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Soviet Foreign Policy 1917—1941

It is fair to say that all Soviet primary and secondary sources are, to varying degrees, suspect. To build up as accurate a picture as possible the researcher must use Soviet materials in conjunction with the relevant Western sources.

The study of the diplomacy of the interwar period is one which has been clouded by emotional judgements. For many in the West, especially on the left, the establishment of the Soviet regime seemed to represent the great hope for the future and for surprisingly many, disillusionment came only slowly. The wartime alliance with the USSR further added to a certain reluctance to see Soviet foreign policy making in a clear light. The inter-war economic crisis, the rise of fascism, Nazi and Japanese aggression and the failure of the policy of appeasement, aided by the undeniable successes of the Soviet propaganda machine, all helped to obscure the fact that from the first, the Soviet leadership pursued its aims with whatever means were at its disposal.

The aims of Soviet Foreign Policy

In November 1917 the new Bolshevik government seemed unlikely to survive and 24 years later, in the autumn of 1941, few contemporary observers expected the Stalinist dictatorship to last out the year. These two facts perhaps help to demonstrate that the primary foreign policy aim of the Soviet government throughout this period was survival in what was with some justice seen as a hostile world. The other aim, or hope, was that the world revolution predicted by Marx would take place soon and that if it did not, then the actions of the Comintern might help to bring it about. By the mid-twenties this seemed increasingly unlikely.

Methods

From the very outset the Soviet government adopted a high moral tone in its comments on international relations, claiming and frequently repeating that the uniquely progressive nature of the Soviet social and political system made it unlike any other regime and that therefore, in marked contrast to imperialist powers, the aims and principles on which it based its conduct of foreign affairs were open diplomacy, self-determination, disarmament and the peace of nations. Apart from anything else, this approach highlights one consistent method of Soviet foreign policy – the use of propaganda to appeal to the masses over the heads of their governments. But more importantly, as a study of the period will reveal, whatever its professed principles, the Soviet government was utterly unscrupulous in its conduct of foreign affairs. When it was weak, peace and disarmament were obviously sensible things to strive for in the public arena, while the USSR built up its strength. When collective security seemed likely to bear fruit, the USSR followed this policy. When the best guarantee of Soviet security was war and occupation, then these methods were used instead. Open diplomacy and national self-determination were no more than catch phrases to confuse the naive or unwary, and certainly the Ukrainians and Georgians were under no illusions with regard to the second point by 1922. Further confusion can be caused if one ignores the fact that the Soviet government was perfectly capable of following two apparently contradictory policies at the same time and, in fact, frequently did so.

How strong was the Soviet Union?

Perhaps the most important thing to grasp about this period is that the Soviet Union was not yet a 'superpower'. It is probably fair to say that the Soviet Union was not even a world power, except in the sense that its territory still covered a large part of the world's land surface. For most of the 24 years under discussion the Soviet Union was industrially backward and, variously, in the throes of civil war, famine, Stalin's forced economic revolution and his murderous purges. By the late 1930s the extraordinary achievements of the five year plans, whatever the human cost, had immeasurably strengthened the USSR industrially and militarily, but even then, most informed sources in the West realised that Stalin's purges of the armed forces had, for the moment, drastically undermined Soviet military potential, as the war with Finland demonstrated.

Despite this material weakness, the Soviet government's ideology undoubtedly inspired fear in her immediate neighbours and among the ruling circles of the major powers, especially in the early years after the October Revolution. This 'Red Scare' was no doubt useful to conservative forces in the West even when it was obvious that the USSR was virtually powerless. When the World Revolution failed to materialise, Soviet leaders realised that some form of accommodation had to be sought with the hostile bourgeois states which surrounded the USSR, but the public utterances retained their heavy Marxist-Leninist content whatever tactical move the Soviet government happened to be following at the time.

It was an article of faith with Soviet foreign policy experts that all imperialist powers were automatically hostile to the world's first socialist state. With the experience of Brest-Litovsk and Allied intervention during the civil war, as well as their ideological background, this is hardly surprising. Therefore if an affiance had to be made with a particular capitalist power, it was purely a question of expediency, not of sentiment, for in Soviet eyes fascism and democracy were just two different forms of the enemy, capitalism.

