



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
to mark the 80th anniversary of Germany's invasion
of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 and the opening of
the exhibition "Dimensions of a crime. Soviet prisoners of
war in World War II"
in Berlin
on 18 June 2021**

Boris Popov bears witness to 22 June 1941 as a young infantryman. He is 19. His unit is stationed a few kilometres from Minsk. After breakfast on the morning of 22 June, he relates, he and his comrades went into the garden to sunbathe. He hears the first shots and explosions from there, lying in the grass. It is a Sunday.

Two of his comrades are killed in the very first battles; his tank is destroyed. The commander of the regiment gives the order to retreat. The soldiers start to make their way back to Minsk on foot, unaware that the German Wehrmacht is lying in wait there. And so Boris Popov is captured by the Germans – ten kilometres outside Minsk, in the very first days of the war.

The first camp that he is brought to is Drosdy, five kilometres north of Minsk – it is hardly a camp, but rather a collection point in the open. Images from a Deutsche Wochenschau broadcast from around this time show the place in question: a vast patch of ground, surrounded by barbed wire on which thousands upon thousands of Soviet soldiers and officers are crouching in the dust or standing in the sweltering heat. Boris Popov is somewhere among that crowd of young and middle-aged men. We hear the narrator of the Deutsche Wochenschau say the following: "The faces of these sub-humans are characterised by rapacity and murderousness." What we actually see in these images are the faces, wracked by hunger and thirst, of utterly exhausted prisoners.

Ten thousand prisoners fall victim to the so-called "Commissar Order" in Drosdy alone. Supposed "political commissars" of the Red Army were, in line with orders from the Wehrmacht, not to be treated as prisoners of war, but rather to be "summarily executed".

Boris Antonovich Popov, a soldier and veteran of the Red Army, died exactly one year ago, on 20 June 2020, at the age of 98. I did not have the opportunity to meet him, but I did hear about his story, which Boris Popov himself told us about in lectures and speeches and, most recently, in a documentary by Rundfunk Berlin Brandenburg five years ago.

You see him sitting on a bench in this film, at a park in Minsk where he lived from 1950 onwards. Sitting there, he does not look like a man in his nineties. He is old, to be sure, but without a trace of fatigue. Lively, alert – he cuts a dashing figure.

He was lucky. He survived the war. And we can count ourselves lucky that he was able to tell us his story.

His is the story of but one soldier. And the war that he tells us about had started already two years previously with Germany's invasion of Poland. I called this to mind on 1 September 2019, in Wielún, Poland, and in Warsaw. These are two years in which the Second World War had brought destruction, occupation and tyranny to large parts of Europe.

What now came to pass, what began on 22 June 1941, was an unleashing of hatred and violence, the radicalisation of a war that culminated in the madness of total annihilation. From day one, the German military campaign was driven by hatred, by antisemitism and anti-Bolshevism, as well as by a fanatical racist doctrine against the Slavic and Asian peoples of the Soviet Union.

Those who waged this war killed people in every imaginable way, with an unprecedented degree of brutality and cruelty. Those who were responsible for it, who in their national fanaticism even invoked German culture and civilisation, Goethe and Schiller, Bach and Beethoven, betrayed all civilised values, violated all principles of humanity and law. The German war against the Soviet Union was murderous barbarity.

As difficult as we may find it, we must remember that. And when if not on anniversaries such as this. Remembering this inferno, this absolute enmity and the act of dehumanising the other – remembering this continues to be an obligation for us Germans and a memorial for the world.

Hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers fell, starved to death or were shot dead during the first few months of the war alone, in the summer of 1941.

Immediately after the invasion by the German troops, the murder of Jewish men, women and children by the firing squads of the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), the SS and their auxiliary troops got under way.

Hundreds of thousands of civilians in Ukraine, in Belarus, in the Baltic States and in Russia fell victim to bombing attacks or were relentlessly hunted down as partisans and murdered. Cities were

destroyed and villages burned to the ground. Old photographs show only charred stone fireplaces rising in a devastated landscape.

