

85 years since Finland's alliance with Nazi Germany

Part 1

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On September 22, 1940, the first ships carrying Wehrmacht soldiers from Nazi Germany arrived in Finland. The startled chief of police at the port city of Vaasa rang the ministry of the interior for instructions. The equally puzzled interior minister, Ernst von Born, reached out to then prime minister Risto Ryti, who instructed them to welcome the troops because they were there at his invitation. This marked the start of Finland's disastrous military alliance with Nazi Germany. It had been hammered out by a narrow camarilla around prime minister Ryti and Marshal Gustaf Mannerheim. Over the next four years, the Finnish government actively supported Nazi domination over Europe and consciously participated in the Holocaust before signing a separate peace with the Soviet Union.

This dark episode looms large over contemporary Finnish politics. Today in Finland's parliament, 85 percent of the legislators are in parties descended from the government during the military alliance with the Nazis. Far from being considered a source of shame, Finland's role in WWII is bragged about by leading politicians like foreign minister Elina Valtonen, who boasted in a speech this March:

We Finns know Russia. Russia shares a land border with 14 countries. Only one of them has constantly remained an independent democracy through the second world war and the cold war: Finland.

The reality is that Finland subordinated itself to Nazi Germany, not through democracy, but a series of conspiracies directed first and foremost against the Finnish working class. Under the claim that unity (*yksimielisyys*) was necessary to preserve Finnish independence, all the major parties from the Social Democratic Party (SDP) to the fascist IKL joined together in handing control of Finland's foreign policy to the unelected Ryti and Mannerheim. This conspiracy then invited Germany to occupy parts of the country and promised support for the Nazi war of extermination (*Vernichtungskrieg*) against the Soviet Union. The ruling class falsely portrayed this policy as a defensive measure against Soviet aggression.

While the fateful decision of the Finnish government to align itself with the Nazis' new order in Europe was arrived at in the space of just six months, following the end of the Winter War with the Soviet Union in March 1940, the move flowed inexorably from the miserable political record of the Finnish bourgeoisie. Throughout Finland's struggle for independence, the bourgeoisie always sought an imperial overlord to protect it from the extremely militant Finnish working class. The fact that Finland's independence came from the Bolshevik seizure of power in the

October Revolution only heightened the capitalists' frenzy for a foreign safeguard against socialism. It was due above all to the nationalist betrayals of Social Democracy and Stalinism that this rotten bourgeoisie was in a position to suppress working class opposition as it increasingly aligned with Nazi Germany.

With Finland's recent accession to NATO in preparation for war with Russia and China, the inheritors to Finland's collaboration are preparing once again to throw Finnish workers into a devastating war of aggression, all in the name of "national defense." Exposing the crude historical falsifications behind the current promotion of Finland's "democracy" in World War II is necessary to arm Finnish workers against the present drive to war.

Independence and civil war

Finland, which was part of the Russian Empire from the early 19th century, achieved independence only with the October Revolution in 1917, with the victory of the Bolsheviks. Following Lenin's policy supporting the right of nations oppressed by the brutal tsarist regime to self-determination, the Soviet government granted Finland independence in early December 1917, just over a month after taking power. This principled policy stood in stark contrast to the bourgeois-democratic provisional government, which, supported by the Mensheviks, had sent Russian troops in the summer of 1917 to Finland to disperse the Finnish parliament by force.

Almost simultaneously with the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in Petrograd, a general strike by Finnish workers erupted. That the working class did not come to power in Finland alongside their class brothers and sisters throughout the rest of the old tsarist empire was due above all to the treacherous role of the SDP, which, in true Second International style, refused to take political power for the working class and instead worked systematically to demobilize the revolutionary workers' movement. This treachery gave the counterrevolutionary bourgeois forces precious time to prepare for civil war. Two and a half months later, the SDP was compelled to take power in Helsinki under conditions of a rapidly escalating civil war.

The White forces under Mannerheim invited Germany to invade and occupy Helsinki, which proved decisive in crushing the Finnish working class. After victory, in May 1918, German soldiers maintained General Rüdiger von der Goltz as the effective military dictator of Finland. The Finnish parliament celebrated their "independence" by asking Germany to install a prince as king over them. It was only the German Revolution in

November 1918, that overthrew the German Kaiser and ruined the Finnish bourgeoisie's plans to crown their ruthless class exploitation of the workers with an iron Prussian helmet.

