

VE Day in Germany: War commemoration and war propaganda

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Countless memorial ceremonies, both large and small, are being held in Europe to mark the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

Russia will celebrate the end of the war on Saturday with a large military parade. In Poland, a commemoration ceremony was held at Westerplatte in Gdansk. The German parliament held a commemoration ceremony on Friday. In the days before, high-level German politicians attended several events at former concentration camps to honor their liberation. President Joachim Gauck spoke on Wednesday in a former camp for Soviet prisoners of war.

But while similar commemorations in previous years were dedicated to shared reflection on the past, now they revolve around current conflicts and future wars. They are exploited for foreign policy objectives and placed in the service of historical revisionism.

Not a single leading politician from Germany was present at the victory parade in Moscow, which was attended by Chancellor Angela Merkel five years ago. The US and Great Britain, allies of the Soviet Union in the war, stayed away as well. Instead, Chinese President Xi Jinping attended, who, for the first time, will hold his own large military parade in Peking on September 3, the day after Japan's surrender.

The western powers justify their boycott of the Moscow celebrations with the conflict in Ukraine and Russia's acquisition of Crimea. In Ukraine itself, the new western-backed regime has placed the commemorations in the service of the rewriting of history. The glorification of former Nazi collaborators, who were previously only paid tributes by fascists and ultra-nationalist groups in Western Ukraine, has become the official program of the government.

One month ago, the Parliament in Kiev adopted a law

which recognizes Nazi collaborators as freedom fighters and makes their public vilification a crime, along with the display of communist symbols. Now, on the anniversary of the end of the war, not only are the victims of the Nazis and the soldiers who fell in the fight against German invaders to be remembered, but so too are the Ukrainians who fought with the Nazis against the Soviet Union and murdered untold numbers of Jews, Poles and Soviet prisoners of war.

Leading the way for this rehabilitation of war criminals is Wolodymyr Wjatrowytsch, director of the Ukrainian National Memory Institute, whose task is the creation of a binding national narrative for all Ukrainians. Wjatrowytsch is an avowed admirer of the Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera.

The German government, which collaborates closely with its Ukrainian counterpart, has somewhat muted its anti-Russian rhetoric. Together with President Putin, Chancellor Merkel will lay a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow on May 10, and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier met with his Russian counterpart at a memorial in Volgograd, the former Stalingrad.

At a ceremony held in a former POW camp on Wednesday, President Gauck paid tribute to the 5.3 million Soviet soldiers in German captivity, of which more than half died. He called this "one of the greatest crimes of this war." He added that "the war in the East by the National Socialist regime was from the beginning planned as an ideological war, a war of annihilation and extermination," and that not only the SS and special forces, but also the Wehrmacht had been guilty of the gravest crimes.

By making such gestures, those governing Germany hope to prevent a complete breakdown of their relations with Moscow. Above all, however, they calculate that

their stated intention to again play a leading political and military role on the world stage will meet less international resistance if they appear repentant.

Foreign Minister Steinmeier stated this freely last week at a memorial ceremony in Berlin at the House of Representatives. According to his logic, the crimes of the Nazi regime make Germany particularly qualified to play the role of a world power.

“Especially Germany, whose unfettered nationalism wreaked havoc on the world,” he said, “Germany, which since that time has been carefully and gradually integrated into the European and international peace order—perhaps we more than anyone else must take on responsibility for the preservation of an international order.”

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* expressed the same idea even more cynically. Under the title “Moral Capital,” Gustav Seibt wrote: “Once again it appears that the continual wrestling with the past was not only a moral obligation but also a politically clever endeavor. Without the moral capital, which the Federal Republic has accumulated since the 1950s, against considerable internal opposition, its standing in the world today would be substantially more complicated.”

The aims which Germany pursues with this “moral capital” are anything but moral. The political scientist Herfried Münkler, to whom Seibt expressly refers, argues openly for German domination of Europe. With its insistence on strict austerity, the government is driving millions into extreme poverty in Greece, throughout Europe and also in Germany. And the German military is playing a central role in the deployment of NATO against Russia.

While the German heads of state and government have somewhat reined in their rhetoric—at least for the time of the war celebrations—lesser politicians continue to propagate war and the universities rewrite history.

In the TV talk show “Anne Will,” the Christian Democratic Union politician and leader of the Federation of Expellees Erika Steinbach was given a public stage to declare that she did not regard the victory of the Red Army over the Nazis as liberation at all, and to play down every crime of the Nazis by referring to the crimes of Stalin.

The Humboldt University in Berlin is defending Ernst Nolte, who ignited the Historians’ Dispute in 1986 with similar arguments and is one of the most notorious

apologists for Hitler and Nazism. Timothy Snyder, whose book *Bloodlands* has become a key reference work for all those seeking to rewrite the history of World War II in a revanchist sense, is a sought-after speaker at German symposia and historical conferences.

The 70th anniversary of the war’s end makes clear that none of the issues which transformed Europe into an inferno in 1914 and 1939, have been resolved. Ruling elites across the globe are responding to the upheavals of the capitalist system with social attacks, the building of a police state, and war. Europe and Germany are no exception.



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