

An important book on fascism and World War II

Jochen Hellbeck's "World Enemy Number 1, Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the Fate of the Jews"

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9 February 2026

The German-American historian Jochen Hellbeck has written an important book. In clear and engaging language and with great empathy for the Soviet people, it deliberately opposes the efforts to minimize the crimes of Nazism and the decisive contribution of the Red Army and the Soviet people to the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. Central to Hellbeck's analysis is the link between Nazi anti-Semitism and anti-Communism.

Hellbeck, a distinguished professor at Rutgers University in the US state of New Jersey, is a renowned expert of Soviet history. He has made his reputation as a historian primarily through his work in Russian archives, concentrating on the diary entries of ordinary workers and soldiers. In particular, he has done extensive work on the battle of Stalingrad, resulting in a book that has been translated into multiple languages. He was also involved in the discovery and first-time edition of the original version of Vasily Grossman's seminal novel, *Stalingrad*.

Hellbeck's new book has appeared first in a German edition under the title "A War Like No Other: The German War of Annihilation against the Soviet Union. A Revision" (*Ein Krieg wie kein anderer. Der deutsche Vernichtungskrieg gegen die Sowjetunion. Eine Revision*). The English edition has a different and more significant title: *World Enemy Number 1, Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the Fate of the Jews*. Hellbeck's central thesis is that the Nazis' principal enemy was Bolshevism and that anti-Communism was the driving force behind its crusade against both the Soviet Union and the Jewish population of Europe.

Hitler's own fanatic hostility toward the Jews and communism was formed in response to the October Revolution and the German Revolution of 1918. Hellbeck writes:

He had been a fierce anti-Semite from early on in his life, but it was only with his embrace of anti-Bolshevik thought in the aftermath of World War I that his hatred of Jews became an ideology. To Hitler, Bolshevism evoked not only Soviet Communism, but the nefarious goals of Jews, who had created Marxism and seized the Kremlin in a bid to invade Germany and all of Europe. (pp. 2-3; all citations refer to: Jochen Hellbeck, *World Enemy No. 1. Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and the Fate of the Jews*, Picador 2025).

His analysis in this regard coincides with the assessment of Hitler by his early biographer Konrad Heiden:

It was not Rothschild the capitalist, but Karl Marx the socialist who fueled Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism.

Countering historical falsification and war propaganda

Hellbeck's book is especially relevant today. It has been published in the fourth year of the war in Ukraine, which is being used by NATO and especially the German government for unprecedented military armament and war propaganda. As in the First and Second World Wars, Western powers conjure up a supposed threat from the East in order to prepare the whole of society for a war against Russia. According to the European parliamentarian Dennis Radtke (CDU) on X: "The Russians are at the gates. The right decision would be conscription for everybody."

Hellbeck himself places his book in this political context, noting that historical truth had become a victim of the war.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the European Union began to absorb most East European states and some former Soviet Republics. The EU, with Germany to the fore, deliberately adopted the anti-communism of the ruling elites of the new EU members in order to assert its own superpower interests. For Germany in particular, it was very convenient to hide behind the "national memory" of the small states of Eastern Europe, which portrayed themselves as victims of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the bourgeoisie of Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic states and Finland, could play down or completely deny their own role in the murder of Jews alongside the Nazis.

Hellbeck notes critically that on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of WWII the EU passed a resolution, introducing the "European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Stalinism and National Socialism," held on August 23, the anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Its political purpose was to rewrite the history of the Second World War by relativizing the Holocaust and shifting blame for war crimes onto the Soviet Union. The EU resolution even called for a second Nuremberg Trial – this time to investigate the "historic crimes of the Soviet Union"! (p. 515)

The German government, in particular, was glad to pick up this line, which allowed for the minimization of the crimes of Nazism. In a recent example of this process, in 2025, the German Foreign Ministry excluded the ambassadors of Russia and Belarus from the main commemoration held in Germany of the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War on May 8.

In the conclusion, Hellbeck insists:

Historical truth is not subject to negotiation. Historians must not yield to political pressures of the present day. Only then can the writing of history become a basis for meaningful discussion and dialogue in tomorrow's world. (P. 425)

This principled stance distinguishes Hellbeck from the dominant majority in his profession. Figures like Timothy Snyder at Yale University, the author of *Bloodlands*, have exploited their academic prestige to bolster the war propaganda through historical falsifications. In Germany, historians such as Jörg Baberowski at the Humboldt University, are rewriting the history of fascism and WWII to present the Soviet Union as either jointly responsible for the war or, echoing the thesis of the discredited historian Ernst Nolte from the 1980's, to describe the crimes of fascism as an understandable and justifiable response to communism.

