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The Eastern Front of WW2 in American Secondary Education

Joshua Derren Klein

Abstract: The present article explores the absence of the Eastern Front in American secondary education and advocates for its inclusion in course curricula and instructional materials. It presents the staggering scale of human death and destruction in this often “forgotten front” and documents its marginalization within state educational standards. It suggests that the lack of instruction on the Eastern Front contributes to important public misunderstandings of the Second World War and twentieth-century European history. The article contends that the Eastern Front is a useful tool for bringing contemporary foreign policy controversies into the secondary classroom. Further, it argues that more instruction on the Eastern Front can support educators teaching the Holocaust by countering a growing trend of neglect towards this pivotal chapter in human history. Finally, the article concludes with a brief essay intended as a useful summary of the Eastern Front properly understood, and as a potential guide for instructors preparing teaching strategies for introducing the Eastern Front in their classrooms.

The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941 and the subsequent four years of apocalyptic combat represent one of the most significant historical blind spots in American understanding of the Second World War. Although the war occupies a prominent place in popular historical memory—appearing regularly in political discourse, popular culture, film, and even video games—this attention largely neglects the most decisive theater of the entire conflict: the Eastern Front, where the outcome of the war was ultimately determined and where, by far,

the largest concentration of armed forces met on the field of battle. The numbers are staggering in comparison. For example, almost every American knows something about D-Day in Normandy, France and the subsequent weeks of fighting, during which over 30,000 Allied soldiers died in the summer of 1944 (Beever, 2009). By contrast, during the Battle of Stalingrad on the Eastern Front, approximately 40,000 civilians died as the industrial city was utterly annihilated over the course of the battle. And that’s before we even begin counting military deaths.

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Historians estimate that at least 500,000 Soviet soldiers died during the fight for the city. More broadly, between 1941 and 1945, the Eastern Front accounted for at least 15 million military deaths shared between the Nazis and Soviets on the Eastern Front (although Soviet figures double the German figures). That number (15 million) should be doubled to include roughly the same number of civilian deaths. Put differently: over the course of fighting on the Eastern Front, more people died than roughly one quarter of the entire United States population in the 1940s (Fritz, 2005). Indeed, during the first two months of fighting on the Eastern Front, Nazi and Soviet deaths were greater than US deaths in the entire Second World War. As hard as it may be for Americans to accept, between 80-90 percent of Nazi resources and manpower were tied up in their titanic conflict with the Soviet Union (Fritz, 2005). Any honest and holistic perspective of the Second World War in Europe simply must concede that the American fronts in Europe (the Western Front and Mediterranean Theater) were ultimately background noise in comparison.

And yet: the Eastern Front merits hardly a mention in most social studies curriculum in the United States. No state requires that it be taught in general education history courses. To some extent this is understandable, because the most common required history course in secondary education is American History rather than European History. European History is not even the second-most common course.

In recent decades, European History requirements have been replaced by course requirements that are less Eurocentric such as World History or Ethnic Studies. Take, for example, California's recent decision to require Ethnic Studies for all high school graduates (See Goldstein, 2024). In 2011, 110,000 students took the AP European History Exam compared to 85,000 students who took the AP World History exam. In 2021, those numbers were 88,000 and 237,000 respectively (AP College Board, n.d.). Ironically, even the AP European History curriculum does not require that the Eastern Front be taught. Neither does the AP World History curriculum. The same is true for even the newer "Modern World History" curriculum being implemented (AP College Board, n.d.). In short, the Eastern Front is only being covered by teachers who go out of their way to employ it in their course material.

A Review of US Standards and Curricula

In the public education system in the United States, standards, curricula, and subject material vary by state. While it is not in the purview of this article to discuss every state, a summary of several large and pattern-setting states is useful. For our analysis of high school standards in conventional US History and World History courses, we will focus on Texas, California, New York, Florida, Ohio, and Massachusetts. Our analysis will focus on high school standards and will assess conventional surveys of US History since

the Civil War (sometimes called “US II” or “US Since 1877”) as well as conventional World History surveys that vary in their historical reach, most extending back to the Neolithic Revolution.

In Texas, World History standards mention only in passing the “German invasions of Poland and the Soviet Union” in the final strand for the Second World War standard. The US History standard for the Second World War includes seven strands, none of which mention the Eastern Front or Lend and Lease, one strand merely requiring instructors to teach about the fighting “on multiple fronts.” The Soviet Union is not even mentioned until the Cold War standard (Texas Education Agency, 2025).

