

Victory Day in Russia: The real historical lessons for the working class

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On Friday, May 9, military parades and various festive events dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Soviet Union and its allies over the Third Reich took place throughout Russia. The parades were held in an atmosphere of heightened security.

Putin took seriously the statements made by Zelensky and other Ukrainian politicians, who directly said that they had the ability to strike Moscow or other Russian cities. It should be noted that the ceasefire proposed by the Kremlin for the period from May 7 to 11 was not actually observed, despite Zelensky's statements that the Ukrainian side would not engage in hostilities. In the days preceding "Victory Day," Ukraine launched several drone attacks on Russian regions, including Belgorod.

According to official figures, over 1 million people participated in a march in St. Petersburg to honor those killed in the war. Thousands participated in demonstrations in other parts of the country, many of them holding up pictures of their grandparents, who fought and died in the war. In Russia, as in all other countries of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine, virtually every family has lost one or more relatives in the war against fascism which claimed an estimated 27 million Soviet lives—one in six Soviet citizens alive before the war. Millions more served as front-line soldiers or rear-echelon workers, working themselves to exhaustion and starvation to feed the front and ensure victory over Hitler.

While there is a deep-rooted popular consciousness of the war, its class and historical significance are not understood as a result of decades of Stalinism. The Putin regime is building upon the legacy of Stalinist historical falsifications and nationalism to present the war as a primarily national undertaking. On that basis, it falsely portrays its reactionary invasion of Ukraine as a continuation of the struggle waged by the Soviet masses in defense of the Soviet Union.

Putin's nationalist distortions of the war

This year's parade was the 31st in the history of capitalist Russia. After the liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991, under President Boris Yeltsin, military parades and festive events began to play the role of a well-orchestrated ideological avalanche aimed at Russian workers with the goal of poisoning them with an anti-historical amalgam. According to this false narrative, the Soviet people did not fight to defend the achievements of the October Revolution against the most barbaric capitalist regime in history, but they fought for the "Motherland," the "Fatherland" and "national interests" that have supposedly existed for a thousand years.

To Putin, the historic feat of the Soviet people in the struggle against Hitler, which had international class significance, was only a link in the chain of feats of the 1,000-year-old Russian people in the name of their own national culture. The mythology of Russian nationalism has become the principal lever for the Putin regime's efforts to conceal the

fundamental differences between the social foundations of the Soviet Union and modern capitalist Russia. This mythology is based on a mixture of outright historical falsification, religious mysticism and crass omissions.

In his speech at the parade in Moscow, Putin stated:

Our fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers saved the Fatherland. And they bequeathed to us to defend the Motherland, to be united, to firmly defend our national interests, our thousand-year history, culture, and traditional values. Everything that is dear to us, everything that is sacred to us. ... It is our duty to defend the honor of the soldiers and commanders of the Red Army, the great feat of representatives of different nationalities who will forever remain in world history as Russian soldiers.

By turning Soviet soldiers into "Russian soldiers," Putin suggests that the war against Hitler was merely a matter of national defense. In reality, the Red Army was created under the leadership of Leon Trotsky after the October Revolution to fight the bourgeoisie of the former Russian Empire and imperialist intervention, and it was originally oriented toward the world revolution of the working class. In World War II, the Red Army consisted not simply of "Russian" but of Soviet soldiers, including millions from Ukraine, the Caucasus, Central Asia and other ethnic and religious minorities who fought side by side against imperialist barbarism.

Moreover, contrary to Putin's mythology, 1,000 years of Russian history lasts, at best, 500 years, beginning with the first centralized Russian state of Ivan III. It was then that the word Russia came into widespread use as a synonym for the name of the state. However, this name was not officially established until the reign of Russia's first emperor, Peter I, in 1721. The first 500 years of this history cannot be called Russian in the sense that it concerned the East Slavic tribes. There could be no question of any Russians or their unity. The national idea of Russia was simply impossible at that time. People associated themselves first and foremost with their tribe, prince or city. The fragmentation by the princes and the constant wars between them were the most striking manifestations of the heterogeneity of society at that time.

