

May Day 2005: Sixty years since the end of World War II

Part two

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The following is the first part of a report delivered by David North, chairman of the WSWs international editorial board and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of the United States, to a May Day meeting held in Berlin on April 30. Part one was published May 2.

Sixty years ago, as the world emerged from fascism and total war, millions of workers hoped for a future in which such horrors would not be possible. And yet the possibility of another such catastrophe looms before mankind. How has this come to pass? What prevented the working class from translating its socialistic aspirations at the end of World War II into revolutionary policies that could have put an end to capitalism? The answer will not be found, as demoralized skeptics are all too eager to claim (the better to justify their own discouragement), in an absence within the working class of revolutionary determination and courage. Those qualities existed in abundance in the aftermath of World War II.

The answer, rather, must be found in a study of the politics of the post-war period. The principal reason for the survival of capitalism in Europe in the critical period that followed the collapse of Hitler's Third Reich was the treachery of the Stalinist and social democratic parties and organizations of the working class. Both the Communist parties (which operated as agents of Soviet bureaucracy in the USSR) and the social democratic parties were absolutely opposed to the overthrow of capitalism in Western Europe. The powerful resistance movements in France and Italy were disarmed by the Stalinist leaders, who collaborated with bourgeois leaders and parties in re-establishing the authority of the capitalist governments. In this way the Stalinist and social democrats provided the weak European bourgeoisie and its American imperialist patrons the necessary time that they required to undertake the reconstruction of the war-shattered economies on a capitalist basis.

The policies pursued by Stalin were in no way determined by the objective interests of the European and international working class (to which he was utterly hostile), but by what he considered to be in the national interest of the Soviet state. Fearing that revolution in Europe would provoke a confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, Stalin did everything in his power to block and derail the struggle for power by the working class. In those cases where the influence of the Soviet bureaucracy proved insufficient to prevent the outbreak of civil war, Stalin resorted to outright sabotage. Having assured Winston Churchill that he viewed Greece as part of Britain's sphere of influence, Stalin withheld aid from the KKE, the Greek Communist Party, when civil war broke out after the collapse of the German occupation. In the words of a historian of the Greek civil war, "The rank and file of the KKE, and in particular its leaders, were expendable. Without a trace of compunction, Stalin let them go to their doom." [1]

Without the critical breathing space provided to the European bourgeoisie and American imperialism, the post-war reconstruction of

Western Europe—upon which the survival of American capitalism depended—would not have been possible. It should not be forgotten that it was not until 1947—two years after the war—that the Marshall Plan was introduced. By that time, the revolutionary movement in Western Europe that accompanied the end of the World War had been betrayed by the political leadership of the working class and was in retreat.

The policies of the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies provided the political opportunity for the restabilization of capitalism. The subsequent expansion of the world economy created the material basis for the strengthening of illusions in the working class in the viability of national reformism. As in an earlier "Golden Age" of reformism, the 1890s, the rapidly rising living standards of the working class fostered confidence not simply in capitalism, but in the viability of the national state as an instrument of social progress.

The specific form taken by the resurgent nationalism depended on the specifics of the political and economic conditions facing one or another country. In the advanced capitalist countries of North America, Europe and Japan, the post-1947 economic boom encouraged the belief that the steady growth of the national economies would guarantee a constantly rising standard of living and eventually eliminate the social evils traditionally associated with capitalism. The rapid growth of the Soviet economy in the years following Stalin's death in 1953 seemed to lend legitimacy to the bureaucracy's perspective of a national road to socialism. A variant of the same nationalist perspective found expression in China, where Mao conceived of socialism in entirely nationalistic terms. Yet another form of nationalist perspective—the economic program of "import substitution—guided the policies of the bourgeois leaders in India and many other decolonized countries of Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

For about two decades, it seemed to many that a new national nirvana, an alternative to revolutionary socialist internationalism, had been discovered. But the end of the post-war expansion of capitalism and the growing signs of crisis in the world economy—from the early 1970s onward—undermined all policies based on faith in the possibility of a limitless growth of the national economy. During the period of the boom, the essential forces of world economy seemed to work silently in the background, providing steady support for the development of the national economy. But under conditions of crisis, the real relationship between global and national economic forces was revealed all too clearly. No national program, whatever its specific characteristics, could provide a means of defending the interests of the working class of any country against the massive force of international capital.

The national pseudo-socialist utopianism of the Soviet bureaucracy disintegrated during the 1980s. As for China, the long debate about the nature of the Maoist regime has been decisively resolved. In the early

1950s, Ernest Mandel, Michel Pablo and other theoreticians—having convinced themselves that Trotsky’s classical Marxist conceptions were inadequate in the face of new political developments—saw in China proof that socialism could be achieved without either the independent political organization of the working class or the creation of new revolutionary and mass democratic organs of power upon which the conquest of power by the proletariat would be based. They invented a new political category—which they called a “deformed” workers state, that is, a “workers state” which lacked any genuine, democratic institutions through which the working class wielded political power. The evolution of this state led eventually to the transformation of China into the indispensable foundation of global capitalist production. It is all too clear today that the state established by Mao Zedong in 1949 could have been far more accurately defined as a “deformed bourgeois state.”