Secondary World History courses in California spend less time on ancient history compared to other states and thus reserve more attention for the Second World War (in fact, multiple standards). Since 2016, California also goes farther than most states, providing many pages of detailed instruction in the form of commentary for each strand of each standard (as opposed to the more conventional listing of strands, each one a few sentences maximum). Nevertheless, the Eastern Front receives hardly any mention in either the strands or commentary. While other theaters receive detailed instruction, the Eastern Front is mentioned in passing, embedded in the larger “European war.” The sole instruction reads: “[f]or much of the European war, the Soviet Union bore the

brunt of German aggression on the Eastern Front, leading to the death of tens of millions of soldiers and civilians.” The instruction then proceeds to segue with that sentence to “America’s entry into the war,” followed by a detailed explication of the American-led crushing of Nazi forces in Europe. The text also advances a subtle equivocation of the European fronts, narrating Germany’s invasion of “both Western and Eastern Fronts” simultaneously with no mention of the overwhelming disproportionality. California’s US History standards similarly include an expanded commentary for the strands and standards. However, once again, the Eastern Front and Lend and Lease receive no mention. In fact, instructors are told explicitly that any instruction about the war before America’s specific entry should focus on the “American perspective, which means [students] learn that the war was extremely unpopular domestically before 1941.” In one section, instructors are told to teach “how [the Second World War] was fought differently in the Atlantic versus the Pacific.” The section highlights many battles of importance without mention of the Eastern Front and sadly includes the allowance that “students may explore the Holocaust” and that this should be done “from the American perspective.” Such instructions surely enable the neglect of the Holocaust’s centrality to the war as well as misapprehension of its Eastern European origins, which we will discuss in more detail below (California State Board of Education, 2017).

New York requires high school World History students to learn about the First World War, the Interwar Period, and the Second World War all combined in one standard composing of five strands. The strands are uniquely short and vague, allowing teachers remarkable flexibility in how to teach the Second World War with minimal instruction on how to teach the conflict itself. Although the strands require instructors to teach “nationalism” in Nazi Germany and “Soviet ideology” under Lenin and Stalin, there are no references to the Eastern Front. New York’s high school US History survey extends back to the Colonial Era, leaving one standard and only three strands for the Second World War. In contrast to most states, one of these strands does, in fact, require instructors to cover Lend and Lease (albeit without reference to its recipients). But the Eastern Front receives no mention at all, even in a strand asking instructors to focus on the unique devastation of the Second World War (State Education Department, The University of the State of New York, 2017).

Florida standards deserve praise for their repeated and detailed emphasis of the Holocaust in their WW2 standards across multiple general education courses. However, the centrality of the Eastern Front and Eastern Europe writ-large are absent in even these thorough outlines. The high school World History survey, like New York, combines the First World War, the Interwar Period, and the Second World War into one standard that comprises eleven strands. None of those strands mention the Eastern Front,

including the strand on the Holocaust. While Florida’s US History survey does mention Lend and Lease, it does not discuss recipients, which will necessarily facilitate an Anglo-centric approach despite the critical nature of the US-Soviet partnership. Additionally, there is no mention of the Eastern Front or even the Soviet Union or any of its leaders in any of the Second World War strands. (Florida Department of Education, 2023).

Ohio’s high school World History survey begins as late as the Enlightenment and thus, in theory, allows for more attention on the Second World War. Nevertheless, the Second World War is covered in only one standard, and once again in combination with the Interwar Era, the First World War, and, in this case, even the turn-of-the-century. In five short strands, the Eastern Front and the Soviet Union receive no mention whatsoever. The Holocaust receives mention in passing, but without any situation in Eastern Europe or the Eastern Front. The US History survey likewise completely ignores mention of the Eastern Front or even Lend and Lease (Ohio Department of Education, 2018).

Massachusetts is unique in its approach to high school World History surveys, requiring students to take two courses, the second of which begins as late as the eighteenth century. As such, the Second World War standard comprises fifteen detailed strands of instruction. Of all the states examined in this review, Massachusetts comes closest to integrating the Eastern Front into public education curriculum, but its shortcomings are also instructive.

Unlike other states, students are explicitly required to learn about the rise of totalitarian fascist and communist regimes in comparison to one another. Even here, though, the resulting European Red Scare and centrality of anti-communism and Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracism in the fascist movements are absent. Moving forward to the war itself, one of the strands has instructors choose a battle from the war to focus on. The Battle of Stalingrad is one of the fourteen options, but it is the only Eastern Front battle offered as an option. Furthermore, it is bizarrely combined with the Mediterranean Theater: “1943: Stalingrad and the Allied Invasion of Italy.” Stalingrad was largely fought in 1942 as part of the German “Operation Blue,” the culmination of the second Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. The American “Operation Husky” (invasion of Sicily) took place months after the final German troops had surrendered at Stalingrad and, in fact, during a separate and equally important Eastern Front battle: Kursk and “Operation Citadel” (the third and final Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union).

