

On Putin's "Greater Russian" aspirations and NATO

22 June 2000

The following is an exchange with a reader in Germany concerning the article "The political and historical issues in Russia's assault on Chechnya"

[<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jan2000/chec-j17.shtml>] . The article also appeared in *Gleichheit*, a magazine published by the Socialist Equality Party of Germany.

Dear Editors,

In the March/April 2000 issue of *Gleichheit* you published an article which deals critically with the propagation of a strong Russian state by President Putin. My comment is the consideration that this may have less to do with domestic politics (i.e., the re-establishment of the repressive state apparatus within Russia) or "Greater Russian" aspirations, than with a reflex reaction to the exterior threat to Russia from NATO and/or the Western European Union (WEU).

I would like to substantiate this consideration as follows: twice Germany attempted to "grasp for world power status", which resulted in two world wars. And in both instances this included the attempt to wrest away the Caucasus, first from czarist Russia and then from the Soviet Union, since the political control of this bridgehead between Europe and Asia would open the door to world domination, as the Nazi geo-politician Karl Haushofer put it.

In both cases there were concurrent plans for completely dividing up Russia/the Soviet Union. One variety proposed was that of a Social-Liberal (Paul Rohrbach and his "Orange Theory"*); the other that of a Nazi (Heinrich Himmler's "Thoughts on the Treatment of Alien Peoples in the East"). And both times the first step was to subjugate Serbia or Yugoslavia. The question that now arises is whether today's Greater Germany does not have the same intentions.

At any rate, there are texts which would permit such a conclusion. In 1998, Walter Schilling, the former military attaché [of the German Embassy] in Moscow and former lecturer at the German Army Officers Academy in Hamburg, wrote:

"Pragmatism and realism are what is required here—an approach that takes into account the complexity of the situation and that is able to make use of Russia's current weakness. New pipelines that are not subject to Moscow's influence, a determined approach to political and cultural activities there, financial and technological aid and closer economic and military cooperation with the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia will surely prove to be suitable instruments for removing this region from Russian control in the future as well."

He concludes his text with an explicit remark:

"It would not be wise to let much more time pass by, as nobody can be sure that the coveted resources of Central Asia may not be needed very soon."

In 1999, Prof. Heinrich Vogel, the director of the Federal Institute for Eastern and International Studies (BIOst) and advisor of the

German Foreign Ministry during the war against Yugoslavia, claimed that "a country as enormous as Russia cannot be ruled by a central government because the interests and possibilities of the federation subjects are too diverse." Wishful thinking?

Besides, aren't the creation of a German/European war economy (including German access to nuclear weapons and nuclear first-strike options), the preparation of a German/European intervention army and the concurrent resurgence of discussion revolving around the historically revisionist theory of a "preventative war by the Nazis against the Bolshevist Soviet Union under Stalin" clear indications that an assault on Russia within a few years is not entirely unthinkable?

MW, Leipzig

* *Editor's note: Paul Rohrbach was an influential liberal German publicist at the beginning of the twentieth century who, in the period leading up to the First World War, proposed gaining access to Transcaucasia/Central Asia and its resources by "extracting the elements of the region one by one from Russian control like the sections of an orange". Rohrbach justified this "Great Game" strategy with the claim that it would "liberate the subjected peoples of Caucasia" and install the rule of "culture".*

Berlin, June 7, 2000

Dear Mr. W.,

Thank you for your letter of May 25 in which you consider whether Putin's striving for a great power role for Russia may have less to do with the internal situation in Russia, and more with foreign policy issues, i.e., that it may be a reaction to the threat against Russia from NATO or the WEU. You back up this consideration with quotes and references to former and present German foreign policy strategists.

As we have pointed out in numerous articles, there can be no doubt whatsoever that both NATO in its entirety and the Western European powers, especially Germany, are striving to gain control of the Caspian region and push back Russian influence there.

A power that controls Caspian oil and thus, as you point out in your letter, the bridgehead between Europe and Asia has a crucial advantage in the fight to re-divide the world's markets and resources. We completely agree with your assessment of the geo-strategic game plans of Germany's political leadership. But that doesn't answer the question of what position we are to take with regards to Putin and what conclusions should be drawn from his "Greater Russian" ambitions.

As Marxists, we do not accept the abstract conception of the "nation", by which the bourgeoisie attempts to conceal class divisions. Rather, we examine the social and economic interests of the involved groups. If Putin's great power aspirations are a "reflex" to the "exterior threat", as you write, then we must ask: *whose* reflex is this?

A reflex by “Russia” as such is an abstract construction. The actual Russian nation consists of different social strata and, more recently, of clearly distinct social classes. Putin’s reflex is the reflex of the ruling group of criminal entrepreneurs that emerged in the main from the old state bureaucracy. This grouping is defending its loot against the equally rapacious appetites of the Western imperialists. There is no reason at all for us to support them in this.

