

# Seventy-five years since the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union

Barry Grey  
22 June 2016

Seventy-five years ago today, in the early morning hours of June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, a massive, undeclared invasion of the Soviet Union. Over the course of the operation, some 4 million soldiers of the Axis powers attacked the USSR along an 1,800-mile front, the largest invasion force in the history of warfare.

Operation Barbarossa was, in the words of the German state, a *Vernichtungskrieg*, a war of annihilation. Its aim was not simply the conquest of territory and seizure of human and natural resources, it was the physical liquidation of the Soviet Union and extirpation of all traces of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

The war against the Soviet Union expressed the historical and political essence of the Nazi regime, which had been brought to power by the German bourgeoisie to destroy the German workers movement and end for all time the threat of socialist revolution. But in a profound sense, Operation Barbarossa was the response of world imperialism and the international capitalist class to the crisis of their system and the growth of revolutionary Marxism.

It was well known that in the years leading up to the German invasion, the Western imperialist powers and capitalist governments had looked sympathetically upon Hitler's despotic regime and hoped that it would at least initially turn its military might to the East and serve as an instrument for the destruction of the USSR.

In his book *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*, published in 2011, historian Stephen G. Fritz summed up the motivation behind the Nazi invasion as follows:

Contrary to the belief of many in the West, Hitler did not blunder into the war in the east. For him, the "right" war was always that against the Soviet Union, for to him Germany's destiny depended on attaining Lebensraum and solving the "Jewish question." Both of these, in turn, hinged on destroying the Soviet Union. Which of these aims was most important? Given Hitler's views, it would be artificial to attempt to prioritize or separate them. For him, the war against "Jewish-Bolshevism" and for Lebensraum was comprehensive and of whole cloth.

This political and historical goal determined the character of the German war in the East and the methods employed. From the outset, and by design, the German *Wehrmacht* unleashed a level of brutality such as the world had never seen. Between 2 million and 3 million Russians, mainly civilians, were killed in the first three months of the invasion.

The *Generalplan Ost* (General Plan East), adopted in 1940, included a "Hunger Plan" that envisioned the deliberate, targeted starvation of 30 million people in western and northwestern Russia—18 percent of the Soviet population.

On the orders of Hitler and the general staff, all basic tenets of

international and military law were to be ignored. The so-called Commissar Order issued in advance of the invasion decreed: "In this battle it would be a mistake to show mercy or respect for international law toward such elements... The barbaric, Asiatic fighting methods are originated by the political commissars... Therefore, when they are picked up in battle or resistance, they are, as a matter of principle, to be finished off immediately with a weapon."

General Erich Hoepner told the 4th Panzer Group that "the struggle must aim at the annihilation of today's Russia and must therefore be waged with unparalleled harshness... No adherents of the present Russian-Bolshevik system are to be spared."

The invasion of Russia had a genocidal character. It marked a new phase of the Holocaust, setting into motion the systematic campaign to destroy European Jewry. The Wannsee Conference, where the decision to implement the "Final Solution" was taken, was held seven months after the launch of Barbarossa.

The almost complete annihilation of Jews in all the conquered territories began with the first days of Operation Barbarossa. In the Baltic countries, a large majority of the Jewish population was exterminated within six months of the invasion. Over a million Soviet Jews were murdered by *Einsatzgruppen* death squads.

The number of casualties among Soviet civilians has to this day not been definitively established, but it is usually put at around 18 million out of a total of 27 million people from the Soviet Union who died in the war.

The war was launched nearly two years after the August 1939 non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin that ushered in the German invasion of Poland and World War II. This pact, which greatly disoriented the international workers movement, occurred two years after the destructive and demoralizing purge of the Red Army in the Great Terror of 1937-1938. This historically unprecedented massacre of Red Army officers, on the eve of a major war, left the Soviet Union immensely vulnerable to a German attack. Stalin killed more high level officers than were killed in the four years of the subsequent World War.

Stalin thereby eliminated virtually the entire military cadre that had emerged from the Revolution and the 1918-1921 Civil War, and been trained and educated under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution and the creator and commander of the Red Army in the early years of the regime. In total, some 30,000 Red Army personnel were executed, including high percentages of division, corps and army commanders.

Germany began massing troops and materiel near the Soviet border months before the invasion. Despite being warned by British intelligence and the Soviet regime's own intelligence agencies that Hitler was preparing to attack, Stalin delayed the reconstruction of defensive fortifications in the border regions.

