

The 75th anniversary of D-Day and the rising threat of imperialist war

Bill Van Auken**7 June 2019**

The commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the D-Day invasion of Nazi-occupied France on June 6, 1944 was an event marked by stark contradictions.

The invasion itself, the largest seaborne assault in world history, was a massive military operation involving 160,000 troops—American, British and Canadian—thousands of ships and landing craft as well as an intense bombing campaign from the air.

Like all such operations, D-Day involved its share of reckless actions and miscalculations for which soldiers, many of them 18- and 19-year-olds who had never fired a gun in battle before, paid with their lives.

Before the battle was over, there would be nearly 20,000 dead, counting both the invaders and the German troops that they confronted. Another 20,000 French civilians lost their lives during the battle of Normandy, including over 4,000 on D-Day alone.

The veterans of the battle who returned for the anniversary, walking with canes and walkers or in wheelchairs, and many, almost certainly, coming for the last time, recalled the horrors of a war that marked their entire lives. Those who spoke of their experiences that day—and many still cannot—recalled climbing over the bodies of fellow soldiers to reach the beachhead and hearing dying friends crying for help. One British medic's indelible memory from D-Day was having a 16-year-old German soldier, both his legs blown off, dying in his arms.

The suffering, pain and, indeed, heroism of these aging veterans of the most terrible war in humanity's history are undeniable. Their statements that they had made a necessary sacrifice in a fight for "freedom" are no doubt sincere, reflecting the widespread popular sentiments at the time that the war was being waged to defeat fascism.

The speeches delivered by the various leaders, Donald Trump at the lead, were, however, of a completely different character. For them, the words "peace," "freedom" and "democracy" invoked in Portsmouth, England and near Omaha Beach in Normandy were loaded with so much cynicism and hypocrisy that they turned into their opposites.

Trump, praised by the so-called liberal media for reading and sniffing his way through a string of platitudes and anecdotes

assembled by his staff, credited the D-Day veterans with "the survival of liberty" of "our civilization and "our way of life," as well as "the blessings of peace."

His host, French President Emmanuel Macron, spoke along similar lines: "We must never stop working for the alliance of the free world," he said. "We must prove ourselves worthy of this heritage of peace that we have been bequeathed." At the same time, he invoked the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union—all institutions which Trump has contemptuously derided—as the embodiment of this heritage.

All this talk of "peace" is belied by the deaths of at least 20 million people in the wars fought by imperialism since the end of the Second World War, from Korea, to Vietnam, the Balkans, Iraq, Libya and Syria, not to mention Algeria, where the French military slaughtered some 200,000.

Moreover, immediately after their speeches, Trump and Macron met to discuss Iran, where Washington is steadily building up its military forces for war.

And one would not guess from the speeches celebrating a war waged ostensibly to vanquish the Nazis that Trump is deliberately stoking the fires of xenophobia, extreme nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism that constitute the essential ideological foundations of modern day neofascism, or that Macron only last year praised France's fascist dictator, Marshal Philippe Pétain, who gave his unqualified support to the Nazi occupiers, as "a great soldier." Or, for that matter, that Europe as a whole has more neofascists in government than at any time since the fall of the Third Reich, with the fascistic Alternative for Germany (AfD) now the largest opposition party in Germany's Bundestag.

Behind the speeches delivered Thursday—as with the bloody event that they were meant to commemorate—lay the definite political calculations of politicians seeking to further the imperialist interests of their respective countries.

World War II, the speeches delivered on opposite sides of the English Channel this week notwithstanding, was not a "war for democracy" against fascism. Rather, like the First World War which it followed by just 21 years, it arose out of the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system, between the world economy and its division between antagonistic nation-

states, and between socialized production and the continued private ownership of the means of production.

The D-Day invasion came out of a protracted struggle between the US and Britain over the course of the war and the opening of a “second front,” which the Soviet Union had called for over at least the previous two years.

