

May 8: How the Soviet Union's victory over the Nazis is being erased from memory

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On May 8 and 9, 1945, the Second World War came to an end. The Red Army marched into Berlin; Hitler's regime had been defeated. The Nazis' campaign of extermination against the Soviet Union and their drive for "living space in the East" ended in a catastrophic defeat. Today—81 years later—German imperialism is attempting to undo this humiliation.

The ideological campaign surrounding the 81st anniversary of the end of the war this year was marked by undisguised revanchism. The Soviet Union's victory over Germany is to be erased from memory. The commemorative day on May 8 is being used ever more openly and shamelessly as an opportunity to falsify history and create the ideological conditions for the wars of the present.

While visitors to the Soviet memorials in Berlin laid wreaths for the soldiers of the Red Army and commemorated the victims of Nazi terror, the German government is rearming at a pace not seen since 1945. A new world war is already unfolding on several fronts. The war in Ukraine has entered its fourth year, and the war of aggression by the US and Israel against Iran threatens to set the entire region ablaze.

Germany is, in effect, once again at war with Russia and is risking a nuclear escalation. In the weeks leading up to the anniversary, the German government introduced the new Conscription Act, published a German military strategy for the first time since the end of the war and agreed on a "strategic partnership" with Ukraine that provides for joint arms production and the economic exploitation of Ukraine. The German armoured brigade in Lithuania, which is permanently stationed in the immediate vicinity of Russian territory, is being reinforced.

The more aggressively the German imperialists stoke the war against Russia, the less they can tolerate people recalling the Nazi crimes of the last world war—and who was instrumental in defeating the fascists. The Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany, the struggle of millions of Soviet workers of all nationalities who gave their lives to defend the achievements of the October Revolution, is being erased from the collective memory. For it is this memory that stands in the way of the new war policy.

The ruling class is trying by every conceivable means to demonise the Soviet Union and banish it from public consciousness. On May 8, bans on Soviet symbols, flags and songs were once again in force around the Soviet memorials in Berlin and at the Karlshorst Museum—the site where the surrender was signed in May 1945. One visitor was even denied entry to the museum because he was wearing a scarf from the anti-fascist association VVN (Association of Victims of Nazi Persecution). His mother had been a persecuted Jew, and his father, a communist and resistance fighter, had been tortured by the SA (Sturmabteilung, or Storm Division), reports the newspaper *Neues Deutschland*.

The government can barely bring itself to utter the words "Soviet Union." Chancellor Friedrich Merz contented himself with a brief post on X, in which he stated, among other things, on the 81st anniversary: "8 May 1945 brought liberation—for millions of people, for Germany, for Europe."

Liberation—from what, and by whom? Not a word about the fact that it was primarily the Soviet Army that liberated Germany from fascism. At the Federal Press Conference on May 8, journalist Tilo Jung asked Deputy Government Spokesperson Steffen Meyer why Merz had not mentioned the Soviet Union. When he asked Meyer directly once again who the liberators had been, Meyer refused to answer. The government not only refuses to acknowledge the Soviet Army's struggle—it wants to render it unmentionable.

Former Federal President Joachim Gauck was more explicit at the official commemorative event at the Saxony State Chancellery in Dresden. He did admit that the Soviet victors had played an important role in overthrowing the "bloodthirsty Nazi regime," only to immediately add that the liberating army had become an army of oppression. For Gauck, the fight against fascism is made into an episode that was swiftly overshadowed by Soviet crimes. This is a calculated distortion of history.

Gauck is a specialist in exploiting the history of Stalinism and the GDR (East Germany) for anti-communist propaganda. It is no coincidence that the long-standing head of the Stasi Records Agency was elected Federal President in 2012—a year before Germany openly proclaimed a return to aggressive great-power politics. This time, under the guise of "defence capability," he advocated rearmament. Peacekeeping must not be "confused with pacifism, inaction, wishful thinking and defencelessness," according to Gauck. "Peacefulness is a very important virtue; defencelessness is not."

Hitler would have readily agreed. Was it not the Wehrmacht's purpose—as the name suggests [in German, "Wehrhaft" means "defensive"]—to safeguard the defensive capabilities of the Germans, indeed of the whole of Europe, against the threat posed by Soviet Bolshevism? German governments have always justified every war as "peacekeeping."

The *Berliner Zeitung* noted: "Not a word about the 27 million dead in the Soviet Union. No mention that the Eastern Front bore the brunt of the war." Gauck's call for rearmament in the face of the war in Ukraine seemed like an "exploitation of the historical date for current security policy."

Culture Minister Wolfram Weimer, who is known for his reactionary attacks on left-wing artists, booksellers and filmmakers, issued a press release on May 8 in which one searches in vain for any mention of the Soviet Union or the Red Army. There were two references to the "war of annihilation," yet one is not informed against which country it was directed.

