

Finland and Sweden prepare to join NATO

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The imperialist powers in North America and Europe are preparing to dramatically intensify their military encirclement of Russia aimed at regime change by accepting Finland and Sweden into NATO. The ruling elites in both Scandinavian countries, which maintained formal neutrality after World War II, have seized on the Russian government's invasion of Ukraine to overcome long-standing popular opposition to the aggressive US-led military alliance.

Finland's parliament, with the approval of the country's Social Democrat-led government under Prime Minister Sanna Marin, began debating NATO membership last week. The outcome is a foregone conclusion, with observers expecting that Helsinki could formally apply for NATO membership as soon as mid-May. The political establishment has exploited the war fever whipped up by the imperialist powers against Russia and public opinion polls ostensibly showing a substantial growth in support for NATO membership to impose a policy they have long sought to adopt.

Newspaper reports Monday confirmed that Sweden will submit its application simultaneously with Finland, possibly during the week of May 16, when Finland's president is scheduled to make a state visit to Stockholm.

Finnish membership in NATO will extend the military alliance's border with Russia by 1,300 kilometres (about 800 miles), more than the current border Russia shares with the imperialist military alliance. A train journey from Helsinki to St. Petersburg, Russia's second city, takes just three-and-a-half hours. The country will become yet another staging ground for aggressive NATO operations to subjugate Russia to the status of a semi-colony.

In their rush to join NATO, the Finnish and Swedish ruling elites are reviving their historic role as servants of the most rapacious imperialist powers. Every article dealing with Helsinki and Stockholm's imminent NATO membership repeats uncritically the fact that both countries remained "neutral" after 1945, as if they have only now been awoken from their naive peaceful slumbers by the "Russian aggressor" Putin. But an examination of Finland and Sweden's history refutes such claims.

Both countries' ruling elites were among the bitterest opponents of the 1917 Russian Revolution and collaborated first with Nazi Germany and then the US Cold War against the Soviet Union.

Finland never existed in modern times as an independent state until the Bolshevik government under Lenin's leadership extended it the right of self-determination following the successful conquest of power by the Russian working class in October 1917. Less than three months later, the Finnish bourgeoisie used its "independence," based on a dependent and subservient relationship to German imperialist militarism, to wage a brutal civil war against its own working class to prevent a socialist revolution.

The prospects for such a revolution loomed large. Finnish workers had responded to the Bolsheviks' taking of power in Petrograd by launching an indefinite general strike in November 1917 that directly posed the question of which class would rule society. But it was betrayed by Finland's Social Democrats, a party that loyally followed the pro-imperialist Second International.

The Finnish white terror in the winter and spring of 1918 was the most

savage display of butchery since the Paris Commune of 1871, with tens of thousands of workers, including women and children, massacred in one-sided battles and in concentration camps. In addition to German military expertise and weaponry, the Finnish bourgeoisie received military support in the civil war from Sweden, which had ruled Finland as a colony as part of the Swedish Empire until its defeat by Russia in the Swedish-Russian war of 1808-09.

Advocates of Finnish NATO membership invariably cite the 1939 Winter War with the Soviet Union, which was the result of Stalin's nationalist policies that stood diametrically opposed to the principles of Soviet democracy fought for by Lenin and Trotsky when they granted Finland independence from Russia in 1917. The conflict was a disaster for Soviet forces, who faced stiff Finnish resistance and suffered 321,000-381,000 casualties, including 120,000-170,000 deaths. Finland suffered around 70,000 casualties and 26,000 deaths by comparison.

As Trotsky wrote in his *Open Letter to the Workers of the USSR* in April 1940, "(T)he infamous oppressive regime of Stalin has deprived the USSR of its attractive power. During the war with Finland, not only the majority of the Finnish peasants but also the majority of the Finnish workers, proved to be on the side of their bourgeoisie. This is hardly surprising since they know of the unprecedented oppression to which the Stalinist bureaucracy subjects the workers of near-by Leningrad and the whole of the USSR."

However, none of the present-day proponents of Finnish and Swedish NATO membership care to mention the "Continuation War" between 1941 and 1944, when Finnish divisions participated in Nazi Germany's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, which claimed the lives of at least 27 million Soviet citizens and made possible the Holocaust of European Jewry. Both Finland and Sweden were notified in advance of Operation Barbarossa, with Finnish officers travelling to Germany in May 1940 for consultations so they could coordinate their attacks on the Soviet Union. Stockholm granted passage by train for German troops to deploy from Norway to Finland to support the Finnish offensive, which would go on to play a key role in the blockade of Leningrad.

The "continuity" between the Finnish white terror of 1918 and the Continuation War was personified by the man who led the Finnish army during both, Supreme Commander Karl Mannerheim, a former general in the Tsarist Russian army who headed the Finnish white army in 1918 when it exterminated Finnish workers. Mannerheim celebrated his 75th birthday in 1942 in the company of Adolf Hitler, who paid a surprise visit to Finland to mark the occasion. Mannerheim, known for his aristocratic tendencies and inability to speak the Finnish language fluently, went on to serve as Finland's president between 1944 and 1946.

Swedish "neutrality" during World War II was based on Stockholm's supply of iron ore and other critical raw materials to Nazi Germany's war machine. After occupying Norway and Denmark in the spring of 1940, Hitler saw no reason to waste additional military resources on a takeover of Sweden, which was cut off from the possibility of receiving allied military aid and more than willing to do business with the Third Reich. Stockholm's cordial relations with Berlin were assisted by an affinity with fascist ideology in Swedish ruling circles, a fact underscored by the

country's continuation of eugenics policies long after World War II. Protected from the ravages of modern warfare, Sweden's economy boomed during and after the war, laying the basis for the ruling elite's substantial concessions to a radicalized working class to safeguard capitalist rule—the so-called “Swedish model.”