Who made Soviet Foreign Policy?

From the revolution until the late 1920s, foreign policy was made by the relevant People's Commissar in consultation with senior Politburo colleagues. Trotsky was the first People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs until 1918, when he was replaced by G. V. Chicherin who stayed in office until 1930. After this time, as in all other matters, it was Stalin whose decision was final, though it is not impossible that he let Maxim Litvinov have his head during his nine years in charge of the Narkomindel (People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs) from 1930 to 1939, while Stalin himself took foreign policy initiatives which secretly contradicted the USSR's public position. The replacement (but not death or humiliation) of Litvinov by Stalin's old crony V. M. Molotov in May 1939 is generally taken to demonstrate Stalin's decision to 'play the German card' as the international crisis deepened.

Phase 1: October 1917 to March 1918

In this extraordinary period when the Bolsheviks were flushed with success, their behaviour in the international sphere was as deliberately provocative as possible. The Decree on Peace issued the day after the Bolshevik coup, plus the sensational publication of the Tsarist secret treaties and the repudiation of all legal ties with other nations made by the Tsarist regime, was the first foreign policy act of the new government. Neither Lenin nor Trotsky believed that they were going to 'have' foreign relations in the accepted sense and Trotsky assumed he could issue a few proclamations and then 'shut up shop'. The expectation that a world revolution was nigh led to the distinctly unconventional approach to the negotiations with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk. The troops of the Central Powers were bombarded with Bolshevik propaganda while the Soviet delegation wasted as much time as possible. After some months of this the Germans lost patience and forced the Bolsheviks to accept the savage treaty which deprived the old Russian Empire of so much of its territory, population and resources.

Phase 2: March 1918 to 1921

After Brest-Litovsk it was quite clear that not even the survival of the Soviet government could be taken for granted. Foreign affairs in the conventional sense hardly existed during the bitter fighting between the Reds and the many foreign supporters of the White armies during the civil war. For a while, the newly founded Comintern's hopes of a spreading proletarian revolution must have seemed high with, at various times, Bela Kun's brief success in Hungary, a Soviet government in Bavaria, the Spartakists in Berlin and numerous other disturbances across Europe, not to mention the Red Army's tantalisingly close approach to Warsaw in 1920.

By the end of the civil war, however, the reality of the Soviet international position was only too clear. Soviet Russia was economically devastated, militarily weak and, from a territorial point of view, separated from the more developed parts of Europe by a wall of hostile states ranging from Finland in the north,through Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to a newly enlarged Rumania in the south. All communist insurrections had been crushed by the forces of reaction and to all intents and purposes Soviet Russia was little more than an irritant to the victorious Entente Powers who dominated early postwar Europe. Russia was excluded from the League of Nations and was not yet formally recognised by any major power. The most pressing problem for the Narkomindel was to secure something like normal diplomatic and economic relations with as many states as possible.

Phase 3: 1921 to c. 1931

The next decade saw the birth and development of the curious relationship between communist Russia and capitalist Weimar Germany which was the main plank of Soviet foreign policy until Hitler came to power in 1933. Negotiations between the two countries had been in progress since early 1921 and secret contacts had already been made in the diplomatic, commercial and military fields. The failure of the World Economic Conference at Genoa in 1922 had led the Soviet and German delegations to conclude the Treaty of Rapallo by which diplomatic and economic relations were established between the two 'outcast' countries. Within a few months secret military agreements were signed which led to the setting up on Soviet soil of joint German-Soviet training bases in the fields of aerial, armoured and chemical warfare. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that already by 1922 the Soviet authorities had left behind the idealistic concepts of open diplomacy and disarmament and that the 'twin track' approach of attempting to

foment revolution in those countries with which the USSR had regular diplomatic relations was seen as normal.