Weimer wrote that Nazi crimes must "not be relativised or called into question." Coming from a nationalist right-wing hardliner like Weimer, this is purely farcical. In fact, he is driving the rewriting of history. With his support, Weimer says, the permanent exhibition at the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum on the Nazi war of extermination is currently being revised. The intention is to "incorporate recent research findings with broader European perspectives." In addition, a new network of experts on

German-Russian relations will be established at the museum, which aims to “critically engage with the historical myths of the current Russian government.”

Behind these academically convoluted formulations lies a concrete revisionist agenda: Nationalist and anti-Soviet historical narratives, which prevail in the Baltic and Eastern European countries and were already propagated in a special exhibition at the museum on the Hitler-Stalin Pact, are now finding their way into the permanent exhibition.

The campaign against Soviet memorials

The attacks on the Soviet Union are most clearly evident in the reignited campaign against Soviet memorials, which commemorate the approximately 13 million Soviet soldiers who fell in battle. Today, they are a thorn in the side of the ruling class because they remind the whole world of what war produces.

Following the demolition of hundreds of Soviet monuments in Ukraine and the Baltic states in recent years, alongside the erection of new monuments to fascist collaborators such as Stepan Bandera, efforts are now underway in Germany to put an end to the commemoration of the Red Army’s victory. The campaign is advancing step by step.

In the treaties of 1990 with the USSR and subsequently with Russia, the Federal Republic of Germany undertook to preserve and maintain Soviet monuments and war graves in Germany. Therefore, demolition, as has occurred in Ukraine, is not legally possible without further ado. Instead, a “redesign” and “contextualisation” of the memorials is being demanded.

The focus is on the three Berlin memorials in the Tiergarten, where some 2,500 soldiers are buried; in Treptower Park, the largest memorial of its kind in Germany, where 7,200 soldiers are buried; and in the Schönholzer Heide in the district of Pankow, the largest Soviet military cemetery with some 13,200 fallen Red Army soldiers. The monument in Dresden is also being called into question—the oldest memorial to the Red Army in Germany, which was inaugurated immediately after the war in 1945.

Calls for the removal or alteration of the memorials are not new. As early as 2014, at the start of the Ukraine crisis, the right-wing Springer press had called for the dismantling of the monument in the Tiergarten. Following Russia’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Soviet tank there was draped in a Ukrainian flag and the monument in Treptower Park was sprayed with swastikas and anti-Russian slogans.

Now the offensive is entering a new phase. The Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens tabled motions in the Berlin State House of Representatives calling for a “contextualisation” of the Stalin quotations at the Treptow monument and for the inclusion of the other successor states of the Soviet Union in the handling of the monuments—several of which are pursuing a policy of rigorously removing Soviet monuments. The Berlin Left Party agreed to such a motion in the committees.

In the week leading up to the anniversary on May 8, the Berlin-based association Vitsche organised a “Ukrainian Remembrance Week” with the stated aim of freeing German remembrance culture from “Soviet narratives” and instead strengthening Ukrainian nationalism. Speaking at the opening were the Ukrainian Ambassador Oleksii Makeiev, the Green Party politician Robin Wagener and the historian Kai Struve, head of the German-Ukrainian Historians’ Commission.

Alongside public events and a new, manipulative “interactive museum” on the war in Ukraine at the Berlin Story Bunker, Vitsche also organised a “performative memorial march” through Berlin-Mitte—calling for a dedicated memorial site for Ukrainian war victims as a counterpart to the Soviet memorials. According to Vitsche, Soviet memory fails to

acknowledge the “particular suffering of Ukraine.” “All victims were counted as Soviet citizens; national identities were erased,” they claim.

The theoretical ammunition for this campaign is being provided, among others, by the Eastern European historian Franziska Davies, a research fellow at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam, who also took part as a speaker at the “Ukrainian Remembrance Week.”

In a detailed interview on May 9 with the Ukrainian state news agency Ukrinform, Davies bluntly described the Soviet Union as a “Russian colonial empire” and called for a “decolonisation” of the culture of remembrance—including the “re-evaluation of Soviet monuments.” However, she lamented that there is still a lack of awareness of this in Germany.

Die Zeit also published a provocative interview on May 9 under the headline: “Can This Remain Standing?” In it, the Ukrainian art historian Yevheniia Moliar proposed altering the monuments with signs, QR codes and “artistic interventions” in order to “break Russian dominance in these places and also throughout Germany.”

It is no coincidence that the second interviewee is none other than the far-right academic Jörg Baberowski—the man who declared as early as 2014 that “Hitler was not vicious,” and who systematically trivialises and justifies Nazi crimes in the Soviet Union. As professor of Eastern European history at Berlin’s Humboldt University, he continues to play a key role in rewriting history and making the views of the far-right Alternative for Germany mainstream.

