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The Soviet Foreign Policy and the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact

By E. K. Williams

The foreign policy of the Soviet Union between World War I and World War II should be viewed in the light of an age that may be generally characterized by political instability, economic insecurity and international anarchy. During this era the policy of the USSR inexorably reflects the aftermaths of three upheavals: the Russian Revolution; the rise of Hitler; and the debacle at Munich.

The first period of the Soviet policy begins with the complete overthrow of the old regime in Russia, and ends with the political triumph of nazism in Germany. Generally, the foreign policy of USSR for this period can be summed up in two distinct phases:¹ (1) determined defensive and offensive actions against the capitalistic states, and (2) defensive isolation. There may be apparent exceptions to this thesis in situations where the Soviets sought bilateral pacts or trade agreements; nevertheless, collective security as an instrument of policy was premature.

The overthrow of czarism in Russia was accompanied by a universal appeal for peace. The Soviets were determined to end hostility with the central powers, and were willing to pay the price in terms of deterioration of international prestige, mutilation of frontier, and disruption of normal relationship with the allied powers. Consequently, the Germans encountered no serious difficulty in imposing the Brest-Litovsk² Treaty on the Russians.

The signing of this treaty did not end the conflict, but merely helped to create new enemies for the communist regime. In a short period, the allies had dispatched troops on the Russian territory for the apparent purpose of overthrowing the new regime and re-establishing the old one; while the alleged purpose was to prevent war material from falling in the hands of Germany. In addition to this conflagration, there was a civil strife between the Red and the White Russians. The new State was fighting for physical survival. Later an open conflict developed between Russia and Poland. Despite these military aftermaths of World War I, the new State successfully survived all of the crises.

During the early period of the formation of the new regime, the policy of the Soviets was in keeping with cer-

¹W. H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Enigma*, (New York, 1943). p. 187.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

tain phases of Marxism; that is, to foment revolutionary movements and to establish proletarian states in foreign lands. The failure of the Russians to establish firmly communism in Poland, Finland, Hungary, and other states signalled a modification of the revolutionary tactics. Too, the failure of the intervention of the allies suggested a new policy of the allied powers toward their former ally. Chamberlin said: "In view of these circumstances, a **modus vivendi** between the Soviet Union and the outside world was clearly called for. . . ."³

One of the main problems which prolonged the disturbed relationship between the Soviet Union and her allies was the refusal of the new regime to assume the debt incurred by the regimes of the czar and Kerenski. On February 8, 1920, the new government announced its intention to that effect.⁴ The announcement was a serious blow to effective and further cooperation between the Soviet Union and her former allies.

In 1929 the Soviet-British Commercial Agreement was signed.⁵ This was a clear renunciation and repudiation of a solid economic and political front against the Soviet Union. It too, marked the incipency of a chain of commercial understandings between the Russian* government and the world in general.

Great Britain, the first country to break the diplomatic front against Russia, recognized⁶ de jure the Russian government on February 4, 1924. England's action was copied immediately or soon thereafter by Italy, Norway, Austria, Greece, Sweden, China, Denmark, Mexico and France. The United States, the last power to recognize the Soviet government, accorded diplomatic recognition to it on November 16, 1933.⁷

On April 16, 1922, a new era in the diplomacy of Europe was signalled. The two outlawed states, Russia and Germany, had reached an agreement in which the two nations could cooperate, culminating in the Treaty of Rapallo. Commenting on the action of the two states, Yakhontoff said: "The Treaty of Rapallo was a gain for Soviet Russia 'she established her position on the international stage' she was no longer alone. . . ."⁸ Apparently, the

³*Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

⁴F. H. Simonds and B. Emeny, *Great Powers in World Politics*, (New York, 1939), p. 661.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 660-661.

*The terms, Russian government and Russia are used synonymously with the Soviet government and USSR in this paper.

⁶V. A. Yakhontoff, *USSR Foreign Policy*, (New York, 1945), p. 67.

⁷A Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs*, (London, 1933), pp. 530-44.

⁸Yakhontoff, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

Soviet leaders envisaged a complete deterioration of the diplomacy of the capitalistic states of Europe similar to the debacle of intervention.

Within a decade, the Soviet government had signed numerous non-aggression pacts. They were signed with the countries⁹ as follows: Turkey, December 17, 1925; Germany, April 24, 1926; Afghanistan, August 31, 1926; Lithuania, September 28, 1926; Persia, October 1, 1927; Finland, January 21, 1932; Latvia, February 5, 1932; Estonia, May 4, 1932; Poland, July 25, 1932; and, France, November 29, 1932.

