

Eighty years since the Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union

Peter Schwarz
21 June 2021

Eighty years ago, on June 22, 1941, the German military invaded the Soviet Union. A war began the likes of which humanity had never before experienced. The barbarism of the Middle Ages was combined with the most modern technology of the 20th century.

There had previously been horrific wars with millions of victims. The cannons of the First World War had been silenced just 23 years earlier. The blood-soaked fields of Verdun and the Marne, on which the flower of German, French and British youth were mown down by machine guns, were considered a monument of human barbarism.

But the attack on the Soviet Union went much further. From the outset, it was planned as a war of annihilation. It was not only a war for territory, raw materials and markets, but also a war driven by racism and ideology. The destruction of Bolshevism, the extermination of the Jews and the creation of living space in the east, which Hitler had been proclaiming for 20 years, was now put into practice.

“Contrary to the belief of many in the West, Hitler did not blunder into the war in the east,” wrote the historian Stephen Fritz in his landmark work *Ostkrieg: Hitler’s War of Extermination 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.”

When 3 million German soldiers, 600,000 vehicles, 3,500 tanks, 7,000 pieces of artillery and 3,900 aircraft invaded the Soviet Union at 3 a.m., they brought with them detailed orders and plans to physically exterminate millions of people. The invasion was accompanied by four *einsatzgruppen* (operational units) whose members had been carefully selected and trained by Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Agency. The task of these 3,000-member units of “stormtroopers of genocide” (Ian Kershaw) was to immediately kill any communists, partisans, Jews and Sinti who came into their possession.

“The four *Einsatzgruppen* and their helpers killed well over 500,000 Soviet Jews in the first six months of Barbarossa in addition to tens of thousands of partisans and Soviet prisoners of war, none of which would have been possible without the willing and active cooperation of the Wehrmacht,” wrote Fritz.

The active complicity of the Wehrmacht in mass murder, which was denied in Germany for decades and even as late as 1999 led to the censorship of the exhibition “War of annihilation. Crimes of the Wehrmacht,” has been incontrovertibly documented. Already in January 1941, Hitler issued a target to a selected group of SS leaders that the Slavic population in the east should be reduced by 30 percent. Entire military staffs and racist theorists subsequently translated “the will of the Führer” into precise orders on who should be shot and exterminated.

The generals signed off on these plans and ensured they were carried

out. During the war “army officials even inaugurated an exchange of ideas and experiences between army and SS officers,” according to Fritz. “As events on the ground demonstrated, criminal orders from above and vengeful impulses from below created a climate of violence that would remove any inhibitions about murder.”

German professors embellished the murderous plans with pseudo-scientific arguments. In June 1942, the *Generalplan Ost* (General Plan East) was published based on the work of numerous academics. It planned for the murder of millions of Slavs to create room for German settlers. The German Society of Research (DFG), a coalition of renowned scholars, was already financing studies during the Weimar Republic that “asserted a general superiority of the German population over the Slavic” and others that “understood race research as an applied science.”

The operational plans for Operation Barbarossa, which was the code name for the invasion of the Soviet Union, were worked out in the course of several round table discussions in early 1941 between the Chancellor’s Office, the SS, Reich Security Agency and the Wehrmacht [German military] High Command. The goal that was repeatedly formulated was to destroy the “Bolshevik heads and commissars,” “Jewish-Bolshevik intellectuals” and “the socialist idea.”

On May 2, several state secretaries and leading Wehrmacht commanders discussed the consequences of Operation Barbarossa for the war economy. According to a briefing note, they came to the conclusion that “undoubtedly tens of millions of people will starve if we take from the country what is necessary for us.”

On May 13, Wilhelm Keitel, head of the Wehrmacht High Command, issued the Military Judiciary Authorisation Order. It ordered that crimes committed by civilians against the Wehrmacht would no longer be handled by the courts, but that the accused could be immediately shot on the orders of an officer. Violent acts of collective punishment against entire areas were also permitted. This often resulted in women and children (men were at the front) being herded together in large buildings and shot with machine guns, before the buildings were torched so the remaining survivors were burned alive.

