

Seventy years since the defeat of Hitler's Third Reich

Fred Williams**9 May 2015**

In Moscow today, a major military parade will celebrate the victory over Nazi Germany that ended the European theater of the Second World War. Several world leaders of countries that were allies of the Soviet Union in the war are boycotting the ceremonies, and little attention is being paid to the holiday outside of Russia.

US President Barack Obama will be conspicuously absent, as will British Prime Minister David Cameron. German Chancellor Angela Merkel is scheduled to visit Moscow to lay a wreath on May 10.

The ruling class in the US and in Europe have no desire to acknowledge the central role played by the Soviet working class in the defeat of fascism in Europe—particularly under conditions in which they are promoting and allied with fascistic forces as part of a virulently anti-Russian campaign.

It is a historical fact that the defeat of Nazi Germany would have been impossible without the enormous sacrifice of the Soviet people. Although the precise number may never be known, about 27 million Soviet citizens lost their lives in defeating the Nazi forces. Nearly every Soviet family lost one or more members. Thousands of villages were completely destroyed, and many major cities reduced to rubble.

The Stalinist leadership of the Soviet Union and the Comintern—rooted in the reactionary and nationalist theory of “socialism in one country”—shared immense responsibility for both the outbreak of the war and the unpreparedness of the Soviet armed forces before the Nazi invasion on June 22, 1941.

First of all, failure to unite the German working class in the two major parties of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Communist Party (KPD) allowed Hitler to come to power in January 1933. The Comintern denounced the SPD as “social-fascists” who were hardly distinguishable from the Nazis (“not antipodes, but twins”), and the KPD advanced the slogan, “After Hitler, us.”

Suggesting that Hitler would fall after a few months of rule criminally disarmed the German workers. Hitler used extraordinary laws after the Reichstag fire in February to crush organized resistance in the working class. Among the first victims of the Nazi regime were the Social-Democratic, Communist and trade union leaders, many of whom were killed or sent to concentration camps.

The next major blow was Stalin's Great Terror, which exterminated almost all of the surviving leaders of the October Revolution from 1936-1938. This included a purge of the Red Army in 1937, in which 30-40,000 officers were executed, essentially decapitating the military on the eve of the impending war. Officers such as Tukhachevsky, Yakir, Eideman, Kork and Primakov, who had invaluable experience in the civil war and had developed advanced military strategy in the decades since, were tortured and shot in May 1937. Had they been alive in 1941, the initial catastrophe of Hitler's invasion of 1941

would have been significantly reduced.

In addition, Stalin conducted Popular Front policies during the Spanish Civil War, in which the Communist Party strangled the socialist revolution in order to preserve alliances with “imperialist democracies” against Franco's Falangist forces, supported by Hitler and Mussolini. The ensuing defeat of the Spanish working class virtually guaranteed that world war was on the horizon.

Then, to the shock of many in the international workers' movement, Stalin signed a pact of nonaggression with Hitler on August 23, 1939. The very fascist parties that had been denounced during the Popular Front period were now being hailed as dependable allies, causing extreme disorientation in the political consciousness of the working class.

Throughout the 1930s, the most perceptive analyst of these events was Leon Trotsky, the co-leader with Lenin of the October Revolution and founder of the Red Army, who had been exiled from the Soviet Union by Stalin in 1929. When the Comintern defended its policies up to and after Hitler's coming to power, Trotsky set out to build a new revolutionary party of the international working class, the Fourth International.

While defending the social conquests of the October Revolution, Trotsky called for the political overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a crucial component in advancing world socialist revolution. His assessment of the potential strength of the Soviet Union in 1934 in a possible war with a rapidly rearming Germany was prescient:

Facts must be taken as they are: not only is war not excluded but it is also almost inevitable. He who is able and willing to read the books of history will understand beforehand that should the Russian Revolution, which has continued ebbing and flowing for almost thirty years—since 1905—be forced to direct its stream into the channel of war, it will unleash a terrific and overwhelming force.

In the six years leading up to the Stalin-Hitler Pact, Trotsky had repeatedly warned that Stalin was seeking an accommodation with Germany. When Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, the secret protocols of the pact of “nonaggression” were unknown. On September 17, the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east, effecting a partition of that country with Germany. Included in the pact were clauses allowing Soviet occupation of the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia), as well as portions of Romania. In November 1939, Stalin invaded Finland in the bloody “Winter War”

that led to the annexation of portions of Finland at great human cost.

During this 22-month period before Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, Stalin supplied Germany with raw materials and foodstuffs that significantly assisted the Nazi war effort in Western Europe.

