“Russian War Crimes” exhibition at Berlin’s Humboldt University: Atrocity propaganda in the service of German militarism

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On September 4, University President Julia von Blumenthal opened the photo exhibition “Russian War Crimes” in the foyer of the main building of Berlin’s Humboldt University. The pictures are in the worst tradition of imperialist atrocity propaganda and serve to further escalate the war in Ukraine. The university is thus placing itself directly in the service of German militarism, which for the third time is setting out to militarily defeat and subjugate Russia.

Under Adolf Hitler, Humboldt University helped devise the concept of the war of extermination against the Soviet Union. Thus, once again it is participating in the escalation of a terrible war, which was deliberately provoked and is being pushed forward by the NATO powers. They regard Putin’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity to realise their own imperialist goals.

At the opening of the exhibition, Blumenthal stated unequivocally that Humboldt University was pursuing a clear political goal. She lamented that “gradually diminishing support” for Ukraine was spreading among the German public. She hoped the university could contribute to reversing this and “raise awareness.”

The billionaire oligarch Victor Pinchuk, who is financing the exhibition, then explained what this means in concrete terms. To thunderous applause from the 60 or so selected guests, he expressed his hope that the exhibition would help convince governments “to send more weapon and much quicker.” Significantly, Pinchuk linked this demand directly to the trivialisation of Nazi crimes. For example, he called the Russian invasion a “genocide of the Ukrainian population” that had destroyed hope that the tragedy of the Holocaust should never be repeated.

The greatest crimes in human history, which cost the lives of millions of civilians in Ukraine alone, including 1.6 million Jews, were thus placed by Pinchuk on a par with the present war in Ukraine, which has nothing to do with the Nazis’ war of extermination, either in intention or in execution. The atrocities of the Ukraine war also fall far short of the brutality with which the NATO states have waged their wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and Syria, in which up to 4.5 million people have fallen victim.

When Pinchuk engages in such a trivialisation of the Holocaust to applause at the former Friedrich Wilhelm University, it is directly aimed at historically whitewashing German imperialism. It is not only the Ukrainian government that is placing itself in the tradition of Nazi collaborators such as Stepan Bandera, but also imperialist Germany that is picking up where its war policy left off in the Second World War.

The extent of the escalation of the war that is being prepared with this propaganda was made clear by Bundestag (federal parliament) Vice-President Katrin Göring-Eckardt (Greens) at the exhibition opening. The goal must not only be the territorial integrity of Ukraine—and thus the complete military defeat of Russia—but Russia must also be forced to pay compensation to Ukraine, she said. This will only be possible with a direct war by NATO against Russia and will not only cost the lives of hundreds of thousands more people but will place the survival of the entire human race in question under the threat of nuclear war.

The traveling photo exhibition serves these imperialist aims. It has been shown before at NATO headquarters, at the World Economic Summit in Davos and at the Munich Security Conference. The pictures have nothing in common with the famous anti-war photographs of a Nick Út or Robert Capa, which captured the cruelty of war and called for reflection on its background but stand in the foul tradition of imperialist atrocity propaganda. They are meant to shock and to portray Russian soldiers as monsters in order to justify a further escalation of the arms race.

This starts with the information board at the beginning of the exhibition. Under the heading “Incomplete Map of Russian War Crimes,” the 10,926 confirmed civilians killed so far are listed by region. But it fails to mention that this figure also includes the thousands killed by the Ukrainian army, which are summarily blamed on the Russian army. Also not listed are the approximately 3,400 civilians killed in the Donbass from 2014 to 2022.

The same utter one-sidedness is found in the pictures. Not a single photo documents crimes committed by the Ukrainian army, which uses, among other things, outlawed weapons such as depleted uranium-tipped munitions and cluster bombs, or its fascist militias such as the Azov Regiment, which have been shown to have mutilated prisoners of war, raped women, and murdered civilians.

Moreover, in the case of the images that are shown, the claimed Russian authorship of the horror is often not conclusively demonstrated but is part of the propaganda on both sides. This applies to the victims of the destruction of the Kakhovka dam, the bombing of a maternity clinic in Mariupol and the numerous destroyed residential buildings shown in the exhibition. Amnesty International and the UN have long documented that Ukrainian troops use civilian buildings as “human shields,” which is itself a war crime.

That is why the images are often devoid of context and instead rely on classic stylisations. Even a Pietà-style staging of an old woman with a child in her arms fleeing the flooded areas is presented.

The terrible horror at the front, to which the soldiers of both sides

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are exposed on a daily basis, on the other hand, is completely hidden. Every day, hundreds of Russian and Ukrainian men are wounded and die in a hail of bullets and shells. None of this is shown in the exhibition, however, because that would demonstrate what further arms deliveries and an intensification of the war mean.

