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Russian mothers clear the corpse field after the battle of Kerch in 1942. (Foto: Dmitri Baltermanz / public domain)

War of Annihilation: “The Highest Death Toll Since the Thirty Years' War” – 81 years ago, the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union

Anyone speaking of Russia's “war against Ukraine” as a “war of annihilation” should first study the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Wehrmacht very carefully. That war was planned as a war of annihilation from the very beginning, specifically also targeting parts of the civilian population. Almost 27 million Soviet citizens lost their lives.

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During the past two months, Kiev has repeatedly declared that Russia is waging a “war of annihilation” against Ukraine – a statement avidly seized upon by leading German media. In a situation where approximately every third public debate in Germany seems to contain an inappropriate allusion to Hitler or accusations of “downplaying the holocaust”, the thoughtlessness with which this term is being bandied about almost everywhere is astonishing. (Or could it be part of a deliberate PR strategy?) By comparison, accusations of “downplaying German crimes committed during the war against the Soviet Union” have yet to be made. However, if ever a war earned the title, “war of annihilation”, then it is the war unleashed by the Wehrmacht from 1941 to 1944 on the territory of the Soviet Union.

“Russian stomachs adapt!”

“The Russian people have endured poverty, hunger and frugality for centuries. Their stomachs adapt – there is no need for misplaced sympathy.”

These words were not written by Hitler, Himmler or Goebbels. The phrase stems from Herbert Backe, State Secretary of the Reich's Ministry for Food and Agriculture. It is part of a document known as the “Yellow Folder”, which was classified as a “Secret Command Document” and distributed by Backe, while he was Goering's director of food policy, to more than 10,000 agricultural leaders, just three weeks before the invasion of the Soviet Union. The entire occupation policy envisioned for the enormous areas to be conquered in the east was to follow a single guiding principle: “How does this

serve Germany?” One month earlier, at a meeting of State Secretaries and leading officers of the Wehrmacht on 2 May 1941, a conclusion had already been reached: “Unless the entire Wehrmacht can be fed by Russian produce during the third year, this war cannot be waged. Undeniably, tens of millions of people will starve as we take what we need from the land.”

Invasion as a “Necessity of War”

During the second year of the war they had unleashed, the German aggressors had manoeuvred themselves into an impasse. In spite of successful Blitzkrieg attacks on Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France, Hitler’s Wehrmacht had not managed to bring England to her knees. A decisive victory on the western front had become increasingly unlikely, since the British Navy was still able to existentially threaten Germany by blockading naval routes.

Even during times of peace, the German Reich had not been able to ensure food security by means of its own agricultural products. As the historian Götz Aly has shown in his notable volume, “Hitler’s Volksstaat”, the situation was such that “... even with maximum effort, the NS leadership had been unable to produce more than 83 percent of the necessary foodstuffs within the country itself. Imports – particularly of vegetable oils and animal feed – remained necessary to ensure adequate supplies for the population. The mobilisation inevitably led to a lack of fertilizer, since nitrogen, an essential element in fertilizer production, was needed for the production of gunpowder. In addition to this, shortages of men, horses, tractors, new machines, and fuel rapidly developed.” Under the conditions imposed by the British naval blockade, all of these imported goods – not least among them, oil, the most essential fuel of war – had become scarce goods that were difficult to acquire.

As Hitler had explained to the High Commissioner of the League of Nations, Carl Jacob Burckhardt: “Everything I do is directed against Russia; if the West is too stupid and too blind to grasp this, I will be forced to come to an agreement with

the Russians, defeat the West and, after its defeat, gather my forces to fight the Soviet Union. I need Ukraine to ensure that we will not be starved again as we were during the last war.” From the perspective of the aggressors, the “Eastern Lebensraum” Hitler had vaguely alluded to as a distant ideological goal in “Mein Kampf” – the conquest of the Soviet Union up to the Urals and the accompanying expulsion, enslavement, and murder of the local populace – had become an “urgent necessity of war” by the spring of 1941.



Soviet civilians leave their destroyed houses after a bombardment by the German Army during the battle for Leningrad, 10 December 1942 (Wikimedia Commons)

“They died so that Germany could live”

Hitler’s statement cited above describes the Nazi dilemma in a nutshell: A revolution born of hunger, a lack of food, and war-weariness by the German people against their own regime, as had occurred in November 1918, had to be prevented at all costs – or rather: at the cost of the population of the Soviet Union. Or, as Goering later said on 24 August 1942: “Before the German population suffers a catastrophic shortage of food, the occupied areas and their people will starve.” On 8 November of the previous year, he had anticipated “the highest death toll since the Thirty Years’ War”.