At the war's end, the death toll of the peoples of the Soviet Union numbered some 27 million. Twenty-seven million people were killed, murdered, bludgeoned, starved or left to die as a result of forced labour by National Socialist Germany. Fourteen million of them were civilians.

No one had to mourn more victims in this war than the peoples of the then Soviet Union. And yet these millions are not as deeply etched in our collective memory as their suffering and our responsibility demand.

This war was a crime – a monstrous, criminal war of aggression and annihilation. Those who go to its theatres today, who encounter people who bore the brunt of it, will be reminded of 22 June 1941 – irrespective of whether there is a day of remembrance or memorial or not.

Traces of this war are to be found among the elderly who experienced it as children, and in the younger generation, in their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. You can find them from the coast of the White Sea in the north to Crimea in the south, from the dunes of the Baltic in the west to Volgograd in the east. They are scars of war, scars of destruction, scars of loss.

What remained were mass graves, brothers' graves, as people say in Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian.

The murdering continued in the hinterland. On 31 January 1942, Wehrmacht soldier Paul Hohn, who was stationed in Berazino in what is now Belarus, wrote the following in his diary: "It's 3 p.m. The shooting of all Jews who still live here – 962 people, women, old folk and children – started an hour ago. [...] At long last. A commando of 20 men from the Gestapo is carrying out the action. They are taking it in turns to shoot in twos. The Jews walk in single file [...] through the snow [...] to the open grave, which they enter one by one and are shot lying down one after another. [...] In this way, the plague is being eradicated. From the window of my workplace, I can see the ghetto 500 metres away and hear screams and shots clearly. It's a pity I'm not taking part."

Every war brings devastation, death and suffering. And yet this war was different.

It was an act of German barbarity. It cost millions of human lives, laid waste to the continent and – as a consequence – divided the world for decades.

The war and its legacy have also divided our memory, a division that has yet to be overcome even three decades after the lifting of the Iron Curtain. It continues to be a burden for the future. Changing this state of affairs is our task, a task for which we urgently need to redouble

our efforts beyond borders – for the sake of the past, but, above all, for the sake of a peaceful future for coming generations on this continent. That is why we are here today, at a historic site, at a museum supported by 17 institutions from four nations. Their four flags are flying in front of this building.

You can sense traces of the war even where its visible ones are now obscured or concealed by the undergrowth of a fateful century, by the years of Stalinism, the Cold War, the end of the Soviet Union. The war remains tangible – like a scar that you run your fingers over.

But are we Germans doing that? Are we looking in that direction at all, towards the east of our continent about which we know far too little?

Who in Germany is familiar with Maly Trostenets in the vicinity of Minsk, where at least 60,000 people were murdered from 1942 to 1944? Or the little village of Khatyn, which was razed to the ground in the summer of 1943 with all of its inhabitants murdered – half of whom were children? Who has heard of Koriukivka in northern Ukraine, where, over the course of two days, 6700 men, women and children fell victim to the biggest and most brutal reprisal of the Second World War?

Who knows the town of Rzhev, not far from Moscow, where the Red Army suffered over a million dead and wounded there alone in the course of a seemingly never-ending battle?

Who knows the little town of Mizoch, on the outskirts of which its Jewish population was shot dead in the space of just a single day, on 14 October 1942? There are only five photographs left by German policeman Gustav Hille bearing witness to the scene of the crime, which is a gentle, hilly meadow today.

“Stillness and silence hang over the dead who lie buried beneath the collapsed homes covered by grass. The stillness is worse than tears and curses.” This is what Vasili Grossman wrote in the autumn of 1943.

Yet in the silence you can hear them, the stories of the survivors, the Soviet prisoners of war, the forced labourers, displaced citizens who were robbed of their homes and possessions, the Red Army soldiers who went on to push back and defeat the Wehrmacht. One of them was David Dushman, who, as the last surviving liberator of Auschwitz, died just a few days ago – like Boris Popov at the age of 98. He, too, told us about these events throughout his lifetime.

Yes, this war casts a long shadow, a shadow that hangs over us to this very day.