A separate Massachusetts strand in the Second World War standard correctly separates out the Holocaust for analysis, but rather than connect it to the Eastern Front, anti-Communism, or even Eastern European history, it invites instructors to focus on its roots in Christian anti-Semitism, which is admirable but also secondary to the more immediate causes and instigators. The final strand of the Second World War standard invites instructors to cover the unique destruction of the war, mentioning economic

dislocation and the bombing of population centers. Once again, the Eastern Front is not mentioned at all. Moving over to US History, the Massachusetts standards once again do better than other states, repeatedly emphasizing the Holocaust even in an American History survey (yet surprisingly silent about Lend and Lease). But once again, the Eastern Front is entirely absent. In fact, like the World History standards, instructors are allowed to pick out a key battle for study with their students. But even as some non-American battles/theaters are offered (including the Nazi invasion of Poland and the Japanese invasion of China), not a single Eastern Front battle is presented as an option.

Ultimately, in even the most Eastern Front-friendly state, only historians specially trained in the history of Eastern Europe will understand to substantially establish the Eastern Front in Second World War curricula (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018).

A Review of Influential Social Studies Subject Material

Another way we can survey the deficit of Eastern Front instruction in the American education system is by analyzing a sampling of social studies content from the leading producers of World History subject material. First, we will look at leading World History textbooks from three of the largest textbook publishers in the United States: Pearson Education, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and W.W. Norton. Then we will look at one of the most used online educational resources:

OpenStax.

One of Pearson's highest selling textbooks on modern World History is an enormous, 1,000+ page collaboration between Dr.(s) Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, titled *The Western Heritage*. One of its later chapters, titled "World War II," comprises twenty-seven pages. In it, the Eastern Front is covered in two back-to-back sections titled "The German Attack on Russia," and "Hitler's Plans for Europe," in which ten paragraphs and roughly one full page of text are dedicated to the topic. In comparison, two full pages of text are reserved for the Western campaigns of 1940, alone, including six paragraphs and nearly a full page of text for the Battle of Britain. Interestingly, the Holocaust is covered in a separate, stand-alone section that covers over twenty paragraphs and roughly four full pages of text. By the authors' own admission, this section decides to focus specifically on the destruction of the Polish Jewish community as a case study for the broader Holocaust (Kagan, Ozment, Turner, 2023). This choice crucially shifts the focus of the Holocaust away from the destruction of the Jews of the Soviet Union, where, as Jochen Hellbeck has most recently demonstrated, the key decisions and mass murders of 1941 were committed that crossed the Rubicon from state-sponsored discrimination to continent-wide mass murder, ultimately reverberating back to the Jews of Europe (including Poland) in later years (Hellbeck, 2025).

Another widely-used World History textbook (and, in fact, endorsed by the

History Channel) is Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. Its Second World War chapter comprises thirty-seven pages. In it, the Eastern Front is covered in only four paragraphs and roughly one-half page of text, embedded in a section that subsumes it under "The Mediterranean." A separate section on the Holocaust spans four full pages of text, but mostly focuses on the policies in Germany and only mentions in passing the Nazi Eastern Front death squads that began the Holocaust. A separate section near the end of the chapter handles the "Tide Turn" and "Allied Victory," but disappointingly only mentions the Battle of Stalingrad for four paragraphs, while handling American-led victories for a total of eight pages (McDougal, 2012).

Next, we can examine a very recent World History textbook published by W.W. Norton, titled *The Webs of Humankind: A World History*, which was produced explicitly to expand American students' perspective in a more global direction. The Second World War chapter, titled "World War II: Global War in the Global Web, 1937 to 1945," comprises thirty-eight pages. Despite the globalist reframing ambitions of the authors, the Eastern Front only receives five paragraphs and roughly one full page of text analysis. To be sure, the chapter does better than most with a detailed account in a separate section about the importance of Lend and Lease and the economic cooperation between the Western Allies and Soviets. A separate section on the Holocaust fails to integrate the scholarship

on the centrality of the Eastern Front to the development of genocide in 1941, and instead quickly moves to the Wannsee Conference and the genocide from 1942 onwards (McNeill, 2024).

Finally, given the trend in public education toward online educational resources (OERs), it is worth our time to analyze a World History textbook from one of the most-used such databases: Purdue University's OpenStax textbook titled *World History: Volume 2: From 1400*. The Second World War chapter, titled "The Causes and Consequences of World War II," comprises five online sections, each with 40-60 paragraphs. In the first section, the Eastern Front receives only five paragraphs of treatment while other theaters are handled in much more detail. For example, the war in Asia (even before American involvement) receives nine paragraphs, and the conflict in Western Europe before the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union is handled in roughly twenty-five paragraphs. One might suspect that the authors had chosen to reserve the Eastern Front for the next section, in which the brunt of combat in the Second World War is reviewed. Also, only three paragraphs embedded in a sub-section titled "Europe and Africa" handle the Eastern Front at its climax. Meanwhile, the other theaters are surveyed with dozens of paragraphs devoted to them (including, for example, six paragraphs for Japan's Southeast Asian theater). To be fair, this section of the textbook includes a sub-section of the Holocaust that handles the German death squads of the Eastern Front explicitly, including a primary source conversation between Nazi

perpetrators, albeit shorn of the context of the Eastern Front and the broader ideological conflict between Fascism and communism. After reviewing military conflict in the Second World War, the online textbook then presents an entire thirty-three-paragraph section about "Life on the Home Fronts." In it, the Eastern Europe and the Eastern Front are only mentioned in passing two or three times, while the primary emphasis of the narrative is the Home Front experiences of citizens and scientists in the Western nations, including a sub-section on Japanese-Internment in the United States. "Scorched Earth" policies in Eastern Europe and the more than 15 million Soviet civilian deaths in the bloodiest home front of the entire war receive no mention at all (Kordas, Lynch, Nelson, Tatlock, 2022).

Why Teach the Eastern Front?

The most straightforward argument in defense of Eastern Front instruction in American secondary classrooms is that students misunderstand the Second World War without it. The American-centric approach to the Second World War not only fails to capture the reasons for Axis defeat and Allied victory, it likewise obfuscates the causes of the war and the ideological underpinnings of the conflict (Hellbeck, 2025). As polling data indicates, few students in the United States can explain the differences between Fascism, Marxism, Communism, and Liberalism. Between 20-30 percent of Americans admit to not understanding these terms or not having an opinion about them, and even more report

misunderstandings and disagreements about their definitions (Newport, 2020 and YouGov, 2020). Yet, the Second World War cannot be understood without these concepts, in particular the multi-decade international conflict between right-wing authoritarian movements such as Fascism and their left-wing Marxist and Communist rivals which stretched back decades before the Second World War began. Additionally, many do not know that the Eastern Front was much more than a conflict between Germans and Russians, having actually involved dozens of European nationalities and religions. This is a particularly salient point for instructors of World History and European History, for whom the Eastern Front should be centered in any holistic teaching of the Second World War. But the instructional utility of the Eastern Front stretches beyond the Second World War. As recent trends in the scholarship testify, the Eastern Front was a pivotal flashpoint in broader Eastern European history, the roots of which illuminate Eastern European history before the Second World War and afterwards (Snyder, 2010 and Mazower, 1998). Indeed, it has long been a bone to pick for European historians that Eastern Europe is so often forgotten in favor of Western Europe (Wolff, 1994).

Yet American History specialists also have good reason to focus on the Eastern Front. Most obviously, the Eastern Front and the resulting war with Nazi Germany launched the Soviet Union into a position of global power and leadership from which they were able to immediately contend with American global dominance in the aftermath of the Second World War

and the resulting Cold War. Students cannot understand the Cold War, for example, without understanding the Potsdam and Yalta Conferences. Too often, American History teachers begin a unit on the Cold War as a new story when in reality it was a continuation of a conflict already happening during and even before the Second World War (Gaddis, 2005). But even the Eastern Front fighting itself involved the United States. One of the important developments in the academic literature has been to highlight the importance of American contributions via Lend and Lease, a massive expenditure by the American government to fund not only the British, but also the Soviet Union's fight against the Nazi invaders (McMeekin, 2021). As the United States in the twenty-first century continually involves itself in financial proxy wars as a form of indirect foreign policy (in the form of hundreds of billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, for example), the Eastern Front can be a useful tool for helping students analyze present international conflicts.

Finally, perhaps the most important reason for bringing the Eastern Front into our secondary classrooms is its vital importance for understanding the Holocaust. Fortunately, most Americans still view the Holocaust as a pivotal chapter of history, but there are concerning signs that the younger generations increasingly do not. An Economist/YouGov poll from December of 2023 discovered some shocking results. While only 7% of Americans agreed with the statement "The Holocaust is a 'myth,'"

that number jumped up to 20% of those between the ages eighteen to twenty-nine. No other age group reported higher agreement with the statement. Almost nobody over the age of forty-five agreed with the statement. Similarly alarming, 16% of Americans agree with the infamously anti-Semitic statement “Jews have too much power in America.” Once again, the age group with the highest percentage reporting agreement were those between the ages eighteen to twenty-nine (28%). Perhaps most alarming, though, were the responses to the question “is it anti-Semitic or not to deny that the Holocaust happened?”—to which only 46% of those between the ages eighteen to twenty-nine agreed, 17% disagreed, and 37% were unsure (The Economist/YouGov, 2023).

Why Holocaust historical memory is weakening is certainly a multifaceted and complicated question. But it is reasonable to surmise that students are not being taught the Holocaust enough or effectively enough. For many students, the Holocaust has become what the late historian Tony Judt described as an event that transcends history—a moral narrative into which notions of Western morality and humanity are anchored in a secularizing world, but which are ultimately detached from historical circumstances (Judt, 2005). While this is entirely wholesome and important, perhaps losing the historical circumstances of the Holocaust leads students to view it more as a story than real history. And here the Eastern Front

can provide a useful corrective. Many are unaware that the Holocaust literally took place during the Eastern Front’s fighting and directly behind the front lines of the Eastern Front. Whereas most students of the Holocaust locate the story at the extermination camps in Poland (such as Auschwitz), most fail to understand that the Holocaust began a year before the extermination camps went into operation. As Christopher Browning and other historians have illustrated, the Holocaust began almost immediately after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in what has sometimes been referred to as the “Forgotten Holocaust” or the “Holocaust by Bullets.”¹ Mobile Nazi killing squads called *Einsatzgruppen* began combing the countryside behind the advancing Nazi armies, rounding up Jews and shooting them into massive death pits (ultimately killing upwards of 1.5 million Jews, or roughly one out of four deaths in the Holocaust). This was not coincidence. The transition in the Nazi empire from anti-Jewish discrimination to an exterminatory “Final Solution” was uniquely tied to the Eastern Front and the Nazi obsession with fighting what they called “Judeo-Communism.” (Hellbeck, 2025). This is why historians like Saul Friedlaender have asserted that the Holocaust needs to be told as an “integrated narrative” alongside the war and the perspectives of victims (Friedlaender, 2007).

What follows for the remainder of this article is a short essay titled “An Introduction to the Eastern Front,” which

¹ These terms contrast with the “Holocaust by Camps.” The delineation serves to highlight the development and evolution of murder processes in the early stages of the Holocaust in the summer of 1941 following the Invasion of the Soviet Union, or Operation Barbarossa.

the present author intends as a useful summary of the Eastern Front properly understood, and as a potential guide for instructors preparing teaching strategies for introducing the Eastern Front in their classrooms.

An Introduction to the Eastern Front

The war against Russia is an important chapter in the German nation's struggle for existence. It is the old battle of the Germanic against the Slavic people, of the defense of European culture against Muscovite-Asiatic inundation and of the repulse of Jewish Bolshevism. The objective of this battle must be the demolition of present-day Russia and must therefore be conducted with unprecedented severity. Every military action must be guided in planning and execution by an iron resolution to exterminate the enemy remorselessly and totally. In particular, no adherents of the contemporary Russian Bolshevik system are to be spared (Foerster, 1992).

While Nazi General Erich Hoepner uttered these words in May of 1941, calling for a war of “remorselessness” and “extermination” to be fought with “unprecedented severity” against Soviet Communism, German forces were meanwhile assembling in Poland at the border of the USSR. A few weeks later, on June 22, 1941, nearly 4 million Nazi forces fell upon Soviet lines in the largest ever land invasion in military history (Fritz, 2005). On nearly the same day 129 years earlier, Napoleon Bonaparte likewise invaded Russia in what was also

at the time the largest ever land invasion. Like Napoleon, Hitler assembled a coalition of soldiers from dozens of different countries in a project that would ultimately spell his doom. Like Napoleon, Hitler could not overcome the Russian winter and numerical disadvantages in manpower. But unlike Napoleon, Hitler's forces left behind them a blood-soaked trail of genocide that would go down in history as arguably the greatest mass murder ever committed by a political regime.

In the previous two years, Hitler's armed forces had shocked the world (as well as most Germans) by swiftly conquering Western Europe, crushing the French 3rd Republic, forcing the British Expeditionary Force back to Great Britain, and securing the entire continent under Nazi control. In two years, Hitler had accomplished what Germans had utterly failed to accomplish in four years during the First World War. But he wasn't done. In fact, in his mind he had not even begun his true military project; up until this point, the war that had been fought was for him a distraction forced upon him, a detour that was obstructing his lifelong ideological ambition in the East: the invasion of the Soviet Union, the destruction of Communism, and the domination of Eastern Europe as the foundation of his 1000-year Third Reich. This war within a war was known by Germans as *die Ostfront* (Eastern Front), a term that struck terror in the hearts of German soldiers for decades after the Second World War.

As discussed above, the Eastern Front is

shocking in terms of the size and scale of death and destruction. But the Eastern Front was categorically unique in more ways than raw numbers. It was not just a bigger conflict, it was also a different *kind* of conflict. It was, to use a term employed by Hitler and his generals, a *Vernichtungskrieg*, or “war of extermination.” From the very beginning, it was envisioned, planned, and conducted as a war in which traditional rules did not apply. Unlike the Western Front, which is sometimes described, albeit unfairly, as a “Gentleman’s War,” the Eastern Front was unprecedented in its brutality: entire regions were decimated, military decorum disregarded, and countless war-crimes committed. The simple fact that civilian deaths equaled military deaths on the Eastern Front underlines this point. It begs the question: why was this front so different? To answer this question we have to understand Nazi ideology, and to do that we must begin with Hitler. In one of the most infamous documents from the Second World War, Hitler laid out his ideological aims for the coming war with Communism at a meeting with military advisers months before the invasion:

Clash of two ideologies. Crushing denunciation of Bolshevism
[Communism], identified with social criminality. Communism is an enormous danger for our future. We must forget the concept of comradeship between soldiers.... This is a war of extermination.... We do not wage war to preserve this enemy.... The individual troop commanders must know the issues at stake. They must be leaders in this fight. The troops must

fight back with the methods with which they are attacked.... This war will be different than the war in the west. In the east, harshness today means lenience in the future. Commanders must make the sacrifice of overcoming their personal scruples (Fritz, p. 67, 2005).

Nazi Anti-Communism

What is immediately striking to anybody immersed in the primary sources of the Eastern Front such as the one above is the extent to which Nazis viewed the war against Communism as an apocalyptic struggle—a fight against an enemy perceived as a threat to Germany and Europe’s very existence. To make sense of this, it helps to understand the politics of Nazism. Fascism emerged in Europe after the First World War as an extreme right-wing movement that combined chauvinistic nationalism with existential anxiety about Communism. Fascist parties (such as the Nazis) captured voters from other already-existing conservative and nationalist parties that were increasingly perceived by many citizens as insufficiently strong to counter the prevailing left-wing trends of the day. In the 1920s and 30s, after the destruction of the traditional conservative monarchies at the end of the First World War, many Europeans found themselves in democracies that preserved the rights of Communists to assemble, organize, and grow. Meanwhile, Lenin and (later) Stalin were turning their dictatorship into an increasingly dark nightmare that they actively sought to expand into the rest of Europe. Fascists like Hitler benefited

enormously from the resulting “Red Scare,” because they promised to remove any “democratic” obstacles in the way of crushing perceived threats to the nation (such as Communism). Their message was simple: Communism as an ideology replaces national unity with the doctrine of class division, and the logical conclusion of the growing “Communist world revolution” was the destruction of national identity throughout the world, including the end of Germany. Thus, for Hitler and his soldiers on the Eastern Front, the war was an inevitable, Manichean clash between Communism and nationalism.

In comparison, Nazi attitudes towards liberal democracy were certainly hostile but not apocalyptic. Unlike Communism, Hitler could envision a world shared with liberal democracy. The Western Front offensive against liberal democracy that began on September 3rd, 1939 (when France and Great Britain declared war on Germany following the German invasion of Poland), was a war Hitler originally sought to avoid. In fact, Hitler truly believed that the French and British would let him take Poland as they had let him take Czechoslovakia a year before, and he was upset and angered at their intervention in his eastward plans. Indeed, Hitler had originally hoped that the British (in his view a healthy race) would ultimately be an ally in his premeditated, coming war with Soviet Communism. Defeating Communism, on the other hand, was always the primary and immediate goal of Hitler’s foreign policy. In short, Nazi ideology was somewhat willing to co-exist with democratic-leaning governments. Not

so with Communism, which in Nazi ideology and Hitler’s Eastern-oriented mind posed an existential threat to the German nation (Kershaw, 1998 and Kershaw, 2000). As long as Communism existed the German nation was not safe. Thus, the war against the Soviet Union was more than defeating an opposing military or government—it was a war to entirely eliminate an ascendant and threatening idea. This is how we make sense of Hitler’s proclamation that the Eastern Front would be “different than the war in the West” and require more “harshness.” Ultimate victory would have to cut much deeper than a superficial military victory on the surface.

Nazi Race Ideology

Yet for Hitler and the Nazis, the war with Communism had even deeper ideological roots than anti-Communism. Eastern Europe was for Hitler more than just the home of Communism. It was also the natural home of the German race. Nazi racial ideology posited that the human species was not a single species at all; but rather, a collection of species in a protracted conflict of racial competition against one another. In this Social Darwinist account of human history, the Nazis believed in a concept known as *Blut und Boden* (“blood and soil”); namely, that a race needs land to thrive and survive in its unavoidable competition against other races, and that the German race had been historically hemmed-in to its current overcrowded location in central Europe as progressive generations of Slavic *Untermenschen* (“racial inferiors”) had gradually pushed Germans off of their

Eastern European birthright (Friedlaender, 1997). It was, Hitler proclaimed, time for Germans to reclaim it. As such, the Eastern Front brought together a toxic stew of both fear and bigotry. Existential anxiety about rising Communism fused with the racial dehumanization of entire populations. To make matters worse, there was one more poisonous ideological ingredient to the Nazi vision of Eastern Europe (and perhaps the most fateful): anti-Semitism.

Nazi Anti-Semitism

The Nazi hatred and persecution of Jews can only be fully understood in the context of the Eastern Front (Hellbeck, 2025). Too often, we reductively teach Nazi anti-Semitism in narrow biological terms. For example, we explain how the Nazis presented the Jews as the “most dirty” and “least civilized” of the races. But Nazi anti-Semitism went much further as a *political* narrative. It posited that in addition to their racial inhumanity, Jews were also enormously powerful politically. Despite their racial shortcomings, the Jews had allegedly developed the parasitical ability to take over governments and turn them into puppets in their racial war against healthy races. In this conspiratorial view, the Jews did so by taking over governments with political ideologies that erase nationhood and any other traditional institutions that stand in the way of their domination (Herf, 2006). The supposedly most dangerous of such regime-takeovers was, of course, Communism, or “Bolshevism” as it was originally called. Consequently, Nazi officials regularly referred to their enemy

on the Eastern Front not as “Communism” or “Sovietism” but rather as “Judeo-Bolshevism,” a concept that combined racial ideology, anti-Semitism, and anti-Communism all into one word (Hanebrink, 2018). The idea that the Soviet Union and its Communist ideology was in actuality a camouflaged conspiracy of Jews fighting a race war was, of course, absolute nonsense. But at the time it appealed to many anxious, unread European nationalists who saw Jews in their country as a foreign group with too much political, social, and economic power; who were perplexed by the disproportionate presence of Jewish members in the Communist parties across Europe; and who did not have the historical understanding as to why Jews as a population group were predominantly located in Eastern Europe. The Nazi association of Jews with Communism was the reason why the mass murder of Jews in the Holocaust took place when and where it did. Indeed, the Holocaust began shortly after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, and the killing fields and extermination camps were established behind the moving frontlines in Soviet territory (Browning, 2004). Without the Eastern Front there would have been no Holocaust. As a wealth of scholarship has shown, in the minds of Nazi officials, the Holocaust and the Eastern Front were one and the same fight—by killing the Jews of the Soviet Union, Nazis believed they were undertaking a necessary action to ultimately defeat Communism and save Germany. Eventually, this paranoid preoccupation expanded back westwards to Central and Western European Jews. This is why some historians call Nazi anti-

Semitism “redemptive anti-Semitism” (Friedlaender, 1997). The Nazis came to believe that to redeem Germany from Communism, they would have to defeat its foot soldiers in the process: the Jews of Europe.

A Crime from the Beginning

As the quotations earlier in this essay illustrate, Hitler and the Nazi officials who planned the invasion of the Soviet Union fully intended to fight a war of unprecedented brutality. Historians often point to the so-called “Criminal Orders” of the German military in preparation for the war against Communism. These orders were established at the highest echelons of authority in the German military before the invasions, were distributed throughout the ranks, and therefore directly instigated the barbarism that unfolded and metastasized throughout the Eastern Front upon the beginning of hostilities (Fritz, p.61-68, 2005). Those orders were:

- The “Jurisdiction Order,” which stated that soldiers would not be prosecuted for crimes on the Eastern Front.
- The “Behavior Guidelines,” which demanded troop leaders to take murderous action against any passive or active resistance. In short, the order demanded that troop commanders commit war crimes regularly. The order also explicitly mentioned taking violent actions against Jews.
- The “Commissar Order,” which directed that all Soviet troop commanders who were taken prisoner be immediately executed on the spot.

Although the extent to which these orders

were followed and executed varied from unit to unit, historians agree that the vast majority of German armed forces participated in these orders to some extent. Other units, such as many divisions in the infamous Waffen-SS even went beyond the orders in their violent enthusiasm to annihilate “Judeo-Bolshevism.” The Waffen-SS was an elite branch of the Nazi military that brought together the most ideologically committed men from across Europe into a transnational army of fanatics that reached nearly a million in number by the end of the war. The Waffen-SS was notoriously hesitant to take any prisoners of war at all and regularly committed “reprisals” against entire villages whenever partisan guerrillas disrupted the German lines (Böhler, Gerwarth, 2017).

