

Eighty years since the outbreak of World War II

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Eighty years ago, on September 1, 1939, the Nazi government of Germany launched its invasion of Poland. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Second World War—which would expand across the globe and last for six years before coming to an end in 1945—was waged with unspeakable brutality and haunts the collective memory of mankind as the most barbaric event in history.

Bestial crimes against humanity were committed during this war. Claiming the lives of more than 70 million human beings, the war erased all boundaries between combatants and civilians, with unarmed men, women and children dying in roughly twice the numbers as soldiers on the battlefield.

Relentless bombardment of cities, along with wholesale famines caused by economic disruption, were joined with systematic attempts to exterminate entire peoples.

Even before Germany sent 1.5 million troops along with more than 2,000 airplanes and 2,500 tanks across the Polish border on September 1, 1939, the drive to war had already claimed massive casualties. Italy had invaded Ethiopia in 1935, exposing the impotence of the League of Nations and slaughtering nearly 400,000 civilians over a period of six years. Japan had invaded and occupied China, carrying out the infamous Rape of Nanjing of 1937–38 in which up to 300,000 civilians were slaughtered in one city. Before the war was over, 15 million Chinese would be killed.

World War II introduced a grim catalogue of new words into the world's political and military lexicon: genocide, *blitzkrieg*, Total War, Holocaust, death camp, Final Solution, Zyclon B, A-bomb, mushroom cloud, fallout, Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

There are many people still alive who went through the horrors of World War II. Those who survived, both soldiers and civilians, bore scars—physical, mental and emotional—for the rest of their lives. Their bitter experiences played an immense role in shaping the lives of their children and in instilling within them a broad popular revulsion toward war.

The anniversary of such a world-historic cataclysm should obviously be the occasion for sober reflection, the studying of the lessons of the events of 80 years ago and acting upon them in order to prevent the outbreak of yet another world war that would put an end to human civilization.

Needless to say, this is the last thought on the minds of the world's capitalist leaders as they assemble in Warsaw for an official commemoration of the anniversary on Sunday. Rather, they are staging a celebration of the kind of militarism and right-wing nationalism that accompanied the war's onset in the first place.

Polish President Andrzej Duda has ordered the ceremony, traditionally held in the opposition-led city of Gdansk, where the first

shots were fired in 1939, relocated to Warsaw's Pilsudski Square, a shrine to right-wing Polish nationalism. His ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) has conducted a massive assault on basic democratic rights and spearheaded a campaign of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, going so far as to make it a crime to even mention Polish complicity in crimes against Jews during the Holocaust. It intends to turn the ceremony into a paean to Polish military "heroism."

Trump, whose fascistic nationalism, anti-immigrant chauvinism and attempts to assume dictatorial powers mirror the politics of Duda and the PiS, canceled his trip to Warsaw for the ceremony, citing the approach of Hurricane Dorian. Vice President Mike Pence will appear in his stead, and his Polish hosts hope that he will announce a further escalation of the number of US troops deployed in the country to 4,500. The Polish government has agreed to spend \$2 billion for a base to house the US soldiers, a facility that they initially proposed would be named "Fort Trump."

While Pence will be there to represent the US, and Chancellor Angela Merkel is going to Warsaw to represent Germany, the government of Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, received no invitation. Moscow bitterly protested its exclusion from the anniversary event, given the immense price paid by the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany and driving the Wehrmacht out of Poland.

It is an undeniable fact that the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany was facilitated by the signing of the infamous Stalin-Hitler Non-Aggression Pact on August 23, 1939. Moreover, on September 17, 1939, the Soviet regime invaded Poland from the East. These were acts of reactionary political treachery characteristic of the Stalinist regime, which had by the time the war began already betrayed every basic principle of socialism and revolutionary working-class internationalism.

But it is also a fact that approximately 27 million Soviet citizens lost their lives during the four years that followed the Nazi invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941. The Soviet Union bore the brunt of what was consciously planned by Nazi Germany as a war of extermination. In terms of military casualties alone, 80 Soviet soldiers died for every US fatality. Moreover, the Soviet Red Army—backed by the war production of the USSR's nationalized industries—was responsible for more than three-quarters of the casualties inflicted upon Hitler's armies, breaking the back of the Wehrmacht in the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk.

The decision not to invite Russia is not, in any event, a response to the crimes of Stalinism. The representatives of German imperialism will be in Warsaw as honored guests. A spokesman for Poland's President Duda stated: "The invitations were issued according to a contemporary, not a historical, context."