At a meeting of high-ranking SS commanders at the Wewelsburg in mid-June 1941, one week before the invasion, his colle-

ague, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, had specified the “decimation of the Soviet population by 30 million people” as a military goal.

On 22 June 1941, the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union with approximately 3,000,000 soldiers and 625,000 horses. Initially, they achieved large territorial gains in spite of the dogged defence of a badly organised Red Army – Stalin had removed most of the competent leaders beforehand – and captured hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops in large cauldron battles. In order to lessen the burden on the population in the “Reich”, the Wehrmacht followed the principle of “living off the land”. Hitler’s unspecified command, to “... divide this great cake into manageable portions so that we can dominate it, govern it, and exploit it. The huge expanse in the east must be pacified as soon as possible, preferably by shooting dead anyone who even looks doubtful ...”, had been operationalised and turned into concrete plans and occupation policies by the Reich’s administration and the Wehrmacht.

The administration’s specialists for population and supplies had divided the Soviet regions to the west of the Urals into surplus and deficit areas. The aim was to separate the surplus regions of “black earth” in the Ukraine and the Caucasus from the northern deficit areas, to seal them off hermetically and to then leave the population to starve. The economic policy guidelines for the Agricultural Section of the Economic Organisation East, dated 23 May 1941, read as follows: “The population of these areas, particularly the urban populations, will face the most severe famines. In these regions, many tens of millions of people will become superfluous and perish or have to emigrate to Siberia” (a euphemism for brutal expulsion, L.E.).

In reality, however, this plan proved largely unfeasible, since the German occupying forces found themselves unable to control the migratory waves caused by hunger. In some instances, however, the implementation of the plan was – from the perspective of the German aggressors – quite successful. This particularly applied to the Soviet prisoners of war, of

whom 3,3 million (i.e., 57,9 percent) in German custody died miserably of hunger, exhaustion or disease – a clear violation of the internationally recognised martial law of the time. (The fact that the Soviet prisoners of war murdered in this manner – their deaths had, after all, been anticipated as a “necessity of war” from the beginning – represent the second largest group of Nazi victims has still not been adequately recognised by the collective German consciousness.)

The plan also had some success during the encirclement of Leningrad – originally intended to be entirely razed to the ground, as were Moscow and the other great cities – that lasted 500 days and exacted a toll of between 900,000 to 1,000,000 victims. Other cities, like Kharkov, were turned into ghettos of starvation by the rigid requisition practices of the occupying forces and the sealing off of the town. Vast areas of Ukraine and the Crimea were rendered entirely bare, with no foodstuffs or any other usable goods left.

In brief: The cynical epitaph that appeared in the “Völkischer Beobachter” on 4 February 1942 for the German soldiers that fell in Stalingrad, saying “They died so that Germany might live”, can be more truthfully said of the millions of Soviet citizens that died of famine for the German populations in the Wehrmacht and the Reich.

Criminal commands and mass murder

However, Hitler’s directive to shoot anyone “who even looks doubtful” had also been pro-actively reformulated as criminal commands by the Wehrmacht.

The “Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlass”, also known as the Barbarossa decree, was issued on 13 May 1941 by the High Command of the Wehrmacht and exempted “deeds committed by members of the Wehrmacht towards civilians from military jurisdiction”. This was extended to include actions that were military crimes or offences. In other words, the German soldiers were given a carte blanche, placing Soviet civilians at the mercy of arbitrary decisions and the caprices of local



Cemetery of villages in the memorial Khatyn: 186 graves, one for each village. (Foto: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung / Flickr / CC BY-SA 2.0)

commanders. Just a few weeks later, on 6 June 1941, the High Command issued the “Kommissarbefehl”, the Commissar Order. Because the political Commissars were seen as the ideological functionaries within the Red Army, they were not recognised as soldiers; they were to be eliminated immediately, either in battle or as soon as they had been “separated” from the troops.

With these two commands – in full knowledge of the criminal consequences of their orders – the leaders of the Wehrmacht suspended fundamental components of the international martial law valid at the time, including a number of internationally recognised principles specifically designed to protect civilians and prisoners of war. By issuing these commands, the German High Command effectively set the stage for an unprecedented, racially motivated war of extinction, directed, above all, at the Jewish population.

The systematic mass murder of European Jews began on the territories of the Soviet Union. At first, isolated and horribly brutal anti-Jewish pogroms were executed by local populations, particularly in Lithuania, Latvia, and the western part of Ukraine. As these events, which the SS described as “self-cleaning practices”, unfolded, the occupying

forces of the Wehrmacht, though legally responsible, stood idly by. The pogroms were soon followed by systematic executions performed by the security police and special forces. Although the executions were, in the beginning, limited to Jewish men eligible for military service, from August 1941 onwards, at the latest, entire Jewish communities were exterminated. Every Belarussian or Ukrainian town, no matter how small, suffered thousands of victims. According to estimates, the German occupiers murdered between 2,5 and 2,6 million Soviet Jews. Very often, the Wehrmacht provided logistical support.