If any lesson is to be drawn from the experience of the last six decades, it is that capitalism can be defeated only on the basis of internationalism. All nationalist alternatives have been discredited. The celebration of May Day must be re-infused with its original content—as the day in which the working class reaffirms internationalism not only in the sense of a general expression of supra-national solidarity, but as the foundation of its political program and perspective.

Permit me to conclude these remarks by returning to the theme with which I began. Sixty years after the end of World War II, the hopes and aspirations for a world cleansed of poverty, exploitation, and oppression have not been realized. Indeed, the political and intellectual climate grows increasingly reactionary. The drive by the ruling elites to wipe out the remnants of post-World War II social reforms is inevitably accompanied by the most reactionary ideologies—above all, religion.

In the United States, the Bush administration is seeking to destroy the essential constitutional pillar of democratic rights, the separation of church and state. The Republican Party is seeking to recast itself as the political arm of a religious community. It is attempting to create a mass base for right-wing politics through the mobilization of the Christian fundamentalist churches and their members. Attempting to whip up hysteria among demoralized, disoriented and even irrational elements within the American population, the Republicans portray their opponents as enemies of God, who are engaged in the persecution of helpless Christians.

The fascistic character of this propaganda is becoming increasingly apparent. The noted American historian, Fritz Stern, who fled from Germany as a child, has recently called attention to the similarities between the propaganda employed by the Nazis and that of the Republican Party. In the latest edition of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, Stern writes: “Today, I worry about the immediate future of the United States, the country that gave haven to German-speaking refugees in the 1930s.” He recalls the use that the Nazis made of religious appeals in their efforts to gather mass support:

“God had been drafted into national politics before, but Hitler’s success in fusing racial dogma with Germanic Christianity was an immensely powerful element in his electoral campaigns. Some people recognized the moral perils of mixing religion and politics, but many more were seduced by it. It was the pseudoreligious transfiguration of politics that largely ensured his success, notably in Protestant areas.” [2]

That one of the United States’ most distinguished historians should feel compelled to issue such a warning is an indication of the depth of the crisis of American democracy. Sixty years after its victory over Nazi Germany, the government of the United States is flirting with a fascist ideology and encouraging the development of a fascist-type movement.

The ideological dependence of bourgeois politics upon religious backwardness and obscurantism testifies to the bankruptcy and desperation of the ruling elites, and not only in the United States. The hysteria that accompanied the final weeks of the life of Terri Schiavo in

the United States was immediately followed by the orgy of medieval necromancy surrounding the death of John Paul II, and, lastly, by the anointing of the arch-reactionary Cardinal Ratzinger as his successor. The media’s worldwide and all-pervasive coverage of Karol Wojtyla’s death and Ratzinger’s election utilizing the most technologically sophisticated means of mass communications reminded me of Trotsky’s description of his visit to Lourdes in 1934. “What crudeness, insolence, nastiness!” he wrote. “A shop for miracles, a business office trafficking in grace.... But best of all is the papal blessing broadcast to Lourdes by—radio. The paltry miracles of the Gospels side by side with the radiotelephone! And what could be more absurd and disgusting than the union of proud technology with the sorcery of the Roman chief druid? Indeed, the thinking of mankind is bogged down in its own excrement.” [3]

The decisive event in the new Pope Benedict’s spiritual journey, we are informed, was his horror at the events of 1968—where his lectures on theology were interrupted by unruly students. That the protests of that year contributed significantly to a deeper examination of the crimes of the Third Reich and their enduring impact on German intellectual, political and social life was of no concern to Ratzinger. He saw the mass demonstrations as a threat to “ordnung,” and they convinced him of the evils of rational thought and secularism. The *New York Times* reported on April 17 that the new Pope “would like the church to assert itself more forcefully against the trend he sees as most threatening: globalization leading eventually to global secularization.”

What, in essence, is the “global secularization” that Pope Benedict identifies as the most dangerous threat to the Church? It is nothing other than the strengthening of those tendencies within society—economic, scientific, cultural and political—that are laying the basis for the triumph of socialism and internationalism. And we must admit that the fears of the Pope are well justified. The most powerful objective forces that exert the greatest influence on the direction of historical development are leading to the triumph of internationalism over nationalism, of scientific reason over irrationalism, of a universal human identity over a sectarian identity defined by ethnicity, nationality, and religion.

Notwithstanding the travails and tragedies through which it has passed since the end of World War II, socialism is rooted in the objective historical logic of economic and social development. The crisis of capitalist society will drive the working class, as an international force, back on to the road of struggle—and this road leads inevitably toward socialism.

Notes:

1. C.M. Woodhouse, *The Struggle for Greece 1941-1949*, Chicago, 2002, p. 289.
2. Fritz Stern, “Lessons from German History,” *Foreign Affairs* (May-June 2005), p. 17.
3. Leon Trotsky, *Diary in Exile 1935*, New York, 1963, p. 93.



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