On the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, fascism and the triumph of revolution

written by Lev Koufax
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Soviet Red Army soldiers chatting with children just liberated from the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Over the past two weeks, the global working-class community has observed several anniversaries dating back to World War II. These anniversaries have included the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany in the 1943 Battle of Stalingrad, the lifting of the 1944 siege of Leningrad and the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp in 1945. The anniversary of the Stalingrad victory is Feb. 5. The end of the siege of Leningrad and the liberation of Auschwitz share an anniversary, Jan. 27. They occurred a year apart, to the day. Jan. 27, 2020, was the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

The Auschwitz Concentration Camp is the most notorious of Nazi concentration

camps. This is due to the extremely high death count and the experiments of the "Angel of Death"–Josef Mengele–on innocent people. Over a million people died within the walls of Auschwitz, the vast majority of whom were Jewish or Roma. Of the million who perished, 850,000 were Jews who were killed in gas chambers upon arrival. The tragedy of the Holocaust left a deep scar in the Jewish community, which is still healing today.

When the multinational Soviet Red Army marched into Auschwitz as liberators on Jan. 27, 1945, they found a horrific scene. Days earlier, 58,000 prisoners at Auschwitz were forced by the Nazis on a march of over 100 kilometers in freezing temperatures. As the Nazis retreated, they had left behind approximately 7,000 prisoners. All of these prisoners were starving and ill.

The Soviet troops that liberated Auschwitz were commanded by Lt. Col. Anatoly Shapiro, a Jewish officer in the Red Army. Another Jewish Soviet officer, Georgii Elisavetskii, was one of the first soldiers inside the camp. His experience was recounted in the 2015 book "Liberation of Camps" by Dan Stone:

"When I entered the barrack, I saw living skeletons lying on three-tiered bunks. As in fog, I hear my soldiers saying: 'You are free, comrades!' I sense that they do not understand and begin speaking in Russian, Polish, German, Ukranian dialects; unbuttoning my leather jacket, I show them my medals. ... Then I use Yiddish. Their reaction is unpredictable. They think that I am provoking them.They begin to hide. And only when I said to them: 'Do not be afraid, I am a colonel of the Soviet Army and a Jew. We have come to liberate you.' Finally, as if the barrier collapsed, they rushed towards us shouting, fell on their knees, kissed the flaps of our overcoats, and threw their arms around legs. And we did not move, stood motionless while unexpected tears ran down our cheeks."

This passage reflects the conflicted reality of the liberation. The military defeat of the Nazis was a great victory for all workers and oppressed people across the globe.

The liberation of Auschwitz was a moment of relief and joy for those who had been kept there. However, the situation was as equally horrific as it was victorious.

Leading up to the liberation were two Soviet victories over Nazi forces: at Stalingrad and at Leningrad. Anniversaries of both these battles were also recently observed. These victories came at immense cost to the Soviet people. The Battle of Stalingrad lasted over 5 months and came at the cost of one million Soviet lives, soldier and civilian. Throughout the battle, the people of Stalingrad suffered disease, hunger and frigid weather. But their sacrifice led to the destruction of the German Sixth Army, which surrendered on Feb. 2, 1943. It was the biggest defeat the Nazis had yet suffered and was the turning point in the war.

On Jan. 27, 1944, Soviet forces finally broke the lines of the Nazi army at Leningrad. Nazi forces had besieged the city for almost two and a half years. Over 800,000 civilians died in the siege, mostly of hunger and disease. That was as many as the combined casualties of the U.S. and Britain in the entire war. Eventually, these victories would allow the Soviet army to launch the Vistula-Oder offensive, which resulted in the liberation of Auschwitz.

The evils of fascism should never be forgotten. And we must reject the capitalist line that the United States and Britain defeated Hitler. Nazi fascism only rose in the first place as an outgrowth of capitalist crisis in the wake of World War I. Many in the U.S. capitalist class supported the Nazis, who drew inspiration from the murderous racism and "white supremacy" which was still the law of the land in the United States. The socialist Soviet Union, aided by Communist-led Partisan movements across Europe, played the decisive role in their defeat.

The blood was not dry on Europe's battlefields, its ruined cities still smoldered, when the U.S. and Britain allied with former Nazis to launch a "Cold War" against the USSR and the new socialist countries of East Europe and East Asia. This was also a war against the liberation struggles of oppressed people in Africa, Asia, Latin

America and the Caribbean.

Today, despite its "Cold War victory," the global capitalist system is in contraction. The specter of fascism again raises its ugly head. The danger of a new world war looms on the horizon. Working-class and oppressed peoples around the world must draw inspiration and lessons from our struggles in the past.

The writer is a Jew who had ancestors perish in the Holocaust.