Berlin exhibition—“Mass Shootings: The Holocaust from the Baltic to the Black Sea 1941-1944”

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Mass Shootings: The Holocaust from the Baltic to the Black Sea 1941–1944, September 28, 2016–March 17, 2017

A small, but nonetheless very significant exhibition—75 years after the invasion of the Soviet Union and the massacre of thousands of Jews at Babi Yar in Ukraine—is currently on display at the Berlin Documentation Centre, a history museum in Berlin located on the site where the Gestapo and SS had their headquarters from 1933 to 1945. The Documentation Centre displays documents, photos, videos and audio exhibitions related to the Nazi crimes.

The exhibition, “Mass Shootings: The Holocaust from the Baltic to the Black Sea 1941–44,” draws attention to the little known fact that shortly after the invasion of the Soviet Union by the German military on June 22, 1941, Nazi paramilitary death squads collaborated with the military and police in a systematic campaign of mass shootings of Jews, other civilians and Soviet Red Army members. The commanders later introduced the use of special vehicles for gassing victims so as to spare the soldiers the images of screaming women and children.

One feature of the Second World War that generally goes unexamined is the fact that of the 6 million Jews who were exterminated, more than 2 million died in the Soviet Union as a result of such mass executions and not in concentration camps.

The visitor in Berlin stands shocked and shaken in front of a map near the entrance to the exhibition. The Babi Yar massacre of September 29–30, 1941, in which 34,000 Jews from Kiev in Ukraine were killed, is notorious. But the sheer scale of the mass shootings marked on the map by black points is less well known.

Some 570 locations are marked on the map on territory that stretches from Riga in Latvia to the Black Sea. In this area, according to current research, there were 1.5 million victims. As a text explains, the black points only count the towns, cities and villages where at least 500 Jewish women, children and men were shot. In addition, there were many crime scenes where non-Jews were massacred: Communist officials, Roma, or patients of psychiatric institutions. There were also a great number of massacres with smaller victim totals that remain to be examined sufficiently by researchers.

The documents at the Berlin exhibition include shocking pictures of the mass shootings at Babi Yar and other locations, which were taken secretly by Wehrmacht [German military] soldiers and not handed in to the commanders in violation of orders. There are also operational reports from the heads of various army units, which detail the numbers shot, and documents from legal proceedings after the war, in which many of the convicted commanders of the Wehrmacht units were rapidly set free. The German army’s participation in the mass shootings was kept quiet for years.

A large portion of the exhibition treats the destruction of the Jewish community of Mizocz in the western Soviet border area of Volhynia (which today straddles Poland, Ukraine and Belarus). The Polish section of Volhynia, which includes the small town of Mizocz, was given to the Soviet Union in the secret protocol of the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939. In Volhynia alone, some 160,000 Jews were murdered between May and December 1942.

With its timeline of events in Mizocz, the exhibition gives the mass shootings a face. Photos from the period prior to 1941 show a Catholic kindergarten; women taking a walk; a sugar factory, in the vicinity of which the mass shootings occurred in October 1942; pictures from family albums; members of the Socialist-Zionist youth association Gordonia with a sign reading “Workers’ Group.”

Executions in the forest, public executions and finally the brutal mass shooting in October 1942, in which all 1,500 Jewish men, women and children lost their lives, are all documented. A gendarme’s post captured the shooting in photos. The rescue efforts of one Gräbe, a leading engineer in the firm of Josef Jung that employed many Jewish forced labourers, are documented, as is the formation of a youth resistance group in September 1942, which armed itself with axes, knives and iron bars.

In addition, the “Mass Shootings” exhibition makes clear the central role played by the Ukrainian Resistance Army (UPA) in the persecution of the Jews. It was the UPA that drove the Jews out of Mizocz to the trenches. In the subsequent period,

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members of the UPA, who are celebrated today by Ukrainian fascists as heroes, hunted down Jews who survived.

The Berlin exhibition, however, is not limited to documenting the horror. It makes clear that the mass shootings were not the result of excesses by one or several commanders, but rather the outcome of a policy deliberately pursued by the Nazi leadership.

