

May Day 2005: Sixty years since the end of World War II

Part one

David North
2 May 2005

The following is the first part of a report delivered by David North, chairman of the WSWs international editorial board and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of the United States, to a May Day meeting held in Berlin on April 30. The concluding part was published on May 3.

Today's celebration of May Day necessarily assumes special significance; for we cannot meet in Berlin without recalling the events that were taking place in this city exactly 60 years ago. Berlin, which was prior to 1933 one of the greatest centers of art and science in world history, had been transformed into a horrifying inferno of death and destruction. During the last 10 days of April 1945, as Hitler's "Thousand Year Reich" made its last stand against the Soviet army, a quarter-million soldiers and civilians perished in Berlin. Finally, on April 30, 1945, Hitler committed suicide, bringing more or less to an end a regime of unequaled bestiality. As May Day dawned, Soviet forces were in control of the city. One week later, on May 8, 1945, the remnants of the German General Staff signed the articles of surrender, and the war in Europe, which had begun in September 1939, was over.

But the final act of the world tragedy was still to be played out. The war in Asia continued for another three months. Finally, on August 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, a city without any particular military significance. Three days later, a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. The two nuclear devices killed or grievously wounded approximately a quarter-million people. There is no disputing the fact that the Japanese imperial government was guilty of monstrous crimes against the people of Asia. Nevertheless, the dropping of atomic bombs on two Japanese cities, a decision that President Truman cheerfully admitted did not cause him to lose an hour's sleep, was an act of barbarism. As the American historian Gabriel Jackson was to write many years later, "In the specific circumstances of August 1945, the use of the atom bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the conduct of different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy." [1]

Even after the passage of six decades, it remains almost impossible to comprehend the magnitude of the violence and suffering caused by the war. The total number of human beings who were killed during World War II may be as high as 70 million, or perhaps even higher. No one knows for certain. We do know that the Nazi regime and its accomplices murdered 6 million European Jews. Another 3 million non-Jewish Poles were killed. Approximately 25 million Soviet soldiers and civilians were killed. Fifteen million Chinese lost their lives. Six million Germans and as many Japanese were killed. Another 2 million Yugoslavs perished.

As World War II came to an end, the emotions among the masses who had witnessed the carnage oscillated between outrage and hope. Capitalism was profoundly discredited in the eyes of millions of workers all over the world. The very word carried about it an odor of criminality. There was outrage against the social order responsible for the horrors of imperialism, colonialism, fascism and war. And there was hope that the world would be rebuilt and reorganized, in the aftermath of the war, on a more humane, democratic, egalitarian—in a word, socialistic—foundation.

Acutely aware of the popular revulsion against capitalism, President Franklin Roosevelt had pledged to the American people that a better and more just world would emerge from the war. He declared:

"The basic things expected by our people of their political and economic systems are simple. They are:

"Equality of opportunity for youth and for others.

"Jobs for those who can work.

"Security for those who need it.

"The ending of special privilege for the few.

"The preservation of civil liberties for all.

"The enjoyment of the fruits of scientific progress in a wider and constantly rising standard of living.

"These are the simple, the basic things that must never be lost sight of in the turmoil and unbelievable complexity of our modern world. The inner and abiding strength of our economic and political systems is dependent upon the degree to which they fulfill these expectations."

If we take this pledge by President Roosevelt as the standard by which the capitalist system is to be judged, what verdict should history render 60 years after the end of World War II? Which of these "simple" and "basic things" have been realized in the United States, the richest and most powerful capitalist country in the world?

Is there equality of opportunity for youth, let alone for others? Throughout the United States, in all but the wealthiest suburban enclaves, the public education system is in a state of collapse. Thousands of schools in major cities across the country are being shut down for lack of funds. Of the 35 million Americans living below the official poverty line, 40 percent of them are children.

What about jobs for those who can work? The official unemployment rate in the United States is between 5 and 6 percent. But this statistic does not include the millions who are either underemployed or who have given up looking for work. Nor does it include the 2 million Americans who are incarcerated. Nor does it shed light on the quality of the jobs available to American workers, millions of whom have been compelled to accept employment at a lower wage after the elimination of their previous jobs. As for the promise of "security for those who need it," the overriding reality of American life is that the vast majority of working people live in a state of perpetual insecurity, at the mercy of economic forces over which

they have no control.

Existing class relations in the United States are a bitter mockery of Roosevelt's promise to end "special privileges for the few." The United States is now the most unequal of all capitalist countries, with less than 1 percent of the population effectively controlling more than half the national wealth. A small layer of corporate aristocrats receive incomes that are, on average, more than 500 times greater than those paid to the workers employed by their companies.

As for civil liberties, these are under unprecedented attack in the United States. In defiance of the constitution, the Bush administration has claimed for itself the power to seize and imprison citizens for an indefinite period of time, without informing those who have been seized of the crime they are alleged to have committed and without providing them with access to an attorney. It has sanctioned torture as a legitimate instrument of interrogation, dismissing with contempt the provisions of international law, including the Geneva Conventions.

