

Seventy-five years since the outbreak of World War II

1 September 2014

Today, September 1, 2014, marks the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. The German invasion of Poland was followed two days later by the British and French declarations of war against the Third Reich.

The human and social catastrophe that began with the Nazi bombing of Warsaw ended six years later with the United States' atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the intervening six years, between 80 and 90 million people were killed, and additional hundreds of millions of people were physically and emotionally crippled.

Military deaths totaled between 22 million and 25 million, including the deaths of 5 million prisoners of war.

The human cost of the Second World War was far greater than the First, which itself had taken between 9 and 16 million lives. A mere 21 years separated the end of the first global bloodbath and the onset of the second.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 arose out of the contradictions of world capitalism that exploded in World War I, and the war itself was essentially brought to an end as a consequence of the socialist revolution in Russia.

Over the subsequent two decades, the international working class suffered a series of defeats due to the betrayals of the Stalinist bureaucracy that arose within the Soviet Union and the treachery of the social democratic parties. Fascism triumphed in Italy, Germany and Spain.

The Fourth International, led by Leon Trotsky, warned that the alternatives facing mankind were socialism or barbarism. The only force that could prevent a new world war was the proletarian revolution. The defeats of the working class in Europe, Trotsky wrote, made such a war inevitable.

One year before the outbreak of World War II, Trotsky, in the founding program of the Fourth International, warned of the coming cataclysm. The bourgeoisie, he wrote, "toboggans with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe."

World War II was not, as the propagandists of American and British imperialism claimed, a "war for democracy" against fascism. It was an imperialist war that arose out of the fundamental unresolved contradictions of capitalism that had erupted in the First World War: the conflict between world economy and its division between antagonistic nation states, and between socialized production and private ownership of the means of production.

The Hitler regime instigated the war in Europe. But the Nazi Reich was only the most extreme expression of the destructive and criminal nature of imperialism. The ruling classes of all the imperialist powers, major and minor, including the United States, Britain, France, Japan, Italy, Canada and Australia, were involved in a struggle to redivide the world and increase their control of raw materials, markets and sources of cheap labor at the expense of their rivals.

In the course of the six years of war, the horrors included the virtual extermination of European Jewry, itself part of Hitler's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union lost 27 million people, 14 percent of its population. Poland lost 5.8 million, more than 16 percent of its population. Countries that lost at least 10 percent of their populations included Greece, Lithuania and Latvia.

Some 6 million Jews were murdered between 1939 and 1945, including 90 percent of Jews in Poland, the Baltic countries and Germany.

In Asia, Japanese imperialism carried out a murderous campaign to seize control of the Pacific and colonize China. But the methods employed by American imperialism to bring about Japan's capitulation in August of 1945 were of a completely barbaric character. Over the course of three days, the US dropped atomic bombs on the defenseless and militarily insignificant cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The death toll from the two bombs was 150,000 people.

As the American historian Gabriel Jackson wrote in his 1999 book *Civilization and Barbarity in Twentieth Century Europe*, "In the specific circumstances of August 1945, the use of the atom bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the conduct of different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy."

The American ruling class viewed its victory in the war as opening the way for US imperialist domination of the world. But its ambitions were frustrated by the existence of the Soviet Union as well as the anti-colonial struggles that swept Asia, Africa and Latin America, including the revolutions in China and India. US imperialism responded brutally.

It is estimated that in the wars that followed—Korea, Vietnam

and the numerous smaller wars associated with the Cold War—some 20 million people died.

With the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, instigated by the Stalinist bureaucracy, the United States not only declared an end to the Cold War and the triumph of capitalism, it also promised a “peace dividend.” Nothing of the kind occurred.

The American ruling class officially adopted a policy of global hegemony. It seized on what it called the “unipolar moment” to escalate its use of military force, hoping thereby to offset its economic decline. From the fall of the Berlin Wall until the end of the 1990s, the US invaded, bombed or occupied a series of countries, including Panama, Somalia, Iraq, Haiti, Sudan, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia.

Washington seized on the September 11, 2001 attacks to proclaim a “war on terror” that was nothing more than a cover for the use of military force all over the world. It adopted a policy of preventive war, granting itself the right to attack any person, group or country it deemed an obstacle to its global interests.

The breakdown of world capitalism that erupted in 2008 accelerated the drive by the imperialist powers for a new division of the world. The savage wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were followed by the wars for regime-change in Libya and Syria. Now, the US has launched a new war in Iraq and is preparing to bomb Syria.

Under conditions of mounting social tensions and deepening economic crisis, the imperialist ruling classes are recklessly pushing the conflict over Ukraine, triggered by an American and German orchestrated fascist-led coup in Kiev, to the point of open warfare between NATO and Russia, which holds the world’s second largest nuclear arsenal.

The US-led offensive in Europe is aimed at transforming Ukraine into a base for military operations against Russia, which is to be carved up and reduced to a semi-colony of American and German imperialism

On the very eve of the 75th anniversary of the beginning of World War II, government and military leaders in Europe met to escalate the provocations and threats against Russia. The European Union summit held over the weekend pledged to increase sanctions on Moscow while NATO leaders called for Ukraine’s integration into the US-led imperialist military alliance.

Dalia Grybauskaitė, the right-wing, US-backed president of Lithuania, a NATO member country, declared Saturday that Russia was already at war with Ukraine and the whole of Europe.

Anne Applebaum, the neo-conservative *Washington Post* columnist and wife of the Polish foreign minister, published a column Sunday bearing the headline “War in Europe is not a hysterical idea.” The column concludes by asking, “So is it hysterical to prepare for total war? Or is it naive not to do so?”

Meanwhile, in the East, US imperialism is carrying out an offensive aimed at reducing China to a colonial status, under

the banner of the Obama administration’s so-called “pivot to Asia.” The logic of the drive to isolate China and surround it militarily is outright war.

In the 1938 founding program of the Fourth International, Trotsky wrote: “Under the increasing tension of capitalist disintegration, imperialist antagonisms reach an impasse at the height of which separate clashes and bloody local disturbances (Ethiopia, Spain, the Far East, Central Europe) must inevitably coalesce into a conflagration of world dimensions.”

Substituting Iraq and Syria for Ethiopia and Spain, these words written 76 years ago provide a concise summation of the world political situation today. This time, however, the prospect is for a nuclear world war that could put an end to human civilization.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) declared in its statement “Socialism and the Fight Against Imperialist War,” issued on June 9, “Another imperialist bloodbath is not only possible: it is inevitable unless the international working class intervenes on the basis of a revolutionary Marxist program.”

The lessons of history must be learned. Nothing can stop the imperialist drive to world war except socialist revolution. It is necessary to build a mass movement against war based on the working class and guided by a revolutionary program directed against the imperialist system and capitalism.

We appeal to workers and young people around the world. Join and build the International Committee of the Fourth International and its national sections—the Socialist Equality parties—to provide the leadership necessary to prevent another world war. Build the ICFI as the world party of socialist revolution.

Barry Grey

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