One of the most striking features of the D-Day anniversary commemorations, in both the UK and France, was the deliberate exclusion of Russia from the events. Whatever the undoubtable role played by the Normandy invasion in the defeat of the Third Reich in World War II, the overwhelming sacrifices and impact of the Red Army, which was responsible for 80 percent of the casualties inflicted upon German forces, are undeniable. While the combat deaths of nearly 300,000 US military personnel were staggering, their numbers pale in comparison to the unfathomable toll of 26 million Soviet dead, military and civilian.

It was the victories of the Red Army—and behind it the antifascist resistance of the Soviet masses—fighting along a front that extended over 1,000 miles, that pushed the US and Britain to carry out the D-Day invasion and finally open up the second front demanded by Moscow.

Both US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill were concerned that without an intervention in France, the war in Europe could be won solely by the Soviet Union, raising the specter of socialist revolution throughout the continent.

Both imperialist heads of state were concerned over the defense of capitalism in a postwar Europe and the prospect of millions of workers, having passed through the searing experiences of the Great Depression, the rise of fascism and the horrors of world war, taking the road of revolution.

Churchill had a long record as a rabid anticommunist and implacable enemy of the Soviet Union, going back to the deployment of British troops in Archangel and Murmansk in 1918 in what he then described, as minister of war, as a campaign “to strangle at birth the Bolshevik State.”

While describing Bolshevism as a “disease” and a “pestilence,” as late as 1935, Churchill, like many in the British ruling class, was holding out the hope that Adolf Hitler would “go down in history as the man who restored honor and peace of mind to the great Germanic nation and brought it back serene, helpful and strong, to the forefront of the European family.” In the 1930s, he and likeminded right-wing Tories held out the hope that Nazi Germany would settle accounts with the Soviet Union.

Churchill’s calculations during the Second World War were based not on “democracy” or “freedom,” but on defending a British empire that enslaved hundreds of millions of workers and peasants in the colonies of the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the Middle East.

Roosevelt, for his part, represented a rising US imperialism that had become the predominant Atlantic power and was

seeking to exert global hegemony. By the time of D-Day, the United States was producing 45 percent of the world’s armaments and nearly 50 percent of the world’s goods, while two-thirds of all the world’s ships afloat were US-built.

These divergent interests underlay the Anglo-American differences over military strategy in Europe, both before and after D-Day, with Washington ultimately dictating the war plans against Germany.

In the recently published book *War and Peace: FDR’s Final Odyssey: D-Day to Yalta, 1943–1945*, British biographer Nigel Hamilton recounts how after D-Day Churchill was incensed over the decision of Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, the supreme allied commander, not to send an army racing east to beat the Soviet Red Army to Berlin.

Hamilton writes: “All too soon, in fact, he [Churchill] would order plans to be drawn up for an Anglo-American Barbarossa [the Nazi codename for the invasion of the Soviet Union]: an attack from the Dresden area ‘so as to impose upon Russia the will of the United States and the British Empire’... It would involve almost fifty—mostly American—divisions, and up to a hundred thousand Wehrmacht troops! It was to be launched, moreover, four days before the British general election: Operation Unthinkable.”

Churchill’s proposal to ally with the armies of Germany’s Nazi regime to attack the Soviet Union was vetoed by Washington, which rightly believed that the population of the United States—having been told it was waging a crusade against fascism—would never stand for such a war. Nonetheless, it exposed the “democratic” and “antifascist” pretenses of the US capitalist ruling class and its principal ally.

Seventy-five years later, with the Soviet Union having been dissolved by the Stalinist bureaucracy and US imperialism turning ever more aggressively toward militarism as a means of offsetting the decline of its global economic hegemony, the threat of a new world war, fought with nuclear weapons, has never been greater. Hand in hand with the drive to war is the resurgence of extreme right-wing and fascist elements in both Europe and the United States itself, along with the buildup of state repression.

Once again—for the third time in a century—humanity is confronted with the choice between socialism and barbarism. There is no other way of stopping a new imperialist war, and with it the threat of nuclear annihilation, outside of socialist revolution. The decisive question is that of establishing a new revolutionary leadership in the working class through the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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