

60TH ANNIVERSARY OF WORLD WAR II VICTORY

Commemoration Sends a Double Message to the Russian People

by Michael Liebig

On May 9, during the celebrations held at Moscow to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Victory over Nazism and the end of the Second World War, two messages came very prominently to the fore.

The first was a message to the Russian people. Despite Russia's collapse in the course of the 1990s, and the huge problems that remain, the country is pulling itself together. That War is, in a way, the exemplar for what is taking place before our eyes. In the Autumn of 1941, when crushing defeat seemed inevitable, suddenly, in a paroxysm of effort almost without precedent, and as more than 20 million men and women went to their deaths, the U.S.S.R. nevertheless succeeded in stopping the Wehrmacht, rolling back those massed armies, and in the end, sending them down to defeat.

From the standpoint of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian leadership, the critical thing has been to seize the opportunity presented by this Commemoration of Victory, to strengthen the country's severely damaged sense of national identity and pride. That over 50 heads of state and government made a point of travelling to Moscow on May 9, most certainly had the impact, domestically, that Putin would have wished. But there is another issue of importance, *viz.*, to stress throughout the former U.S.S.R., the experience of that War as a bond, an achievement of their joint history. Aside from the Baltic States, that is undoubtedly how the vast majority of the peoples that comprise the former U.S.S.R. have seen the event.

The second message of the Moscow Commemoration was the public demonstration of a "strategic partnership" between Russia and Germany, the erstwhile enemies. Bear in mind, that Russia's concept of "strategic partnership" most definitely does include France and so-called "old" Europe. The May 9 events in Moscow unveiled to all onlookers what had

transpired more discreetly on March 18 in Paris, where Putin, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, French President Jacques Chirac, and Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero held a summit. The same might be said, insofar as economic matters are concerned, of Putin's attendance at the Hanover Trade Fair in Germany on April 11.

These events are counterposed to George W. Bush's leaden sorties while on his recent diplomatic wanderings. Before he reached Moscow, he stopped in Riga, Latvia, there to confer with the Baltic heads of state. The Lithuanian and Estonian leaders then saw fit to boycott the Moscow event. On leaving Moscow, Bush turned up in Tiflis, Georgia, to meet with another such boycotter, Georgian President Shaakashvili.

As a Russian analyst put it, were Putin to imitate Bush's take on "diplomacy," he would visit Washington, only to fly from there straight to Havana, and thence, to North Korea. In Riga, Bush sailed right over the top, lashing out at the Baltic States' forced integration into the U.S.S.R., and at Communist control over Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, his speechwriters had forgotten that at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Stalin had not sat alone, but had come to meet with representatives of the United States and Great Britain, who there resolved with the U.S.S.R. that Europe should be carved up into zones of influence.

In his Red Square speech on May 9, Putin paid high tribute to the Allies. Beside him on the Tribune, there sat Presidents Bush and Chirac. But the fourth Allied power, Great Britain, did not come to Moscow. Fearing domestic uproar, Prime Minister Blair stayed home. But China's President Hu Jintao also stood in the first row of the Honor Tribune, as did German Chancellor Schröder.

This could scarcely be described as an obvious move. On

May 9, Putin had been interviewed by CBS newsman Mike Wallace, who asked: “Why invite the Germans? Were Hitler still living, would you have invited him?”

Putin’s reply was very like the one he was to give May 9 on Red Square. “Reconciliation,” he said, “between Russia and Germany is one of the most crucial achievements of Europe in the entire post-war period . . . and a shining example that should rather be imitated by others in modern world politics.” He set aside a full hour for Schröder, so that together they might meet with seven Red Army and Wehrmacht veterans, alongside youths from both nations. To that small assembly, Putin said that Russia and Germany had lived through “dreadful tragedy in the 20th Century and had themselves suffered the greatest number of dead.” The “quality of German-Russian cooperation” was the factor that would decide “which way the weather will turn in Europe, and throughout the world.” For Schröder’s part, he recalled that his own father had fallen on the Eastern Front, and that Putin’s mother had escaped death by a hair’s breadth during the siege of Leningrad.

One should also stress the very remarkable two-man interview given by Schröder and Putin to the German mass-circulation daily *Bildzeitung* of May 6 and 7. The two statesmen refer, in highly personal terms, to the vicissitudes of their respective families during the war and the post-war period, how they became aware of the other’s nation. Putin, in his days as a KGB officer, lived for years in Dresden, and speaks fluent German. As for Schröder, he and his wife adopted a Russian orphan child last year.

Although the “personal chemistry” between Putin and Schröder cannot simply be brushed off as a trifle, the essential issue is the strategic convergence of interests between Russia and Germany, as well as of “old Europe.” Western Europe and Russia are, from an economic standpoint, bound up together, the former needing Russia’s energy and raw materials, the latter, Western Europe’s capital goods and equipment to modernize and rebuild. Russia has a most significant potential in science and high technology, particularly in the aerospace and aeronautics sector, and in military technologies with civilian applications, to which, by the way, Putin expressly refers in the *Bildzeitung* interview. Economic cooperation must not, he said, consist solely of “exchanging Russian raw materials against German manufactured goods,” even though such trade has grown at a two-digit rate annually. Putin called for greater German investment in Russian industry, and Schröder, for cooperation “beyond trade in oil and gas.”

A noteworthy factor in German-Russian trade relations is



Presidents Jacques Chirac, Vladimir Putin, George Bush, and Hu Jintao watch the victory parade in Red Square, commemorating the end of World War II, on May 9. Putin underlined Russia’s new “strategic partnership” with Europe.

the emergence of joint, interlocking property arrangements, one key example being the BASF-Gazprom agreement signed at the Trade Fair in Hanover in April: BASF becomes a shareholder in Gazprom, while the latter acquires a 49% share in BASF’s Western European pipeline. The Baltic Sea underwater-pipeline, “St. Petersburg-Greifwald,” is also in joint Gazprom-BASF hands.

At the end of the *Bild* interview, Schröder states that “60 years after the end of World War II, the time is ripe for a true strategic partnership with Russia. Only in this way shall we achieve a just and lasting peace, and so afford the peoples of all Europe security, stability and well-being. Vladimir Putin and I intend to do all we can to that end.”

Both Putin and Schröder are keenly aware that this partnership, a qualitatively deeper one, whether in the sphere of politics or that of the economy, will likely arouse what one might call an “anti-Rapallo reflex,” especially within the Bush Administration. Consequently, in that *Bild* interview, they stress that such cooperation is not designed to work “to the detriment of third parties,” whether in Europe or elsewhere. Indeed, the “strategic partnership” of Russia with Western Europe will not stop at Germany, but extends to France, Spain, and Italy. One should never lose sight of the fact that neither Russia, Germany, nor France, whether alone, or severally, are in a position to put an end to the current systemic breakdown of the world’s financial and economic system. It will all work, only if the United States pulls with us. The new-found quality of economic and political relations in Eurasia, assuming this were to be accompanied by an entirely new form of trans-Atlantic relations through the anticipated changes in U.S. policy, is an opportunity the world must not miss.