national origin or religion, “total war” targeting civilians as well as soldiers, and even the possible use of nuclear weapons are once again considered “normal.” This also characterises the official commemoration ceremony, which takes place today at 4 p.m. on the former concentration camp site in Auschwitz.

The official guest list includes numerous heads of state and heads of government from Europe. French President Emmanuel Macron, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Chancellor Olaf Scholz as well as Britain’s King Charles are travelling to the event.

Russia, the main successor state to the Soviet Union, which liberated Auschwitz at enormous cost, will not be represented. The reason for

this is that Germany is once again waging war on the Eastern Front, the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war three years ago, the imperialist powers have supported Ukraine with weapons, ammunition and financial aid totalling 213 billion euros. A further 147 billion euros have already been pledged.

The claim that this war is in defence of Ukraine against a Russian war of aggression is simply a lie. In reality, NATO provoked the war by expanding further and further towards Russia, contrary to earlier commitments it had made.

The Putin regime, which owes its power to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the plundering of social property by billionaire oligarchs, had no progressive response to this. Unable to appeal to the Ukrainian and international working class, it responded with a reactionary war. However, the responsibility for the war lies with NATO, which is pursuing the goals of controlling Ukraine and breaking up Russia, as well as exploiting the vast natural resources of both countries.

Significantly, there is no Ukrainian representative on the official guest list for the Auschwitz ceremony. This may yet change, as Poland is one of Ukraine's closest allies in the war against Russia.

However, there are also good reasons for Poland not inviting Ukraine to the Auschwitz commemoration. The regime in Kiev honours Nazi collaborators and accomplices of the Holocaust. In the Ukrainian city of Lviv, less than 400 kilometres from Auschwitz, there is a huge monument to Stepan Bandera, whose OUN not only supported the Holocaust but also murdered tens of thousands of Poles in order to create an ethnically pure western Ukraine. The official Bandera cult has repeatedly led to conflicts between Warsaw and Kiev.

Israel is represented by Education Minister Yoav Kisch. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not travelling to Auschwitz because the International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant against him for war crimes and crimes against humanity. There was a long debate in Poland as to whether the arrest warrant, which it is legally obliged to execute, should be ignored.

Israel's actions against the Palestinians, which bear frightening parallels to the methods of the Nazis, are perhaps the clearest illustration of the extent to which genocide has once again become officially accepted "normality."

Even the US government is only represented at the memorial service by a member of the third rank, billionaire Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff. President Donald Trump harbours barely concealed sympathies for Hitler, and his policies—the deportation of millions of migrants, massive social cuts, the establishment of a police state, threats of violence against rivals and allies—show strong parallels to those of the Nazis.

Trump's close confidant Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, spoke on a big screen at the far-right Alternative for Germany's election campaign kick-off event in Halle the weekend before the memorial service in Auschwitz. He called on 4,500 cheering supporters of the far-right party to leave behind "too much focus on past guilt." Musk asserted that children should not be guilty for the sins of their great-grandparents. "It is very important that people in Germany are proud to be German," emphasised Musk. The commemoration of Auschwitz can only disturb this.

Eighty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, it can no longer be claimed that the Nazi barbarism was a historical accident. It was the concentrated expression of the bankruptcy of the capitalist social system. During the First World War, German imperialism

unsuccessfully attempted to bring Europe under its control and expand eastwards. Under the Nazis, it made a second attempt. It needed Hitler to crush the workers' movement and convert the entire economy to war production.

The working class could have stopped Hitler at the time. The two major workers' parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD), had more supporters than the Nazis, and they occupied an incomparably stronger position in the heart of the German economy. But neither the SPD nor the KPD leadership were prepared to fight. The SPD relied on the Weimar state and Reich President Hindenburg, who ultimately helped Hitler to power. The KPD, which was under the pernicious influence of Stalin, hid its unwillingness to fight behind radical verbal attacks on the SPD.

The genocide of the Jews was a result of this failure of the leadership of the working class. Hitler instrumentalised anti-Semitism in order to channel social tensions against a minority. He had learnt this in Vienna from the anti-Semitic Mayor Karl Lueger. The war of annihilation against the Soviet Union then created the conditions for realising his murderous plans.

Today, attacks on migrants, especially those of Muslim faith, play a similar role to that played by anti-Semitism in the past. But no one should be mistaken: Where there are right-wing extremists and fascists, anti-Semitism is also rampant.

The world is now confronted not only with the eruption of German imperialism, but also of American imperialism. Trump is no more a historical accident than Hitler. His return to the White House signifies, as the WSWS has declared, "the violent realignment of American politics with its underlying social reality." Huge social inequality and the relative decline of the US economy compared to its rivals, especially China, cannot be reconciled with democracy and peace.

This also applies to Germany and Europe. Far-right parties are already in power in Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and soon Austria. In Germany, the AfD is the second-strongest party, with support of around 20 percent in pre-election polls. The next German government wants to double or triple defence spending. All the established parties agree on this. This can only be achieved using fascist methods.

If there is one lesson to be learnt from Auschwitz, it is this: Fascism and war can only be stopped by the intervention of the working class. It must defend all democratic and social rights, unite internationally, expropriate the oligarchs and build a socialist society. To do this, it needs its own party—the Socialist Equality Party in Germany and its sister parties worldwide, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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