

On the 60th Anniversary of the victory of the Red Army over Nazism

Anti-Russian nationalism in the Baltic States

Part two

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This is the concluding part of a two-part series. Part one was posted May 9.

The reincorporating of the Baltic states within the USSR after 1945 necessitated their integration into the centrally planned economy based on socialised property. This remained, despite severe bureaucratic deformations and an absence of any expression of genuine workers' democracy and control, as a lasting gain of the revolution of 1917.

The industry and transport systems of the Baltic states were developed to unprecedented levels. And the Baltic republics became home to some of the USSR's most developed scientific, military and industrial complexes.

The fundamental problem faced by the Baltic working class was not their inclusion in the USSR, but that the Soviet economy was ruled over by a parasitic bureaucratic elite, which based itself on the anti-Marxist policy of economic nationalism. The bureaucracy could never succeed in progressively integrating the Baltic states because it was politically hostile to the unification of the working class in the struggle for socialism. This policy required not only the division of the Soviet working class from the world proletariat, but also from their fellow workers within the USSR. It meant that national divisions could never be overcome and that the relationship between Moscow and the various republics assumed the form of a dominant power over its satellites.

Over the 45 years of the three Baltic republics' membership within the Soviet Union, the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow and the local officials in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius maintained strong divisions within the working class along ethnic and linguistic lines. The bureaucracy deliberately housed Russian workers who moved into the region in separate areas as part of a policy of divide-and-rule.

The independence movement that emerged in the 1980s in the Soviet republics, including Russia itself, channelled the justified but confused popular hatred felt towards the Stalinist bureaucracy into support for nationalism. This served to divide the Soviet working class, while allowing the Stalinists to re-establish capitalist property relations.

The legacy of Stalinism has been to create massive confusion in the former-Soviet working class, which has enabled the national bourgeoisies to re-establish themselves on the same lines as in 1920. There is a political continuity between the unstable Baltic regimes of the 1920s and 1930s and those of today, which have turned to highly reactionary means to prop up their unstable rule. Despite their insistence on the moral equivalence of the Soviet period and the Nazi occupation, the Baltic ruling classes are willing to tolerate and even sympathise with the open defenders of the Nazi legacy.

In Latvia, the government sent a representative to the annual

Schutzstaffel (SS, the elite bureaucratic-military organization of Nazi Germany) veterans' marches up until 2000, when the country's impending European Union membership compelled them to officially distance themselves from glorifying Nazism.

These marches draw neo-fascistic groups around them. In March of this year, WWII veterans who fought with the occupying German forces were joined by members of Russian and Latvian extreme-right groups. Police arrested more than 20 anti-Nazi protesters who tried to block the march.

On July 6, 2004, veterans and supporters of the 20th Estonian division of the SS paraded through Estonia's capital, Tallinn. Organizers of the event said it had been held to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the battles fought by the Estonian SS against the Soviet army, and also to celebrate the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country in the early 1990s.

SS veterans' marches have taken place in Estonia ever since the country gained independence in 1991. Following such a gathering in 1998, SS veterans were invited to address members of the Estonian armed forces. In 2002, a memorial depicting an Estonian in Waffen-SS uniform and holding a gun pointing east towards Russia, was unveiled in the city of Parnu.

Another similar case was prominent in Estonian news last year. In the town of Lihula, a monument depicting an Estonian soldier in a World War II German uniform was unveiled on August 20. Two weeks later, a team of municipal workers backed by police was sent to the town in the dead of night to remove the statue. The government of Juhan Parts considered it an embarrassment that threatened to tarnish the international image of the country shortly after its admission to the EU. (Estonia expects its EU membership to significantly aid the tourism industry that has developed as a major sector of its economy over the past decade.)

Far from condemning the glorification of Nazism represented in the statue, Parts went out of his way to apologise for the structure's removal. Visiting the town in December, he stated that the decision to take down the statue had been one of the hardest of his premiership, but had to be taken because "Estonia does not live in a vacuum."

The growth of the far right and fascistic elements is a product of the broader anticommunist and national-chauvinist political climate that has been the essential prop to bourgeois rule in the Baltic states since 1991. This has involved open discrimination against the large Russian-speaking populations in the three countries. Especially in Latvia and Estonia, where the proportion of Russian speakers is very high (roughly 40 percent and 25 percent, respectively), the minority faces discrimination in education, careers in public service and holding elected office. Thousands of Russian speakers have never been granted citizenship in the independent countries.

The Baltic countries are of vital geopolitical importance to the powers hoping to gain ascendancy over the Eurasian continent, as they have been throughout the twentieth century. Situated between Russia and Europe, the outlet for much of Russia's exports—especially its vast energy reserves—to the world market, the three small states have been the subject of rival US, EU and Russian interests and intervention.

Members of NATO and the EU, the three countries have oriented politically towards the Western imperialist powers, just as they did after 1920. As in that earlier period, they also remain in an uneasy but necessarily close economic relationship with Russia.