In the *Zeit* interview in question, he pointed out that the German government cannot make any changes to the memorials without terminating the treaty with Russia—only to go on to demand precisely that in the very next breath: “If it were up to me, I would terminate the treaty.” Moliar also advocates highlighting the different nationalities of the Red Army soldiers buried there.

The class logic behind the attacks on the Soviet Union

These nationalist attacks on the Soviet Union are based on a distortion of history. As Jochen Hellbeck demonstrates in detail in his latest book, “World Enemy Number 1,” Hitler’s war in the East was directed primarily against the Soviet Union. In that war, the drive of German imperialism towards the East converged with the anti-communism of the Nazis, who propagated the fight against “Jewish Bolshevism” and sought to reverse the October Revolution. This is the only way to explain the Nazis’ massive extermination campaigns, to which 27 million Soviet citizens fell victim.

The Nazis treated all Soviet prisoners of war as representatives of despised Bolshevism and subjected them to barbaric “special treatment,” in violation of the 1929 Geneva Convention. In consultation with the Nazi leadership, the Wehrmacht command deliberately had over 3 million of the 5.7 million Soviet prisoners of war murdered through mass shootings, starvation, epidemics and forced labour.

Conversely, millions of workers and peasants from all the Soviet republics joined the Red Army to defend the achievements of the October Revolution—and not for their respective nations. They fought side by side for the Soviet Union and were victorious despite Stalin’s devastating policies and the terror and the brutal persecution of national minorities and groups by the NKVD.

If Stalin’s crimes are now being used to belittle the heroic struggle of the Red Army soldiers and to bolster the nationalism of the former Soviet republics, this is a falsification of history in two respects.

Firstly, Stalin was not Lenin’s legitimate heir, but the gravedigger of the Russian Revolution. After Lenin’s death in 1924, the Soviet bureaucracy

under Stalin seized power and transformed the USSR into a dictatorship that oppressed the working class and murdered the flower of the revolution in the Great Terror of the 1930s.

Secondly, it was Stalin himself who brought back nationalism, which ultimately culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy. When the heads of state of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus—Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevich—decided to dissolve the USSR on December 8, 1991, without any democratic legitimacy, they opened up the territory of the Soviet Union to imperialist ambitions and created the multitude of post-Soviet mini-states that are now being pitted against one another, which forms the basis for the war in Ukraine.

The erasure of the Soviet Union and the rehabilitation of the national movements in the Soviet republics that collaborated with the Nazis serve the transparent aim of rehabilitating the Nazis' old anti-communist narratives, which were used to justify the war against the Soviet Union. By rehabilitating the collaborators, the Nazis are ultimately rehabilitated, and today's war policy is legitimised.

In an article for the *Berliner Zeitung* on May 9, Ukrainian Holocaust researcher Marta Havryshko warns against the Bandera myth in Ukraine and quotes from a speech given by an officer of the Third Storm Corps, which is linked to Azov, at a commemorative event for the 14th SS Waffen Grenadier Division: "83 years ago, thousands of Ukrainian volunteers joined the defence of Europe against a Moscow invasion—just as we are doing today."

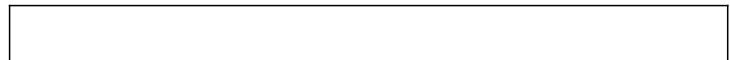
Havryshko, whom the *World Socialist Web Site* defended against a smear campaign in Ukraine, commented: "Modern Ukrainian soldiers have been symbolically equated with men who swore allegiance to Hitler and fought for the Third Reich." She continued: "By this logic, Nazi Germany appears as the lesser evil compared to the Kremlin. The tenor is that life under Hitler was better than life under Stalin. A dangerous slide into historical revisionism and Nazi apologetics."

Furthermore, the distortion of history against the Soviet Union is aimed at removing the world's first workers' state—and thus the October Revolution—from history books and collective memory. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was the greatest transformation in history and proves that an alternative to capitalism is possible. It dealt a severe blow to the ruling class and inspired workers and oppressed peoples across the world to mass uprisings and revolutions. The national independence of the former colonies would have been just as unthinkable without the October Revolution as the social gains in the industrialised nations.

Today, all these achievements are under attack across the board. "All that had occurred in the aftermath of the revolution—the upsurge of the international working class, the monumental global movement of the oppressed masses against imperialism, and the social advances that were won in the aftermath of the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 and the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949—was to be reversed," explained David North in his May Day speech this year, referring to the US wars and the social counter-revolution.

What the imperialist powers actually seek to impose with their bombs and missiles, as well as by smashing workers' social rights, is ideologically underpinned by the erasure of the October Revolution. Politicians and the media seriously believe they can simply wipe out the most important event of the past century.

Yet in reality, both the horrors of world war and fascism and the struggles of the working class are deeply rooted in mass consciousness. That is why the vast majority reject the politics of war. But to transform this rejection into a conscious movement, it is essential to counter the falsification of history and to keep alive the memory of fascism and war on the one hand, and the October Revolution on the other.





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