In his promotion of Russian nationalism, Putin is merely repeating, with minor modifications, the propaganda of Stalin during the war against Hitler. It was under Stalin that the Nazi-Soviet war was termed the "Great Patriotic War." With this term, the gigantic battle to defend the conquests of the October Revolution was thus presented as a continuation of the "Patriotic War" of the Russian Empire of the Tsars against Napoleon in 1812. The underlying motivation for this terminology was to obfuscate the class and international character of the Soviet war against Nazi Germany, which contained strong elements of a revolutionary civil war, falsely

turning it into an exclusively national affair. In fact, it was during the Second World War that the nationalist propaganda of the Soviet bureaucracy reached its temporary peak: For several years, Stalin had been engaged in rehabilitating the old Russian tsars, reviving Great Russian chauvinism, and trying in every way to erase from memory the history of the Civil War as a class war against imperialism and the bourgeoisie.

This propaganda was a continuation of Stalin's nationalist betrayal of the revolution on the basis of the program of "building socialism in one country." It was aimed both at undermining and weakening the revolutionary impulses in the consciousness of the masses that were revived with the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union and that threatened not only the fascist invaders but also the Soviet bureaucracy which had violently usurped political power from the working class.

In fact, the Stalinist bureaucracy bore a substantial share of political responsibility for the rise of fascism and the scale of destruction it brought upon the Soviet people. Just three years before the war, the country saw the peak of state terror against old Bolsheviks and all opponents of Stalin's regime in the Great Terror. In this campaign of mass murder, all the principal leaders of the October Revolution and thousands of Trotskyists were murdered, including Leon Trotsky himself in August 1940. The Terror involved a large-scale purge of the Red Army, which weakened it and encouraged Hitler to attack the Soviet Union in June 1941. Hitler hoped that Stalin's purges had so weakened the Red Army that the Soviet Union would suffer a crushing defeat at the first serious blow.

Fortunately, Hitler's hopes were not entirely fulfilled. However, the Soviet Union came to the brink of destruction. The first months of the war were a huge failure and confirmed the bankruptcy of the Stalinist clique, which was completely unprepared for war. In 1941 alone, combat losses amounted to 3 million people, more than in any other half-year of the war. In fact, the Soviet Union managed to hold on because Hitler's regime was in an even more acute crisis and was unable to wage a long war against the Soviet Union over such vast distances.

The hardships of war that befell a country already weakened and bled dry by repression were unprecedented: 11.4 million died in combat; 7.4 million were deliberately exterminated; 2.2 million died in forced labor in Germany; 4.1 million died of starvation, disease and lack of medical care. Total population losses amounted to 27 million people. Material losses during the four years of war amounted to 30 percent of the Soviet Union's national wealth.

It is worth noting the "special treatment" of communists by the Nazis: All political workers in the Red Army were to be shot immediately, according to a Wehrmacht order dated June 6, 1941 (the "Commissar Order"). As a result, the Communist Party was particularly hard hit by the fascist terror. Although it had long been usurped by Stalin and lost its best leaders, it still had a huge number of rank-and-file communists who were determined to defend the achievements of the October Revolution. One in three of the 9.1 million communists who fought against Hitler died.

In his speech on Victory Day, Putin stated that he would not allow history to be rewritten. In an attempt to present himself as a supporter of historical truth, Putin did not say a word about what made the Germans, once at the forefront of many fields of science and technology, follow Hitler and challenge the very existence of the Soviet Union. The true reasons would be too inconvenient a truth for the former Stalinist KGB agent.

To understand the causes of World War II and the origins of the war of annihilation waged by the Third Reich against the Soviet Union requires an analysis of the situation after World War I and the October Revolution of 1917, out of which the USSR emerged.

The start of World War I and the seizure of power by the working class in the October Revolution in 1917 marked the end of the pre-war capitalist

balance. From then on, Europe and the world would be characterised by acute social crises and rapid shifts between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary situations.