The relationship with Germany was not untroubled. The Comintern's failed attempts to rekindle the German revolution in 1921 and 1923 were not helpful. The Narkomindel was greatly alarmed at Germany's *rapprochement* with the Entente Powers when she signed the Locarno agreements in 1925 and joined the League of Nations the year after. However, the Treaty of Berlin in 1926, which reaffirmed Rapallo, and important German-Soviet trade treaties in 1925 and 1931 demonstrated that both governments found their links much too valuable to let ideology or diplomatic manoeuvring get in the way.

As far as the rest of the world was concerned, the Soviet government enjoyed some limited success. Formal recognition by Great Britain in 1924 and by most other nations around this time at least made Soviet isolation less acute, but Soviet newspapers still gave the impression that the capitalist world was on the point of launching another intervention against the world's first workers' state. This somewhat paranoid approach fed off incidents like the 1927 rupture of diplomatic relations by Great Britain, and the Soviet press frequently described the League of Nations as little more than a thinly disguised conspiracy to attack the USSR. Even the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 was vitually characterised as yet another attempt to undermine world peace! No doubt this atmosphere of hysteria was largely designed for internal consumption, especially as an extra stimulus to Stalin's economic revolution, but it did little to lessen the general distaste and suspicion felt towards the Soviet Union by most European governments.

In China the USSR suffered an important reverse when the Chinese Communist Party was dealt a savage blow by Chiang Kai Shek's massacre in Shanghai in 1927. This was also a blow to the Comintern policy of the 'united front from above' which hoped to strengthen the role of foreign communist parties by ordering them to support nationalists or other left-wing groups. The situation in the Far East was to prove the most worrying to Moscow as Japanese attitudes to China became increasingly aggressive.

As the 1920s came to an end the Soviet international position seemed far more encouraging than at any time since the revolution. The USSR had achieved international acceptance,_ her economic transformation was under way, she had a valuable working relationship with Germany and her skilful use of propaganda, such as Litvinov's 1927 demand for immediate and total disarmament at the Geneva Preparatory Commission on Disarmament, had given her a position of moral leadership for much of the world's left. Without doubt the most satisfying development was the economic

catastrophe which hit the capitalist world in 1929. The political effects of this crisis were, however, to bring about a rapid readjustment of Moscow's policies.

Phase 4: c. 1931 to 1934

In this period the USSR managed to conclude a series of neutrality or non-aggression pacts with most of her neighbours. Probably the most significant were those made with Poland and France in 1932. Of largely symbolic importance, these pacts nonetheless publicly demonstrated the USSR's desire for peace, stability and international acceptance, and proved to be a vital preparation for the realignment of Soviet foreign policy that was begun by events in the Far East.

The Japanese attack on China in 1931 and the subsequent setting up of the huge puppet state of Manchukuo right on the Soviet Far Eastern border was an extremely alarming development for Stalin. It made further Japanese expansion into Siberia seem a distinct possibility and the lack of a firm French and British response to the Manchurian crisis, both within and outside the League, probably made Stalin suspicious of the West's intentions. A conspiracy of imperialist powers would always seem more plausible to Stalin as an explanation of Western actions than mere weakness or incompetence. Stalin soon pragmatically resumed relations with and arms deliveries to Chiang Kai Shek, and military strength in the Soviet Far East was steadily increased.

The situation was also changing in Europe. The collapse of rational politics in Germany as the economic crisis worsened was not at first the disaster it later became for Stalin. The Soviet interpretation of events in Germany was that the polarisation in politics could only ultimately lead to a strengthening of the KPD and that the Nazis''short-lived' success would presage some sort of left-wing revolution. As a result the KPD was ordered to attack the middle ground of German politics, labelling the SPD 'social fascists'. Stalin was not the only one to underestimate the power of Hitler and the Nazis. After a year of confused signals from Berlin, it became quite obvious in the Kremlin that the German link was no longer to be relied upon. Although economic relations continued, the secret military cooperation was ended by Hitler, the KPD was destroyed, the tone of the Nazi press was distinctly anti-Soviet, and the expansionist aims of Hitler's foreign policy were openly discussed.