On June 6, two weeks prior to the invasion, the High Command, under the direction of Lieutenant General Alfred Jodl, issued the Commissar Order. It called for the civilian and military political commissars to be identified and that invading forces “in principle immediately dispose of them with a weapon.” On the basis of this order alone, there is evidence of at least 140,000 executions, with estimates ranging as high as 600,000.

This shows that on June 22, a well-prepared murder machine was set into motion. The last moral inhibitions had already been overcome in Poland, where the Wehrmacht had invaded and unleashed an orgy of violence two years earlier. Polish territory would also later serve as the location for the notorious death camps. But before millions of Jews from across Europe were sent to the gas chambers in Auschwitz and Majdanek, the German troops had already massacred hundreds of thousands of them in the Soviet Union.

One of the most well known massacres occurred on September 29 and 30, 1941, in the Babi Yar ravine near Kiev, where a special operations unit shot 33,771 Jews, including men, women and children, from the Ukrainian capital in the space of two days. Over subsequent months, a further 70,000 civilians were executed in the same ravine.

The balance sheet of the war of annihilation was horrendous. A total of 27 million Soviet citizens fell victim to the war. A commission organised by the Soviet Defence Ministry and Russian Academy of Sciences, which reviewed the figures between 1987 and 1991, placed the figure as high as 37 million. Of these, only 8.6 million were soldiers and 27 million to 28 million were civilians, many of whom lost their lives due to hunger and unbearable living conditions. The 28-month blockade of the city of Leningrad, which the Wehrmacht intentionally starved, claimed the lives of 470,000 people alone.

Among the Wehrmacht's numerous war crimes was the murder of 3 million Soviet prisoners of war. On September 8, the High Command issued an order that placed the Red Army soldiers beyond the protection of international law: "The Bolshevik soldier has lost any right to treatment as an honourable soldier under the Geneva Convention... The use of weapons against Soviet prisoners of war is in general legitimate."

Roughly 60 percent of prisoners of war lost their lives. If they were not murdered or died of hunger, they were brought to the concentration camps, where they performed forced labour under inhumane conditions for the German war effort.

The course of the war

During the first weeks of the war, the Wehrmacht advanced rapidly into the Soviet Union. Its initial successes were above all thanks to the criminal policies of Stalin and the privileged bureaucracy, whose rule he personified. They had bled the Soviet Union dry and left it totally unprepared.

In the course of the Great Terror, which claimed the lives of almost the entire leadership of the October Revolution and hundreds of thousands of loyal communists and intellectuals, Stalin also beheaded the Red Army. Of the 178,000 leadership forces in the Red Army, 35,000 were arrested and some executed. Twice as many generals were killed than during the Second World War, including outstanding military commanders like Tukhachevsky, Yakir, Gamarnik and Uborivitch, who rose to leadership within the Red Army under Trotsky during the Civil War.

This was the generation who had received a baptism of fire during the Civil War, who "rose suddenly above the mass, disclosing talent for organization and capacity for military leadership," "tempered their will in a large-scale struggle" and subsequently enjoyed further military training, as Trotsky noted in 1934. "Military theory enabled them to discipline their minds, but did not kill the audacity that was steered in the impetuous maneuvers of the civil war." They were replaced by less experienced officers who were characterised above all by their subservience to Stalin.

For his part, Stalin was totally surprised by the German invasion, even though he had been warned by his own and Western intelligence agencies. The communist spy Richard Sorge even supplied the entire plan of attack from Japan, including the timetable. But Stalin ignored all warnings and trusted in the non-aggression pact, which he had agreed with Hitler in August 1939. He was convinced that Germany, which was already at war with Britain, would not risk a war on two fronts. After the invasion, Stalin disappeared from the scene for days, leaving the Soviet Union practically leaderless.

But the October Revolution remained alive in the Soviet working class. Stalin may have murdered its leaders, but he had not destroyed its

achievements: the state ownership of the means of production and the planned economy, which now proved to be tremendous advantages. The Wehrmacht soon realised that they were not fighting this time against the Tsar's army of forcibly recruited semi-serf peasants, but against the motivated army of a workers' state, which despite the terror did not capitulate, and instead developed a remarkable energy and readiness to sacrifice.

Trotsky, who had built the Red Army, also predicted this in 1934. The Red warrior differs sharply from the czarist soldier, he wrote: "The cult of passivity and of submissive capitulation before obstacles has been supplanted by the cult of political and social audacity and technological Americanism. ... 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."

Although the war continued for over three-and-a-half years and over 6 million soldiers were either killed or severely wounded on the German side, it was already clear after the first several weeks that the Wehrmacht had no chance of victory. "Long before the first snows of winter began to fall, however, and even before the first autumn rains brought most movement to a halt, in fact as early as the summer of 1941, it was evident that Barbarossa was a spent exercise, unavoidably doomed to failure," wrote the military historian David Stahel.

In the arms production sector, which was so decisive for the war, the Soviet planned economy proved to be far superior to the German economy based on private property. In 1941, German industry produced 5,200 tanks, 11,776 planes and 7,000 artillery guns measuring more than 7 millimetres. In the first half of 1941, the Soviet economy managed only 1,800 tanks, 3,900 aircraft and 15,600 artillery pieces. But during the second half of the year, it increased arms production, in spite of the shifting of entire factories to the East and the destruction caused by the war, to 4,740 tanks, 8,000 aircraft and 55,500 pieces of artillery. In 1942, Germany manufactured 15,409 aircraft, while the Soviet Union managed 25,436. While Germany produced 9,200 tanks, the Soviet Union manufactured 24,446.

Despite its Stalinist degeneration, the Soviet Union, which emerged from the October Revolution, served as a decisive barrier against the plunging of humanity into barbarism. Serious historians leave no doubt about what a victory by Hitler would have meant.

Stahel remarked, "The importance of Hitler's new war in the east was understood by all sides at the time as the definitive moment in the future fortunes of the expanding world war. Either Hitler would soon stand almost untouchable at the head of an enormous empire, or his greatest campaign would falter (something no government at the time believed to be likely) resulting in the dangerous Allied encirclement Hitler was aiming to eliminate forever. It is therefore not an overstatement to say that the German invasion of the Soviet Union represents an extraordinary turning point in world affairs, central not only in our understanding of World War II, but indeed as one of the most profound events in modern history."

The origins of the war

After Germany's defeat, nobody wanted to be responsible in Germany for the war of annihilation. There were only victims and people following orders—no perpetrators. Hitler was to blame for everything. The Second World War was "Hitler's war."

Adolf Hitler, who shot himself shortly before the Wehrmacht's unconditional capitulation, possessed extraordinary powers and was

personally involved in all major political and military decisions. Despite that, he was merely supplying a product demanded by capitalist society. The answer to the question of how this failed Austrian artist and embittered war veteran could rise to the position of Germany's "Führer" inevitably leads to the conclusion that he had powerful backers in the elites of business, politics, the military, aristocracy, culture and the universities.

One of his most well known promoters in early years was the general Erich Ludendorff, the second-in-command of the army during the First World War who co-led the 1923 coup attempt in Munich with Hitler. Others included the industrialists Fritz Thyssen and Erich Kirndorf, Crown Prince Wilhelm of Prussia and the composer's widow Cosima Wagner. The media empire of the German nationalist industrialist Alfred Hugenberg, who was economy minister in Hitler's first cabinet, played a major role in his rise. In January 1932, an appearance by Hitler at the Düsseldorf industrialists' club secured him the political and financial backing of the most important circles of big business.

Hitler did not have to violently seize power; it was offered to him on a silver platter. At the time of Hitler's accession to power, the Nazis were in a deep political and financial crisis. In the Reichstag election of November 1932, the party received just 33 percent of the vote—4 percent less than in July and 4 percent less than the two large workers' parties combined—the Social Democrats and Communist Party. Hitler even toyed with the idea of suicide.

The decision to appoint Hitler as Chancellor in January 1933 was ultimately taken by a small circle of conspirators representing the interests of the state and big business around the elder statesman President Paul von Hindenburg. Two months later, with the Communist Party banned and the concentration camps filling up, all bourgeois parties voted for the Enabling Act, making Hitler a dictator.

During the war, Hitler then found thousands of willing assistants in the officer corps who carried out his murderous orders, among state officials, who terrorised the population and selected the Jews for extermination, in industry, which increased its profits through war production and forced labour, among professors, who gave race theory and arbitrary justice the appearance of science, and many more.

The war of annihilation did not emerge from "the will of the Führer," who unquestionably desired the war. The ruling elites promoted Hitler and placed him at the head of the state because they wanted and needed the war. It had deep objective causes in the irresolvable contradictions of the capitalist system.

Leon Trotsky, who understood the danger of fascism and war more than anyone else and mobilised the working class in opposition to them, wrote one year prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union, "The sole feature of fascism which is not counterfeit is its will to power, subjugation and plunder. Fascism is a chemically pure distillation of the culture of imperialism... This German epileptic with a calculating machine in his skull and unlimited power in his hands did not fall from the sky or come up out of hell: he is nothing but the personification of all the destructive forces of imperialism. Just as Genghis Khan and Tamerlane appeared to the weaker pastoral peoples as destroying scourges of God, whereas in reality they did nothing but express the need of all the pastoral tribes for more pasture land and the plunder of settled areas, so Hitler, rocking the old colonial powers to their foundations, does nothing but give a more finished expression to the imperialist will to power. Through Hitler, world capitalism, driven to desperation by its own impasse, has begun to press a razor sharp dagger into its own bowels."

Already during the First World War, German imperialism sought to subordinate Europe to its interests, and failed. It now attempted this for a second time.

The First World War was an imperialist war in which all of the major powers fought for the redivision of the world and the subordination of the

world economy to their hegemony. German imperialism played an especially aggressive role, because capitalism developed belatedly due to the delayed bourgeois revolution, but thanks to modern technology enjoyed a tremendous dynamism. Confined to Central Europe, confronted with the British and French colonial powers, and an even more potent American rival, it could only rise to become Europe's dominant power and secure access to raw materials and markets by violent means.

In the early hours of June 22, 1941, over 3 million troops of the German Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union, launching the bloodiest conflict in the history of humanity.

Germany lost the war. Weakened and heavily indebted due to the Treaty of Versailles and shaken by class struggles, all of the problems that drove German imperialism into the First World War were posed with renewed sharpness. In addition, in the east, the main area of German imperialist expansion, a workers' state now existed which served as a revolutionary inspiration to workers in Germany.

The only way out of this blind alley open to German imperialism was the use of methods that were more brutal and barbaric than anything ever before experienced. The "destruction of Bolshevism," the securing of "living space" in the east and the establishment of German hegemony over Europe required the concentration of state power in the hands of one individual, the subordination of all the country's resources to war production, the destruction of the organised workers' movement, and a war aimed not at the capitulation, but the extermination of the enemy.

The Nazis had the most to offer to meet this demand from society. The leaders of the state, business and the military did not support Hitler because they were ideologically dazzled, but because they needed him to achieve their goals.

They only succeeded due to the abysmal betrayal and failure of the workers' leaders. The SPD firmly refused to mobilise its members against the Nazis. They trusted the state and supported all dictatorial steps—from Brüning's emergency decrees and Hindenburg's election as President—that paved the way for Hitler to take power. The KPD leadership, which was under the influence of Stalin, concealed its passivity and cowardice behind radical left-wing phrases. They firmly refused to fight for an anti-fascist united front with the SPD, as Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition demanded, and denounced the SPD workers as "social fascists" who were no different to the Nazis.

The United States, Britain and Germany's other capitalist opponents in the Second World War also fought for their imperialist interests, and not "against fascism" and "for democracy." Only the Soviet Union fought for its very survival. A German victory would have meant the destruction of the workers' state and its transformation into a slave colony.

As long as Hitler's regime was directed mainly against the German working class and the Soviet Union, it enjoyed considerable international support. Among the admirers of Hitler was the American industrialist Henry Ford, Britain's King Edward VIII, and his American spouse Wallis Simpson. After Edward's abdication, the pair visited Hitler at his Berghof. During the People's Front government of 1936, the French bourgeoisie even advanced the slogan, "Better Hitler than Blum" (Léon Blum was Prime Minister in the People's Front). Germany's rapid victory over France was more a product of the defeatism of the French generals than of the technical superiority of the Wehrmacht's weapons. The Vichy regime under Marshal Pétain immediately reached an understanding with Hitler.

But American and British imperialism could not merely look on as Germany rose to become the ruler from the Atlantic to the Urals. In alliance with Japan, it would have become a deadly opponent of American imperialism. This led to the United States' intervention into the war against Hitler, which only occurred after Germany was already on the defensive at the battle of Stalingrad.

The threat of a third world war

The lessons of the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union are of contemporary relevance. The same contradictions of world capitalism—the irreconcilability of the capitalist nation state and the private ownership of the means of production with the social and international character of modern production—threaten to plunge the world into the inferno of a third world war.

The centre of the preparations for war is the United States, which will spend \$753 billion on its military in the coming budgetary year, more than the next 10 states. Some \$25 billion is earmarked for nuclear weapons, and \$112 billion for the research and development of new weapons systems.

The US emerged as the real winner from the Second World War, and its economic power—together with the suppression of revolutionary struggles by the Stalinist bureaucracy and Social Democratic parties—enabled it to temporarily stabilise European capitalism.

But the weight of the US in the world economy has declined consistently since then, and Washington is attempting to compensate for this decline with military force. The US has been waging war almost uninterrupted for 30 years. In Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, they, with their allies, have destroyed entire societies.

The US war machine is now targeting China, which is officially defined as a “systemic rival.” The US wants to prevent at all costs that China overtakes it economically and rises to become a world power. US strategists now consider a war with China to be unavoidable.

German imperialism has not accepted its defeats in the two world wars. The German government is pursuing the official goal of expanding Europe into a political and military world power capable of confronting China as well as the United States. This is intensifying conflicts within Europe, especially with France, which is Germany’s rival for hegemony within the European Union.

Germany has increased its military spending from €32 billion in 2014 to €53 billion, and this is only the beginning. A strategy paper from the Defence Ministry dated February 9 states that Germany has “a special obligation for Europe’s security due to its geographic position at the centre of Europe and its economic power,” and must make an appropriate contribution “in military affairs as well.” Essential to this are “credible military deterrence and defence capabilities in all dimensions—on land, at sea, in the air, space, and cyberspace,” and “the readiness and the ability of our soldiers to succeed, including in combat.”

A central component of the revival of German militarism is the trivialisation and historical revision of the war of annihilation.

The Alternative For Germany (AfD) sits in parliament, describes the Nazi regime as mere “bird sh*t in over 1,000 years of successful German history,” and is embraced by all other established parties.

The Berlin-based historian Jörg Baberowski stated publicly as early as 2014 that Hitler was “not a psychopath” and “not vicious.” One year later, he claimed the war of annihilation was imposed on the Wehrmacht. The Wehrmacht soldiers on the eastern front were “involved in a murderous war of partisans.” They had “no other option” but to “adapt to the partisans’ combat style.” He continued, “The war became independent, it freed itself from the original goals that were the pretext for the conflict.” Numerous similar citations can be found in the works of the right-wing extremist professor.

When the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei and its youth organisation IYSSE criticised these and similar statements, giving expression to the widespread opposition in the population to the return of fascism and militarism, the media and political establishment defended the right-wing extremist professor.

A third world war would mean the end of human civilisation. But not a

single established party is opposing the drive to war. Like the situation prior to the First and Second world wars, they are lining up all the more closely behind the warmongers as the inter-imperialist divisions deepen. The so-called peace movement has totally collapsed. The German Greens, which emerged from this movement long ago, have become the most disgusting warmongers. Eighty years after the invasion of the Soviet Union, they are leading the agitation for war against Russia.

A renewed relapse of barbarism can only be prevented by the international working class, which must link the struggle against militarism and war with its source in the capitalist system, and take up the struggle for a socialist programme. This is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, the Socialist Equality parties.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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