

The German invasion of the Soviet Union – a reminder and an obligation

By Oliver Hermes, Chairman of the German Eastern Business Association

80 years ago, on 22 June 1941, a particularly bloody and cruel chapter of the Second World War began with the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The German warfare in the East and the unimaginable crimes committed by Germans in the process are deeply rooted in the collective memory of the states of Eastern Europe. For us Germans, this horrific war remains both a reminder and an obligation to make reconciliation and understanding with Russia and the other countries in the region an unshakeable guideline of our policy.

The German campaign against the Soviet Union was designed as a war of annihilation from the very beginning. With the expulsion and murder of national elites, the targeted extermination of Eastern European Jews, the starvation blockade of Leningrad or the Commissar Order, Germans brought unimaginable suffering to Russia and the other states of the Soviet Union. In the end, the Soviet Union had to mourn over 24 million dead. This must never be forgotten.

The war in Central and Eastern Europe had already begun on 1 September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland. The German attack on the Soviet Union followed on 22 June 1941. In addition to Poland, the present-day territory of Western Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the Baltic states and even parts of Georgia became the theatre of war and the site of the worst German crimes through the enslavement and murder of the elites, minorities and entire ethnic groups there.

The German economy at the time also bears a considerable share of the responsibility for this. Far too many German companies were part of and profiteers from the war in the East, whether as producers of military goods, purchasers of raw materials or by employing forced labourers. It is therefore also a historical responsibility for the German economy of today, as an important social force, to build and expand bridges to Eastern Europe.

Especially against the background of increasing political tensions between Russia on the one hand and the EU on the other, we must also continue to work on the part of the business community to ensure that understanding remains possible. "In this difficult phase of our relations, we must make sure that not all ties are severed," Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier wrote into the German Eastern Business Association's guestbook at our virtual Annual Kick-Off on 25 February. According to a recent Forsa survey commissioned by the German Eastern Business Association, the majority of German citizens would like to see closer cooperation between the EU and Russia. From the point of view of understanding, it is

also to be welcomed that US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke to each other in Geneva last week, even if the differences remain great. Dialogue is always better than speechlessness.

The German Eastern Business Association has been promoting the reconciliation process since its foundation in 1952 and established networks with the Soviet Union at an early stage. Building economic bridges to the East has been a core concern of the German Eastern Business Association for almost 70 years. The close and growing economic ties with Russia and the other successor states of the Soviet Union are an active contribution to securing peace and understanding. Thousands of German companies are successful in the region today. Opponents have become business partners and in many cases friends. The fact that members of states against which Germany has waged horrific wars have reached out to us is and remains a miracle. We must always be grateful to these countries for this second chance.

All the more reason for us to resist all global economic decoupling tendencies. Decoupling means that multinational cooperation is decreasing more strongly, alliances are crumbling, economic bridges between states and thus also politically different systems are being destroyed. We must therefore do everything possible to tear down walls instead of building new ones. Many current challenges such as climate change, securing the world's food supply or the digital transformation of Europe can only be mastered with strong partners. In doing so, we should not only look to Latin America or the Indo-Pacific, but start on our own doorstep and continue to promote the successful model of economic integration in Eastern Europe. Our vision remains an economic and peace area from Lisbon to Vladivostok. This is both our historical mandate and the imperative of forward-thinking economic policy.

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