

ISSE meeting in Frankfurt, Germany

A fierce response by Georgian nationalists

Our reporter
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A meeting of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) at Frankfurt Goethe University on Wednesday evening was the scene of a fierce exchange with Georgian nationalists.

The topic of the meeting, "The war in Georgia—America's aggressive policy in the Caucasus," drew a considerable number of university and high school students. The small seminar room was nearly full as a group of Georgian students entered just as the meeting was starting. It later emerged that the group was connected to the Caucasus Institute of Frankfurt University.

The main speaker was Ulrich Rippert, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG). He began his lecture with an outline of the events which began at the beginning of August with the assault by Georgian troops on the province of South Ossetia and nearly ended in an armed conflict between the world's two biggest nuclear powers—the United States and Russia.

Rippert explained that the aim of the strike by the Georgian army was to occupy and destroy the Roki tunnel, which is the only route between Russia and South Ossetia underneath the Caucasus mountain range. The timing of the attack was by no means coincidental, Rippert said. With the Russian head of government, Vladimir Putin, in Beijing for the Olympic Games, the regime in Tbilisi assumed it would take some time for the Russian army to react.

Georgia's calculation backfired, however, due to the immediate response by the Russian military, which forced Georgian soldiers to retreat and went on to occupy strategic positions in Georgian territory.

Rippert made clear that the Georgian attack on South Ossetia and the fierce bombardment of Tskhinvali could not have taken place without the knowledge of the US government. He pointed out that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had visited Tbilisi only four weeks before the Georgian assault and clearly expressed her support for Georgian claims on South Ossetia.

In addition, shortly before the assault the Georgian army staged a three-week-long military maneuver, "Immediate Response 2008," in which approximately 1,000 US soldiers took part. On the very day Georgian tanks attacked South Ossetia, a total of 127 US "military educators" were still stationed in Georgia.

Under conditions where the rapid and vigorous Russian reaction to the Georgian offensive took the US government by surprise and it was unable to prevent a military setback for Georgia, Washington changed tack and began an intensive propaganda

campaign. "The US ignored the Georgian assault on South Ossetia and presented the war as an attack by a brutal, imperialist Russia on a defenseless, democratic Georgia," Rippert explained. This propaganda line was then taken up by most of the Western media.

At the heart of this propaganda was the assertion of the principle of "Georgian territorial integrity," which has categorically excluded any breakaway by the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Rippert described this form of argument as utterly cynical. Just a few months earlier the US and a number of European governments, including Germany, had supported and recognized the separation of Kosovo from Serbia with the opposite reasoning.

Rippert then dealt in detail with the argument for the right of self-determination, which was used by Russia to justify its own response and which is defended by many leftist groups as a "universal and timeless democratic principle." He made clear that the Caucasus region is a good example of the absurdity of this claim.

"With its enormous fissured mountains and its remote valleys, it has repeatedly served as a collection point over the centuries for diverse population groups moving from north to south or from east to west. The consequence is a patchwork of very different linguistic, religious, ethnic and tribal groupings, with no consistent characteristics," Rippert continued. Depending on how one defines a "nation" it is possible to detect up to 40 different "nationalities" on the tongue of land through the Caucasus which connects the Caspian and Black Seas.

The problems of national oppression, social discrimination, poverty and unemployment can only be overcome in the Caucasus—and the Balkans—on the basis of a socialist perspective, Rippert stated, and explained what he meant: "The working class must topple the rival nationalist cliques, take the power and establish a socialist Caucasus federation, which places the region's resources and productive forces at the service of society as a whole while at the same time guaranteeing the democratic rights of all nationalities and ethnic groups."

In the course of his lecture, Rippert also dealt with the role played by the major imperialist power in Georgia. Rippert referred to Washington's measures since the collapse of the Soviet Union, aimed at encircling Russia with a cordon of military allies. US insistence on the admission of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO was part of this plan and would transform the Black Sea into a territory under the virtual control of NATO. Other countries

already bordering the Black Sea include existing NATO members Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania. Should Ukraine and Georgia join NATO, Russia would be restricted to a short coastal strip in this strategically vital region.

