

The nationalistic reflex: left-wing newspapers in Germany exhibit unrestrained enthusiasm for Putin

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In August the loss of the Russian nuclear submarine the *Kursk* stunned the people of Russia and the whole world. The event struck a nerve even deeper than sympathy for the tragic fate of the 118 crewmen and their mourning families would have led one to expect. As the *World Socialist Web site* wrote at the time, in a real sense, "The Russian people themselves are in a situation similar to that of the submarine crew: they are suffering, they are desperately searching for a means of escape and hoping for rescue."

The catastrophe forced the world to confront the scale of the decline Russia has been subjected to since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Suddenly, there stood President Vladimir Putin stripped of all pretensions. The way the Kremlin reacted to the debacle—its indifference, incompetence and arrogance—brought back memories of the lamentable era of Soviet stagnation under Brezhnev and Chernenko. The yawning gulf between the regime and its people became painfully obvious and could not be ignored by the international press which, to some extent, was critical of Putin's insensitivity.

In this predicament, the Russian president was to receive support from apparently unexpected quarters. Two German newspapers, each claiming left-wing allegiance, threw themselves into his defence.

The publication *Junge Welt* (Young World) regarded Western media reporting of the ill-fated *Kursk* as an attempt to "revive contempt for old enemies". On August 23, Rainer Rupp wrote in his commentary that the new man in the Kremlin had shown NATO his teeth: "Because Putin is not prepared to sell Russia to aggressive neo-liberalism for a few Western trinkets, the free world press has changed its tone recently." The submarine disaster had become the perfect occasion for "giving free rein to old-fashioned anti-Russian reflexes".

Ralf Schröder expressed himself more openly in a recent commentary written in the October edition of the monthly magazine *konkret* (concrete), some time after the events surrounding the *Kursk* incident had taken place. Schröder sees in Putin a "self-proclaimed Russian patriot" who has come on the scene "to restore Russia's greatness and drive the criminal cartel [meaning Yeltsin and other members of the oligarchy] out of the Kremlin". This is supposed to have "impressed ordinary Russians" and "filled them with a new sense of national pride". "Putin sceptics inside and outside Russia," on the other hand, "share the fear that the Russian state would recall its widely accepted reason for existence and -- in contrast to the Yeltsin era -- now promote the national interest."

Schröder's article continues in this tone. He explains that Putin intends "to free his country from the semi-colonial status resulting from Yeltsin's politics," and, "Because Putin, with the substantial approval of his followers, energetically applied himself to revamping the state's sovereignty on both a domestic and international level immediately after taking up office, and moreover because he announced that he would

forthwith disassociate Russia as much as possible from reliance on loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other Western financial institutions, an informal alliance between the Russian mafia and the German press was forged almost inevitably."

Objectively considered, this view is absurd. The claim that Putin is an opponent of Western economic and Russian oligarchic interests lacks any basis in reality and instead constitutes an instance of political wishful thinking. It simply ignores the fact that the then utterly unknown secret serviceman rose to the highest office of state as the handpicked candidate of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, and that his election success was due to propaganda and financial support from the oligarchy. In particular, Boris Berezovsky (financial advisor to the Yeltsin family) had laid the full resources of his media empire at Putin's disposal.

If Putin has fallen out with Berezovsky in the meantime, this in no way indicates that he has become an opponent of the oligarchy. Anyone who believes that confuses the power struggle within a clique with one against it. On numerous occasions, Putin has guaranteed the oligarchs that the state would not interfere with their property. Discord only occurs when he tries to buttress his position against attempts of the oligarchy to exert excessive control over matters of state—a stance also shared by international financial circles that see a disincentive to investment in the web of corruption, struggle for influence and mutual dependencies.

Regarding Putin's relationship to the IMF, the World Bank and international finance in general, he has never left the slightest doubt that he is prepared to work with them at the closest level and will continue the capitalist "reforms" of the Yeltsin era. On this score, too, the claims of *Junge Welt* and *konkret* reveal themselves as pure fantasy.

