

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on American “Concentration Camps” for Migrants

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In a recent Instagram message to her followers, the controversial Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez likened the American government’s treatment of migrants at the Texas border to Nazi “concentration camps.” Questioned about this in an interview in *Mother Jones*, she was unapologetic:

That is exactly what they are: They are concentration camps. I want to talk to the people that are concerned enough with humanity to say that “never again” means something.

I don’t use those words lightly. I don’t use those words to just throw bombs. I use that word because that is what an administration that creates concentration camps is. A presidency that creates concentration camps is fascist, and it’s very difficult to say that because it is very difficult

to accept the fact that that's how bad things happen.

Ocasio-Cortez seems to think that when the border patrol agents place people in detention centers “without trial,” this is something awful. But they are not being indefinitely held “without trial”; they are, rather, being held as they “await trial,” that is, await their turn to a hearing before an immigration judge, which is a very different thing. These refugee shelters exist not to deny them trial, but precisely to ensure that they will remain so as to be given, not denied, their day in court.

A detention center, or refugee shelter (both names are used) is not a Nazi concentration camp. In the Nazi camps, millions of men, women, and children were shot, gassed, tortured, burned alive, starved to death, subject to ghoulish medical experiments by Nazi doctors like Dr. Mengele, or murdered for sport by German soldiers who would throw babies into the air and shoot or impale them before their parents, or would force inmates to fight with each other, with the loser being immediately killed, while the winner had to keep fighting other inmates until he finally lost, and it was his turn to be killed – great fun for the bored German soldiers who witnessed these things. There were so many ways for the Nazi murderers to pass the time! And two million Jews were murdered at Auschwitz alone.

In response to widespread criticism of her statements, Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez and her supporters insisted that she was referring “only” to concentration camps and not to death camps.

That in no way justifies her grotesque remark. For most people, all the Nazi camps are known as concentration camps; no distinction matters whether the deaths came at once from the gas chambers, or were the result of starvation-level diets, beatings, slave labor or other mistreatment. Yes, it is

true that in the death camps, such as Auschwitz and Treblinka and Belzec, the sole purpose was to carry out the mass murder of Jews as soon as they arrived. No other end was possible. We call Auschwitz both a “death camp” and a “concentration camp”; they both brought death to millions, albeit at different rates and using different means.

In the concentration camps, that in the strict sense would include such as Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, and Buchenwald, prisoners were not sent specifically to be killed, although it was understood that a great many would die, and there was no effort to keep any alive. Many were murdered in those camps. Hundreds of thousands did die, as they were subjected to slave labor, disease, brutal beatings, systematic torture, medical experiments, and starvation-level diets. 55,000 were murdered at Buchenwald; 50,000 at Bergen-Belsen; 42,000 at Dachau, to name only three of the best-known concentration camps. Several hundred thousand died in other such camps.

What about those “concentration camps” that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez claims the Trump Administration has built on the Texas border? What are they like?

Not a single person has been shot, gassed, tortured, burned alive, murdered for sport, or used for medical experiments in the temporary detention centers run by ICE on the Texas-Mexico border. Does Ocasio-Cortez not know that? Would she care to adduce a single example of deliberate physical mistreatment, much less murder, of those migrants in the detention centers? There are occasional lapses in the facilities provided, but that is only because of the sudden huge influx of migrants since the beginning of the year that the government has to race to keep up with. Here, for example, is a description of what migrants could expect in Donna, Texas a few months ago:

Thousands of migrant families and children apprehended crossing the U.S. border alone in the Lower Rio Grande Valley will spend their first night in America in a vast air

conditioned tent complex with access to showers, hot meals and cots to sleep on.

The massive 40,000-square-foot white vinyl tent erected in less than a month on farm country owned by the federal government about a mile from the Rio Grande was set to open for the first time Thursday to handle what authorities described as a 240 percent increase in apprehensions in the Border Patrol sector anchored by the city McAllen.

According to Border Patrol figures, more than 361,000 migrants were apprehended at the southern border during the six-month period that ended March 31. Of that total, nearly 36,000 were unaccompanied children.

“Sometimes there are over 100, sometimes there are over 200,” said Carmen Qualia, a Border Patrol executive officer who led a tour of the tent in the town of Donna. She was referring to individual apprehensions in the sector that has been taking an average of 1,200 family members and children each day for the past several weeks.

“As you can see, it puts a big strain on our resources,” she added.

Indeed, a similar tent complex called a temporary detention center was also scheduled to open in the El Paso area as existing detention facilities can no longer handle the influx.

While they are there, they’ll be fed and screened for medical needs. They’ll shower in one of the 36 individual stalls – 18 for men and 18 for women – and have access to chemical toilets that will be serviced at least daily.

“They’ll receive a change of clothes, and the clothes they came in will be laundered. They’ll sleep on cushioned cots that measure about two-and-a-half feet by six-and-a-half feet.

“Border Patrol tent shelter in El Paso for immigrants has baby-changing tables, laundry machines, AC...”