As Hellbeck put it in one interview, he "turns Nolte on his head." Instead of denying the connection between fascism and communism — which historically did, of course, exist — he shows how the Nazi regime plotted and perpetrated its worst crimes in an effort to wipe out the communist movement and the legacy of the October revolution.

The Nazis' targeting of communism

The English title of Hellbeck's book is based on a 1936 Nazi exhibition entitled, "World Enemy Number One – Bolshevism". The exhibition sought to present the Bolsheviks as sadistic sub-humans and following the party conference, it toured through no less than 64 German towns.

Hellbeck explains that anti-communism and the economic impetus to acquire "living space" in the East, as described in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and not anti-semitism per se, constituted the driving force behind the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. He underlines this point by citing the guidelines read out to German troops by their commanders on June 2, 1941, on the eve of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union:

Bolshevism is the mortal enemy of the National-Socialist German people. Germany's struggle is directed against this subserve worldview and its bearers. This struggle demands ruthless and energetic drastic action against Bolshevik agitators, irregulars, saboteurs, Jews and complete elimination of any active or passive resistance. (quoted on p. 116)

In chapter after chapter Hellbeck describes the monstrous brutality with which the Wehrmacht hunted down and murdered "Jewish-Bolsheviks" in the Soviet Union.

For instance, Hellbeck cites from a letter written by Walter Mattner, a 36-year-old police administrator from October 5, 1941:

For the first truckload my hand trembled lightly when shooting, but one gets used to it. By the time the tenth truck arrived I was aiming steadily and fired without hesitating at the many women, children and infants. [...] The infants flew in a wide arc through the air and we blew them away while still in flight, before they fell into the water in the pit. Let's get rid of this brood which has

plunged all Europe into war, and is still warmongering in America until it drags them into the war as well. (p. 133)

Hellbeck also describes how a member of the Propaganda Department of "Operation Cottbus", the code name for the mass repression of partisans and civilians in Soviet Belarus, complained to his senior officer. What made him angry was not the mass murder of civilians identified as alleged partisans, but rather the swath of destruction left by soldiers who had looted the farms and premises of their victims. According to the complaint of this soldier, "The senseless killing of livestock is highly objectionable and must be severely censured." (p. 284).

These craven acts of violence were not only permitted but ordered by the highest ranks of the Nazi party. Indeed, the Nazis deliberately planned "to reduce the Slavic population by thirty million people."

The Soviet war effort against Nazi Germany

Drawing upon a host of original material, primarily, but not only from Russian sources, Hellbeck presents the neglected standpoint of the Soviet soldiers and civilians who opposed the Nazis. Hellbeck's conclusions based on his intensive research in both Russian and German archives demolish the arguments of all those who seek to draw an equal sign between communism and fascism.

Hellbeck's book is at its best when it shows how the self-sacrificing resistance of the Soviet population and the courageous struggle conducted by the Soviet Red Army were nourished by the ideals and goals of the October Revolution. Despite the Great Terror and forced collectivization before the war, the Soviet people rapidly mobilized to defend the gains of the revolution. The defeat of the Wehrmacht was only possible because of these deeply rooted convictions and what effectively became a revival of the revolutionary struggle of 1917-1921.

Although Stalin had refused to believe the many warnings of an impending Nazi attack, leaving the Soviet Union unprepared on June 22, 1941, within days, hundreds of thousands and even millions of workers rallied to volunteer for the Army. In Leningrad, the city of the 1917 revolution, 100,000 men had reported as volunteers by the afternoon on June 23. By the end of the week, the number had doubled, and one million residents — over one third of the working age population — built the city's fortifications in July. (p. 215)

Hellbeck places special emphasis on the struggle of the partisan movement. For instance, in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, communist partisans in conjunction with the ghetto underground organized the single largest and most successful rescue operation of Jews from a ghetto in all of Nazi occupied Europe.

In a particularly powerful passage, he discusses the significance and impact of the Nazi murder of the young partisan Maria Bruskina. A committed communist, she was a member of the first generation born after 1917. She was executed alongside her comrades on October 26, 1941. Hellbeck notes,

Exceptional as her heroism may seem, Maria Bruskina was one of many young Soviet people who resolved to stand up to the German occupants no matter what the cost. They saw themselves as defenders of humanity against the depravity of the Germans. The occupiers made a point of singling out the female resisters, portraying them as callous Bolsheviks, bereft of femininity. Maria responded to these provocations by walking proudly to her death,

her head held high. The photographs that were meant to taunt and vilify inadvertently became documentary proof of her dignity and equanimity in the face of death. As the story of Maria Bruskina's death spread through Minsk, it spurred others to action. (p. 203)

Inspired by the Soviet victory at Stalingrad in early 1943, Soviet prisoners of war and forced laborers in concentration camps began to link up and sought to organize strikes and other acts of sabotage. The victory at Stalingrad also inspired workers in Britain and other countries. Although this fact is largely ignored today, throughout the winter of 1942-1943, the eyes of all class-conscious workers in Britain and the United States were set on Stalingrad. So immense was the enthusiasm and attention over the Soviet struggle that Winston Churchill feared that it could lead Britons to "forget the dangers of Communism". (Quoted p. 246)

Anti-communism and the rewriting of history

Hellbeck traces the current efforts to minimize the contributions of the Soviet Union to the defeat of Nazism to a decades-long history of anti-Communism. For many years, Britain, France and the US, were little concerned with Adolf Hitler's threats of war as long as they concerned the Soviet Union. As late as the fall of 1941, they were more inclined to believe the propaganda of Goebbels than Soviet reports of Nazi atrocities on Soviet soil. While Hellbeck does not spell it out, it is clear that, fundamentally, they shared the Nazis' violent hostility to the October Revolution and the socialist workers movement.

Hellbeck documents the early frictions between the erstwhile Allies — the US, France, and Britain on the one hand, and the Soviet Union on the other — as the war drew to a close. Tellingly, in his speech on the "Iron Curtain", delivered in the midst of the Nuremberg Trials, Churchill took up a metaphor of Goebbels from the spring of 1945, who had sought to rally the Western allies in support of Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union. With the beginning of the Cold War, the decisive role of the Soviet Union in the war was increasingly denied. Even the central role of the USSR in the Nuremberg Trials, for which the Soviet side compiled by far the largest amount of evidence, was downplayed. The Soviet Union was also the only state involved in the Nuremberg Trials to invite Jewish witnesses to the stand and insist that the entire German state apparatus and the army be indicted as criminal organizations.

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, more attention was, very belatedly, paid to the deliberate genocide of the Jews, but even then, the prevailing anti-Communism marred this field of research. Hellbeck correctly criticizes the fact that Holocaust studies were, early on, shaped by an indifference to and even denial of the centrality of anti-Communism to the Nazis' anti-Semitism and broader worldview. As an example for the systematic diminution of the role of Soviet Russia and communists as principal targets of Nazism, Hellbeck cites the well known text by the German theologian Martin Niemöller:

When the Nazis took the communists, I remained silent; I was no communist.

When they imprisoned the social democrats, I remained silent; I was no social democrat.

When they took the trade unionists, I remained silent; I was no trade unionist.

When they took the Jews, I remained silent; I was no Jew.

When they took me, there was no one left to protest.

Hellbeck explains that the quote originates with the tour of Niemöller in post-war Germany when he implored his fellow countrymen to acknowledge their collective guilt for the crimes of Nazism. There are different versions of this speech, but in every single one of them, he named the communists first. Yet today, this fact is often ignored, especially in the US.

...when invoking the theologian, multiple American politicians, as well as an encyclopedia of the Holocaust, moved the Jews from the last to first place, "First they came for the Jews." (p. 11)

The current website of the US Holocaust Museum confirms Hellbeck's claim. The website states in its overhead: "The Nazis considered Jews to be their number one enemy." In seventh place on the list is the category "political opponents and dissenters in Germany." Only by scrolling down to this section can one find a mention of communists and social democrats.

Stalinism, communism and the Second World War

A caveat regarding Hellbeck's work is necessary at this point. While his emphasis on Nazi anti-communism and ideology is important, he only mentions the economic motivations for the Nazis' quest to conquer the Soviet Union in passing. Similarly, despite his insistence on the centrality of anti-Communism, the term "capitalism" is basically not mentioned. Although he does not explicitly articulate his conception of fascism, he clearly rejects the Marxist, materialist analysis of fascism as an outgrowth of the crisis of capitalism.

But the most fundamental flaw of his work is his false identification of the Stalinist regime with the aims of the October revolution and communism. While Hellbeck does deal with Stalin's role as the initiator of the Moscow Trials in the Great Terror and the purges of the Red Army, with its disastrous consequences for the struggle against Hitler fascism, he tends to downplay Stalin's role in creating the path for the disaster of fascism. He makes but two cursory references to Leon Trotsky, the principal socialist opponent of Stalin, and presents the differences between Stalin and Trotsky, rather carelessly, as a clash of personalities. His only references in these passages go to works by Stephen Kotkin whose Stalin biography contains well-documented, flagrant errors.

As a result, Hellbeck's sincere empathy with the heroic struggle and the suffering of the Soviet people at times leads to formulations that serve to minimize the crimes of Stalinism and adapt the line of argumentation of the latter. Hellbeck's false equation of Stalinism with communism and internationalism significantly weakens his account at important points, above all in his discussion of Soviet war-time propaganda and the role of the Soviet journalist Ilya Ehrenburg.

Ehrenburg, along with Vasily Grossman, was the most important war correspondent of the Red Army. His reports were read by millions and also carefully perused by Stalin. They contributed to the war effort and the first documentation of Nazi war crimes, including the Holocaust. This role has often been neglected, not least because Ehrenburg became mostly associated with a very influential pamphlet in which he explicitly called upon the Red Army to exact revenge on "the Germans" and to kill every German they saw.

Hellbeck's discussion of Ehrenburg is nuanced and highly informative. Yet his explanation for both Ehrenburg's calls for revenge and the broader policy of revenge by the Kremlin is marred by his overall approach. Countering the attempts by figures such as Timothy Snyder to exploit the attacks on German civilians, including the rapes of women, for right-wing propaganda, Hellbeck argues that the experience of the horrors of German fascism played a significant role in animating the search for "revenge" by Red Army soldiers advancing to Berlin.

This is no doubt the case and Hellbeck's implicit critique of political attempts to exploit these attacks for right-wing propaganda is to be commanded. But this does not change the fact that from the standpoint of Marxism and class politics, the Soviet government's deliberate encouragement of a policy of "revenge" was a violation of the most fundamental principles of working class internationalism. Hellbeck ignores this point and insists at many points that the Soviet government maintained an "internationalist" line throughout the war. Meanwhile, he largely omits the fact that the war also involved the glorification of Tsarist-era generals and the rehabilitation of the Orthodox Church.

Moreover, while he describes the policy of "revenge" largely as a response to popular sentiments, he ignores the fact that the political motivations on the part of the Kremlin were of a different character. For the bureaucracy the claim of "collective guilt" of "the Germans" and the need for "revenge" was also a means to divert attention from and cover up its own role in the disaster of 1933: As Trotsky scathingly analyzed, the Stalinist line of orienting the Communist Party of Germany toward a struggle against "social fascism" — that is the Social Democratic Party — instead of forming a united front with social democratic workers against Hitler, proved fatal for the working class of Germany and the entire continent. Moreover, especially in 1944-1945, it served to divide and demobilize workers on both the Soviet and the German side as the advance of the Red Army was accompanied by growing social struggles across the continent.

As the Red Army moved into Germany, the Kremlin was still oriented toward an alliance with the imperialist powers. It was concerned that the essentially revolutionary struggle of the Red Army in defense of the gains of the October Revolution would threaten its rule at home and encourage a revolutionary mobilization of workers in Europe. This is, indeed, what occurred, including in Germany. The response by the Stalinist bureaucracy was to stifle and constrain the initiative of the working class as much as it possibly could.

Conclusion

Despite these reservations, Hellbeck's book marks an important intellectual development and deserves a wide readership. US President Donald Trump, who is openly placing himself in the tradition of fascist ideology and frequently rails against communism and Marxism, is mobilizing fascist thugs against immigrant and native-born workers in Minnesota and other parts of the country. The Democratic Party's response to it has been to roll over and do everything it can to contain popular anger. Under these conditions, Hellbeck's detailed account of not only fascist anti-Communism but also the anti-Communism of liberalism, which has served to conceal, minimize and distort significant aspects of the crimes of Nazism, is of immense value to the working class.

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