Anxious at this deterioration in the USSR's international position, Stalin began to switch the emphasis of his foreign policy towards some form of accommodation with those capitalist powers which

also felt threatened by a reviving Germany in Europe and Japanese aggression in the Far East. The Soviet Union's exclusion from the ultimately abortive negotiations for a Four Power Pact in 1933 and Hitler's conclusion of a non-aggression pact with Poland in 1934 made this more urgent. The first obvious sign of this change in approach was the softening of tone towards the League of Nations which the USSR joined on September 18, 1934. From this point on, the policy of 'collective security' was vociferously followed by the Soviet authorities in general and Litvinov in particular.

Phase 5: 1934 to August 1939

What must be made dear at this point is that although political relations with Nazi Germany were very poor, the economic links between the two nations continued. For example another important trade agreement was signed on 20 March 1934. Furthermore, we know from the captured German documents that in 1935, 1936, 1937 and 1939 when Soviet and German officials held their routine economic meetings, the Soviet side suggested that it might be opportune to improve political relations. These suggestions were turned down by the Germans, but it is quite clear that Stalin was prepared to court the Nazis in secret, whilst espousing collective security in public. A final decision on which way to jump could be left until later, while the Soviet Union's ability to defend itself continued to grow.

Stalin moved further towards the West in 1935 when the USSR signed the mutual assistant pacts with France and Czechoslovakia. Given the political geography of Eastern Europe, quite how the USSR was actually supposed to bring its weight to bear on Germany in an international crisis was something of a mystery: the illusion of having a counterweight seemed enough for the French, and for the Soviet Union to be included in such a security system was progress indeed. The agreements included a clause which made it clear that the USSR was only to act if requested to do so by the French. In line with this diplomatic realignment, the Comintern also switched its tactics, now instructing its puppet communist parties to support the policy of the Popular Front, namely cooperation with any political party which was anti-fascist.

However, from 1934 to 1939 Stalin drew little benefit from his new policy. Time after time, the British and French chose not to stand firm in the face of aggressive moves by Italy, Japan or Germany, the three powers who had by 1937 created the Anti-Comintern Pact, which was clearly aimed at the USSR. This is not the place to analyse the policy of appeasement, but it is not hard to imagine the conclusions being drawn in Moscow as Italy took

Ethiopia, Japan seized more of China in 1937, and Hitler remilitarised the Rhineland in 1936, absorbing Austria in early 1938. Was this a deliberate attempt by Britain and France to push the aggressive states towards Russia, as the Soviet press constantly claimed? Was Stalin in a position to assume anything else, as after all, four Soviet suggestions for an international conference between March and September 1938 had simply been ignored by Britain and France? The Munich agreement of October 1938 must have been almost the last straw for Stalin, as throughout the summer crisis he had been assuring the French of Soviet support; yet the French ignored its ally the USSR and followed the British lead in handing over the Sudetenland to Hitler. The Soviet Union was once again excluded from European decision-making, despite being in the League, and despite having conduded mutual assistance pacts with France and Czechoslovakia.

The USSR had no common border with Czechoslovakia and Stalin had recently purged the officer corps of the Red Army, making effective Soviet intervention somewhat improbable; but this did not alter the fact that unlike Britain and France, the USSR could publicly present itself as the only power prepared to stand firm against Nazi aggression. Whether this was a bluff or not, all we know is that the bluff was never called.

The USSR had also managed to reap considerable propaganda rewards from the Spanish civil war. Why did Stalin involve the USSR in this war which was so far away from Soviet borders? There are several possibilities. He may have wished to:

- create a Soviet satellite in Spain;
- preserve the democratically elected Republican government;
- demonstrate his belief in collective security by helping to thwart fascist aggression; or
- show that the USSR was now an international force to be reckoned with.

The first two seem to be the most improbable, but some combination of the others may provide an acceptable explanation. Though the USSR signed the non-intervention agreement, large amounts of military aid were sent to the Republic, but never enough to guarantee a Republican victory. Perhaps Stalin was showing his customary caution by testing the resolve of Britain and France who, as it happened, were prepared to stand aside and let the Republic take its chances without them. Apart from propaganda value, what did Stalin get out of the Spanish episode? One unexpected bonus was the Spanish government's gold reserves. More importantly, the three years of war gave him additional insights into the attitudes of

his ally, France, and his collective security partner, Great Britain. From a Soviet point of view it became obvious that these two powers would accept quite severe risks to their respective strategic positions rather than take effective action against Italy or Germany. Unfortunately for the USSR and unlike Hitler, Stalin could not fully benefit from the military experience gained in the war, because he murdered a number of those officers who had served in Spain, and tended to ignore the lessons that the Germans learned so well.

Thus, by the time of Hitler's seizure of the rump of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, apart from a certain propaganda success, Stalin had absolutely nothing to show for his policy of collective security. Worse still, no accommodation had yet proved possible with Nazi Germany, which was now immeasurably stronger than it had been in 1933. As if to emphasise the USSR's dangerous position, 1938 and 1939 had seen Japan launch very substantial attacks on the Soviet Far East. The USSR had won the battle around Lake Khasan in 1938 and Khalkin-Gol in 1939 which led the Japanese to think twice about any further adventure in the area, but despite a neutrality treaty with Japan in April 1941, Stalin could not be sure of his Far Eastern frontier until late 1941, when his brilliant agent in Tokyo, Richard Sorge, told him that the Japanese had other plans.

And yet from being isolated and ignored in 1938 and early 1939, Stalin suddenly found himself in the extraordinary position of being courted by both of Europe's power blocs. The last moments of the collective security policy came between March and August of 1939. This began with another failed Soviet suggestion for an international conference, continued as an Anglo-French military delegation unsuccessfully tried to negotiate its way towards a joint agreement with the USSR and ended with the 'bombshell' of the Nazi-Soviet pact on 23 August.

Why did Stalin decide to become an ally of Hitler and not of Britain and France? A key factor must have been the utter lack of resolution shown by these two powers over the previous six years. Was it in any way credible that either of them would stand by their guarantee of Poland in the face of increasing German pressure? Neither Hitler nor Stalin thought so. It was to Stalin's great, but temporary, good fortune that his attempts to improve Soviet-German relations suddenly bore fruit. Hitler was anxious to thwart any Anglo-French moves to involve the USSR in a military pact and he was planning to attack Poland on 1 September. Ribbentrop made Stalin an offer that was impossible to refuse. The Soviet-German commercial treaty of 18 August was swiftly followed by the non-aggression pact of 23 August. The secret sections of this pact, in essence, gave the USSR eastern Poland, the three Baltic states and Bessarabia. The treaty also put off the likelihood of a war with

Germany for some time. All that Britain and France could have offered was the strong possibility of a war with Germany in the very near future and presumably on the same side as the old enemy Poland. Stalin had learned the value of mutual assistance pacts with the French in 1938. What other decision could he have made in the circumstances?

Phase 6:23 August 1939 to 22 June 1941

In the course of the next 20 months Hitler extended his control over most of Europe by military might, economic penetration and alliance. By the early summer of 1941 he was ready to launch his long dreamed-of attack on his temporary ally, the USSR. How had Stalin used his time? Vast deliveries of grain, petroleum and other vital strategic materials had been sent to Germany as part of the trade agreements between the two governments, but the Germans had only sporadically kept to their side of the bargain. On 17 September the Red Army occupied its allotted zone of Poland. Between November 1939 and March 1940 Finland was battered into ceding territory to the USSR and by the end of 1940, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had been absorbed. The USSR had gained much, but it had lost the moral superiority it had spuriously claimed ever since 1917, and had now demonstrated the Soviet imperialism which was so marked in Eastern Europe after 1945. More disturbingly for Stalin, the Red Army had performed abysmally in the war against Finland, and a rapid programme of reorganisation had been put into action. That Stalin expected and feared a war with Germany is clear, but during this period he did as much as he could to appease Hitler. It is true that there was some tough jockeying for position in the Balkans between Stalin and Hitler, but the USSR agreed to join the Tripartite Pact which linked her with Japan, Italy and Germany in a vague but grandiose scheme which promised Stalin gains in Central Asia. The deliveries of strategic materials to Germany continued until a few hours before the German attack on the USSR. It seemed as though Stalin was desperate to avoid giving the Germans an excuse to attack, even though there can be no doubt that Stalin was in receipt of some very high grade intelligence material on German plans. It is still a mystery why Stalin, who trusted no one and had murdered millions, could not accept that Hitler would attack him when he did. Perhaps even dictators are prone to wishful thinking, and certainly there was nobody in Stalin's court who would risk his career and life by contradicting him. On 22 June 1941, after 20 years of constantly expressed fear of foreiu intervention, 'the world's first workers' state' was again