Within six months of the invasion, German forces had been stopped just outside Moscow in part due to the unexpectedly early winter. But behind them lay Eastern Europe in ruins and inferno. In addition to the brutality exchanged between the opposing armies, Nazi forces had already embarked upon countless war-crimes against civilians. Hundreds of thousands of Jews had already perished in the opening phases of the Holocaust as Nazi secret police units behind the front lines began a process of gathering confused Jewish civilians in trucks and transporting them to massive “death pits” where they were shot and buried. Thousands of other Soviet citizens had perished in “reprisals” of various forms, and millions more intentionally starved to death by a German military command that had decided upon a

“Hunger Plan” to eliminate “useless eaters” in regions such as the surrounded city of Leningrad in northern Russia. By the end of the war, Nazi officials had knowingly starved to death 3 million Soviet prisoners-of-war that had fallen into German captivity. It is one of the least known genocides of the Second World War simply because other genocides loom larger (Streit, 1997). By the end of the war upwards of 6 million Jews had perished. Had the Soviet forces not heroically held at Moscow and one year later at Stalingrad—and subsequently begun the long three-year counter-offensive that ended in Berlin in the spring of 1945—then these figures would only have been a drop in the barrel compared to long-term Nazi plans for the occupation and transformation of Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, after losing the largest tank battle in military history (The Battle of Kursk) in the summer of 1943, German forces began to implement a strategy of “scorched earth” retreat, in which they intentionally destroyed infrastructure and agriculture before retreating, and in doing so ensured that liberated areas would suffer even long after they had left (Stein, 2025).

When Totalitarianism Meets Totalitarianism

Remarkably, after 1943, even though the German military had zero chance of turning the tide of war against the now insurmountably powerful Soviet Red Army, Nazi soldiers continued to mount a fanatic defense until the bitter end (Stargardt, 2015). This was in part because they justifiably feared the coming Soviet

revenge in German-speaking lands. Indeed, although undeniably a victim of Nazi aggression, Joseph Stalin’s Communist regime was itself no stranger to barbaric violence. Both Nazism and Communism (despite their enormous differences) shared a common political style; namely, dictatorship, terror, propaganda, and mass violence. In short, what political scientists call “totalitarianism.” One way to look at the Eastern Front, then, is to see it as the only time in human history that two totalitarian dictatorships met on the battlefield. As a result, it is fair to say that together they created a cycle of recriminations, a doom-loop of barbarity. This is not to suggest a false equivalence between the two regimes, but rather to point out one final explanatory factor for the unprecedented violence and horror of the Eastern Front. One example is Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin’s infamous Orders 270 and 227 issued in the early months of Eastern Front combat (the latter of which was infamously known as the “not one step back” command), which together became the justification for mass Soviet executions of their own soldiers, civilians, and families of surrendering “traitors” deemed insufficiently stalwart in defense against Fascism. Soviet military units also understandably responded to German treatment of their prisoners with a similar lack of concern for Nazi prisoners. Of the 100,000 German soldiers surrounded and captured at the Battle of Stalingrad, for example, only a few thousand ever made it home. As Soviet soldiers began to enter Eastern German territories in 1944 (Prussia and Silesia), they frequently committed atrocities against German

civilians as a revenge for Soviet suffering. Most ominously, Soviet military commanders allowed, and in some cases even encouraged, the mass rape of German women by advancing Soviet soldiers. Historians estimate that well over 1 million German women were raped from 1944-1945 in what may have been the greatest systematic mass rape in human history (de Zayas, 1994). Mirroring German practices throughout the war, the Soviets also forced entire population groups from their homes in mass expulsions that resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths (Mazower, 1998). The number of Soviet murders on the Eastern Front is not comparable to the considerably larger scale of Nazi genocidal destruction—but the point remains that these two radical political systems brought out the worst in one another.

Conclusion

The Eastern Front in the Second World War was a different kind of war. In fact, it might be best to understand it as a separate war within the Second World War. Three key ideological components of Nazism combined to create an enormous energy for potential violence and barbarity in Eastern Europe: anti-Communism, racial doctrine, and anti-Semitism. Nazi leaders themselves explicitly planned for the barbarity that ensued. When the Nazi “War of Extermination” was unleashed, it was met by a totalitarian dictatorship that was well prepared to match Nazi ferocity with ferocity of its own, and a cycle of expanding violence commenced which engulfed Eastern Europe in the greatest

living hell in the history of human military conflict.

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