The aim is to reduce Russia to its role of 300 years earlier, when, under Peter the Great, it served as a depository of raw materials for the main imperialist great powers. It is in this connection that one must understand the important geo-strategic role of Georgia as a transit country for the rich oil and gas reserves in the Caspian region.

Rippert also opposed the Russian regime of President Dmitry Medvedev and Putin, which responded with thoroughly reactionary measures. He explained that they cynically manipulate national resentments and conflicts, blackmail other countries, and seek to achieve deals with different imperialist powers. By accepting the danger of a third, nuclear World War, they demonstrate that they are just as unscrupulous as the leadership in Washington.

Finally, Rippert stressed that in the wake of the international finance crisis the war in Georgia has recently taken a backseat in the media, but that all of the basic problems in the region are intensifying.

Immediately after his remarks a woman in the audience stood up to address the meeting. She identified herself as Georgian Dr. Manana Tandaschwili, a professor of linguistics and culture sciences at Frankfurt University.

It had been a long time since "she had heard such nonsense," she declared. Everybody knew, she said, that Russia was the aggressor and that the assaults on Georgia by the Russian army had not begun in the summer, "but had been going on for centuries." The assertion that the government of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili had attacked and bombarded South Ossetia and its capital Tskhinvali, was "a complete distortion of the facts," she said.

"I was there, I can you tell what took place and what sort of terror was used by the Russians," Tandaschwili called out with emotion. It was intolerable that such meetings could take place, particularly at the university, she retorted.

Another participant at the meeting intervened to accuse Tandaschwili of presumption. "As a professor you have no right to dismiss such a detailed lecture on such a very complex topic in such a manner and accuse the speaker of incompetence. I would be interested in what you have to say factually on the issue. It is incontrovertible that the American government was informed and pursues its own agenda in the region."

Tandaschwili answered by declaring that the lecture was not worth seriously addressing and maintained that it was absurd to level any accusations against the democratically elected government in Tbilisi, or against Washington.

Rippert intervened to explain that the remarks made by Professor Tandaschwili were nothing less than a regurgitation of the official government propaganda from Tbilisi, Berlin and Washington. Ms. Tandaschwili was no doubt indignant, he said, because she was not used to being contradicted with regard to such propaganda. Nearly all the official political parties, in particular the Green Party in Germany, used alleged and genuine acts of brutality to suppress

any serious discussion of the imperialist policies of the great powers, which had led to such confrontations.

"I stress once again, we do not support Russian policy," Rippert said. He added, "It is understandable that the Russian government resists its encirclement by America, but the means it employs to do so are completely reactionary."

"The regime of Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin does not represent the interests of the Russian population," Rippert added, "but rather a criminal and parasitic clique of oligarchs and nouveaux riches, who have plundered the resources of the Soviet Union and made it the basis for their own fantastic wealth. The regime led by President Mikheil Saakashvili represents a similar social layer in Georgia. The only difference is that this layer seeks to assert its interests in opposition to Moscow and in cooperation with Washington."

Rippert stressed: "As socialists we assume the standpoint of the international working class."

"We do not want to hear anymore!" exclaimed another member of the audience who identified herself as Lela Samushia, a student from Tbilisi who is currently completing her doctorate under Professor Tandaschwili. "The working class does not interest me," she said. "We have had enough of this socialist rubbish."

Once again, Samushia sought to present a list of gruesome brutalities allegedly carried out by Russian troops—including children drowned in wells, mass rapes and beheadings. However, when the discussion turned towards the broader issues of international links and the role of the US government, she stormed out of the meeting together with the remaining Georgian nationalists.

The remaining participants at the meeting were left astonished over the arrogance, aggressiveness and hostility to democratic rights and due process demonstrated by this small group of nationalist students and their professor.



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