The government that emerged in Finland was bitterly anticommunist. During the civil war, just under 6,000 Red Guards were killed in battle, but roughly 10,000 were executed as part of the White Terror, and another 12,000 died in prison camps. These figures appear even more horrific if one recalls that the population of Finland at the time was little more than 3 million. The politicians that would later arrange the alliance with the Nazis established themselves in the civil war. Marshal Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, the former tsarist officer, was the leader of the White Army that carried out massacres of Finnish workers. Väinö Tanner was the right-wing social democrat who hid during the civil war and emerged after to lead the remnants of the SDP to the right, fighting to reconcile Finnish workers with the capitalists who had just massacred their friends and neighbors.

After the dust had settled from the civil war, Finland served as a base of operations for counterrevolutionary attacks by the Whites and their imperialist backers on the first workers' state. Following the Soviets' victory in the Russian Civil War, Finland and the Soviet Union had very little diplomatic or economic exchange, despite their long border, until the crisis of European capitalism once again grew to the point of world war.

The Stalin-Hitler Pact and Winter War

The immediate background to Finland's alliance with Nazi Germany were the wild zig-zags of Stalin's foreign policy. Flowing from the bureaucracy's rejection of Marxist internationalism and the embrace of "socialism in one country," the Communist Parties worldwide were transformed from revolutionary organizations to supplemental tools in Stalin's diplomatic efforts with capitalist countries. In response to the victory of the Nazis in Germany, the Stalinized Comintern retreated from the disastrous ultra-left policy of the Third Period, which declared social democrats to be "social fascists" and rejected the need for a working class united front against fascism. Instead, they adopted the equally disastrous popular front policy, insisting that workers support the "democratic" capitalists. To avoid offending their bourgeois partners, the Stalinist bureaucracy suppressed revolutionary movements of the working class in Spain and France, and subordinated Communist Parties internationally to the "democratic" bourgeoisie in the fight against fascism.

The Munich Agreement in September 1938, when the Popular Front government of France, along with Britain, agreed to Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia over Soviet objections, caused an abrupt shift in Stalin's foreign policy. Less than one year later, in August 1939, Hitler and Stalin approved the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which carved up Eastern Europe into their respective spheres of influence, minimized the potential impact of a naval blockade on the Nazi war machine through greatly expanded trade between the two countries, and freed Germany's hands for the conquest of Western Europe. Under the agreement, Poland was divided between the two countries, and the Soviet Union was given a free hand in Finland and the Baltics.

This complete reversal of the Comintern's anti-Nazi policy threw Communist Parties across Europe into crisis and paralyzed the working class, as Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, signaling the start of World War II.

Since early 1938, the Soviet Union had sent feelers to Finland about exchanging territory in order for the Soviets to better defend the approaches to Leningrad, which was only 20 miles from the Finnish border. Negotiations were held in earnest in October 1939, but they

quickly broke down. The Soviet Union invaded on November 30.

Under the impact of Stalin's purges, the Red Army was ill-prepared for the offensive and disconnected from the mood of the Finnish working class. During the Great Terror of 1937-38, the Stalinist bureaucracy exterminated over a million people in a political genocide, including the remaining old Bolsheviks who helped lead the 1917 October Revolution to victory and supporters of the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky, the co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution. Stalin dismissed, arrested or executed most of the senior military staff. Soviet sociologist Vadim Rogovin gives a sense of the impact on the military in his work *Stalin's Terror of 1937-1938: Political Genocide in the USSR*: "Out of 837 people who had been given military titles in November 1935 (from colonel to marshal), 720 were arrested. Of the sixteen people who received the title of commander or marshal, only Voroshilov, Budenny and Shaposhnikov survived the Great Purge."

The bureaucracy also carried out repressions targeting foreign communists, including Finns. The Finnish National Archives contain records of over 6,000 Finns persecuted inside the Soviet Union between 1935 and 1939, many of whom were members of the Communist Party.

In the initial stages of the invasion, the Soviet Union attempted to form a puppet government, the Finnish Democratic Republic. Far from rallying Finnish workers to their side, the invasion of Finland, after the agreement with Nazi Germany and the invasion of Poland, allowed the leadership of the SDP under Tanner to finally integrate the Finnish labor movement as a defanged junior partner to Finnish capitalism. Stalin's rapprochement with Hitler allowed Tanner to present support for the Finnish state as the fight against Hitler and his allies. This did not stop Tanner himself from becoming a prominent Nazi collaborator less than two years later.