Despite the early successes of Hitler's Blitzkrieg in Poland, France, Netherlands and elsewhere, Trotsky insisted that German imperialism could not solve its contradictions by trying to conquer Europe. He also explained that Hitler would inevitably turn east to attack the Soviet regime. In the looming expansion of the war on a scale never before seen in history, Trotsky also was confident that the Stalinist bureaucracy would not survive the revolutionary upheavals that the war would bring. Under these conditions, he foresaw the possibility of the Fourth International being able to lead a new round of socialist revolution.

Fearing Trotsky far more than Hitler, Stalin ordered intense efforts to carry out his assassination. Ramon Mercader succeeded in killing Trotsky in August 1940, as the world's attention was focused on the Battle of Britain.

Hitler, meanwhile, ordered his generals to prepare Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. On June 22, 1941, over 3.6 million troops poured across the border, with 3,000 tanks and a formidable air force. Within the first six months of the war, three million Soviet troops were captured, of which two million would starve to death as prisoners of war by January 1942.

The starvation of Soviet prisoners was a deliberate part of Hitler's "General Plan East." The goal of the war was to occupy all of the Soviet Union up to the Ural Mountains, while resettling the newly conquered "living space" with Aryan citizens. The indigenous population would be killed in the "war of annihilation"; those not killed outright in combat would be used as slave labor, exterminated by killing squads, or starved to death. Hitler expected that 20-30 million Soviet citizens would die of starvation.

The Nazi regime was ferociously anticommunist, and Hitler himself saw the destruction of "Jewish Bolshevism" as inextricably connected to the destruction of European Jewry as a whole. Of the six million Jews that the Nazis killed in the war, millions were massacred during the invasion of the Soviet Union.

Overconfident due to his rapid conquests in Western Europe, Hitler expected the Soviet regime to crumble in six weeks. As his forces drove in three prongs toward Leningrad, Moscow and Stalingrad, they met unexpectedly fierce resistance. Despite their incredibly high losses, Soviet troops fought ferociously to defeat the fascist invaders. As the German armies advanced deep into Russia, large portions of Soviet industry were dismantled and moved to Central Asia and Siberia, involving enormous sacrifice by the working class. By 1943, the centralized economy of the Soviet Union, despite its Stalinist distortions, was out-producing the German war machine.

The brutal five-month Battle of Stalingrad ended with the rout of Hitler's troops in February 1943. 1943 also witnessed the massive Battle of Kursk, involving 3 million soldiers and thousands of tanks. Soviet troops reached Germany by the end of 1944. During the battle of Berlin, Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945. Total capitulation of the Nazi regime came just after midnight on May 9, Moscow time.

After the war, the Stalinist regime pursued a policy of peaceful coexistence with its main imperialist allies, the United States, Great Britain and France. In agreements that had been worked out in meetings at Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam, Eastern Europe became the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, while revolution was

suppressed by the Communist parties that had largely led the resistance against the Nazis in France, Italy and Greece.

While many Soviet citizens expected a relaxation of the Stalinist regime after all they had endured during the war, there was little let-up during the painful period of rebuilding. Stalin's nationalist and anti-working class policies assumed monstrous forms during the "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign and the Doctors' Plot. These state-sponsored anti-Semitic campaigns were quickly shut down after Stalin died in March 1953.

The seven decades since the victory over fascist Germany have seen the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, carried out by Stalin's heirs in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Vladimir Putin, a corrupt, authoritarian representative of the capitalist oligarchs, is trying to use the celebration of May 9 to prop up his own ultranationalist agenda, including a glorification of Stalin. The military forces on parade on Red Square, however, no longer rest on the progressive social base laid down by the October Revolution. Putin's regime represents the billionaires that have profited from the final act of betrayal by the Stalinist bureaucracy, the dissolution of the USSR and reintegration into the world economy on a capitalist basis.

If the imperialist powers boycott the commemorations in Russia of the victory over fascism, it is due in large part to the fact that the policies they are pursuing today have much in common with those of the Nazis themselves. Indeed, in Ukraine, US and German imperialism are allied with fascistic forces, the descendants of Ukrainian nationalists who collaborated with the Nazi regime during the Second World War.

The United States is deliberately and systematically stoking conflict with Russia. The Ukraine coup in February 2014 has been followed by an immense militarization of the entire region, led by the United States and directed at Russia. Indeed, as commemorations are held in Moscow, military exercises are being conducted by NATO forces not far from Russia's borders.

For its part, the German ruling class, which backed the coup in Ukraine, is seeking to whitewash the crimes of its past in order to prepare new ones in the future. German academics are trying to relativize the crimes of the Hitler regime and present Nazism as the justified response to the Bolshevik revolution.

Seventy years after the end of World War II in Europe, the continent—and indeed the world—confront the resurgence of unrestrained militarism. The only way to prevent new imperialist war, not only in Europe, but in the Middle East, Asia and virtually every corner of the globe, is for the working class to unite internationally on a socialist and revolutionary program.



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