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

Anti-Russian nationalism in the Baltic States

Part one

Niall Green
9 May 2005

This is the first part of a two-part series.

President George W. Bush chose the Latvian capital of Riga to make his May 7 speech denouncing the former Soviet domination of Eastern Europe as one of "the greatest wrongs of history."

Marking 60 years since the end of World War Two in Europe, Bush praised the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania for keeping "a long vigil of suffering and hope" during nearly 50 years of Soviet occupation. While the end of World War II brought peace to these countries, it also brought "occupation and communist oppression," Bush proclaimed.

Bush chose Latvia as the venue for his attack on Moscow to exploit the heightened tensions between Russia and the political elites in the three Baltic states. Politicians and the media in the Baltic countries had already flown into an anti-communist and anti-Russian frenzy following Russian President Vladimir Putin's invitation to all the leaders of the ex-Soviet countries to attend the May 9 event in Moscow commemorating the 60th anniversary of the victory of the Soviet Union and the Allied powers over Nazi Germany.

The local press and academic commentators in the three Baltic countries urged their heads of state not to attend an event they categorised as a celebration of Russian/Soviet "imperialism" and "occupation." Few opportunities were missed to portray the Soviet Union as the moral and political equivalent of Nazi Germany.

Estonia's president Arnold Ruutel was the first to declare that he would not attend the May 9 event in Moscow. After a period of equivocation President Valdas Adamkus of Lithuania announced that he too would be absent. Latvia's head of state Vaira Vike-Freiberga was the only one attending the ceremony.

Latvia's somewhat less frosty response to the invitation was due to concerns over possible damage to vital economic ties to Moscow. All three Baltic states are economically dependent on Russia for much of their trade and most of their energy needs, but Latvia has the highest level of integration with the Russian economy.

Despite the concession to Moscow, Vike-Freiberga made clear that she will be using the occasion to call the post-war Soviet period a "brutal occupation." Her decision to attend was backed by Estonian Foreign Minister Rein Lang, who stated that "What Latvia is doing now is good for all three Baltic states" as it could provide an opportunity to further promulgate the view of the Soviet period as one of occupation comparable to that of the Nazis.

This is the general tone of the official political view of the Soviet period in the Baltic states. The debate over whether or not to go to Moscow for the 60th anniversary memorial is only the latest expression of the nationalist and anti-communist ideology that forms the basis of bourgeois politics.

Throughout the post-Soviet period, the Baltic countries' elites and their media and academic apologists have been engaged in a concerted effort to divide the working class from its shared heritage with workers from the rest of the former Soviet Union, a process that began under the auspices of the Stalinist bureaucracy long before the collapse of the USSR.

In fact, the Baltic working class has a rich revolutionary history in common with their Russian brothers and sisters that the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy cannot erase.

In 1917, while the area was a battleground in the First World War, soviets or workers' councils were established in Latvia's capital Riga and in other areas not under German occupation. Over the following months, Bolshevism became the dominant political force in the Riga working class. In Estonia, the Bolsheviks were also on the ascendancy in 1917, with soviets of workers, sailors and soldiers becoming a more powerful pole of attraction to the proletariat and many peasants than the bourgeois regional assembly, the Maapaev, which had been set up following the coming to power of the Provisional Government in Petrograd.

By October 1917, the Bolsheviks had established themselves as the leading tendency within the Estonian and Latvian soviets. Delegates were sent from the region to Petrograd, where they played an important role in the revolutionary events that were unfolding. Following the revolution, workers from the Baltic countries fought in the Red Army that was established and led by Leon Trotsky to defend the revolution from the attacks of the imperialist powers and the local aristocracy and bourgeoisie who organised the counter-revolutionary white armies. Latvian riflemen even served as Lenin's personal guard.

Following Germany's defeat in November 1918, the Red Army and exiled socialists entered the Baltic areas vacated by the German army, establishing soviet rule. During the ensuing civil war, the Red Army had wide support in the region against the local counter-revolutionary nationalist forces and their foreign imperialist backers. This support was to be found in the main urban centres and also in the countryside, where many peasants sympathised with the Bolsheviks as a force that could liberate them from the Germanic and Polish aristocrats who had owned the land since the Middle Ages.

However, hugely overstretched, the Red Army was unable to maintain its hold in the Baltic area, and in 1920, the Bolshevik government in Moscow was compelled to sign treaties with the three new capitalist states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. These countries were established as a product of a defeat for the local working class that saw tens of thousands of revolutionary workers flee the region for the Soviet Union.

In place of the common struggles waged by the working class of the ex-USSR, today, the Baltic elites glorify the counter-revolutionary bourgeois governments that were established during the inter-war period. The three states that were created in 1920 were, much like their successors today,

© World Socialist Web Site

sustained by economic subservience to their larger neighbours and the maintenance of a political climate in which nationalist chauvinism was the norm.