At first, the Finnish army was able to blunt the Soviet advance, but the disorganization in the Red Army was overcome, and the immense disparity in industry and manpower asserted itself. Mannerheim rejected offers of aid from the Allies, recognizing their primary goal was to seize the Petsamo nickel mines and open a Nordic front against Germany. Facing a steady advance from the superior Soviet forces, Finland accepted peace terms in March 1940, ceding significantly more land than the Soviet Union had proposed exchanging before the war.

Shachtmanism and Finnish "national defense"

The narrative of "democratic" Finland waging a courageous struggle against Soviet "imperialism" was fueled by bourgeois politicians and media outlets. Reflecting a sharp shift to the right on the part of the radical petty-bourgeoisie, a faction within the Fourth International seized on the Winter War to legitimize their repudiation of Trotskyism and their rapprochement with American imperialism as World War II began.

Centered around James Burnham and Max Shachtman in the United States, the petty-bourgeois opposition in the Socialist Workers Party cited the Winter War as a justification for their rejection of the unconditional defense of the Soviet Union against imperialist attack. The opposition asserted that the Soviet Union could no longer be considered a workers state on the basis that the Stalinist bureaucracy had concluded the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Trotsky forcefully rejected these efforts to erase the class character of the Soviet Union based on this or that crime of Stalin and the bureaucracy. He insisted on the defense of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers state, where the bureaucracy needed to be overthrown but the underlying economic relations born from the October Revolution had to be defended.

His article, "Balance Sheet of the Finnish Events," from April 1940, emphasized the need to analyze local events from the standpoint of the

interests of the international working class. Citing the example of Norway, which had been occupied by the Nazis and had for a time a pro-Nazi government in the south and a nominally “democratic” regime in the north under the king—who subsequently fled to Britain—Trotsky insisted that it would have been impermissible to instruct Norwegian workers to support the “democratic” government as a lesser evil compared to the pro-Nazi administration, since both factions of the Norwegian bourgeoisie were tools of the major imperialist powers in the midst of a world war. He wrote:

From the standpoint of the strategy of the world proletariat, Finnish resistance was no more an act of independent national defense than is the resistance of Norway. This was best demonstrated by the Finnish government itself which preferred to cease all resistance rather than have Finland completely transformed into a military base of England, France and the United States. Secondary factors like the national independence of Finland or Norway, the defense of democracy, etc., however important in themselves, are now intertwined in the struggle of infinitely more powerful world forces and are completely subordinate to them. We must discount these secondary factors and determine our policy in accordance with the basic factors.

The basic factors emphasized by Trotsky were elaborated one month later in the Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War, “Imperialist War And The Proletarian World Revolution.” Adopted at an emergency conference of the Fourth International between May 19 and 26, 1940, the document insisted that the world war, like World War I, would provoke revolutionary movements in the working class around the world and raise the necessity of the fight for working-class political power on the program of world socialist revolution as the only way out. Trotsky wrote:

The Fourth International turns not to the governments who have dragooned the peoples into the slaughter, nor to the bourgeois politicians who bear the responsibility for these governments, nor to the labor bureaucracy which supports the warring bourgeoisie. The Fourth International turns to the working men and women, the soldiers and sailors, the ruined peasants and the enslaved colonial peoples. The Fourth International has no ties whatsoever with the oppressors, the exploiters, the imperialists. It is the world party of the toilers, the oppressed, and the exploited.

The correctness of Trotsky’s approach was amply demonstrated in the course of World War II. “Socialists” like Tanner who placed national defense over the international working class, readily allied with the Nazis and ultimately facilitated the Holocaust. Throughout World War II, the SDP heavily promoted the lie that Finland was not allied to Nazi Germany or assisting in their war of extermination, but simply fighting its own independent defensive war alongside them. Moreover, the conflict radicalized the working class throughout Europe and beyond, as anti-capitalist and socialist sentiments spread widely in the face of the bourgeoisie’s complicity in the most horrific crimes against humanity. Mass anti-colonial movements throughout Asia and Africa also demonstrated the potential for the revolutionary program advocated by Trotsky.



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