This culminated in the events in Germany in the early 1930s, when the German working class was threatened with the seizure of power by the Nazis led by Hitler, who was supported by the entire financial oligarchy in Germany. Despite the organization, experience and large numbers of the German working class, Hitler was able to come to power. He immediately proceeded to destroy all workers' organizations, the parliament and the courts, and established a totalitarian dictatorship aimed at war and genocide.

The reasons for this catastrophe was not some "special psychology of the Germans" but the false ultra-left policies of the leadership of the German Communist Party, which was under the direct influence of the Stalinized Communist International. As the bureaucracy in the USSR consolidated its political power and social privileges, it turned the Comintern from a world party into a tool of Soviet foreign policy. By rejecting the "united front" policy proposed by Trotsky to unite communist and social democratic German workers in the struggle against Hitler's rise, the Stalinists surrendered without a fight and cleared the path to power for the Nazis.

This led to the establishment of the most reactionary capitalist regime in history in the most advanced European country, which began a rapid rearmament and saw its mission as ridding the world of Bolshevism and socialism, i.e., above all, putting an end to the very existence of the Soviet Union, a goal which the imperialist powers had failed to achieve during the Civil War of 1918-1921.

This onslaught of reaction rekindled the revolutionary consciousness of the Soviet masses who heroically defended the conquests of the October Revolution against Nazism despite the horrendous crimes of Stalinism. But in the end it was the Stalinist bureaucracy that was able to accomplish what the Nazis failed to achieve in 1941: In 1991, it destroyed the Soviet Union and fully restored capitalism in Russia, Ukraine and all other parts of the former USSR. It is out of this protracted counter-revolution that the Putin regime emerged, inheriting and reviving key features of Stalinist ideology.

It is therefore no coincidence that the Putin regime is ever more openly rehabilitating Stalin. Of the 110 monuments to Stalin that exist in Russia today, 95 were built under Putin. Most recently, authorities erected a monument to Stalin in a popular Moscow subway station. Meanwhile, monuments to victims of the terror have been repeatedly vandalized. Just recently, Putin approved the renaming of Volgograd Airport to Stalingrad, not objecting to Volgograd returning to its old Stalinist name. Stalin's mass murder of hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries and innocent citizens is increasingly being reinterpreted as a "necessary struggle against the enemies of the people."

Putin's hopes for a deal with imperialism

Not only in his promotion of Great Russian chauvinism and historical falsifications does Putin stand in the tradition of Stalin. In its foreign policy as well, the Russian oligarchy has inherited the irrational conception of the Soviet bureaucracy that it was possible to achieve a "peaceful coexistence" with the imperialist powers through a combination of deals, maneuvers and attacks on the working class. But it is doing so under conditions where the Soviet Union has already been destroyed, and the principal goal of its foreign policy is the safeguarding of the interests of the criminal gang of oligarchs that emerged out of the Soviet bureaucracy as the new ruling class of capitalist Russia.

The latest iteration of this basic orientation are the appeals by the Putin regime to the “peacemaker” Trump. In a recent interview given during the filming of a “documentary,” Putin expressed the hope that Trump would strike a deal with Russia. Assessing the tension between Trump and the Europeans, Putin noted with particular satisfaction that

Trump, with his character and persistence, will bring order, and all [the European elites] will stand at their master's feet and gently stroke his tail.

In other words, Putin hopes that the proxy war against NATO in Ukraine will be resolved thanks to the “character and persistence” of fascist President Trump under whom the conflicts between the US and its European imperialist rivals have exploded into the open.

Putin also recently admitted that in 2014 Russia was simply not ready to invade Ukraine. In fact, Russia was not ready in February 2022 either, when he initiated the invasion in a step that was as reactionary as it was adventurous. At the time, the Kremlin counted on a quick victory to force the imperialist powers and the Kiev regime into a peace more favorable to Russia. The imagined “quick victory” turned out to be a three-year war of attrition.