The institution of the NEP and the Five-Year Plan, along with the formation of the USSR increased the prestige of the Soviet states at home and abroad. It helped to return her to the international arena of world politics. Nevertheless, the western states were still unwilling to permit the Russian government to resume her position in the international affairs of the world which she had held before the coming of World War I. She had been excluded from the Larcono agreement; however, she still manifested the political ability to get along with pre-Hitler Germany.

The latter part of the period from 1917 to 1933, Russia had declared openly to subscribe to a formula of international peace. She was among the first to become¹⁰ a signatory of the Kellog Peace Pact. Despite the marked changes in her strategy, she did not accept the policy of collective security as an instrument prior to the advent of nazism.

II

The political triumph of nazism over the transplanted democracy in Germany was followed by a nightmare of insecurity and the ghost of another European war. This perturbing situation had its repercussions in the foreign policy of the Soviet State. The Russian leaders saw in Hitler a direct threat to the existence of their state. They too, envisaged Hitler, a demon, "to pull the chestnuts out of the fire" for the democratic states.

In addition, the failure of the Disarmament Conference and the invasion of Japan into Manchuria augmented the probability of an aggressive design against the Soviet Union. In reference to this state of affairs, the Prime Minister of the Soviet Union, then Molotov, said: ". . . All this compels us to strengthen our vigilance as regards happenings in the Far East. We must not forget that our border lies along the Manchurian lines."¹¹

⁹Simonds and Emeny, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

¹⁰A Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs*, (London, 1928), pp. 24-25.

¹¹H. Moore, *A Record of Soviet Far Eastern Relations*, p. 7 as quoted by Yakhontoff, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

The Soviet leaders know that the League of Nations had been challenged. They knew also, that it had not met the challenge effectively nor constructively. The withdrawal of Japan and Germany from this international organization was viewed by the Soviets as further evidence of aggressive design against the integrity of the Soviet Union. The new threat of war was a direct challenge to the foreign policy of Soviet Russia. It called for a repudiation of the policy of defensive isolation. The Soviets accepted the challenge by embarking on a policy which demanded a system of alliances, collective security and a united front against the aggressors. They pursued this policy unrelentingly until the ghost of the repercussion of Munich arose as a new threat to their security. The rapprochement of Poland and Germany culminated finally in the ten-year Non-Aggression Pact. Hitler's attitude toward Russia as expressed in **Mein Kampf**, made the pre-Hitler policy of the Soviet Union less tenable. The aggressive display of Nazi Germany was viewed by France with much displeasure and fear. Historically, France has always viewed Germany as an eternal enemy and a continuous threat to her security and prosperity. Consequently, France was instrumental in a closer cooperation with the Soviet Union. French statesmen solicited¹² Russia's participation in the League of Nations. On September 24, 1934, Russia officially became a member of that world organization. Here, the Soviets made their first attempt to implement the policy of collective security against aggression.

This threat of aggression was increasing with almost unprecedented rapidity. France viewed the conditions in Germany as a direct challenge to the status quo. The Soviet Union felt the threat of aggression from Japan and Germany. In the meantime, the tension of war began to menace all of western Europe. In March 1935, Germany announced¹³ that she would renew military conscription in direct contravention of the Treaty of Versailles. The horror of war again haunted Russia and France, if not all of Europe.

The denunciation of the Versailles Treaty by Germany precipitated on one hand, the Stresa Conference of which the Soviets were excluded; on the other hand, it helped to precipitate the Franco-Soviet Mutual Assistance Pact. The chief reasons¹⁴ for the Pact of May 2, 1935 were: France's desire for an access to the great oil resources and a desire for the commerce of Soviet Russia; and, the Soviet Union's fear of a direct attack by Germany. The signing of the Franco-Soviet Alliance was soon followed by a Czech-Russian Pact of a similar nature.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹³Simonds and Emeny, *op. cit.*, p. 678.

¹⁴W. C. Langsom, *Documents and Readings in the History of Europe Since 1918* (Chicago, 1939), pp. 237-238.

The rapprochement of France and Russia was soon followed by a series of repudiation of international laws and agreements. On March 7, 1936, Germany denounced the Larcono Pact and notified the world that she would remilitarize the Rhineland. Germany claimed¹⁵ that the decision was a result of the Franco-Russian Pact. The stage for a general European war was in the making. England was embarking on a policy which would soon carry the derogatory stigma of appeasement. The Anglo-German Naval Pact* of June 10, 1935, another contravention of the Treaty of Versailles, gave to Germany a moral and legal basis for altering the status quo. France and Russia viewed this agreement with alarm and suspiciousness.

As early as 1935, the Soviet leaders envisaged clearly an inevitable conflict between fascism and communism. Accordingly, the Third International gave full support to the new foreign policy of Russia. At the meeting of the Third International in 1935, Soviet leaders made a plea for a united front against the evils of the fascist advance. The Congress¹⁶ definitely and specifically demanded a solid front of workers everywhere to unite actively against the growing threat of the fascist aggression.

