

The Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union: Part two

Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization

Clara Weiss**13 January 2015****PART ONE | PART TWO**

Below is the second part of a two-part review of Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization, ed. by Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, David Stahel, Rochester University Press, 2012, 359 p. The first part of the review was posted January 12.

All quotations refer, unless otherwise indicated, to this book.

Operation Barbarossa and the Holocaust

The beginning of Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941 signified a turning point in the Holocaust and was closely linked to the decision to implement the “final solution”—the almost total destruction of European Jewry. While widely acknowledged among scholars, this connection has thus far not penetrated popular consciousness or the general understanding of the Holocaust.

In the ideology of German Nazism, the image of the “Jewish Bolshevik” occupied a central place in its virulent anti-Semitism. Elaborating on this relation, Israeli historian Leonid Rein writes:

“The Germans intended from the very beginning not only to defeat the enemy’s armed forces, but also to suppress and annihilate the real or imaginary bearers of the hostile Bolshevik ideology. For the Nazis, the main bearers of the Communist ideology were Jews. The millions of Jews living in the invaded territory were seen as the very embodiment of the proverbial Jewish Bolshevism dominating the Soviet state, the image of which had been propagated by Hitler and other Nazi leaders long before ascendance to power in Germany. Thus, the extermination of Soviet Jewry was perceived not merely as the annihilation of a racial enemy, but also as a precondition to achieving Nazi geopolitical goals in the east.” [P. 220]

In fact, up until 1941, the Nazi leadership, while violently anti-Semitic, did not have concrete plans for the physical elimination of European Jews. They were removed from economic life and plundered to the bone first in Germany and then in the occupied territories; labor camps and ghettos were set up in Poland early on; and mass shootings of Jews as well as instigated pogroms occurred in numerous towns and cities.

However, the solution of the “Jewish problem” was still seen in forced mass emigration. Most famously, in 1940 the Nazi government was intrigued by the idea of deporting all Jews from Europe to Madagascar. However, this would have required first the military defeat of Great Britain, so the prolonging of the war on the Western front prompted the Nazis to abandon this idea by early 1941.

While no document pointing to an official order for the total extermination of Soviet Jewry prior to June 1941 exists, it has been referred to in postwar trials against Nazi leaders. (It must also be noted that almost no official documents from the decision-making process of the Nazi leadership about the “final solution” exist, since the Nazis were extremely cautious first not to produce many of them, and, second, to destroy what could be destroyed at the end of the war.)

What is clear, however, and powerfully illustrated in this volume, is that the almost complete annihilation of Jews in all the conquered territories began with the first days of Operation Barbarossa.

In Lithuania, 180,000 out of a total of 220,000 Jews were killed in no more than six months. This included the culturally and historically significant Jewish community of Vilna, the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” In Latvia, almost 50 percent of the Jews were already dead by October 1941. Estonia was declared free of Jews (“Judenfrei” in Nazi terminology) toward the end of 1941. As Leonid Rein notes, this swift murder of the Jewish population was possible above all because of the “large-scale collaboration of local nationalist forces.” [P. 231]

In the eastern part of Belarus, practically the entire Jewish population had ceased to exist by the end of the year. Most of the Jews in western Belarus, which had only recently become part of the Soviet Union, had also been murdered. Gas vans to murder Jews began to be used in early 1942, before the gas chambers of Auschwitz were working.

While not noted in this book, it should be mentioned that the destruction of Soviet Jews also signified the liquidation of a substantial part of the urban population; in Eastern Europe, Jews traditionally formed between 10 and 50 percent of the population of the most significant towns and cities.

Parallel to these developments in the Soviet Union, extensive preparations for the mass murder of Jews in Auschwitz and other *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camps) were undertaken. The Wannsee Conference followed on January 20, 1942, and signaled the beginning of the mass extermination of European Jews in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and similar camps.

By that time, a total of 800,000 Jews had already been killed in the Soviet territories. Before the liberation of the territories by the Red Army, another 700,000 Jews would die at the hands of the SS *Einsatzgruppen* and their local collaborators in the Soviet Union.

The role of local collaborators and the Eastern European Axis powers in the Holocaust

One of the politically most significant topics addressed in the book is the role of local nationalists and the Axis powers—Romania, Hungary and Slovakia—which joined the Nazi-led campaign against the Soviet Union. Today, the historical heirs of these forces, whose influence has grown since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, are being mobilized by imperialism in the war drive against Russia.

Apart from the radical right collaborationists in the Baltic countries and Belarus, the Ukrainian militia, comprised largely of adherents of the Ukrainian fascist organization OUN, played a significant role in the Holocaust not only in Ukraine, but also in Belarus.

An essay by American historian Wendy Lower deals with the role of the Eastern European Axis powers in the Holocaust in Ukraine. Axis forces provided every sixth soldier who marched into the Soviet Union under the Nazi flag. The ultra-right regimes of the Axis powers shared the Nazis' violent anticommunism, which in Eastern Europe was closely related to radical anti-Semitism. (See: Anti-Semitism and the Russian Revolution).

In the Holocaust, the most significant role after Nazi Germany was played by the Romanian fascist regime of Ion Antonescu. Romania joined Operation Barbarossa after Hitler promised Antonescu territorial gains in Transnistria, Bukovina and Bessarabia. All of these territories, and in particular Bukovina (now extinguished from the map), had a significant Jewish population with long historical traditions.

Antonescu early on decided to remove all Jews from these areas' villages. In Transnistria, a broad network of concentration camps and ghettos was set up. Here, some 250,000 Jews and 12,000 Roma were murdered.