The exhibition reaches its repulsive climax in a video that is projected large-scale on the wall. For ten minutes images are flashed showing corpses, destroyed buildings and other consequences of war, seen so briefly that there is no room whatsoever to engage with the context or even to take in the whole picture. Instead, it serves to merely stir emotions, which are then punctuated with edited sound recordings of presumed conversations of Russian soldiers expressing their joy at killing civilians and looting their homes.

Viewers are not supposed to gain an insight into the horrors of war, the situation of the Ukrainian population and the soldiers at the front. They are not supposed to question the images critically and think about the background of the war and ways to end it. Rather, emotions are to be mobilised to portray the Russian soldiers as monsters and to justify a further escalation of the war.

This kind of atrocity propaganda follows a foul tradition. The Nazis invented or exaggerated actual actions of the Red Army or took them out of their context in order to justify the campaign against the Soviet Union in propaganda terms. A turning point towards unbridled atrocity propaganda was the Nazi newsreel of July 9, 1941. The film used the killing of 4,000 Ukrainian nationalist prisoners of war by the Soviet NKVD to portray the Red Army soldiers as "beasts in human form" who had massacred "men, women and children" by the most brutal means. After this broadcast, Hitler personally ordered that more such videos of atrocities be shown in the newsreels "so that the German people will realise what the struggle is about and with whom they are dealing with." A propaganda machinery unprecedented until then was created.

The fact that the German ruling class is now using these methods again, presenting unexplained events completely one-sidedly and without context, and painting the enemy as a beast, is due to the fact that it is also harking back to the same war aims that Germany already pursued in the First and Second World Wars: the plundering of Ukraine and the subjugation of Russia.

Mindful of this devastating history, Humboldt University would do well to organise an exhibition on the historically unprecedented crimes of German imperialism in its foyer. But the former Friedrich Wilhelm University has long since become a centre of militarism again.

As early as February 2014, when the Maidan coup in Ukraine was in full swing, the current editor-in-chief of *Der Spiegel*, Dirk Kurbjuweit, relied on the two Humboldt professors Herfried Münkler and Jörg Baberowksi to whitewash the crimes of German imperialism in an extensive article entitled "Culpability Question Divides Historians Today."

Münkler took on the task of whitewashing the crimes of the First World War and described the thesis of the famous historian Fritz Fischer that Germany had pursued imperialist goals in the war as "outrageous, in principle." Baberowski even claimed that the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte had been "done an injustice" and "historically speaking, he was right." As justification, he argued that Hitler "wasn't vicious" and that the Holocaust was "essentially the same thing" as shootings in the Russian civil war. He had previously claimed that "Stalin and his generals" had "imposed" the brutal action against the civilian population on Hitler's Wehrmacht (Army).

Kurbjuweit revived the war propaganda of the fascists. He quoted the inflammatory pamphlet by the notorious anti-Semite R. Nilostonsky "The Blood Intoxication of the Bolsheviks" as a serious source and uncritically regurgitated its propaganda lies about the Russian civil war, which later served the Nazis as justification for their war of extermination. Among other things, he claimed that the Bolsheviks had their prisoners eaten alive by rats. Like Nolte, Kurbjuweit drew on these propaganda lies to justify Nazi crimes. "Of course, Hitler was not unaffected by what he knew about the Russian civil war and Stalinism," again quoting Baberowski.

This boundless trivialisation of Nazi crimes and rehabilitation of Nazi war propaganda was not criticised by a single one of Baberowski's colleagues. On the contrary, the university's Institute of Historical Studies and the university management published statements in which they backed the far-right professor and attacked criticism of his positions by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). Even when Baberowski moved on to threatening other colleagues and even physically assaulting an IYSSE representative to the Student Parliament, he acted with the full support of the university management.

In 2014, the IYSSE had already pointed to the close connection between the rewriting of history at Humboldt University and the return of German militarism. "In order to prepare for new wars, the crimes of the Kaiser's empire and the Nazi regime must be relativised and history rewritten," they declared in their statement for the 2014 Student Parliament elections. In the same year, the German government announced the "end of Germany's military restraint" and intensified the NATO course against Russia.

In the meantime, masses of German weapons are being sent to be used against Russia for the third time and the government is openly proclaiming the goal of defeating the country militarily. The biggest rearmament since Hitler is underway. Under these conditions, universities are also being put even more at the service of militarism.

The IYSSE will not allow this. It protests the fact that the university administration is now directly transforming Humboldt University into an exhibition space for war propaganda and will intensify its struggle against the return of German militarism. We call on all students to join the IYSSE and support the fight against war.

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