Putin’s opposition to NATO is the opposition of a competing capitalist state—a weaker one, true, but a competitor nonetheless. Putin is defending the interests of the ruling stratum in Russia, not the interests of the Russian population.

The assumption that Putin is exclusively reacting to exterior irritants (which is something you, too, apparently don’t agree with entirely) underestimates, in our opinion, the extent of antagonistic social differences and also of general indignation in Russia. The Russian government has every reason to secure itself against its own population with police-state methods. Pressure from outside convinces it all the more that this is necessary.

You address the possibility of a military attack (by NATO or the WEU) against Russia in a few years. The Kosovo War was seen in Russia as an unveiled threat to that effect, and it did indeed contain this element. Currently, it would seem that the Western leaders have switched their tactics to openly wooing Putin, because they have concluded that the gang in charge at the Kremlin can offer them the best access to the regions of the former Soviet Union and help stabilise the situation there for them. It is always more cost-efficient and less difficult in terms of domestic politics to rely on an “on-site” servant rather than engaging in open military conflict.

It is necessary to consider the relations between the Western powers and Russia in their actual context, i.e., within the framework of the overall international situation. This is where the reasons for the demise of the Soviet Union are also to be found.

A major factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union was the globalisation of all economic processes, based on new developments in computerised communications and production technology. Cut off from this development in the world economy, the Soviet economy became unsustainable within its national boundaries.

But the same process of globalisation is also undermining the functions of the old capitalist nation states, casting them into renewed conflict over the re-division of the planet’s markets and resources. The clearly visible tensions between the US and the EU, particularly with respect to military issues, are a clear indication that all of the strategic planners now implicitly accept the possibility of military conflicts *between* NATO countries, as if this were a matter of course.

Our perspective in the struggle against war and militarism is based on an analysis of this overall international situation. The working class, which is intrinsically tied into globalised production, has a common interest in overcoming national boundaries and organising the world economy for the common benefit of humanity. Based on this standpoint, we oppose every form of militarism and nationalism.

A war between a NATO country and Russia is not out of the question, and could arise under various circumstances. In such a case, we would expose and condemn the imperialist interests of the West, as well as Russia, irrespective of “who fired the first shot”. But that is only the first step towards a comprehensive perspective for the future.

How is it that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as science and technology make advances that were inconceivable only a few decades ago, humanity is faced with the danger of falling back into the barbarity of the two world wars in the first half of the

twentieth century? It is only possible to understand—and overcome—this if one comprehends the work of destruction carried out by Stalinism in the working class, and draws the necessary political lessons from this understanding.

One legacy of Stalinism in the consciousness of broad layers of the Russian population is the apparent tendency to think of the Soviet Union in national, rather than social terms, and to transpose this view of things onto today’s Russia. This confusion is dangerous because it renders people defenceless against the national demagoguery of the new rulers.

In a previous period, Soviet patriotism, particularly in the struggle against German fascism, had a class content and was based on the defence of the achievements of the October Revolution. But the ruling bureaucracy, which stood opposed to the ideals of the revolution, distorted this class-oriented patriotism in its propaganda, transforming it into a form of national chauvinism attuned to the bureaucracy’s own outlook.

The Soviet Union was perceived as an expression of national greatness, rather than as an achievement of the international working class. It is this attitude, which has taken hold for decades, that Putin now seeks to exploit. Another article in the issue of *Gleichheit* to which you refer deals specifically with this phenomenon (“The Rehabilitation of Stalin: An Ideological Cornerstone of the New Kremlin’s Politics”).

In this article, we attempt to show that a genuine opposition to the preparation of new wars can only be developed through a return to the original, internationalist ideals of the workers movement, the ideals on which the October Revolution was based. Workers both in Russia and the Western countries must liberate themselves politically from the governments of their “own” nations and recognise their common interests. That is the only way to find an alternative that transcends the question of which country one should fight for and which one should oppose as the “aggressor”. This is the genuine tradition of the Marxist movement, which was cast aside in favour of a nationalist stance first by the Social Democrats, then by the Stalinists.

As the experience of the First World War, in particular, showed, the most effective and best means for opposing war is to mobilise the working population on the basis of an international perspective against the rulers of their own countries. To take up the fight against the danger of war, the Russian working class must first and foremost recognise that Putin is a creature of capitalist restoration, which masks its true intentions with nationalistic phrases. The Russian population can best achieve this understanding if workers in the West finally move forward politically and stay the hand of their governments.

What are your thoughts on this larger context? You are obviously keeping close track of political events, using numerous sources of information. We would therefore be very interested in hearing from you again.

Yours sincerely,
Ute Reissner



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