

Seventy years since the beginning of World War II

Nick Beams
3 September 2009

The outbreak of World War II 70 years ago today set in motion a chain of events that was to result in the deaths of up to 70 million people. Over the next six years, the war saw the eruption of barbarism on an unimaginable scale—the horrors of the Russian front, the fire-bombing of Tokyo and Dresden, the mass murder of 6 million European Jews, and the dropping of the atomic bomb on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are some of the events that immediately come to mind.

It is often said that in war, truth is the first casualty. Seven decades on, all the official organs of public opinion are still working overtime to cover up the causes of the war and the lessons to be drawn from it.

Contrary to the prevailing myths, this was not a war of democracy versus fascism, any more than World War I was a “war to end all wars.” It was an imperialist war waged by the capitalist great powers—“democratic” and fascist alike—for the division of the world and its resources in the interests of profit.

Following the outbreak of World War I, Lenin had warned that unless the working class overthrew the capitalist order in a socialist revolution more wars would inevitably follow. Any “peace” among the imperialist powers, he insisted, would be merely an interlude before the eruption of the next conflict. That warning was now confirmed.

The immediate cause of the war was the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. The previous year, at the infamous Munich conference, the British government under Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had conceded to German demands over Czechoslovakia. Hoping that German expansion could be confined to Central Europe, Chamberlain had returned from Munich declaring that he had achieved “peace in our time.” Just 11 months later, he announced the declaration of war.

The invasion of Poland had made it clear that Germany was not merely seeking to advance its position in Europe, but aspired to become a world power. This was an outcome which Britain—as the world’s chief colonial power, dominating the Indian subcontinent as well as vast regions in Africa, and extracting material and financial resources from every corner of the globe—could not tolerate.

One year before the outbreak of war, the Fourth International had been established. It took on the task of resolving the crisis of working class leadership and preparing the socialist revolution, without which, as the new International declared, “a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind.”

The treacherous leaderships of the working class—the Social Democratic and Stalinist Communist parties—bore a direct responsibility for the outbreak of war. Had the Spanish Revolution, which erupted in 1936, been victorious, it would have led to a renewal of revolutionary struggles across Europe, threatening even the seemingly powerful Nazi regime in Germany.

Likewise, had the French general strike of 1936 gone forward to a direct struggle for political power, it would have dramatically changed the balance of forces. But both of these revolutionary movements were strangled by the Stalinist and social democratic leaderships.

Consequently, as Leon Trotsky explained, the bourgeoisie “convinced itself that with such ‘labour leaders’ at its disposal, it could go ahead with anything, even a new slaughter of peoples.”

In a manifesto issued in May, 1940 as the German armies invaded France, the Fourth International explained the essential social significance of Hitler and the fascist movement he led.

“The democratic governments, who in their day hailed Hitler as a crusader against Bolshevism, now

make him out to be some kind of Satan unexpectedly loosed from the depths of hell, who violates the sanctity of treaties, boundary lines, rules and regulations. If it were not for Hitler the capitalist world would blossom like a garden. What a miserable lie! This German epileptic with a calculating machine in his skull and unlimited power in his hands did not fall from the sky or come up out of hell: he is nothing but the personification of all the destructive forces of imperialism. Just as Genghis Khan and Tamerlane appeared to the weaker pastoral peoples as destroying scourges of God, whereas in reality they did nothing but express the need of all the pastoral tribes for more pasture land and the plunder of settled areas, so Hitler, rocking the old colonial powers to their foundations, does nothing but give a more finished expression to the imperialist will to power.”

The war began as a European conflict but rapidly extended to the entire globe. In the 19th century, the capitalist powers had competed with each other on the basis of an expanding world market. But the Great Depression and the contraction of the world market had seen the global economy split into rival blocs.

Japan, confronted with the collapse of its export markets, sought to overcome its crisis through the conquest of China and the establishment of an empire in the East. But this was intolerable to the United States, which also sought expansion into the Pacific, thus making war inevitable. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 was simply the trigger for a war which had been in preparation over the preceding decade.

For German imperialism, the resources of central and southeastern Europe were insufficient if it was to develop the capacity to challenge the greatest capitalist power, the United States. The invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 was aimed at establishing the economic basis for a German empire able to sustain its position as a world power.

As for the United States, it had risen to power on the basis of the vast resources of the American continent. But it could no longer sustain itself on that foundation—that was the lesson of the Great Depression which had struck so hard at its economy. The markets of the world had to be opened up to American exports, to American investment and American technology, so as to secure American profits. This perspective was

incompatible with the attempts of both Germany and Japan to carve out empires for themselves, as well as with the already established empire of Washington’s ally, Britain. All would have to give way to the American “open door” program.

On the basis of its economic capacity and the vast superiority it enjoyed over its exhausted rivals, the United States was able to stabilize the world capitalist system at the conclusion of World War II. The subsequent post-war boom and the Cold War with the Soviet Union provided the framework for the regulation of the inter-imperialist rivalries that had twice exploded into world war in the space of just three decades.

Today, the foundations of this equilibrium no longer exist. The eruption of the deepest economic and financial crisis since the Great Depression is once again creating the conditions for the transformation of competition on the world market into a ferocious conflict of each against all.

The deep crisis of US capitalism and its increasing resort to military means to overcome its loss of economic power, together with the rise of new powers and the renewed strivings of old ones, are creating the conditions for another imperialist conflict, even more terrible than the last.

The lessons must be drawn. Only through the overthrow of the capitalist profit system and the establishment of a planned world socialist economy—rationally and democratically regulated to meet human needs—can the threat of imperialist war be banished forever. This is the perspective of the world party of socialist revolution, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Nick Beams



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact