

# *I.G. Farben and the Buna-Monowitz Concentration Camp*—A traveling exhibition of the Fritz Bauer Institute, currently on display in Bonn

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A touring exhibition, *I.G. Farben and the Buna-Monowitz Concentration Camp. Business and Politics in National Socialism*, opened its doors in Bonn on Tuesday. The exhibition from the Fritz Bauer Institute starkly illuminates the fact that fascism is not the result of morally corrupt individuals but arises from the profit-driven character of the capitalist economy.

The travelling exhibition originated at an international meeting of Buna-Monowitz survivors in 1998. It has already been on display in Frankfurt, Dortmund, Cologne, Berlin and several other cities. Most recently, it was shown in Nuremberg from June to September 2024 on the grounds of the Palace of Justice, the site of the 1945-46 Nuremberg trials.

The exhibition consists of two parts. In each case, two large panels in the middle of a room form the framework, on which the essential information, facts and figures are soberly presented and placed in context. Around these are further panels that use photos, quotations and eyewitness reports to illustrate the path to the camp and the horrific conditions there.

I.G. Farbenindustrie AG, founded in December 1925 by six chemical companies (Agfa, BASF, Bayer, Hoechst, Chemische Fabrik Griesheim-Elektron and Chemische Fabrik vorm Weiler-ter-Meer), was a leading German industrial conglomerate. Its board of directors was known as the “Council of Gods.” Originally specialising in the production of dyes, the companies made enormous profits during the First World War by producing explosives and poison gas.

After Hitler’s takeover in 1933, I.G. Farben quickly came to terms with the new regime and also provided financial support to the NSDAP (Nazi Party). The company aligned its research and investments with the Nazis’ rearmament plans, particularly in the areas of explosives, chemical weapons, light metals and synthetic rubber. Finally, I.G. Farben became directly involved in the Holocaust by producing and supplying the SS with the poison gas Zyklon B for the mass killing of people in concentration camps.

In 1941, I.G. Farben decided to build a large chemical plant in Auschwitz, in German-occupied Poland, because of its convenient location, the availability of raw materials and (particularly important) access to forced labourers from the nearby Monowitz concentration camp, part of the Auschwitz complex. The main product to be manufactured was “Buna,” a synthetic rubber for tyres.

The Auschwitz concentration camp, established in 1940 by order of Heinrich Himmler, became the largest Nazi extermination centre in the 1942-1944 period. It was here that the Jews, Sinti and Roma, political prisoners, homosexuals and other minorities were industrially exterminated. In addition to the extermination camp, Auschwitz was also the largest Nazi forced labour camp, where thousands of prisoners were

forced to work, often to the point of death.

In addition to employees of the company, German and foreign subcontractors as well as thousands of civilian and foreign workers were used to build the I.G. Farben factory. In particular, however, forced labourers from the Auschwitz concentration camp were used. Their exploitation was particularly profitable, as the cost of prison labour was considerably lower than the wages paid to free workers.

From April 1941, the prisoners had to be transported daily from the camp to the construction site, which was a considerable burden for I.G. Farben. The plant management therefore pushed for the construction of a subcamp of its own, and this was set up in the autumn of 1942 on the site of the previously displaced village of Monowice (Monowitz). In August 1944, 11,500 forced labourers from Auschwitz were working for I.G. Farben.

Where did these workers come from? From autumn 1941, Jews, Sinti and Roma from the German Reich, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and “annexed” Austria were deported to ghettos in Central and Eastern Europe and, from March 1942, also to Auschwitz. The transports, known as “special trains,” were organised by the so-called “Jewish Department” of the Reich Security Main Office under Adolf Eichmann. The victims were first rounded up and interned in provisional collection camps (such as synagogues or exhibition halls) before SS and Gestapo officers brought them to Auschwitz in freight cars.

From spring 1942 until May 1944, the deportation trains arrived at the “Old Ramp” near Auschwitz. After that, the SS used the “New Ramp” in the Birkenau extermination camp from May 1944. Upon arrival, the people were driven out of the wagons with shouts and blows, subject to “selection” by SS officers or doctors (children, the elderly and the weak were sent directly into the gas chambers), and those that survived this process were then robbed of their valuables, registered and assigned to forced labour. If someone was no longer able to work, the SS also sent them to the gas chambers.

The exhibition panels on the walls show numerous testimonials from people who had to experience this horror themselves. They describe their odyssey to the camp, their arrival and the martyrdom they suffered during slave labour in the concentration camp and for I.G. Farben.

Those who were able to work were brutally exploited. The prisoners were deployed both within the camp (in the administration, organisation of work, infirmary and sorting of the millions of stolen clothes and valuables, among other things) and outside the camp as forced labourers for I.G. Farben or other companies.

At I.G. Farben, they were subjected to brutal violence and life-threatening conditions, particularly in the dreaded transportation,

earthworks and cable-laying detachments. At the construction site of I.G. Auschwitz, prisoners were exposed without protection to the weather and suffered from lack of clothing, accidents, and illnesses, with the result that their average survival time was only three to four months.

Imo Moszkowicz, a German film director and writer, wrote in his memoirs:

The first detail we were assigned to was the cement detail.

The railway cars, which looked exactly like those that transported us to Auschwitz, were loaded with cement sacks. In each wagon there were two prisoners who lifted a cement bag, placed it on the shoulders of a prisoner standing in front of the wagon, who then ran with his load to a cement storage area, where the cement bag was taken from him by two other prisoners to be stacked. Then it was back to the wagon at a run.

Everything had to be done at a run.

“Im Laufschrift, dalli-dalli” (Run, at the double!) My memory refuses to recall how many perished from this hard labour in the first few days. It seems to me like a testing ground: those who survive here have a certain chance of getting ahead, of living.

In Buna-Monowitz, the conditions established by I.G. Farben created a constant atmosphere of fear and brutality. The SS guard units, supported by “kapos” (prisoner-functionaries), were free to brutalise and murder prisoners at random, while the SS henchmen either tolerated or even actively encouraged this violence. Some of the I.G. Farben employees also contributed to the worsening of the situation by reporting the slightest offence to the SS, provoking harsh punishments or selections for the gas chamber.

The factory management relied on draconian methods such as goading, beating and punishing to increase prisoners’ work output. The rations were miserable and usually consisted of a nutrient-poor soup that tasted like rubber and consisted only of nettles, grass and the occasional potato. This inadequate nutrition led to significant weight loss and severe health problems, as the prisoners lost up to four kilograms per week and quickly found themselves in a state of total exhaustion and malnutrition. In the language of the camp, these people, who often soon fell victim to a selection, were referred to as “Muselmänner” (Muslims).

These merciless conditions and the systematic abuse illustrate the inhuman brutality and cruel system that I.G. Farben and its employees maintained in Buna-Monowitz.

Primo Levi, an Italian writer and chemist, described everyday life in the Auschwitz concentration camp in his book *If This Is a Man?* (1947) as a contemporary witness; here is a quote used in the travelling exhibition:

Buna is hopeless, dull and grey through and through. This sprawling jumble of iron, cement, mud and smoke is the negation of beauty par excellence. Its streets and buildings are named with numbers and letters, like us, if they don’t have inhuman and ominous names. No blade of grass grows in this area, and the earth is saturated with the toxic juices of coal and petroleum. Nothing lives here, only machines and slaves: and the latter more than the former.

On 27 January 1945, the Auschwitz camps were liberated by the Red Army.

At least 1.1 million (other sources speak of 3 million) Jews, political prisoners, Sinti and Roma or homosexuals had been murdered in the

Auschwitz camps by then. At least 25,000 of them fell victim to the catastrophic working and living conditions in the I.G. Farben camps and plants.

Between 1940 and 1945, around 8,000 members of the SS were deployed in Auschwitz and its satellite camps. In the immediate post-war period, only four of them were convicted. Another 22 were not brought to trial until 19 years later, in the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, and their sentences were disproportionately lenient compared to their crimes.

As for I.G. Farben, only those plants located in the territory of the former East Germany (GDR) were expropriated. In the West, the Allies initially confiscated the company’s assets, after which they divided the company into three parts: BASF, Bayer and Hoechst A.G.

Twenty-three senior executives of I.G. Farben were put on trial in a Nuremberg successor trial in 1947, but only 13 of them were sentenced to prison terms of a few years; ten were acquitted. Most of those convicted were released from custody early and were later able to continue their business and political careers, such as the chemist and “defence industry leader” Otto Ambros.

Ambros had played a key role in organising the company’s exploitation of concentration camp prisoners. He was convicted in 1948 of “participation in the slave labour programme and the genocidal policies of the Nazi regime,” but was released from prison in early 1951. In the post-war period, he was employed as a consultant and supervisory board member of several chemical plants and was also an advisor to Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and the arms industrialist and war criminal Friedrich Flick.