This “contemporary context” is one in which every major power is preparing for war, and Poland is offering itself as the spearhead of the aggressive US-NATO encirclement of Russia.

Washington has officially declared that its strategic policy is one of preparing for war against “great powers,” such as Russia and China, as it passes successive military budgets of over \$700 billion. Trump has recently inaugurated a Space Command dedicated to turning outer space into yet a new battlefield, and, for the third time in recent months, has mused over how he could end the war in Afghanistan by “killing 10 million people,” apparently contemplating an act that would rival even the crimes of Hitler.

The Second World War cannot be explained, any more than the first, by the actions of a single country, much less those of one malignant individual. The roots of both conflicts—separated by little more than two decades—lay in the insoluble contradictions of the global capitalist order: between world economy and the outmoded nation-state system on the one hand, and socialized production and the private ownership of the means of production on the other.

Nonetheless, the circumstances under which the Second World War erupted and the form that it took were unquestionably determined in the first instance by the war aims of Nazi Germany, which was responsible for crimes unprecedented in human history.

The invasion of Poland in September 1939 already revealed the methods that would find culmination in the policies of Total War, i.e., a war of extermination, and Hitler’s “Final Solution” of the “Jewish question.”

The invasion saw the carpet-bombing of Polish cities and, according to one Polish historian, during the September campaign there were roughly 15 massacres a day, which presaged the mass extermination of some 6 million European Jews. Within Poland itself, some 3 million Polish Jews were put to death, along with as many as another 3 million non-Jewish Poles.

Given the unfathomable scale of the crimes committed by the Nazis, the fact that there are today substantial political forces in Germany that seek to justify and legitimize these crimes constitutes a deadly warning to the international working class.

The racist *Alternative für Deutschland*, whose principal leader recently dismissed the Nazi atrocities as insignificant “bird poop” that should not detract from a thousand years of “glorious” German history, has emerged as the main opposition party in the Bundestag, Germany’s parliament. Right-wing terrorists operate with impunity in Germany, enjoying the protection of the country’s intelligence agencies.

Hitler himself is undergoing a process of rehabilitation. One of the most prominent and politically influential academics in the country, Professor Jörg Baberowski, is outspoken in his trivialization of Nazi bestialities. He stated in an interview published in *Der Spiegel* in February 2014. “Hitler was not a psychopath. He was not cruel. He did not like to hear of the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

US imperialism was able during the course of the Second World War to mask its own imperialist aims behind a democratic appeal to the intense hostility of working people in the US and internationally to Hitlerite fascism. Today, after nearly three decades of uninterrupted wars of aggression, it cannot credibly make any such appeal and confronts a population at home that is increasingly hostile to foreign military interventions.

The decisive question in preventing a new world war is one of revolutionary leadership in the international working class.

It is impossible to understand how the Second World War began

outside of the role played by the dominant parties within the working class internationally, and particularly in Germany. The rise of Hitler and the Nazis was, in the final analysis, the product of the betrayals carried out by both German Social Democracy (SPD) and the Stalinist Communist Party, which repeatedly worked to paralyze the revolutionary strivings of the German working class.

It was Hitler’s coming to power in Germany without a shot being fired and the refusal of the Third International under the leadership of Stalin to even discuss this historic defeat that led Leon Trotsky, who had waged an implacable decade-long struggle against Stalinism, to declare the Third International dead for the purposes of socialist revolution. A new Fourth International had to be founded and built as the world party of socialist revolution.

Once again, conditions of insoluble economic and financial crisis, intensifying trade war and global militarization threaten to erupt into an uncontrollable and ferocious struggle of each against all. The same capitalist crisis is simultaneously provoking a worldwide renewal of the class struggle, as workers in country after country fight back against the assault on living standards and basic democratic rights together with the unending growth of social inequality.

Just as in 1914 and 1939, the threat of a global imperialist conflict confronts humanity with the choice of socialism or barbarism. The potential for the outbreak of a third world war is greater today than at any time since 1945. Among the greatest dangers in the present situation is the absence of mass awareness of the depth and extent of the geopolitical conflicts that are driving the imperialist powers to war. As in the years that preceded the outbreak of World War II, they are—to use the words of Trotsky—tobogganing toward a catastrophe. As the international conflicts interact with mounting social turmoil within their own countries, the crisis-ridden capitalist regime increasingly sees war as a way out of the present political, economic and social impasse.

As in the 1930s, the path to war will not be blocked by moral and pacifist appeals to the leaders of imperialism. Opposition to war requires the political unification of the working class, on the basis of an international socialist program, against the capitalist system. This is the perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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