In a letter to his wife, Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, who worked in the international law division of the Wehrmacht High Command, wrote the following in August 1941, “once more the news from the east is terrible.” [...] “we bear the responsibility for hecatombs of corpses”. Time

and again, he writes, news filtered through of transports of prisoners and Jews, of which only 20 percent arrived. Time and again, there were reports of starving prisoners in the camps, as well as outbreaks of typhus and other epidemics caused by general privation.

The war of which von Moltke wrote abandoned every human dimension. But it was people who conceived of it and carried it out. They were Germans.

And so it leaves in its wake – for each and every generation anew – the agonising question: How could this happen? What did our forebears know? What did they do?

Nothing that happened in the depths of the east back then was a coincidence. The operational units of the security forces (Sicherheitspolizei), the SD, the Waffen-SS and those helping them did not haphazardly blaze their pillaging trail. They followed the destructive insanity and murderous plans that had been drafted at the Reich Security Main Office and at the competent Reich ministries. And they followed the Wehrmacht, German soldiers, who had previously robbed and harassed the population or executed alleged partisans. The criminal war of aggression wore the uniform of the Wehrmacht. The soldiers of the Wehrmacht also had a hand in its cruelties. We Germans have taken a long time, too long, to admit this fact.

The plans that the German soldiers followed were called “Generalplan Ost” and the “Hunger or Backe Plan”, enshrining inhumanity as a principle. They were plans whose objective was to exploit and starve people to death, to displace and enslave them and, ultimately, to annihilate them.

Officials at the Reich Security Main Office planned the annihilation with cynical precision. They planned a war that declared the entire Soviet population – the entire Soviet population – to be the enemies, from newborn babies to the very old. The enemies were to be defeated not just militarily, but were also to be made to pay for the war imposed upon them themselves, with their lives, their property, with everything that was part of their existence. The entire European part of the Soviet Union, whole stretches of today’s Ukraine and Belarus – and I quote from the orders – were to be “cleansed” and prepared for German colonisation. Metropolises such as Leningrad, present-day Saint Petersburg, Moscow or Kyiv, were to be razed to the ground.

Soviet prisoners of war were not thought of as prisoners. They were not regarded as comrades. They were robbed of their humanity; dehumanised. The Wehrmacht, which bore responsibility for the prisoners, did not have the intention of feeding them, “durchfüttern”, as this was commonly referred to at the time. And the German generals did not express disagreement with Hitler’s intention of making the Wehrmacht the executors of this crime. “Non-working prisoners of war

must starve." That was the order issued by the Quartermaster General of the German Army in November 1941.

Boris Popov, the man I am speaking of here, starves in four different German camps, from the first to the last day of his captivity. In Drosdy, he relates, it is only after 12 days that they are given half a litre of "balanda", a watery soup that they scoop out of a cast-iron trough, with German guards chivvying them along.

In addition to hunger, the prisoners had to endure deadly hygienic conditions. Vermin, epidemics and diseases spread. Prisoner of war Nikolai Nikolaevich Danilov recounted the following: "Sick and healthy people were lying on top of each other. Lice and rats were crawling over our bodies."

In the exhibition that we are opening today, you can see what appears to be an innocuous photo. It shows hundreds of trees towering towards the heavens. Upon closer inspection, you can see that they are bereft of leaves, branches and bark. Soviet prisoners of war have scratched them from their trunks with their bare hands to avoid starving to death. The photo gives us an impression of the terror of these camps. It is from Schloss Holte-Stukenbrock in East Westphalia. This is another place where these crimes were committed, and not far away in the east, but barely an hour from my home town, from the place where I grew up and where, during my time at school, I learned nothing of what had happened there less than two decades previously.

After Drosdy, Boris Popov is taken to the former Stalag 352 in Masyukovshchina, today a district of Minsk. Here alone, 80,000 prisoners of war lose their lives. However, Popov is lucky. He is assigned to the mailroom of the military administration. In early 1942, he is transferred to a camp in Gomel and two months later to Stalag IV B here in Brandenburg.

Boris Popov is liberated in Mühlberg an der Elbe on 23 April 1945. He is an exception: almost six million men and women from the Red Army were taken as prisoners of war by the Germans. More than half of them died – mostly in the internment camps in the east.

After his liberation, Boris Popov can – for the first time in four years – write a letter to his mother. To Leningrad. He does not know whether she is still alive. After all, one million Leningraders starved to death during the German siege. A few years ago, Daniil Granin spoke of the horrors of the siege in the German Bundestag: "Death", he said, "came quietly, in complete silence, day after day, month after month, each of the 900 days. How could people escape starvation? [...] They scraped the paste from wallpaper and boiled leather belts. The chemists in the institutes distilled varnish. People ate cats and dogs." They were forced to eat unimaginable things during the siege. In his unforgettable speech,

Daniil Granin spoke of atrocities which I as President of this country find difficult to even utter.

This, too – the deliberate decision not to take the city but to starve it in a 900-day siege – was, as I said before, part of the “Hunger Plan”.

Boris Popov’s mother survives the siege. In 1946, Boris Popov returns to Leningrad. He is able to complete his studies, marries and moves with his wife to Minsk, where he works as the chief engineer at the Belarusfilm studios. In this capacity, he even goes back to Germany once more in the 1970s.

Boris Popov left us a moving life story. But no one wanted to hear it for a long time. Not in the Soviet Union, where he had to fight until 1975 as a former prisoner of war to be even recognised as a war veteran. Nor in Germany. The heavy lot of our own, of German soldiers, who had been taken as prisoners of war by the Soviet Union, overshadowed any interest in the fate of Soviet prisoners of war. That may have eased the conscience of some Germans in the first post-war years.

Yet the crimes committed by Germans in this war place a heavy burden on us. They place a heavy burden on the victims’ descendants as well as on us, the present generation. To this very day. That it was our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers who waged this war, who were involved in these crimes, places a heavy burden on us. That too many perpetrators who had committed the most heinous of crimes were not held to account places a heavy burden on us. That we failed for far too long to recognise the victims in the east of our continent, also to recognise them through remembrance, places a heavy burden on us.

And on this anniversary let us not forget the impact to this very day on ourselves, on our own family histories, of the suffering, the horrors of this war and its consequences: I am talking here of displacement, of division, of occupation. It is the elderly among us who experienced this war as children. It is their fathers who fought in it. It is their mothers, women, who suffered terrible things, also at the hands of the advancing Red Army. As we used to say just a few years ago, many of the fathers “had stayed in Russia”. They were killed, went missing or died as prisoners of war. The war also cast a shadow over the lives of this fatherless generation.

Anyone who wants to shed light on this aspect of our history does not have to go far – you can find forgotten corners in the shadows of the past on our own doorstep. These are not only the former prisoner of war camps such as Stukenbrock in Westphalia or Sandbostel in Lower Saxony, which I visited just a few days ago. In Germany, there are more than 3500 burial sites where Soviet forced labourers and prisoners of war are interred. The museum in Karlshorst has drawn up a list of these sites and produced a map. Just as people visit the memorials to the Second World War in the west, I hope that young people will also seek

out the forgotten places in the east of our continent. That would be such an important contribution towards joint remembrance.

It goes without saying that it is not easy for anyone to call to mind the horrors of the past. However, repressing memories, not admitting guilt never makes things easier. Indeed, all of that becomes an ever heavier burden.

We should remember – not in order to burden present and future generations with a guilt that is not theirs but for our own sake. We should remember in order to understand what impact this past has on the present. Only those who learn to understand the traces of the past in the present will be equipped to help shape a future which avoids wars, rejects tyranny and makes possible peaceful co-existence in freedom.

That is why we should know that places such as Mizoch, Babyn Yar and Koriukivka in Ukraine, Rzhev in Russia, Maly Trostenets and Khatyn in Belarus, these forgotten sites, are also sites of German history.

That after everything that happened Germans are received today with great hospitality by people in, of all places, Belarus, Ukraine or Russia, that they are extended a warm welcome – is nothing short of a miracle.

That six years ago, on the anniversary of the end of the war, I as German Foreign Minister was welcomed in Volgograd, the former Stalingrad, by a large crowd of veterans – upright and proud in their uniforms which had become much too big for them, their hands raised in military salute and tears in their eyes – was one of the most moving and lasting memories of my life.

