

The 70th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz

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On Tuesday, a public ceremony was held at Auschwitz to mark the 70th anniversary of the concentration camp's liberation by elements of the Soviet Union's Red Army on January 27, 1945. The very name of this Nazi death camp in southern Poland is synonymous with the greatest crimes and horrors of the 20th century, a byword for capitalist barbarism in its most extreme form.

Between early 1942 and late 1945, transport trains delivered Jews from throughout Nazi-occupied Europe to the gates of Auschwitz, which bore the infamous slogan "Arbeit macht frei" ("Work makes [you] free"). Over 1.1 million people were put to death at Auschwitz, hundreds of thousands of them sent immediately to gas chambers, others exterminated through starvation, overwork, disease or the hideous medical experiments carried out by the likes of Josef Mengele, known as the "Angel of Death."

While 90 percent of those murdered in the camp were Jews, 150,000 Poles, including political prisoners, 23,000 Romani and Sinti (Gypsies), 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and other national minorities, Jehovah's Witnesses and homosexuals were imprisoned and exterminated there.

The Nazi regime's "final solution of the Jewish question," was part of a wider "General Plan for the East," which envisioned the reduction of the population of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union by some 30 million through starvation and mass deportations. The plan included the demolition of cities and the turning over of the land to German colonists. By the end of the war, the Soviet Union had lost 14 percent of its population, some 27 million people, while Poland lost some 5.8 million, 16 percent of its population.

Auschwitz and all of the associated crimes of the Nazis were carried out by a regime brought to power with the support of Germany's capitalist ruling class for the purpose of smashing the country's socialist workers movement and overcoming the crisis of German capitalism by means of militarist aggression and conquest.

The observance of the anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation this year was attended by just a few hundred of the dwindling number of survivors of the death camp, most of them in their nineties. Many made statements of urgency and poignancy, conscious that they would not likely be present at the next major anniversary.

"People forget what Auschwitz was, and it terrifies me, because I know to what kind of hell it leads," said Roman Kent, 85. He concluded his remarks at the ceremony by stating, "We do not want our past to be our children's future."

These words resonated all the more because the ceremony was overshadowed by a new

drive toward world war and the threat of historic crimes to come, horrors that are being consciously prepared through the falsification of history. This was evident in the deliberate attempts to turn the anniversary into a vehicle for whipping up anti-Russian sentiment in Europe and promoting the US-led “war on terror.”

On the eve of the event, the Polish government went out of its way to snub the Russian government of President Vladimir Putin, while inviting the head of the NATO-backed regime in Ukraine, President Petro Poroshenko, as an honored guest. Asked by a Polish radio station whether Warsaw’s attitude toward Putin wasn’t petty, Foreign Minister Grzegorz Schetyna replied that the Russian president’s presence was superfluous because Auschwitz had been liberated by “the First Ukrainian Front and Ukrainians.”

Anyone with the slightest familiarity with the history of Auschwitz knows that it was liberated by a unit of the Soviet Union’s Red Army. More than 200 Soviet troops died in the battle to liberate Auschwitz and the adjacent Polish town. The so-called “Ukrainian Front” was named not for the national composition of its troops, but for the location where it had last fought in driving back the German occupiers.

This grotesque historical revisionism is of a piece with the statement made earlier this month by Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk on German television in which he condemned the “Soviet invasion of Ukraine and Germany” in World War II.

As for the present Ukrainian regime, given a place of honor at the ceremony, it was brought to power nearly a year ago through a US- and German-orchestrated coup spearheaded by the fascist bands of Svoboda and the Right Sector, which venerate the legacy of Hitler’s SS and of the Ukrainian fascist units that participated in the Holocaust.

Among the heads of state attending the ceremony was France’s President François Hollande, who in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in Paris invited to the presidential palace Marine Le Pen. Her National Front party is the political heir of the French Nazi collaborators of the Vichy regime. Hollande’s gesture marked yet another step in the drive by European governments to legitimize and rehabilitate fascism.

Also present was German President Joachim Gauck, who has served as the standard bearer for the revival of German militarism and a return to the great power imperialist politics that led to the catastrophes of World War I and World War II.

As an essential part of this process, German academics are revising history, downplaying the central responsibility of the German state for the previous world wars, and even relativizing the crimes of the Third Reich. The chief representative of this tendency in German historiography, Ernst Nolte, is being feted as a great historian. And in February 2014, the Berlin-based historian Jörg Baberowski — an ardent defender of Nolte — told *Der Spiegel* magazine: “Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn’t vicious. He didn’t want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

While much was written about Putin’s absence from the ceremony Tuesday, little was made in the media of US President Barack Obama’s decision to send the relatively unknown treasury secretary, Jack Lew, to represent Washington, while he and top US military and intelligence officials flew to Saudi Arabia to discuss Middle East war plans with the monarchical regime in the wake of Saudi King Abdullah’s demise.

Once again, as in the period that led to the rise of fascism in Europe and the outbreak of the Second World War, world capitalism is gripped by a deep and systemic crisis that drives the rival imperialist powers to seek their salvation through militarist aggression abroad and the destruction of the social and democratic rights of the working class at home.

Seventy years after its liberation, Auschwitz stands not as some abstract symbol of the human potential for "evil," but rather as a grim and urgent warning of the crimes and catastrophes that capitalism in crisis is capable of inflicting upon humanity.

Once again, the world working class is confronted with the stark alternatives of socialism or barbarism, in which even the crimes of the Nazis can be eclipsed in a nuclear Third World War.

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