Romanian forces were heavily involved in some of the worst massacres of Jews in what is today Ukraine. In one of the most notorious massacres of the Holocaust, the Massacre of Odessa (October 22-24, 1941), which was directly ordered by Antonescu, some 35,000 Jews were murdered. Providing a glimpse of the barbarity of this orgy of violence, Lower writes:

"Romanian methods of murder included throwing grenades at and shooting Jews who had been crammed by the thousands into wooden buildings. In an act reminiscent of the burning of Strasbourg's Jews in the fifteenth century, Romanians forced Jews into the harbor square and set them on fire. Except that in this twentieth-century version, the Romanians did not allow Jews to save themselves through conversion (baptism). Thus, the barbarism of the religious wars was outdone by these modern campaigns of colonization and national purification." [Pp. 205-206]

A few weeks later, at least 48,000 Jews were shot dead in Bogdanivka at Christmas by Romanian soldiers, German SS and Ukrainian militia, as well as other collaborators.

A report from 2004 established that, overall, the Antonescu regime is responsible for the murder of some 280,000 to 380,000 Jews in Transnistria, Bukovina and Bessarabia.

This historical record of the Romanian bourgeoisie is a serious warning to workers of Eastern Europe in light of the fact that the Romanian government is now intimately involved in the imperialist war preparations against Russia, stoking up civil war in Ukraine. (See: Romania joins imperialist war drive against Russia).

Hungarian troops, too, were involved in monstrous massacres. In particular, they participated in the shooting of some 23,600 Jews in the Kamianets-Podilsky massacre of August 27-28, 1941 in western Ukraine. This massacre mainly targeted Hungarian Jewish refugees who had resided in Carpatho-Ukraine.

Lower emphasizes that the "Jewish Question" was an important part of "Eastern European Axis diplomacy," with each power unwilling to accept Jews on its territories. According to the historian, "their views of the Jewish problem, while broadly anti-Semitic, were also at the center of specific clashes over national borders and territorial gains." [P. 197]

Less is known about Slovak involvement in Operation Barbarossa.

However, Tiso's government was informed early on about the "final solution" and fully endorsed it. In fact, the first Jews deported to Auschwitz in March 1942 came from Slovakia. "Apparently, Tiso was so anxious to rid his country of Jews that he paid Hitler five hundred Reichsmarks for each deported Jew." [P. 203]

The significance of this volume

It is timely that the present volume was published on the eve of the new Ukrainian campaign by US and German imperialism.

Whereas the atrocities of the war in the east have been deeply burnt into the historical memory of the working class of Eastern Europe and, for that matter, Germany, for most of the general population in Western Europe and the United States, Operation Barbarossa has largely remained "the unknown war."

There are definite historical and political reasons for this lack of knowledge, which are explained, in part, by the editors of this volume. In the Anglo-Saxon historiography, works on the Nazi war against the Soviet Union focused largely on military history because of the conditions prevailing in the Cold War.

"Due to the circumstances of the Cold War and the desire to integrate West Germany into the NATO bloc, early research into the savage war in the east frequently reduced it to purely operational histories... First, American and British political and military leaders had no experience of fighting the Red Army and sought to learn as much as possible about their new enemy... Second, many of these works relied almost exclusively on the memoirs and studies of former high-ranking German officers themselves... The myth of an honorable German army took firm root in the collective mind of the Western world." [Pp. 4-5]

For the bourgeoisie in America and Great Britain, the crimes of the Nazis paled in comparison to the "crime" of the Russian working class in overthrowing Tsarism and capitalism in 1917 and thus removing vast portions of the globe from the immediate orbit of world imperialism. In their anticommunism and their goal of dismembering the Soviet Union, they found common ground with the old Nazis.

In postwar West Germany, at all levels, the old war criminals—from judges and doctors to journalists and military leaders—were largely allowed to maintain their positions or obtain new, no less prestigious, ones. Some of the leading war criminals, such as Reinhard Gehlen, who was directly involved in Operation Barbarossa and the "final solution," were directly hired by the CIA and ordered to help build the new German secret service, the BND.

Many leading ideologists and academics involved in the preparation and execution of the "final solution" continued their writing careers as ideologists of anticommunism. One example is Peter-Heinz Seraphim, author of the book *Jewry in Eastern Europe (Das Judentum im osteuropäischen Raum)*, which served as an inspiration and guideline for German military administrations' policies in the persecution of the Jews of Poland and later other parts of Eastern Europe. [3] After the war, with the support of the American occupation forces, he worked for Gehlen and became a popular anticommunist author and renowned expert on Eastern Europe.

The US took over most of the Nazi networks of ultranationalist and fascist collaborators in Eastern Europe, basing much of its strategy of covert warfare on precisely these forces. (See: Nationalism and fascism in Ukraine: A historical overview).

Upon its publication, this book has been justly hailed in scholarly publications as a seminal work on Operation Barbarossa in the English language. While original research has gone into the essays, they above all

represent a concise summary of some of the most important findings of historical research of the past two decades.

With the opening of the formerly closed Soviet archives in 1991, studies of the war of annihilation and the Holocaust have received a mighty impetus. Young German scholars, in particular, have done important work to uncover the crimes of the Nazi regime in Eastern Europe. However, very little of the flood of new publications has so far found its way to an English-language audience.

The Soviet Union doesn't exist anymore. The dismemberment of the Soviet Union, which the Nazis failed to achieve in World War II, was accomplished by the Stalinist bureaucracy with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism. However, the geopolitical and economic interests of world imperialism in this region of the world have remained very real. In this sense, the campaign of US and German imperialism stands in the tradition of the Nazi's Operation Barbarossa.

From this standpoint, the historical material presented must be studied by workers as a warning of what imperialism is capable of. If anything, US and German imperialism, unless stopped by the international working class, will be even more brutal in pursuing their geopolitical and economic interests today.

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[3] Dan Michman: *The Emergence of Jewish Ghettos during the Holocaust*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 45-101.



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