Finnish and Swedish “neutrality” after the Second World War was motivated not by some altruistic commitment to peace, but by political necessity and military expediency. The Finnish bourgeoisie, thoroughly discredited by its collaboration with Nazism, saw neutrality as the price to pay for maintaining the existence of a capitalist state, avoiding the fate of the ruling elites in the Eastern European buffer states, which the Stalinists removed from power and replaced with loyal servants of the Moscow bureaucracy as the Cold War intensified. For its part, Swedish neutrality did not prevent it from serving as a key player in US imperialism's spying on the Soviet Union. Documents released by whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013 revealed that Swedish intelligence signed a top-secret agreement with the US, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—the so-called “Five Eyes” alliance—in 1954 to share intelligence on the Soviets.

With the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and restoration of capitalism, the Finnish and Swedish ruling elites sought to return more openly to their counter-revolutionary traditions of the first half of the 20th century. They began to shift more directly into the orbit of the major European and North American imperialist alliances. Both countries joined NATO's Partnership for Peace during the 1990s, a framework that allowed non-alliance members to participate in NATO exercises and training. They also joined the European Union.

Sweden's formal break with almost two centuries of neutrality came in 2002, when the Social Democrat government led by Göran Persson agreed to dispatch troops to Afghanistan as part of the US-led occupation of the Central Asian country. Swedish Saab-Gripen fighter jets flew missions in NATO's savage bombardment of Libya in 2011, which plunged the North African country into a bloody civil war that continues to the present day.

In 2015, representatives from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden signed a multilateral Nordic defence agreement explicitly aimed at confronting “Russian aggression.” The deal included the coordination of military equipment production and joint military exercises conforming to NATO standards.

Swedish and Finnish troops have played a prominent role over recent years in some of NATO's largest military drills, including exercises involving tens of thousands of troops in the Baltic Sea and in Arctic conditions in Norway. They also joined some of the provocative manoeuvres organised by NATO with Ukraine in the Black Sea in the months leading up to President Vladimir Putin's invasion. Swedish forces participated in Exercise Sea Breeze in June and July 2021, a massive NATO-led provocation that saw over 5,000 troops from more than 30 countries practice amphibious, air, and naval warfare manoeuvres co-hosted by Ukraine and the US Sixth Fleet.

US imperialism and its European allies see the integration of Finland and Sweden into NATO as crucial in opening a new front in their efforts to cripple Russia and turn it into a semi-colony. As former NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen wrote in the *New York Times*, Finland and Sweden represent “a convenient buffer zone between Russia and current NATO members,” which “would make it easier to react to any incursion by Russian forces into the Baltic states.” He continued, “At NATO headquarters, membership could be approved overnight.”

In December 2021, two months prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, US officials concluded with the Finnish government the largest single military purchase in the country's history—Helsinki's procurement of 64 F-35 fighter jets from US military contractor Lockheed Martin. To give a sense of the extraordinary scope of the deal for Finland, a country of just 5.4 million people, it would equate to a country the size of Germany

buying over 900 warplanes.

Beyond Finland's lengthy border with Russia, both Sweden and Finland have Baltic coasts, providing ideal locations for NATO to launch aggressive provocations and attacks on Russian forces. Of strategic significance is the Swedish island of Gotland, which lies about 90 kilometres off the Swedish east coast in the Baltic Sea. A NATO presence there would give the alliance the opportunity to directly strike the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, which lies between Lithuania and Poland about 300 kilometres southeast of Gotland and is home to Russia's Baltic fleet.

Magnus Christiansson, a researcher in military strategy at the Swedish Defence University, told *France 24* in January that Gotland could function as a launching pad for NATO attacks on Russia. Couching his prediction in the language of an altruistic United States rushing to the defence of the tiny republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Christiansson commented, “To help its allies, the Americans would have to send jets over—fast—and fly over the Baltic Sea. But if the Russians gained control of Gotland, they could use anti-aircraft missiles and coastal robots, making it extremely difficult for the Americans to reach and defend the Baltics.”

Fabrice Pothier, former head of NATO policy planning also noted, “It's big deal militarily, but it's an even bigger deal politically. Putin has lost two valuable ‘on-the-fence’ countries... Appeasement has failed.”

The claim that Sweden and Finland's ruling elites performed a 180-degree turn in their foreign policy the morning after Putin's invasion of Ukraine is nothing but self-serving propaganda. Their joining NATO has long been in the works, but they have confronted the hurdle of widespread popular opposition. Their headlong rush into NATO's arms is designed to present the Swedish and Finnish populations with a fait accompli: the transformation of both countries into frontline states in the imperialist war drive against Russia. As Petteri Orpo, head of the conservative opposition National Coalition Party in Finland, put it during a visit to Washington for consultations with Biden administration officials, “For 16 years, we have supported NATO membership, and now it's possible. Thanks, Putin.”

Orpo and the rest of the political establishment know very well that it is not Putin, but US President Joe Biden, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that they must thank for their opportunity to join NATO. Putin, the representative of the bankrupt Russian oligarchy that emerged due to the Stalinist restoration of capitalism, was goaded by the imperialist powers through a succession of provocations and threats to launch his reactionary invasion of Ukraine. The US-NATO war with Russia threatens to escalate into a broader global conflagration, including the Baltic and Nordic regions.



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