What is more interesting than these obvious instances of false interpretation of reality is the outright nationalistic tone running through both articles. Since when have left-wingers or socialists defended the promotion of national interests as "the state's reason for existence", as Ralf Schröder does in *konkret*? Such a proposition is particularly absurd in relation to Russia.

Historically, nationalism in Russia has always played a reactionary role. The national idea came into being in Western Europe during the era of the bourgeois revolution. It was a progressive movement whenever it was directed against feudal particularism. As the bourgeoisie gained power it became increasingly reactionary and finally assumed an openly imperialist character. In Russia, however, the bourgeoisie came onto the stage extremely late in history and was never to play a progressive role.

The events of the year 1917 revealed the bourgeoisie's inability to solve the democratic tasks of the bourgeois revolution. Swept into power during the February Revolution, it had no answer to the burning questions of the time: the land issue, the war situation and the question of nationalism—which in Russia was posed, not as a task of uniting small

states into a national state, but of securing democratic rights for the repressed nationalities languishing under tsarist tyranny.

The success of the Bolsheviks in October was fundamentally due to the fact that they alone had an answer to these questions. But to achieve this success they had to base their strategy on an international and not a national perspective. The October Revolution would only prevail if it were to be supported by the socialist world revolution. It was only under the Stalin regime that the October Revolution was increasingly interpreted as a national event. But from that point the decline of the Revolution began, ending in the restoration of capitalism by Stalin's heirs.

The nationalistic clichés serving Putin's propaganda machine today do not derive from a tradition of bourgeois struggle for freedom—there never was such a thing in Russia—but from the junk room of Greater Russian chauvinism which polluted the ideological climate in the tsarist empire and went through a revival under Stalin. This chauvinism is easily recognisable due to its unappealing appearance: the rebirth of the Orthodox Church, the revival of anti-Semitism and the outbreak of racial prejudice against national minorities which took hysterical forms during the war in Chechnya.

Putin's nationalism serves the purpose of securing the hegemony of a semi-criminal parasitic clique, owing its rise to power and wealth to the undermining of the achievements of the October Revolution. His momentum is not in the direction of democracy but rather towards a dictatorial regime. Today's Kremlin overlords are living proof of the fact that, today more than ever, Russia lacks a firm foundation for bourgeois democracy. In comparison to the contemporary power mongers, the Kerensky regime (which was overthrown in 1917) appears positively fresh.

Putin's occasional sabre-rattling against NATO does not make him an anti-imperialist as *konkret* implies with its reference to the “semi-colonial status” of Russia. There can be no doubt that NATO is systematically edging the former superpower into a corner. The Balkans War, the advances on the part of the western powers into regions of the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea and American plans for the construction of a new anti-missile system (NMD) all work to this end. But whoever then draws the conclusion that Putin's nationalism defends the interests of the Russian people overlooks unbridgeable class contradictions between the ruling clique in the Kremlin and the broad masses.

Irrespective of its nationalist rhetoric the Putin government operates as a means of access for international capital in the former Soviet Union. When problems emerge between Russia and the West this only indicates that, despite its economic weakness, Russia under Putin is attempting to follow its own imperialist ambitions. It is not the job of socialists, however, to support weaker imperialist powers against the stronger. The continuous economic decline of the country does not alter the reactionary character of Russian imperialism. Quite the opposite, the combination of Russia's social decline together with the fact that the country remains a nuclear power gives rise to an explosive mixture which, should it ignite, would have catastrophic consequences for all of humanity. Under conditions where both America and the European powers are increasingly prepared to use the military option in order to assert their global interests, it is no longer possible to exclude such a tragic development.

The only possible answer to this danger lies in the international unification of the working class in the struggle against organised capital and every form of chauvinism and nationalism, irrespective of whether it cloaks itself in the star-spangled banner, black-red-gold (Germany) or blue-red-white (Russia).

The shameless glorification of Russian nationalism by *konkret* and *Junge Welt* indicates a sharp turn to the right by these magazines.

