



22.06.1941

22 June: With the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler starts the racist war of extermination for 'Lebensraum' in the East



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Among historians, there is a strong group of those who despite their conflicting aims, tend to view Nazism and Stalinism as closely related to each other. Under the term 'totalitarianism', their common features might be summed up: They pursue a massive cult of personality. Both specify an unequivocal Feind (enemy) – here Weltjudentum (world Judaism), there the Klassenfeind (class enemy) – that needs to be physically eliminated. Both oppress their citizens with utmost brutality and, ultimately, claim world supremacy of their ideologies. Finally, both use the word Sozialismus (Socialism) in their name. It is solely the absolute and racist desire to annihilate, directed towards entire peoples, which Nazism could claim as an exclusive distinguishing feature for itself. Those who support this highly controversial Totalitarismus-Theorie (totalitarianism theory) point out that in absolute numbers, the markedly longer lasting Stalinism actually cost more lives than Nazism.

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Both Hitler and Stalin proved their ruthlessness in their choices as early as their joint defeat of Poland. Before the Soviet Union is attacked, it had attacked an uninvolved country itself and occupied sections of it. And the aggressive character of the Soviet Union is not just displayed in Poland. Stalin pressures Romania into surrendering Bessarabia and, in 1940, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are annexed. The military situation in the Soviet Union is not favourable prior to the German attack. In his paranoid fear of conspiracies during the 'Great Terror' of 1936 to 1938, Stalin had executed or locked up the vast majority of his officer corps. Soldiers are neither well-armed nor adequately equipped. The inherent weakness of the Red Army is clearly demonstrated during the 'Winter War' that Stalin initiated against the tiny nation of Finland in November 1939. Despite actually being significantly outnumbered and inferior, the Finns proved to be extremely difficult to defeat. Agents warn Stalin of the imminent German attack, however he does not take the warning seriously. An attack on his giant realm with a simultaneous war on two fronts against Great Britain presumably appears to be such a crazy plan that Stalin believes there is no need to take it seriously and ignores the fact that Hitler propagates the Ausrottung des Bolschewismus (eradication of Bolshevism) as a part of his political programme. Just like the German invasion of Poland, the attacks on the Soviet Union follow the clear logic of Nazi ideology: by exterminating the slawischen Untermenschen (Slavic sub-humans) living in the vast expanses of the East, Lebensraum (living space) is to be created for the German Herrenrasse (master-race). At the same



time, Jews are to be wiped out in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Hitler has also never tried to conceal his firm conviction – held since the 1920s – that Bolshevism is an ideology that ultimately needs to be eliminated. Perhaps those who are cynical about Stalin’s power simply underestimate the devastating effect of ideological conviction, as most likely must have been assumed with regard to Hitler. Like no other war, there is a sense of inevitability about the invasion of the Soviet Union that follows from Hitler’s convictions and the Nazi ideology.



The German Army, better known as the Wehrmacht – a totally obedient instrument of war and annihilation in the hands of Hitler – plans the attack on the Soviet Union with meticulous care. Code-named ‘Operation Barbarossa’, the invasion is envisaged as a war to be heavily waged by tanks and the air force, and which is intended to be ended victoriously as quickly as possible. Because German resources and capabilities will not be sufficient for a longer war campaign on two fronts, the Wehrmacht capitalises on quick success. In addition to the fundamentally racist convictions of the leading commanders, it is also these considerations that are basically responsible for the extreme brutality with which this war is waged on the civilian population and the hostile armed forces from the very first day. After approximately three million German soldiers, supported by around 700,000 allied or in volunteer associations organised Romanians, Hungarians, Slovaks, Italians, Croats and Spaniards invade the Soviet Union without any declaration of war, the Germans set about the systematic committing of war crimes. In the first months, the Wehrmacht fights victoriously against Red Army soldiers who are poorly organised and in part inadequately armed. However, behind the back of the Wehrmacht, a systematic mass terror programme begins: Soviet political Commissars are executed in accordance with the ‘Kommissarbefehl’ (Commissar Order); millions of Soviet prisoners of war are left to starve to death; cities like Leningrad are besieged and starved out; and so-called Einsatzgruppen, or paramilitary death squads, and mobile SS units shoot hundreds of thousands of Jews. Between 1941 and 1943, approximately 1.5 million people fall victim to the firing squads of the Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union. In Babi Yar alone, a ravine near Kiev, SS Einsatzgruppen execute 33,771 Jews in just two days. Wehrmacht soldiers are inculcated that they are to show absolutely no consideration for the civilian population. In the first months of the war, a very high number of civilians and Red Army soldiers are killed. In the Baltic States and Ukraine, the Germans are initially celebrated as liberators, before the true character of this war becomes evident. All the same, many locals offer themselves to the Germans as collaborators in the persecution of the Jews. Waffen-SS, or Armed SS, fighting units are also formed with soldiers from the Baltic States and Ukraine. Events only start to turn around with the arrival of the Russian winter, as the country’s inadequate infrastructure cause German tanks to advance more slowly than planned, the new Soviet T-34 tanks roll onto the battlefields, and Stalin manages to restore combat strength and discipline in the army by means of draconian measures. The German Army is not equipped for the winter war; modern war machines do not function in the cold, and German foot-soldiers sicken and die in large numbers. The German advance comes to a standstill in the winter of 1941 before reaching Moscow, and Soviet counter-attacks force the Wehrmacht and its allies onto the defensive. The Second World War ultimately

reaches its decisive turning point at Stalingrad when the German 6th Army capitulates and is taken prisoner. The Battle of Stalingrad costs both sides a total of some 700,000 killed. The invasion of the Soviet Union marks the beginning of the end for the Nazi regime.

The invasion of the Soviet Union and the crimes committed there significantly shape the German historical consciousness. Insight into German guilt and the duty of atonement remain an important German policy paradigm this day. The 'Great Patriotic' War is also deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the post-Soviet nations. The Soviet Union lost approximately 27 million lives in this monstrous war, including not only Russians, but also Ukrainians, Belarusians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and persons of other nationalities. The Nazi war of extermination brings grief and suffering to every family. However, as a totalitarian community, neither Stalin nor the Soviet Union is an innocent victim. In reality, the people in the Soviet Union are the victims who have to pay the price for the delusional madness of two dictators. The people in the Soviet Union are the first victims of the Stalinist terror, of the forced collectivisation of agriculture that millions of farmers do not survive and, lastly, the negligent weakening of the Army caused by Stalin's cleansing of the officer corps in the years of the 'Great Terror'. It is not until after these events that the already weakened country, which is in a constant state of fear, is occupied by the German Army, ravaged and, in many areas, totally depopulated. The end of the war does not bring an end of suffering. Stalin delusionally scents alleged disloyalty and political opposition. Further population groups become a target of repressions, among them since 1948 also the Jews.

Translated into English by Heather Rae, proofread by Maria-Philippa Wieckowski



Prof. Dr. Tobias Arand



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