The exhibition is highly topical in view of the resurgence of fascism and provides a clear impression of the inmates’ living conditions and the brutality with which they were daily confronted. At the same time, the links between business and politics are insufficiently presented, and the focus is sometimes more on individual destinies. The word capitalism is not mentioned once.

The exhibition does not address the question: “How could this horror have happened?”—which would have required, first, an analysis of German imperialism and its crisis and, second, a critical examination of the politics of the German Communist Party (KPD) under Stalin’s influence. To this day, there is only one valid analysis of this, that of Leon Trotsky. The following lecture, for example, is highly recommended: “How could fascism triumph?”

There is a close connection between capitalism and fascism. Hitler was installed as Reich Chancellor in 1933 by a conspiracy of German big business, the military and state officials to enforce the profit interests of the German ruling class and break the resistance of the working class.

Many German conglomerates were supporters of the Nazis. Their wealth today is based on the plunder of the Second World War and on the slave labour of forced labourers that the Nazis provided from the concentration camps. In return, the corporations proved to be grateful supporters of Hitler’s regime: they produced weapons, ammunition and other goods for the Wehrmacht (Armed Forces) and donated large sums to Nazi mass organisations.

The chemical concern IG Farben played a particularly perfidious role, but it was by no means the only German company to collaborate with the Nazi regime and profit from the Holocaust. Here are just a few of the best-known corporations and banks:

- **Deutsche Bank:** It financed Auschwitz by providing credit to the companies involved in the construction and operation of the concentration camp; it maintained direct business relations with the IG Farben complex. It financed rearmament and the war and participated in the plundering of occupied states. It held the accounts of the Berlin Gestapo, into which the expropriated and “aryanised” Jewish assets were paid, and it also processed the transfers of plundered gold, including gold from the dental fillings of concentration camp victims, into the vaults of Swiss banks.

• **Deutsche Bahn:** Its predecessor, the Deutsche Reichsbahn, was instrumental in the Holocaust by organising the deportation trains that took Jews, Sinti and Roma to the concentration camps. (See, for example, the SWR documentary: “Eisenbahner im Widerstand” (Railway Workers Resist).

• **Deutsche Telekom** (formerly Reichspost): The Reichspost also played an important role in the administration of communications during the Nazi era. Although less involved in the direct war economy, it was part of the state apparatus.

• **Daimler-Benz:** During the Second World War, the company was a major supplier of vehicles and equipment for the Wehrmacht and employed forced labourers, prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates.

• **Siemens:** During the Third Reich, Siemens was deeply involved in the war economy and used forced labourers in its factories. The company profited directly from the exploitation of thousands of forced labourers, including people from concentration camps.

• **Volkswagen, or the Porsche and Piëch families:** the founding and financing of Volkswagen GmbH (via the German Labour Front, DAF) was based on the assets of the trade unions that were broken up and expropriated by Hitler. During the Second World War, Volkswagen and Porsche profited both from armaments production and the extensive use of forced labour.

• **Allianz insurance:** Allianz insurance was involved in the policies of the Nazi regime. Among other things, it insured property that was expropriated by the Nazis, including Jewish property.

• **Continental and Schaeffler:** Both companies owe the origins of their wealth to the Nazi regime. They made a profit producing for the arms industry and the war effort and benefited in the most terrible way from the forced labour of concentration camp prisoners.

• **BMW’s main shareholders Quandt and Klatten** are among the richest people in Germany today: they owe this to their close ties to the Nazi regime, the profits from the military build-up and the exploitation of forced labourers. See also: “The Silence of the Quandts.”

• None of these corporations was expropriated and held to account in West Germany after the end of the Second World War. Today, the German bourgeoisie is once again building upon the crimes of the Nazis by fully supporting the genocide in Gaza and escalating NATO’s proxy war against Russia.

Even if it is not explicitly stated, the exhibition clearly establishes that capitalism, in its decline, needs and produces fascism. The crocodile tears shed today by some CEOs of large German companies over the election successes of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) are hypocritical. The German ruling class, together with the media and the establishment parties, has systematically built up the AfD, and is now in the process of implementing its programme.

This makes one thing clear: anyone who wants to fight fascism, war and the associated crimes must on principle also fight capitalism, because it is the root of these evils.

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