

German president in Estonia: Historical revisionism to justify militarism

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In a speech in Estonia on the 78th anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin pact, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) sought to whip up nationalist resentments against Russia.

The German president is currently paying an official visit to the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. His first stop was the Estonian capital, Tallinn, where he gave a presentation on August 23 titled “Germany and Estonia—a changing history, a common future” at the Academy of Sciences. On that day in 1939, the German and Soviet foreign ministers, Ribbentrop and Molotov, signed the German-Soviet non-aggression pact. The pact gave Nazi Germany a green light for its invasion of Poland and led to the eventual incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union.

Steinmeier used the anniversary to threaten Russia and boost Estonian nationalism, which draws directly from the traditions of the Nazis.

Addressing Moscow, he warned that Berlin would never “recognise the illegal annexation of the Crimea” nor “accept covert interference through hybrid means or deliberate disinformation,” as has supposedly taken place in Estonia. Steinmeier accused the Russian leadership of “deliberately defining their country’s image as different from, or even in hostility to us in the West.”

He then falsely presented Estonia and the other Baltic states as havens of freedom and justice. “The very first message echoing here in Tallinn is the power of freedom—a force which no inhuman ideology or totalitarian rule can restrain in the long term,” he gushed.

Steinmeier knows very well this is not true. As is the case across Eastern Europe, where Stalinist regimes collapsed or were overthrown between 1989-91, there has been no flourishing of democracy and prosperity in the Baltic states. Instead, power was shared between competing capitalist cliques, whose interpretation of “freedom” is the unrestrained exploitation of the working class. They have maintained power primarily by fomenting nationalism and racism.

In Estonia, for example, the Russian minority, which accounts for more than one quarter of the country’s 1.3 million inhabitants, is subject to systematic discrimination. About half of the minority lack an Estonian passport and can only acquire one by completing a difficult Estonian language test, which is particularly hard for the elderly. Income and career prospects for the Russian minority are correspondingly lower.

Economic growth, based on low wages, meagre social benefits and limited workers’ rights, benefits only a small minority. The average income of a full-time employee is one-third of that in Germany, and unemployment is relatively high, officially 7 percent. Around 100,000 Estonians work abroad due to lack of work at home.

Nevertheless—or precisely for this reason—Steinmeier praised Estonia as a role model for the European Union. “Many people in Germany are grateful for the fresh European wind that blows over the Baltic Sea from the Baltic states at a time when some Europeans are turning away from unification and its values,” he said.

Steinmeier’s accusation directed at the Russian leadership of “defining their country’s image” in opposition to another is much more true of ruling circles in Estonia, which campaign in a hysterical manner against Russia. They go so far as to glorify the Nazis and their collaborators. In 2012 the Estonian parliament adopted a resolution honouring the voluntary Estonian members of Hitler’s Waffen-SS as “freedom fighters” and “fighters against the communist dictatorship.”

Some 80,000 Estonians had joined the Nazis in World War II in order to fight the Red Army. August 28, the day on which the Waffen-SS recruited members of the Estonian Defence League in 1942, is a national holiday, celebrated every year with marches. Neo-Nazis take part, including those travelling from abroad, while leading politicians send their greetings. There is no corresponding tribute for the 30,000 Estonians who fought in the Red Army against the Nazis.

The Hitler-Stalin Pact is used to argue that the Baltic states

were more oppressed and persecuted by the Soviet regime than by the Nazis. “August 23 has long since been a day of anti-Russian emotions at this historical intersection between East and West,” the correspondent of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* writes from Tallinn. “The memory of communism times is more alive than the German occupation.”

Steinmeier exploits this historical revisionism to justify the return of German militarism. The argument that the Soviet regime was worse than the Nazi regime and National Socialism, as a justified reaction to the crimes of “Bolshevism”, has long been a weapon in the hands of right-wing extremist historians, from Ernst Nolte to Jorg Baberowski.

Stalin’s pact with Hitler was undoubtedly criminal, delivering a severe blow to dedicated Communists and anti-fascists all over the world and undermining their fighting morale. But this does not mean that Hitler and Stalin pursued the same goals or, as Steinmeier in Tallinn put it, “made East Central Europe their prey.”

Hitler represented German imperialism, whose hunger for markets, raw materials and “living space” in the East could only be satisfied by violent expansion. For Hitler, the pact with Stalin was a tactical measure to gain time for his war plans against England and France, and then attack the Soviet Union.

For his part, Stalin represented the interests of a privileged bureaucracy which had usurped Soviet power from the working class. The bureaucracy feared, above all, uprisings by workers across the globe, which would inspire Soviet workers to take similar action, thereby threatening the rule of the clique in Moscow. It was incapable of defending the Soviet Union, as Lenin and Trotsky had done, by mobilising the international working class. Instead, it relied on alliances with various imperialist powers.

Two important events preceded the Hitler-Stalin pact: Stalin’s Terror of 1937-1938, which decapitated the leadership of the Red Army and the Communist Party and rendered the Soviet Union virtually defenceless; and the Munich Agreement of 1938, with which Great Britain and France delivered Czechoslovakia on a plate to Hitler. Stalin concluded he could no longer rely on London and Paris. Moscow had sought to strike an alliance with Great Britain and France to the end, but they were merely playing for time until Stalin finally struck his deal with Hitler. Despite the cynicism, brutality, and recklessness with which it was carried out, Moscow’s pact had essentially a defensive character.

Hitler was able to fulfil his historical mission by taking the path to war. In his article “The Twin Stars: Hitler-Stalin”, Leon Trotsky wrote in 1939: “A victorious offensive war would secure the economic future of German capitalism and,

along with this, the National Socialist regime. It is different with Stalin. He cannot wage an offensive war with any hope of victory. ... No one knows this better than Stalin. The fundamental thought of his foreign policy is to escape a major war.” (*Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, Pathfinder Press, p. 115).

In a section of his speech in Tallinn, Steinmeier indicated the real reason for his visit. He expressed his pleasure with his Estonian hosts who “appreciate our cooperation and seek to collaborate with us on the existential questions of security and defence.”

Germany, the US and NATO use the right-wing, anti-Russian regimes in Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius and Warsaw to encircle Russia militarily. A large proportion of the 4,000 NATO soldiers permanently deployed on the Russian border as the vanguard of a 40,000-strong rapid deployment force, are stationed in the Baltic states, with their combined population of just 6 million. Steinmeier is due to visit NATO troops in Rukla, Lithuania, on Friday.

In September 2014 US President Obama gave an assurance that NATO would provide Estonia military assistance in any conflict with Russia. Steinmeier has now echoed that call. “I assure people in Estonia: their security is our security,” he said. This means that in the event of a provocation by the right-wing government of the tiny state, Germany will be plunged into a war capable of transforming Europe into a nuclear battlefield.

It is not the first time that Steinmeier has worked with Nazi apologists to advance German militarism. In 2014 he was intensively involved in the preparation of the coup in Ukraine, which toppled the president-elect Viktor Yanukovich and brought the pro-Western oligarch Poroshenko to power. Steinmeier’s Ukrainian allies at that time included the leader of the fascist Swoboda party, Oleh Tyahnybok. Yanukovich was forced to flee the country by armed fascist militias who drew on the tradition of Nazi collaborators in Ukraine during WWII.

Shortly before the putsch in Kiev Steinmeier had proclaimed the “end of military restraint” at the Munich Security Conference. Germany is “too big and too important” to stand on the world’s side lines, he said.

Steinmeier’s recent trip to Estonia confirms that the return of German militarism is inextricably linked to the revival of the vilest traditions of German history.



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