attacked by a coalition of imperialist powers, this time led by Nazi Germany.

The catastrophe which Operation Barbarossa began, came within a few weeks and a few miles of destroying the Soviet Union and probably Stalin himself, but this is not the place to catalogue the dreadful suffering of the Soviet population during the Great Patriotic War, nor to deal with the emergence of the USSR as a superpower after 1945.

Conclusion

How can we assess the success or failure of Soviet foreign policy between the wars? If the overriding aim of the Soviet leadership had been to avoid being attacked, then it had failed disastrously by June 1941. But to a large extent much of the manoeuvring of the Narkomindel throughout the entire interwar period had been from a position of weakness. The USSR was rarely able to influence world events and indeed was often simply ignored at key moments, while being seen as useful at other times. It is true that the Soviet Union derived real benefit from its economic relationship with Germany throughout the period and that the secret military links had been valuable. The non-aggression pact with Hitler had also given Stalin a chance to expand his borders, but it was invariably Germany who called the tune. Perhaps this alliance had given Stalin a breathing space, but one is entitled to ask whether the time gained was used fully. Paradoxically, it was Stalin who must take the responsibility both for the disaster which almost overwhelmed the USSR in 1941 and for ultimate victory which could not have been won without the industrial base created in the 1930s. For Stalin the lesson was clear. The Soviet Union had to be economically and militarily strong before she could either survive or play any significant role in world affairs.

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John Whittam

The Origins of the Second World War

A number of different, if linked, conflicts in different theatres have traditionally been ascribed the general title of the Second World War. John Whittam explores the deep roots of these conflicts and makes the case for arguing that the Second World War only really began when it became a global war in 1941.

On 27 September 1940, Japan, Italy and Germany signed the Tripartite Pact in Tokyo. This may seem a perverse way to begin a discussion of the origins of the Second World War; it may also be seen as eloquent proof that since 1989 historians appear to have contracted a kind of anniversary mania. There is nothing new in this. Indeed, some years ago a group of historians published a book on the origins of the war to commemorate the publication of a book on the origins of the war! They were celebrating the 25th anniversary of A. J. P. Taylor's controversial refutation of the theory that the war which began in September 1939 can be explained quite simply by calling it 'Hitler's War'. Deliberately provocative - and we must include his often-quoted remark that Hitler stumbled into war 'through launching on 29 August a diplomatic manoeuvre which he ought to have launched on 28 August' - he forced a re-examination of the impact of the First World War, of the diplomacy of the inter-war period, of the phenomenon of appeasement and of the short- and long-term objectives of German foreign policy and military planning. Taylor's 1961 book certainly stimulated further research. His critics were quick to point out that he had paid insufficient attention to economic factors or to ideology and some objected to his manipulation of the documentary evidence. They then proceeded to write their own interpretations. It was a controversy which yielded rich dividends, and not just in royalties for the authors.

European origins

But in one sense Taylor and his critics did their readers a disservice. Their apparent preoccupation with European issues left them open to the charge of parochialism, if indeed they claimed to be examining the origins of *a world* war. Like Taylor's own book many of these studies stopped short in September 1939. All this tended to