Finally, the "enjoyment of the fruits of scientific progress in a wider and constantly rising standard of living" is impossible in the United States of 2005. The living standards of the vast majority of Americans have been declining for the last three decades. And science itself is under siege, as a reactionary alliance of the state and neo-fascistic Christian fundamentalist groups seek to proscribe the teaching of evolutionary theory and even to restrict, if not entirely outlaw, branches of scientific research that conflict with Biblical dogma.

Roosevelt also promised that the postwar world would guarantee what the president called "freedom from fear," which, to quote his own words, "means a worldwide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world. That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation."

If anything, this pledge to create a peaceful and law-governed world order, based on the reduction of armaments and the renunciation of aggression as an instrument of state policy, has failed even more spectacularly than Roosevelt's national program for the creation of a democratic and more egalitarian society on the basis of capitalism. The use of aggressive war as a means of achieving international objectives—the principal crime for which the Nazi leaders were hanged after World War II—has been embraced by the United States in the form of the Bush administration's doctrine of preventive war.

But American imperialism does not exist in a vacuum. Its predatory policies represent a reactionary attempt to regulate, beneath the banner of its own global hegemony, conflicts generated by the essential contradiction between the growth of world economy and the historically archaic system of national states. The level of international tension that exists today is without precedent since the eve of World War II. In a world awash in armaments, and in which nations compete in life-and-death struggles for access to strategic raw materials, sources of cheap labor and a host of other geopolitical and economic advantages, a clash in almost any region of the world can escalate into a worldwide conflagration.

The invasion of Iraq by the United States in March 2003 accelerated the breakdown of the diplomatic, legal and structural framework within which international relations had been regulated since the end of World War II. This process had begun with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. International alliances and institutions that had served the interests of the United States during the Cold War with the Soviet Union came to be seen by Washington as obstacles to the realization of its new global ambitions.

The first and most significant casualty of the post-Cold War alignment of forces has been the US-West European alliance. While it had been seen previously as an essential strategic partner in the containment of the USSR, the United States has come to view Europe as its principal economic competitor and as a barrier to the assertion of America's

hegemonic role.

The US is above all concerned with preventing the emergence of a common European foreign policy, with a European military that can compete on a global stage with the United States.

The realization within Europe that the United States is more an enemy than an ally has produced uncertainty and anxiety. Each country within Europe is now compelled to reexamine its place in the new world order and make a fresh evaluation of its geopolitical options. Can Germany trust France to remain loyal to their previously shared vision of a unified Europe under their joint sponsorship? Or will France cut a deal with the United States at the expense of Germany? Should Germany seek to secure its access to critical oil resources by establishing an alliance with Russia and possibly Iran, and in so doing risk confrontation with the United States?

Iran has emerged as a major factor in European-American relations. The US has taken an aggressive stance toward Iranian plans to develop a nuclear energy capacity, while Europe has sought to engage in negotiations that will not lead to a disruption of the growing economic ties between Iran and Europe. Iran is a key EU trading partner as well as a major source of oil.

In its drive to ensure control over the world oil market, the US has set its sights on Iran, a key supplier not only of Europe, but also of Russia, China, India and Japan. The US government has publicly and adamantly opposed a gas pipeline that would run from Iran to India through Pakistan.

According to oil resource expert Michael Klare: "Bush administration officials have two key strategic aims: a desire to open up Iranian oil and gas fields to exploitation by US firms, and concern over Iran's growing ties to America's competitors in the global energy market.... From the Bush administration's point of view, there is only one obvious and immediate way to alter this unappetizing landscape—by introducing 'regime change' in Iran and replacing the existing leadership with one far friendlier to US strategic interests." [2]

The continuing struggle over access to Middle East oil resources could very easily lead to a war between several of the major powers. If the US attacked Iran, how would Europe respond? How would China, India and Russia respond?

In a world in which the fear of America's global designs has become a major factor in international politics, countries that see themselves as potential targets for attack hope to avoid the fate of Iraq by accelerating the pace of their military and economic development. Russia feels increasingly threatened by the expansion of American influence in Central Asia and the former Soviet Republics. At the end of 2004, the United States engineered the victory of a pro-American government in the Ukraine. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently spoke at a NATO conference in Lithuania, once considered part of Russia's backyard. There she made bellicose calls for a change of government in neighboring Belarus, one of the few remaining close Russian allies in the region. Significant sections of the US ruling elite have raised calls for "regime change" in Russia itself.

The Chinese, also fearful of an American attack, consider the possibility of closer ties with India. But India and China are both in need of Iranian oil, and this need may generate new conflicts among these Asian powers.

At the same time, relations between China and Japan have reached their lowest point in decades. While the dispute over the content of Japanese history textbooks provided the pretext for the last flare-up, there exist between the two countries conflicts that involve very definite political and strategic interests. These include control over oil in the East China Sea and the growing militarization of Japan, supported by the United States.

Any one of these or some other point of conflict could become the starting point for a major confrontation between the great powers. The explosion of American aggression has created a situation in which every country of the world is making plans to secure its own economic and

military position relative to actual and potential competitors. To a greater extent than any time since the end of the Second World War, the world has become a powder keg of inter-imperialist and inter-state conflicts and antagonisms.

To be continued

Notes:

1. *Civilization and Barbarity in 20th Century Europe* (New York, 1999), pp. 176-77.
2. *Asia Times*, April 2005



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact