Shots fired in the Channel—Britain, Russia and the threat of World War III

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The shots fired into the air from a Russian warship in the Channel Tuesday were a warning to a nearby British yacht. But they should be taken by the European working class as a warning that they are being dragged ever more surely into a war with Russia by their governments.

Naturally there are conflicting accounts of the event. The Russian military claims the yacht was on a dangerous approach course and that multiple attempts were made to contact it and signal flares launched before five warning shots were fired into the air from the Admiral Grigorovich. The couple on the yacht claim no flares were sent up or radio calls made but have confirmed the shots were fired in warning. The British military, which was monitoring the event, also initially described the Russian actions as simply "an attempt to prevent a possible collision."

Whatever the exact events, two facts are decisive and irrefutable. Shots would not have been fired if tensions between Russia and Britain had not been brought to a fever pitch. These tensions are the result of a de facto state of war between the European powers and Russia, which threatens to spread the catastrophe already underway in Ukraine across the continent.

Two days earlier, in the same waters, British forces seized the Cameroonian-flagged tanker the Smyrtos, part of Russia's shadow fleet, carrying oil to India. This was the latest in a series of seizures and impoundments carried out by European governments—including Belgium, France, Sweden, Finland and Germany—enforcing economic sanctions against Moscow.

Britain signaling its readiness to intercept vessels in the Channel significantly raises the stakes. It is the main route used by tankers sailing from Russia's major Baltic ports: Ust-Luga, Primorsk and St. Petersburg. According to a *Sunday Times* investigation, approximately £239 billion worth of Russian oil ($319 billion) has passed through the waterway since 2022.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer responded to the yacht incident by denouncing Russia's "reckless" actions. The accusation should be turned back tenfold on Starmer and his Labour government. Claims from his Cabinet Minister Nick Thomas-Symonds that the incident of Russian warning shots "is not related to the seizing of the Russian oil tanker of the shadow fleet that happened last weekend" are absurd.

Britain and the European powers have been aggressively stoking the conflict with Russia for more than a decade, since supporting the far-right Maidan coup of 2014. Backed by the Biden administration, they saw the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022—a reactionary response to NATO's eastward expansion—as a golden opportunity. They could bog down and bleed Russia, possibly even provoking regime change, while reducing Ukraine to a vassal state ripe for economic exploitation.

After more than four years of war, these objectives are being pursued with frenzied enthusiasm. This is now led by the European powers, the Trump administration having cooled on the war—preferring to pursue favourable trade relations with Russia on rare earths, oil, gas and other strategic assets, while securing its own economic control over Ukraine.

Tanker seizures are part of a broader military assault on Russia's energy exports spearheaded by the Zelensky regime in Ukraine and an economic offensive led by the European imperialists.

The Ukrainian military, aided by NATO technology, has substantially improved its ability to reach targets deep inside Russian territory. Strikes have hit over a dozen refineries and other oil and gas infrastructure in the last six months and half a dozen ports and oil terminals. Successful strikes on St. Petersburg, President Vladimir Putin's hometown, during an economic forum known as Russia's Davos, were particularly politically damaging.

Cargo ships and tankers have also been struck, including on the day of the Channel incident.

On the economic front, between 2,000 and 3,000 individuals and entities have been subjected to sanctions by the UK and European Union, with trade halted across critical sectors and a G7 price cap set on Russian oil. The ongoing G7 summit has issued a written commitment to increase "the pressure on the Russian war economy." The statement continues: "In this context, we will strengthen our sanctions, including those on the oil and gas sectors."

Multiple indicators suggest this pressure is beginning to tell. Russian growth forecasts have been slashed, the national budget deficit is ballooning, as are private business debts and arrears, and the country is now suffering a fuel shortage as even critical oil exports are reduced. Multiple monitors also indicate a significant fall in the amount of territory Russia has captured in the recent months. Recruitment efforts are reportedly faltering.

Far from using this as leverage to push for talks, as they claim, the European powers have made clear their intention to ensure that "peace" negotiations only take place in the form of Russian surrender negotiations.

