

Baltic governments use war in Ukraine to accelerate removal of Soviet World War II monuments

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28 August 2022

Last week, the Baltic state of Latvia completed its removal of a 79-meter tall World War II monument dedicated to the defeat of Nazi Germany. The demolition of the Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders is part of an ongoing reactionary campaign throughout the Baltics and Eastern Europe, designed to erase from historical memory the defeat of fascism and the massive victory it signified for both the Soviet and international working class.

At least 27 million Soviet citizens of all nationalities gave their lives in the fight against Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945. The war on the Eastern front was the single bloodiest military conflict in world history. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union was also a critical turning point in the Nazi-led genocide of European Jewry. Within months after the beginning of the invasion on June 22, 1941, the Jewish population in modern-day Ukraine and the Baltics had been wiped out almost in its entirety.

The Soviet-era World War II monument was erected by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which itself engaged in systematic falsifications of the history of the October Revolution as well as the war. Nevertheless, for decades, many of these monuments have resonated strongly in the working class across the former Soviet Union. Despite significant political and historical confusion, there is a deep popular consciousness of the enormous significance and sacrifices of the fight against fascism by the Soviet masses who rose up to defend the conquests of the October Revolution in spite of the immense crimes of Stalinism.

In the Estonian city of Narva near the Russian border, authorities removed a World War II T-34 tank monument dedicated to the Soviet victory over fascism. The tank will be moved to the Estonian War Museum north of the capital Tallinn. A common grave for the victims of fascist

Germany in the largely Russian-speaking Narva will now have its Soviet markers replaced with “neutral” grave markers.

The Estonian government first announced the accelerated removal on August 4, justifying it with the war in Ukraine and supposed Russian attempts to create “hostility” within the country. One-third of the Estonian population are Russian speakers. The removal of a memorial to Red Army soldiers within the predominantly Russian-speaking city is an obvious provocation intended to sow ethnic tensions between Estonians and Russian speakers and further embolden far-right forces.

Defending the removal of the monument in Narva against criticism, Estonian President Alar Karis purposefully conflated genocidal Nazi Germany with the Soviet Union. Eastern European governments routinely employ this narrative, cynically exploiting the crimes of Stalinism in order to downplay the crimes of fascism, legitimize neofascist forces and vilify socialism.

“Historical diversity will not disappear with this, but will be placed in a dignified manner in a location where it does not hurt many people or sow confrontation. Everyone can remember those who died in World War II in the peace of a cemetery. And one important reminder: Estonia did not participate in this war as a country, but was a victim of both the communist and Nazi regimes,” Karis said.

Lithuania—one of the biggest arms suppliers to the anti-Moscow Ukrainian government in recent years—has likewise undertaken a mass “de-Sovietization” campaign and removed a number of Soviet-era monuments since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

In June, the Lithuanian parliament drafted a so-called “de-Sovietization” bill that would speed up both the removal of statues and monuments as well as eliminating

street and square names associated with the Soviet Union. Under the law, any final decision on removal would be made by the government-appointed Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre. As in the case of Estonia, it is clear that the government will use the law to override any local opposition, strengthen the right and whip up ethnic animosity.

All three Baltic states were incorporated into the Soviet Union as a result of the Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939, a bankrupt and politically criminal effort by the Stalinist bureaucracy to preempt an invasion by Nazi Germany. The pact paved the way for the beginning of World War II in September 1939. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union followed in June 1941, and the Wehrmacht quickly overran much of what is now Ukraine and the Baltics. In concert with the collaborationist administrations and homegrown fascist elements, the Nazis murdered the local Jewish population with Estonia becoming the first country in Europe to be declared “judenfrei” (“free of Jews”).

In Lithuania, 95 percent of the country’s Jews were murdered, the highest rate in all of Europe. The Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF)—like the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in Ukraine—fully participated in the Nazi-led ethnic cleansing of Jews and even began the murder of Jews prior to the arrival of the German Wehrmacht.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracies, the right-wing legacy of the bourgeois regimes in the Baltics during the inter-war period was revived. Under the aegis of both NATO and the EU, the Baltic Nazi collaborators from the World War II era were systematically rehabilitated, often earlier and more aggressively than in other parts of Eastern Europe, including Ukraine.

In Lithuania, one of the first actions of the post-Soviet Lithuanian parliament was to declare Jonas Norelka, a Nazi collaborator who had signed deportation orders for Jews, a “national hero.” Beginning in 2006, the Lithuanian government, already a member of NATO and the EU, engaged in a despicable, right-wing campaign against the few surviving Jewish Soviet partisans, who fought against Lithuanian Nazi collaborators during the war. Among the targets of the Lithuanian government was the noted Holocaust survivor and historian Yitzhak Arad who had fought with the Soviet partisans and was now accused of being a “war criminal.”

After 1991, the Estonian government granted citizenship only to residents who lived in the country prior to 1940. Latvia also adopted a similar reactionary

nationality law, denying citizenship to its Russian-speaking population. In 2019, the Institute of Statelessness and Inclusion estimated that there were still up to 200,000 “noncitizens” living in Latvia and Estonia, most of them ethnic Russians. Latvia and Estonia have a total population of 1.9 and 1.3 million, respectively.

These reactionary anti-Russian laws have gone hand in hand with the destruction of Soviet monuments. In 2007, Estonian authorities provocatively demolished a two-meter-tall statue known as the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn dedicated to Soviet victory in World War II. The move was protested by the country’s ethnic communities and resulted in a riot with over 1,000 arrested and one Russian protester killed.

The promotion of fascist elements and racist, anti-Russian hysteria have made the post-Soviet Baltic states fast friends with NATO and the United States. Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia were all accepted into the military alliance in 2004, one year after the US launched its decades-long occupation of Iraq.

Speaking in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, in 2002, US President George W. Bush ominously stated, “The long night of fear, uncertainty, and loneliness is over. You’re joining the strong and growing family of NATO. Our alliance has made a solemn pledge of protection, and anyone who would choose Lithuania as an enemy has also made an enemy of the United States of America. In the face of aggression, the brave people of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia will never again stand alone.”

Prior to the US- and EU-orchestrated coup in Kiev in 2014, when the elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych was overthrown and replaced with a rabidly anti-Russian and pro-NATO government, it was widely believed that the Baltic states and not Ukraine would serve as the *casus belli* for NATO to carry out its war plans against Russia. Now that the war has begun, the Baltic states’ anti-Soviet campaign has become an integral part of both the NATO war against Russia and the war on the working class at home.



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