The murderous collaboration between Wehrmacht, SS and the regular Nazi police forces followed a similar pattern during the fight against partisans. Between 1942 and 1943, particularly in Belarus, entire regions were turned into “desert zones”. Thousands of villages were burnt down, hundreds of them along with their populations, who were locked into a barn or a church prior to the event. It is estimated that between 300’000 and 350’000 people were killed in Belarus alone. (To gain an impression of the atrocities committed, one should visit the memorial site of Khatyn, the “Cemetery of Villages” [1], or, if one has the stomach for it, watch the 1985 film “Come

and See / Иди и смотри” by Elen Klimow [2]).

During their forced retreat, the German troops left a trail of destruction behind them. The German High Command had ordered that nothing but burnt earth should be left behind; anything in any way essential to the sustenance of life was to be destroyed: industrial plants, mines, water and electricity works, bridges, dams, waterways and sluices, the railway, agricultural machines, mills, dairy production plants, the harvest in the fields, as well as all means of transportation and any supplies that could not be carried away. Civilians capable of work were forcibly evacuated, often under horrific circumstances. The rapidity of the Soviet advance prevented this command from being as thoroughly realised everywhere as planned.

In a cynical assessment of this most barbaric of wars, a comparison of the number of Soviet citizens – almost 27 million – who lost their lives with the original plan of 30 million dead, one would have to admit that the occupying forces almost reached their target.

It is nothing short of miraculous – and anyone who travels to these parts will confirm this – that the people in the countries that suffered most, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, do not feel any hatred towards Germans. This suggests an incomparable, moral achievement that is still not adequately acknowledged in Germany – indeed, it is hardly even recognised! It is, therefore, all the more shameful that German soldiers are once again lining up at the Russian border.

Post-war Repression

In the old Federal Republic of Germany, the birth place of the author of this essay, the emergent Cold War and a revival of the enemy image “Soviet Union” led to the repression of any debate on the unprecedented atrocities committed by the occupying forces in the Soviet part of the world. The Iron Curtain blocked any direct human contact between the populations of the two nations, although at least



„This is how many human lives were claimed by the Nazi racial mania - Minimum number of victims of German mass crimes in the 2nd world war“ Source: Statista

some prisoners of war returning home were known to say, “Basically, the Russian people are good!”. Those responsible for mass murder, insofar as they had survived, usually withdrew quietly into middle class lives; very few were ever legally called to account.

During the fifties, an entire slew of justificatory literature written by former generals of the Wehrmacht was published, more or less expressing the idea that “if Hitler hadn’t conducted the war so stupidly, we would have won!” Even when the crimes committed by the SS special forces could no longer be denied, a stubborn narrative defending a “clean Wehrmacht” continued to persist. From a psychological point of view, this seemed all the more imperative, since the 18 million Wehrmacht troops had become a representative cross-section of society. The narrative only started disintegrating when two travelling exhibitions organi-

sed by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research went on tour: “Crimes of the Wehrmacht”, which toured from 1995 to 1999 and again, in a revised form, from 2001 to 2004. For a long time, they faced considerable opposition – not only in the media.

The fact that the war against the Soviet Union was not a war conducted according to traditional concepts, but a war of annihilation, during which the rules governing international martial law were arbitrarily suspended, has remained outside of the consciousness of the German people for decades. Even today, the general awareness of these facts remains rudimentary. (One can only hope that this understanding will not be degraded to a sort of tokenism when it becomes more widespread.) Accordingly, the levels of empathy for the suffering of the populations of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine during the German occupation remain low. (With

respect to the two last-named countries, the mass media are beginning to foster a different attitude – for blatantly obvious, geopolitical reasons!)

The only real attempts at rapprochement have taken place “from the bottom up” in interdenominational exchanges – the German evangelical churches published a memorial positional paper titled “Reconciliation and Peace with the Peoples of the Soviet Union”, in German-Russian city partnerships, in the German-Russian Forum, in sport, and with the help of the untiring efforts of individuals, like Marco Henrichs [3]. Official commemorations seem to belabour the matter

out of a sense of obligation only, and have become – especially since Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine – repurposed by a new layer of geopolitical instrumentalization [4], playing the victims in Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine off against each other.

Keeping this in mind, it is perhaps fortunate that the peak news programmes “Tagesschau” and “Tagesthemen” that aired on 9 June last year simply covered the 80th anniversary of the German invasion with a mantle of silence. The topic of the evening lasted a full 13 minutes and 25 seconds: gender issues in the German language![5]

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