At the same time, Putin has feared dragging wider layers of the population into the war, as he is aware of the risks of repeating the fate of the tsarist regime during the First World War which was toppled after sending millions of soldiers to the slaughter.

When Putin carried out a partial mobilization in September 2022, it was one of the most dangerous steps for his rule. The reaction of the population was so hostile that Putin did not dare to take similar measures again, focusing instead on replenishing the army through cash payments, thereby drawing in patriotic men in dire financial straits and a certain number of prisoners.

On the night of May 11, Putin announced that he was ready to begin peace talks on May 15 in Istanbul, and Zelensky responded with his willingness to travel to Istanbul. Fearing economic collapse amid sanctions and stagnant domestic production, Putin may agree to a deal that is less favorable to him in order to prevent social unrest. His hope for a rise in patriotism, which was somewhat justified in the early years of the war, is no longer so unshakable today.

The initial rise in patriotism was based not least of all on the still vivid memories of the horrors of the war against fascism among the majority of the population. Appealing to and manipulating these sentiments, Putin, the heir of the “gravedigger of the revolution” Stalin, managed to present himself as the heir to the struggle against fascism. This propaganda was further aided by the imperialist powers’ open promotion of neo-Nazi forces in Ukraine, whose crimes during World War II are well known. Yet no historical distortion and nationalist propaganda can completely hide the sharp class contradictions in Russian society.

The Putin regime is the guardian of the greatest social inequality in the history of modern Russia. Even during the war, the number of Russian billionaires has continued to grow, reaching 146, according to *Forbes*. In 2024 alone, these 146 individuals were able to increase their fortunes by a total of \$48.7 billion.

Putin has emerged as a Bonapartist figure whose principal function is to protect this immense wealth of the oligarchs by balancing between different sections of the oligarchy, and between the oligarchy and imperialism. However, the Kremlin’s military and economic policies have only exacerbated all the pre-war imbalances of Russian capitalism.

As an experienced politician who was trained by the Stalinist KGB, Putin is well aware that his role as the “savior of the nation” is increasingly under threat. However, he has no reasonable answer to the

deepening crisis of his own regime other than continuing to maneuver with the imperialist powers and promoting nationalism to disorient and divide the working class. Far from protecting the masses against imperialism, this policy, rooted in the class interests of the oligarchy, creates the grounds for a disaster even greater than the war in Ukraine which has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives.

Although it is impossible to predict what kind of deal Moscow and Kiev will reach if any, it can be stated with certainty that no deal will resolve the fundamental contradictions of the world capitalist system that are propelling the imperialist powers toward an ever more aggressive pursuit of a new redivision of the world. Whatever tactical shifts may occur, obtaining full control over the resources of the former Soviet Union is no less important to the imperialist powers today than it was to the Nazi regime in World War II. The genocide in Gaza is a sinister warning of the levels of violence that imperialism is prepared to resort to today to achieve its ends.

Therefore, on the 80th anniversary of the victory over Nazism, it is imperative for workers in Russia to understand the insoluble connection between their fate and that of workers in other countries. Only a world revolution of the working class can stop the emerging imperialist conflict over a redivision of the world. To this end, the Russian working class and its brothers and sisters living in the former Soviet Union must learn the lessons of World War II and the politics of Stalinism and consciously return to the traditions of the October Revolution, embodied by Lenin, Trotsky and the struggle of the Left Opposition.

Our Comrade Bogdan Syrotiuk, a leader of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists (YGBL), has fought for precisely these principles. For this reason, he has been imprisoned by the Zelensky regime in Ukraine.

On this anniversary, we call on all workers and young people in the former Soviet Union to join the campaign for the release of Bogdan Syrotiuk and take up the fight for the internationalist program that Bogdan and the YGBL represent.

Unite workers in Russia and Ukraine against imperialism and the oligarchic regimes of Moscow and Kiev!

Join the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists!

Build the International Committee of the Fourth International in the former Soviet Union!



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