In the case of *Junge Welt* it is not so surprising. The paper was formerly the central organ of FDJ, the youth movement of the former ruling Stalinist party (SED) in East Germany. Following reunification the paper

undertook a certain opening up in its outlook but has never fundamentally broken with the foundations of Stalinism. For *Junge Welt*, as we have seen, the October Revolution was a strictly Russian and national event. Correspondingly the paper considered the defence of the Soviet Union to mean subordination to the national interests of the ruling bureaucracy and not the advocacy of an international socialist perspective.

For many years Rainer Rupp, the author of the cited article, worked as a spy for the Soviet Union inside NATO headquarters, before being caught and serving a long prison sentence. After his release he joined the staff of *Junge Welt*. The paper, therefore, has no difficulty in extending its loyalty to the former Soviet Union to today's Russia despite the change in social fundamentals. In the final event, the successor organisation to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, headed by Gennady Zyuganov, had found favour in Putin's nationalism. Here it is simply an issue of a long ingrained national reflex making itself felt.

The situation is somewhat more complex with regard to *konkret*. The magazine also has its origins in the murky circles of Stalinism. Headed by Rainer Röhl and Ulrike Meinhof, who was later a founder of the Red Army Faction (RAF), the magazine served in the fifties as an unofficial organ of the German Communist Party which had been banned at that time. In the middle of the sixties it loosened itself from Stalinist tutelage and served as a vehicle for various factions of the radical movements of 1968.

Unlike other newspapers and magazines that emerged from this movement, such as the daily *taz*, *konkret* maintained its critical standpoint in relation to official German politics even after the elevation of the Green Party into government. The magazine vehemently opposed the NATO intervention into Kosovo and its editor Hermann L. Gremliza still proudly recalls his description 10 years ago of a reunited Germany as a sort of Nazi “Fourth Reich”.

What is striking with *konkret* is the cynical undertone which characterises most articles. It resembles above all the tone of the offended intellectual snob, grumbling and complaining about current conditions but unable to see a way out.

This is based upon a subjective world outlook characteristic of many political radicals: for them politics consists of a chain of conspiracies. The media are nothing more than manipulators of opinion. When the bourgeois press writes something is white, then the radical declares it is black, or vice versa. When the German press attacks Putin, then they feel compelled to defend him. This is the basic muster which runs through Ralf Schröder's article. The authors at *konkret* prefer to ignore the fact that there is such a thing as an objective world which even the bourgeois media cannot completely ignore.

Above all they refuse to acknowledge that as well as official politics there exist the broad masses who, because of the degeneration of the official workers movement, are unable to give expression to their wants and desires, but nevertheless embody progressive tendencies. For *konkret*, the people comprise merely a dull, passive mass allowing themselves to be manipulated at will.

This is especially clear from a further article written on the “Kursk Accident” in the same edition of *konkret*. The author, Florian Sendter, pokes fun at the sympathetic way the Kursk tragedy was followed in Germany. He interprets such feelings as a mixture of war nostalgia and media manipulation. He never even considers that behind such expressions of sympathy for the desperate situation of young sailors, many of whom were barely 20 years of age, could lie an element of profoundly felt international solidarity.

The article climaxes in a parallel drawn between the Kursk events and the Concorde plane crash in Paris and the rhetorical question: “How has it come about that for the German media the North Sea is closer to their hearts than Paris? That for them (the media) 118 Ivans are more important than 114 innocent air passengers, most of whom were German? How did

Germans end up in a Russian submarine?” This is supposed to sound ironic, but is in fact just cynical. It is impossible to mistake the racist undertone. Arrogance and hostility to the masses could not be more clearly expressed.

This standpoint drives *konkret* and *Junge Welt* into the camp of nationalism—and not just of the Russian variety. When the “broadly accepted basis” of the Russian state consists in the defence of national interests as Ralf Schröder writes in *konkret*, then why not the same “basis” in relation to the German state? This is the barely inescapable logic of such an argument—particularly as tensions intensify between Germany and America, also bearing in mind the latter's overwhelming military superiority.

In the last instance, expressed in the enthusiasm for nationalism on the part of *konkret* and *Junge Welt* are tensions and changes in the base of society. It would not be the first time that left-wing intellectuals switched to the enemy camp on the eve of great class struggles.



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