As a result of Stalin's policies, driven by the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy's fear of a revolutionary challenge to its rule by the Soviet working class, when the *Wehrmacht* crossed the border it quickly

overwhelmed the Soviet forces. In the first weeks of the war, German and allied forces advanced with breathtaking speed across virtually the whole of the front, occupying some of the most important economic areas of the USSR, mainly in Ukraine. Stalin, caught by surprise and in total panic, suffered a nervous breakdown. He did not even address the nation until July 3, 11 days after the invasion.

Hitler had organized the offensive on the premise that the war would be quickly won.

But despite the catastrophic failure of the Stalinist leadership and the terrible losses suffered by the Soviet Union in the initial weeks, the resistance mobilized almost spontaneously by the Soviet people had a massive and historic character. By the mid-autumn of 1941, notwithstanding the fact that the Germans had advanced some 600 miles, had encircled Leningrad and were almost within sight of Moscow, the German high command concluded that the invasion had failed and Germany was trapped in a protracted war it could not win.

In December of 1941, the Red Army launched a devastating counterattack and, for the first time ever, the fascist armies were thrown backwards. The failure of Operation Barbarossa was a decisive turning point in the fortunes of the Third Reich. The scale of popular resistance in the USSR, and the heights of courage and self-sacrifice displayed by the suffering Soviet masses were a testimony to the world historic and progressive significance of the Russian Revolution and the world's first workers state which it brought to power, despite the crimes and depredations of the Stalinist ruling clique.

The Soviet victory, which still required four more years of fighting and more terrible human losses to consummate, had a powerful impact on the working class all over the world. It was the residual strength of the Russian Revolution that played the decisive role in the defeat of fascism. The Soviet counteroffensive inspired the growth of resistance movements throughout Nazi-occupied Europe and internationally.

Summing up the crucial role of the Red Army and the resistance of the Soviet masses in the defeat of Hitler's Reich, Stephen G. Fritz wrote in the volume cited above:

The Second World War was not won or lost solely on the Ostfront, but it was the key—while the scale of fighting there dwarfed anything in the west. In retrospect, the disproportional nature of the Ostkrieg is striking: roughly eight of every ten German soldiers who died were killed in the east ... the Red Army, at the cost of perhaps 12 million dead (or approximately thirty times the number of the Anglo-Americans), broke the back of the Wehrmacht...

Trotsky, the leader of the international struggle to defend and extend the Russian Revolution on the basis of the program of world socialist revolution, and implacable opponent of Stalinism, anticipated and understood better than anyone else the significance of the Red Army. He concluded a 1934 article titled "The Red Army":

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.

Seventy-five years later, the Soviet Union no longer exists. It was destroyed, as Trotsky had warned, by the reactionary, nationalist character of the Stalinist bureaucracy. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 was the culmination of the betrayals and crimes of the Stalinist regime and a major blow to the international working class.

The quarter century since the restoration of capitalism in Russia, far from producing a flowering of peace and democracy, has inaugurated a new period of imperialist war and reaction all over the world. For Russia, it has been an unmitigated disaster. One of the necessities driving the Russian Revolution was the fact that Russia, so long as it remained under capitalist rule, would inevitably be carved up by the Western imperialist powers and reduced to the status of a semi-colony. Today, militarily encircled and under relentless political, economic and diplomatic assault by the United States and its NATO allies, capitalist Russia is incapable of warding off its attackers. The Putin regime embodies a return to the most bankrupt forms of Russian nationalism, pursued in the interests of a criminal capitalist oligarchy.

The removal of the Soviet Union from the scene, despite its degeneration under the Stalinist bureaucracy, has fueled a growth of interimperialist conflict and militarism, and hastened the drive of world imperialism toward a new world war.

It is remarkable how little is being written or said about the anniversary of one of the most monstrous crimes of the 20th century. This is not accidental.

For some time and with increasing ferocity, particularly as we approach the centenary of the Russian Revolution, a spirit of revanchism has animated the political, ideological and academic representatives of imperialism. Books are being published, articles written, interviews given seeking to legitimize and apologize for the Nazi war against the Soviet Union. The central calumny and historical falsification of these screeds is not only the claim of an equivalency between the invader and the invaded, but the assertion that the unspeakable crimes of Nazism were a justified response to what they claim was the real crime of the 20th century—the overthrow of capitalism in Russia.

These are preemptive and, in the end, desperate attempts to prevent a new generation of workers and youth, entering into revolutionary struggle and attracted to the banner of socialism, from drawing inspiration from the greatest event of modern history—the October 1917 Revolution—and learning the true lessons of the heroic and tragic fate of the Soviet Union.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**