Prominent place is given to a June 6, 1941 order. More than two weeks before the beginning of Operation Barbarossa [the invasion of the USSR by the German military], it was issued by the Wehrmacht leadership and ordered that all political commissars in the Red Army be "in principle eliminated immediately."

"It cannot be expected that in the struggle against Bolshevism, the enemy will behave according to the standards of humanity or international law," the order of the OKW (supreme command of the Wehrmacht), which was signed by Alfred Jodl, declared by way of justification. "Leniency and the respecting of international law when dealing with these elements" would therefore be wrong, and further, "The originators of the barbaric-Asiatic methods of combat are the political commissars. Therefore, all ruthlessness must be used immediately and without restraint."

On July 2, 1941, the chief of the security police and the SD [SS intelligence agency], Reinhard Heydrich, issued an order to the leading SS and police commanders, "All officials of the Comintern, (as well as all professional communist politicians) are to be executed; the middle and radical officials of the party, the central committees of regional party organisations; people's commissars; Jews in the party and state positions; other radical elements (saboteurs, propagandists, snipers, attackers, agitators and so forth.)"

Two things become clear as a result. First, the central goal from the outset was to exterminate the "Jewish-Bolshevik" leadership of the Soviet Union. Hitler hated the Jews above all because they had played an important role in the October Revolution and the workers movement. A left-wing journalist during the Weimar Republic, Konrad Heiden, summarised this point, "Not Rothschild the capitalist, but Karl Marx the socialist provoked Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism." (Konrad Heiden, *Der Fuehrer*, 1944, p. 58)

Second, the war against the Soviet Union, unlike the war in the West, was planned as a war of annihilation. This was underscored by the opening lecture of the current Berlin exhibition titled "Barbarossa: strategic planning and political decisions, June 1940–June 1941," delivered by the Freiburg-based historian Ulrich Herbert. Already in July 1940, less than a year after the Hitler-Stalin pact, Hitler informed the army leadership of his decision "to eliminate Russia."

Herbert noted that under the slogan "*Lebensraum* [living space] in the east," Hitler intended to conquer colonial territory for German big business to exploit raw materials and create space for settlement and the securing of foodstuffs. To this end, long before the beginning of the war, SS leader Heinrich Himmler requested a group of academics at Berlin University, led by agricultural scientist Konrad Meyer, to prepare the *Generalplan Ost* [General Plan East]. It envisioned the conquered territories to be free of people, thus requiring the extermination or deportation of the existing population.

Herbert rejects the claim by the German revisionist historian Ernst Nolte in the 1980s that the Nazi war of annihilation was a preventive strike and an "understandable reaction" to the violence of the Bolsheviks, which triggered the famous "historians' dispute."

Stalin's terror in the late 1930s directed against the Bolshevik leaders of the October Revolution, which also virtually decapitated the Red Army, played into Hitler's hands. When the Wehrmacht invaded, the Soviet Army was taken by surprise and suffered severe losses. The numbers of dead in the USSR, 27 million in total, including 14 million civilians, speak for themselves.

Nolte justified his position in words almost identical to those of the Nazis' "commissar" order: "Did Hitler perhaps carry out an Asiatic act because they and others like them feared becoming potential or real victims of an Asiatic act?" (Ernst Nolte, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, "The Past That Will Not Pass", June 6, 1986)

Today, this historical revisionism in Germany is being revived and intensified by the occupant of the chair of Eastern European history at Humboldt University, Professor Jörg Baberowski. In his books *Scorched Earth: Stalin' s Reign of Terror* and *Spaces of Violence*, he attacked the "mass violence" of the "Bolsheviks," which allegedly laid the basis for the acts of violence by the Wehrmacht. In a 2007 publication, Baberowski went on to claim, "Stalin and his generals imposed a new type of war on the Wehrmacht, which no longer spared the civilian population." Unlike Nolte, Baberowski removes the question mark.

The Berlin exhibition on "Mass Shootings" provides a stunning refutation of this historical falsification and demonstrates how similar it is to the propaganda of the Nazis themselves.

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