During the inter-war period of independence, the Baltic elites had to rely on rightist and fascistic elements as props for their rule. Lithuania, economically the weakest and most backward of the three countries, turned to an autocratic form of rule in 1926 when its right-wing coalition government was hit by an internal crisis following parliamentary elections in which the working class elected a record number of opposition Social Democrats. Unable to resolve its divisions and in mortal fear of the proletariat, the ruling elite turned to Antonas Smetova, head of the fascistic Nationalist Union, who took power in a military coup amidst a propaganda campaign aimed at whipping up fear of a putsch by agents of Moscow.

In Estonia, the League of Independence War Veterans was founded in 1928, a Nazi-style organisation based on petty-bourgeois elements who had fought against the Red Army and had subsequently been cultivated as an anti-communist bulwark of the state. In the putrid nationalist atmosphere in the country, the organisation was able to gain support during the economic and social crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Though the party was well connected to the national elite, it was viewed as too unstable a formation to assume power. But its rise gave the Estonian bourgeoisie an excuse to implement martial law and the authoritarian rule of Konstantin Pats—one of the leading nationalists of the civil war—in 1934.

Latvia quickly followed Estonia's example, as its elite was gripped by the fear of a leftward movement of the working class in response to events in Estonia and the protracted economic recession. In May 1934, a "Cabinet of National Unity" with semi-dictatorial powers was established.

In their effort to prop up their rule through nationalism, today's bourgeoisies in the Baltic states have been able to utilise the legacy of decades of betrayal by the Stalinist bureaucracy, from whose ranks many members of the countries' current political elites are drawn.

The consolidation of bureaucratic rule by Stalin and the clique around him by the end of the 1920s, following the mass arrests of the Left Opposition in 1928, marked a major setback for the Soviet working class and for the world revolution. Stalinism alienated millions of workers and peasants from the Soviet Union with its nationalist policy of "socialism in one country," which produced disastrous expressions such as the brutal agricultural collectivisation from 1929.

The adoption of the perspective of socialism in one country marked the repudiation of the strategic axis of the Communist Parties—the struggle for world socialist revolution. In its place was substituted a nationalist perspective based on the primacy of defending the existence of the Soviet Union—and by extension the basis for the privileged existence of the bureaucratic caste around Stalin that had emerged within the USSR as a result of its backwardness and isolation.

The Stalinist bureaucracy was at first deeply sceptical and later actively hostile towards the revolutionary struggles of the European and international working class, fearing the spread of revolutionary sentiment and the galvanising impact this would have within the USSR itself as the greatest threat to its own existence. In 1933 came the defeat of the German working class as a result of the disastrous policies pursued by the Stalinists and the coming to power of Hitler without a shot being fired. The bureaucracy within the Soviet Union emerged as a consciously counter-revolutionary force that actively worked to suppress any and all independent political activity in the working class. It transformed the Communist Parties into instruments for the defence of the nationally conceived interests of the bureaucracy.

The defence of the Soviet Union was not to be secured by revolutionary means, but by seeking agreement with various bourgeois powers or supposedly progressive forces within bourgeois states. This policy found tragic expression in the betrayal and defeat of the Spanish revolution, when the Stalinists brutally suppressed their socialist and left opponents and insisted that the working class remain subordinated to the democratic bourgeoisie in the struggle against Franco. It was to have its most disastrous results in the efforts of the Stalin clique to reach an accommodation with Nazi Germany, which served to disarm and disorient the working class throughout Europe on the very eve of the Second World War.

The 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact promised non-aggression between Germany and the USSR and a re-division of northeastern Europe between the two countries.

The USSR posted troops in the Baltic countries, and in 1940 the three states were annexed into the Soviet Union. A purge of nationalists and anti-Stalinists was initiated. Stalin's brutal and insensitive treatment gave credence to the right-wing nationalist forces and politically disoriented the working class. The result was a weakening of the opposition to the German armies when they paid back the Stalinist bureaucracy for its attempts at appeasement by launching an invasion of the Baltic region and a war against the USSR in 1941.

During the German occupation of the Baltic countries, thousands of local people were forcibly drafted into pro-occupation Legions. However, many others had volunteered to serve. That the Nazis were able to muster support among the peoples of the Baltic states, as they had in the Ukraine and other areas of the Soviet Union, is a damning indictment of the betrayals of Stalinism over the preceding period.

In May 1945, the Red Army secured its final victory over Nazi Germany after the fierce Battle of Berlin. This was the final stage of a massive offensive that saw the Soviet forces fighting westward for four months, beginning with the liberation of Warsaw and the Baltic states that January. Despite the history of Stalinist betrayals, the Red Army was able to take the Baltic region within days of the start of the January offensive, often receiving support from local anti-Nazi partisans.

Following the liberation of the Baltic states, the full extent of the crimes perpetrated under the Nazi occupation was revealed. The local Jewish populations, already in decline during the interwar period of independence, had been decimated. In Lithuania, the vast majority of the tens of thousands of Jews who had constituted more than 6 percent of the country's population in 1939 had been exterminated by 1945.

To be continued

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site