Goodness. Does that detention center’s facilities, with those laundry machines, changes of clothes, cots with mattresses, baby-changing tables and diapers, the screening for medical needs which are then met – does any of this sound like a “concentration camp,” a veritable Buchenwald or Bergen-Belsen?

The government clearly wishes to treat migrants with decency, but the sheer number of them has led to certain shortages that the government is trying to rectify. Cots with mattresses are provided most migrants, but some have had to sleep on cement floors until new supplies of cots arrive; sometimes the cots are available, but there are not enough mattresses for the cots. This is not a deliberate attempt to make their lives difficult, but a temporary problem that a bill sponsored by Texas Senator John Cornyn may rectify, by providing more money for facilities to house migrants. As we have seen, many of the migrants sleep in clean large airy buildings, have access to showers, are given medical examinations and where appropriate given care by nurses and doctors, are supplied with medicines, given blankets, appropriate clothes and footwear, are further supplied with nutritious food, hygienic supplies, toiletries, diapers and baby-changing stations. Can Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tell us in what ways the treatment of these migrants is akin to the treatment of Jews in concentration camps, enduring life as slave laborers, being beaten, sometimes to death, fed starvation-level diets, tormented and often killed in medical experiments, and murdered, too, for sport? Or does she still think they are roughly the same? No migrants in Texas are being physically abused. They are not being treated as prisoners in a penal system; they being held for their own benefit, so that they will be present to claim – through the interpreters the government supplies – refugee status before an immigration judge.

What would Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez have the American immigration authorities do? Simply let in every single person who arrives at the border, forgetting about hearings and the immigration judges, deeming everyone suitable for entry? Is unvetted and uncontrollable immigration what she wants? Or will Ocasio-Cortez concede that it makes sense to have a judge hear the immigrants present their cases, and then to winnow the truly deserving from the rest?

Ocasio-Cortez paints quite a disturbing picture of these migrant shelters or detention centers:

“This administration has established concentration camps on the southern border of the United States for immigrants, where they are being brutalized with dehumanizing conditions and dying,” she wrote. “This is not hyperbole. It is the conclusion of expert analysis.” What experts are those? No ICE officer has “brutalized” immigrants with “dehumanizing conditions.” Even where, because of overcrowding, some migrants have had to temporarily sleep on a concrete floor until the arrival of more cots and mattresses, this reflects not an attempt at “brutalizing” anyone, but merely a lack of supplies because of the recent huge increase in numbers of those trying to cross into America, migrants who walked all the way to the American border from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. No official is killing these migrants. Of the hundreds of thousands of migrants, a handful of those trying to make it to Texas have lost their way in the desert, and die of thirst, or illness; ICE officers are the ones who are trying to locate and rescue such people. There has been no “brutalizing” nor “dehumanizing conditions.”

Before becoming a Democratic Congresswoman, Ocasio-Cortez worked as a bartender. That’s still no excuse for her astonishing ignorance of what went on in the Nazi death and concentration camps. If she wants to make analogies to “concentration camps,” she had better learn what atrocities went on in both the “death camps,” where the mass-murdering

was immediate, and on an industrial scale, and the “concentration camps,” where death was the result of beatings, starvations, slave labor, and systematic torture, rather than from the mass gassing of inmates. That’s the past she needs to learn about. If she has any decency, she will be properly ashamed that she ever made such a grotesque comparison of the detention centers with Nazi concentration camps.

If AOC needs to learn more about Nazi atrocities, she also needs to learn more about what’s going on today near the Texas-Mexico border, where those detention centers and refugee shelters have been set up. Let her see all the goods (food, clothing, bedding, medicine, toiletries, diapers) and services (doctors, nurses, interpreters) that are provided to the migrants. Then let her realize for herself how horrifying was her likening what our government is doing with these migrants with what the Nazis did to the Jews. Perhaps she will even feel some remorse about cheapening the experience of the Holocaust to make a political point. She might even decide to apologize to the families of those who died in these camps, but given her aggressive never-apologize temperament, her wide-eyed self assurance, I suspect such an apology is beyond her.

Perhaps Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez will decide to study in depth what went on in the Nazi camps. And she might even take the occasion to visit those camps. Had she studied the Holocaust, had she visited the camps, she might never have compared those immigrant shelters where the migrants await their hearings before a judge, to those camps where fiendishly cruel murders were carried out in a dozen different ways.

As for Ocasio-Cortez’s appropriation of “Never Again” – the phrase used by Jews and non-Jews in referring to the Holocaust, and meaning that “Never Again” will we allow such things to happen – and then applying that phrase to the migrants in the detention centers, likening their treatment to

that of inmates of Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, and Auschwitz, she is again likening the greatest crime in human history to the discomfort some migrants may experience at having to remain for a few months in a detention center, perhaps one with an insufficiency of showers, or laundry facilities, or mattresses for cots. To show she has learned something, a chastened AOC should demand of herself, to make amends, that "Never Again will I make such an ill-informed analogy between a Nazi camp and a refugee shelter, never again will I invoke the Holocaust in this way, so false, so stupid, and so cruel." Right you are, Alexandria – for all our sakes, don't do it ever again.

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