What I say to you today is: on this day when we are remembering the millions upon millions who lost their lives, let us also recall how precious reconciliation is when it has grown over the graves of the fallen.

This gift of reconciliation gives rise to a great responsibility for Germany. We want, and indeed must, do everything to protect international law and territorial integrity on this continent and to strive for peace with and among the success states to the former Soviet Union.

Boris Popov received post from the German organisation Kontakte-Kontakty in 2007. He was asked to tell his story in a letter. This first letter was just the beginning. Until his death last year, Boris Popov gave lectures and speeches about his experiences, speaking in schools and before audiences in Belarus and Germany. He was presented with the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in Minsk in March 2020, just a few months before his death.

I know that Zoya Mikhaylovna Popova, Boris Popov's widow, and her granddaughter are watching us via live stream from Minsk. I would like to take this opportunity to send you a very warm greeting.

When asked by a pupil in Berlin what he felt when he thought back to his time as a prisoner of war, Boris Popov once said:

“This raises the compelling question: is it not time for humanity to categorically reject wars and to resolve issues – no matter how complicated – peacefully and in a spirit of mutual respect?”

This is the question which Boris Popov put to us.

It is my impression that Europe was once closer to the answer than it is today. Decades ago, despite tensions and the confrontation between the two blocs, there was a different spirit on both sides of the Iron Curtain. I am talking about the spirit of Helsinki. In the midst of the mutual threat of nuclear annihilation, a process developed which was intended to avert, and did indeed help to avert, another war through the recognition of joint principles and through cooperation. This path, which led to the Helsinki Final Act, now lies almost half a century behind us. It was neither easy nor straightforward. However, it was a path which led us away from the logic of escalation and the threat of mutual destruction. You could say that it was a long and difficult path. However, I fear impasse and alienation much more than difficult paths.

I am very concerned that the painful history we are remembering today is in itself increasingly becoming the source of alienation. When looking back means focusing solely on our own national perspective, when the exchange on different perspectives on remembrance comes to a halt or is rejected, writing history becomes an instrument for new conflicts, the object of new forms of resentment. I therefore remain firmly convinced that history must not be allowed to become a weapon!

After all, we have this in common: we remember not by turning our backs to the future. Rather, we remember by looking ahead and shouting out loud and clear: never again should there be such a war! I know that I share this sentiment with a great number of people in Poland and the Baltic States, in Ukraine, in Belarus and in Russia, and in all successor states to the Soviet Union. Today I want to address you, the citizens of all the countries which suffered during the German war of annihilation:

I ask you to ensure, indeed let us all ensure, that we do not confront each other again as enemies; that we do not fail to recognise the human being in others. Let us ensure that those who propagate national hubris, contempt, enmity and alienation do not have the last word. Remembrance should bring us closer together. It must not be allowed to divide us once more.

Here, in this very house, the war was formally ended. Karlshorst will therefore always be a special place for our country and for this city – a place of remembrance.

Despite all the political differences, despite all the necessary debates on freedom and democracy and security, there must be room for remembrance. That is why I am here today.

Remembering the past does not heal any wounds inflicted in the present. However, events in the present can never erase what happened in the past. No matter what, the past lives on in us: either as repressed history or as history that we accept. For too long, we Germans have failed to do that when it comes to the crimes committed in the east of our continent. The time has come to rectify that.

That is why we are here today in Karlshorst. We are here to remember the 27 million dead, the 14 million civilian victims.

We are here to remember the huge contribution of the men and women from the ranks of the Red Army who fought against Nazi Germany.

We remember their courage and resolve, we remember the millions who risked and the many who lost their lives alongside their American, British and French allies as well as all the others, in order to free us all from the National Socialist tyranny.

I profess my deep respect for their fight against – as Yehuda Bauer writes – “the worst regime that has ever disgraced this planet”.

I bow in sorrow before the Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian victims – before all victims of the former Soviet Union.

Let us work for a different, for a better future. That is a task for us all.