

Germany Threatens “Massive Damage” to Russia ahead of Crimea Referendum

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Ahead of Sunday’s referendum on the independence of Crimea, Berlin and Washington are escalating a campaign of threats and sanctions against Russia, risking civil war in Ukraine and war with Russia itself.

Addressing the German parliament on Thursday, Chancellor Angela Merkel warned of a “catastrophe” unless Russia backs down. “Ladies and gentlemen, if Russia continues on its course of the past weeks, it will not only be a catastrophe for Ukraine,” she said. “We would not only see it, also as neighbors of Russia, as a threat. And it would not only change the European Union’s relationship with Russia... No, this would also cause massive damage to Russia, economically and politically.”

Merkel blamed Moscow for illegal actions, using the methods of the 19th and 20th centuries. “The law of the jungle is placed against the strength of the law, unilateral geopolitical concerns against understanding and co-operation,” she said.

With staggering hypocrisy, Merkel is standing reality on its head. It is Germany and the US that are acting as the aggressors, backing and organizing a putsch led by fascist groups in Ukraine, the descendants of political forces Nazi Germany relied upon to commit horrible crimes during World War II. It doing so, it is the Western powers that are reviving the criminal methods of 20th century imperialist politics to secure their geo-strategic aims in Europe. Now Berlin and Washington want to force Moscow to back down on the question of Crimea, which has a Russian-speaking majority and is home to Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. Merkel warned that the EU would push ahead with economic sanctions unless Moscow agreed to negotiate “in the next few days.” She said: “None of us wishes that it should come to such actions. But we are all ready for them and will decide on them, if they are unavoidable.”

As the US and NATO build up military forces in the region, Russia responded by holding military exercises involving over 8,000 troops near the Ukrainian border. Belarus, a Russian ally, also requested extra fighter jets and transport aircraft.

In its drive for war, the imperialist powers are relying on the most right-wing forces within Ukraine. Yesterday the Ukrainian parliament approved a proposal from unelected President Oleksandr Turchynov to create a 60,000-strong national guard. It will be formed of interior ministry troops, recruits from military academies and “self-defense” units—i.e., paramilitary troops from the fascist Right Sector or other ultra-right-wing militias that led the February 22 coup against Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich.

In a press conference on Wednesday, the Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, Andriy Parubiy, claimed that he has “every reason to believe” that “Ukraine now faces the threat of a full-scale invasion.” He called “upon all the groups that were on the Maidan [to] ensure state security, defend the borders, and eliminate terrorist groups.”

Parubiy also used his press conference to appeal to the United States and Britain to fulfill their obligations as guarantors of Ukraine’s security, evoking the 1994 Budapest Memorandum under which Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons stockpile in return for security assurances.

Parubiy was one of the founders of the fascistic Social-National Party of Ukraine, which later transformed itself into the Svoboda party. He played a leading role in the Western-sponsored “Orange Revolution” in 2004. In the lead-up to the 2014 coup, he coordinated the volunteer security corps on the Maidan, made up of war veterans and retired police officers.

Parubiy’s deputy in the new government, Dmytri Yarosh, is the leader of the fascist Right Sector militia and the All-Ukrainian Organization “Tryzub,” whose hero is the World War II Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera.

On Wednesday, the US news magazine *Newsweek* carried an interview with Yarosh, who said, “My guys are continuing military training all across Ukraine, ready to cleanse the country of the occupiers.” He added, “We are coordinating our actions with the council of the National Security and Defense, as well as with the army’s General Headquarters. We are currently negotiating to put our forces on a proper legal footing.”

On Thursday, clashes in the industrial city of Donetsk, near the Russian border, broke out between pro-Russian demonstrators and a group allied with the new government, including Right Sector forces. At least one person was killed.

Asked if the new Ukrainian regime would raise the flag of Bandera, Yarosh replied in the affirmative: “We stood under red and black flags throughout the revolution. Red Ukrainian blood spilled on the black Ukrainian earth—that flag is the symbol of the national revolution. I am convinced that this flag will bring us freedom.”

Yarosh indicated he would resort to force if Crimea voted to secede from Ukraine on Sunday: “Right Sector, together with all other Ukrainian citizens, are ready to defend Ukraine’s territorial integrity by all possible means.”

The creation of the national guard and the transformation of the fascistic shock troops of the “revolution” into official state institutions has the backing of the imperialist powers. The vote on the national guard came only one day after interim Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk met in Washington with US President Barack Obama, who emphasized his support for the new Ukrainian regime and issued new threats against Moscow.

While the Ukrainian National Guard is aimed at Russia, another key target is the Ukrainian working class. Though it is vastly outgunned by the far larger Russian military, the Ukrainian National Guard is sufficiently large to try to intimidate or possibly crush protests against the reactionary agenda of the right-wing, pro-imperialist regime in Kiev.

During his visit with Obama, Yatsenyuk pledged to enforce IMF demands, eliminate subsidies on natural gas prices, and be “the most unpopular prime minister in the whole history.” The gas subsidies, which keep heating costs relatively affordable for Ukrainian

workers, amount to fully 7.5 percent of the economy. Eliminating them would bankrupt large sections of the population.

One indication of the unpopularity of these measures is that Yanukovich backed away from signing an association agreement last autumn with the European Union that included such cuts, fearing that they would trigger protests and the fall of his regime.

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