Russia has responded in part by stepping up its air war on major urban centres, making May the worst month of the war, according

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to the United Nations, citing Ukrainian civilian casualties of 274 dead and 1,763 injured. Pressure will be growing in the most militarist and nationalist sections of the Russian oligarchy for a more expansive and aggressive response, placing Putin in an increasingly exposed position.

At multiple points throughout the war, Russian officials have threatened to strike European targets outside of Ukraine in response to stepped-up involvement in the Ukrainian war effort.

In 2024, Putin indicated that any NATO airbases used as takeoff points for Ukrainian jets would be a "legitimate target." The same year, when Paris floated the idea of sending troops to Ukraine and London authorised the use of its long-range missiles to strike Russian targets, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov warned of "a new round of escalation," as Russia publicly announced drills involving strategic nuclear weapons.

This year, the Russian defence ministry listed the addresses of European companies helping Ukraine produce drones, commenting that their involvement represented the "creeping transformation of these countries into a strategic rear for Ukraine" that would lead to "a sharp escalation."

These warnings barely feature in the British press and have been routinely denounced as a "bluff" by the government, attempting to lull the population into a false sense of safety. This is despite the heads of Britain's armed forces repeatedly insisting that plans must be made for all-out war with Russia.

Within months of the war's outbreak, newly appointed head of the British Army General Sir Patrick Sanders told a military conference, in a speech broadcast by Sky News, "There is now a burning imperative to forge an Army capable of fighting alongside our allies and defeating Russia in battle. We are the generation that must prepare the Army to fight in Europe once again."

Retired Russian Lieutenant-General Evgeny Buzhinsky responded by telling the Russian state broadcaster, "He doesn't understand that as a result of the Third World War Britain will physically cease to exist. The island will vanish, so I've no idea where he or his descendants will live."

The working class cannot allow these maniacs who presently govern them to remain in power. European officials speak of war with Russia "by the end of the decade" or "within years" as if this is an unfortunate fact of life, not a catastrophe for humanity.

Under these conditions, the smallest incident can become the starting point of a rapid escalatory spiral. Serious incidents already happen regularly. Drones, both Ukrainian and Russian, have entered Lithuanian, Latvian, Polish and Romanian airspace. An RAF spy plane was intercepted by Russian fighter jets over the Black Sea last month; Swedish jets intercepted Russian fighters a few days ago.

Similar events will become more frequent and more grave as the European powers rapidly militarise. A total of $559 billion was spent on the military by Europe's NATO members in 2025, as spending "rose faster than at any time since 1953," according to Jade Guiberteau Ricard of the SIPRI Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme.

Across the continent, the drumbeat is growing louder. Starmer last week suffered the resignation of his Defence Secretary John Healey, who denounced the government for being "unable and unwilling" to raise military spending high enough "at this time of rising threats."

His predecessor Ben Wallace complained to BBC Radio 4's Today programme that the Channel incident shows Russia is "not deterred by us." House of Commons Defence Committee chair Tan Dhesi said, "Evidently, we need to move much faster, including by increasing defence spending."

Germany, meanwhile, is leading the way, increasing its military spending by 24 percent in 2025—the third consecutive year of double-digit growth—to become the world's fourth biggest spender on the armed forces at $114 billion. Russia is third at $190 billion, its government caught between a reactionary war it cannot win and a "peace" it would struggle to survive.

As the events in the Channel unfolded, Trump was boasting to the world's imperialist powers at the G7 summit in Evian that peace with Iran was just days away, pending only the signing of a "memorandum of understanding." Instead, the world has moved a step closer to open war with Russia.

None of the combatants can provide a way out of this rising inferno. They represent factions of a capitalist oligarchy increasingly dependent on the methods of war and dictatorship to defend their interests: whether that be through the carving out of new zones of influence, as in the case of the imperialist powers, or the attempt to establish a strong regional position from which to resist these efforts, as with Russia.

The working class in Europe is already paying for this through ever more savage austerity and the destruction of fundamental democratic rights. Like their Ukrainian and Russian brothers and sisters, workers will also pay with their lives.

The burning necessity now is to construct a mass socialist anti-war movement. It is only the working class that can halt the escalating global war, using its own method of international socialist revolution.

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