In such a situation, the events surrounding the 60th anniversary events in Moscow take on a decidedly contemporary political character.

Vladimir Putin's invitation to the heads of state of all the former Soviet republics was not a simple act of historical commemoration. Just as the Stalinist bureaucracy did, Putin's Kremlin has no compunction about falsely appropriating the history of the heroic efforts of the Soviet working class to defeat fascism, amalgamating it with nationalist demagogery.

Putin and the oligarchic layer he represents look to Stalinism for lessons in the use of nationalism and ethnic divisions to divide the working class and secure their privileged and increasingly autocratic rule.

For all their hysteria about Putin's use of Great Russian chauvinism, his methods have much in common with the anti-Russian nationalism of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian leaders whose own rule depends on national prejudice as a distraction from their big-business policies.

American imperialism is also anxious to utilise the May 9 events to push its agenda in the region. Latching onto the outpourings of the Baltic elites, President Bush and other leading figures in Washington have turned criticism of the period of Soviet "occupation" into a thinly veiled attack on Russia today.

Prior to Bush's May 7 speech in Riga denouncing "occupation and communist oppression," the former US diplomat Richard Holbrooke had commented in February on Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus's dilemma over whether to go to Moscow for the May 9 celebrations. He said that Russia was exhibiting a "disturbing trend" in its behaviour toward the Baltic states and that Russian influence in the region was becoming a challenge for American diplomacy.

Writing in the *Washington Post* February 9, Holbrooke stated, "Putin is rattled by the growing independence of some of the former Soviet republics, most notably Georgia and Ukraine. But his inept meddling, which failed to prevent democratic popular uprisings last year in both countries, has only weakened him."

Bipartisan voices in Congress chipped in with an April 12 resolution calling on Russia to admit that the Soviet Union had illegally occupied the Baltic countries in 1940 and again following the war until the USSR's collapse in 1991. The resolution warns that "the illegal occupation and annexation of the Baltic countries is one of the largest remaining unacknowledged incidents of oppression in Russian history."

The piece was sponsored by John Shimkus, an Illinois Republican of Lithuanian lineage, and Denis Kucinich, the former Democratic presidential candidate from Ohio, along with seven other members of Congress.

Latvia's president Vike-Freiberga warmly welcomed the resolution as an aid to her campaign: "It means that Congress is going to debate the issue, and the American nation will be reminded about what happened then, and what it meant. To me, such discussion seems very valuable, regardless of the resolution passed at the end of it."

Finally, Bush himself intervened, writing to support the Latvian head of state. Bush's letter stated that 1945 "marked the Soviet occupation and annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and the imposition of communism."

It continued, "Even as we acknowledge the past, this anniversary is an opportunity to look forward and build a future based on our shared values

and our shared responsibilities as free nations. As allies and friends, our countries will work to strengthen democracy at home and advance freedom abroad. America is proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with you."

Such comments are designed to put further pressure on Putin, whom Washington has begun to criticise as autocratic. In the context of Bush's self-proclaimed crusade against tyranny, which has been used to justify an even wider expansion of US aggression around the globe, the letter's stated aim to "advance freedom abroad" has ominous implications.

US imperialism's intentions in the territories of the former Soviet Union are aggressive. This was shown by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's recent threats to Belarus, a key Russian ally next to the Baltic states. On April 20, Rice told a press conference in Lithuania that it was "time for change to come to Belarus," which was the "last true dictatorship" in Central Europe. This comment followed her rebuke of Putin's autocratic tendencies during her state visit to Moscow.

Washington aims to advance its hegemony across Eurasia and must weaken and destabilise Russia to achieve this. The tensions between the pro-American Baltic states and Russia provide another means to pressure Moscow. That this involves a political attack on the Soviet Union and on "communism" and the October Revolution is a bonus to the American elite.

This is grist for the mill in the Baltic states, whose nationalist forces feel emboldened by Washington's growing belligerence towards Moscow.

On April 19, the Lithuanian Parliament adopted a declaration, "On the Assessment of the Outcome of the End of World War II in Europe." Parliamentary Speaker Arturas Paulauskas said that a decision by the Kremlin to apologise for the "occupation" of the Baltic states "can hardly be expected today or tomorrow," but that the statement by the US would "help Russian citizens think and Russian politicians make decisions."

Washington and Moscow are engaged in a conflict in which both seek to employ nationalist divisions to aid their geopolitical ambitions. Turning to anti-Russian chauvinist tendencies in the former Soviet Union, and potentially within the ethnically heterogeneous Russian Federation itself, US imperialism threatens to promote the Balkanisation of the region.

Against this imperialist strategy, workers and youth in the Baltic states and across the former Soviet Union must base themselves on a correct appraisal of the complex lessons of the twentieth century, particularly the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism and the struggle by the Left Opposition and the Fourth International against it. Only through an assimilation of these lessons can the working class of the region politically re-orient towards an alliance with workers in Russia, the former Soviet republics and Europe based on an internationalist and socialist perspective.

Concluded



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