In 1935, a direct diplomatic offensive was begun by Germany and Japan against the Soviet Union. November 25, 1936, Germany and Japan signed¹⁷ the Anti-Communist Pact. Italy and Hungary soon became signatories of a similar pact. Soviet Russia, then faced two hostile great powers from the opposite direction. Along with this unwelcomed situation, there existed within the Soviet state several outstanding Russians who were alleged enemies of the state.

The communist government began to prepare for the inevitable life and death struggle. In 1936, and 1937, the world was shocked by the sensational purge which was carried on in the Soviet Union. Seventeen leaders of the Soviet Union was accused of¹⁸ plotting against the State and being in collusion with avowed enemies of Soviet Russia. Fourteen of the accused were mortally liquidated; while four were given prison terms not exceeding eight years.

Italy's rape of Ethiopia; the Spanish Civil War; the annexation of Austria by Germany; and, Japan's undeclared war against China followed the consistent pattern of the fascist states as they neared the diplomatic crisis. In every crisis, fear and insecurity haunted Russia.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 255-259.

*The Pact established a ratio of 35:100 for the German and British Navies respectively.

¹⁶F. Schuman, *The Crisis of Diplomacy*, (New York, 1939), p. 244.

¹⁷Simonds and Emeny, *op. cit.*, p. 681.

¹⁸Langsom, *op. cit.*, pp. 823-824.

The Soviets openly condemned every aggressive act and called for united action. In the meantime, the West displayed a sign of weakness. In speaking of the annexation of Austria, Shuman said: "The West did nothing. Halifax cried: "Horrible, horrible, I never thought they would do it—though he had implicitly sanctioned the doing four months ago."¹⁹

The last great drama that this period produced was still in the making. Hitler had dismembered Austria, and now he was ready to dismember Czechoslovakia. What would France and England do to stop Hitler? Would France honor her obligation? Would collective actions against aggression be taken? Those were the questions of paramount importance to the Russian leaders.

During the summer of 1938, the tension over the Sudeten created a crisis in Europe. The Sudetens under the leadership of Henlein wanted to become reunited to the Reich. Such a proposal was a direct challenge to the integrity of Czechoslovakia. This crisis was settled at Munich on September 29-30, 1938. At that time the area under dispute was transferred to Germany. The conference was attended by Hitler, Chamberlain, Mussolini and Daladier. Russia had no representative, despite the fact that she was an ally of the victim. Furthermore, the Soviet Union was completely isolated. Strong made the following remarks concerning the conference: "If any doubt as to the motive of the British Foreign Office, it was removed at the Munich Conference. Munich—with its cynical sell out of Czechoslovakia—was the triumph of the cards of the Tory ruling class in its game of driving Germany toward the East. . . ."²⁰ The western powers bowed deliberately to the will of Hitler in dismembering Czechoslovakia as a state. Soviet Union was technically an ally of the victim. She stated emphatically her opposition to the demands of Germany on that small state.

Molotov again called for collective action against the aggressor. He stated openly opposition to the policy of appeasement which reached its zenith at Munich. Chamberlain said: ". . . Munich may be considered the prelude to the drastic re-orientation of Soviet foreign policy in 1939. Professed concern for collective security and the rights of small nations gave way to hardboiled isolationist imperialism."²¹ While Chamberlain returned to England under the vague impression that he had averted a war that would have destroyed most of Europe, he remarked: ". . . I do not regard the Munich agreement as a defeat either for

¹⁹Schuman, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

²⁰A. L. Strong, *The Soviets Expected It*, (New York: 1940), p. 147.

²¹Chamberlain, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

democracies or the cause of law and order.”²² At the same time, France was desirous of reaching an understanding with Germany at the cost of further appeasement.

III

The triumph of the aggressors at Munich was followed by the annexation of Memel by Germany; the annexation of Teschen by Poland, and Hungary's seizure²³ of 4,200 square miles of Slovak-Ruthenian territory. On March 15, 1939, Hitler set up a protectorate over Bohemia and Moravia which meant the complete liquidation of Prague as the capital of an independent state.

This latest aggression marked an apparent change in the foreign policy of France and Great Britain. They sought to stop Hitler by some means. The West, France and England, were convinced that they could not expect Hitler to keep or abide by an agreement.

By the spring of 1939, the British envisaged a conflict between Germany and the democracy. They believed that the West could not defeat Berlin without the aid of Moscow. However, the British policy was dilatory and vacillating. Great Britain feared a²⁴ military triumph of Moscow over Berlin with the consequence of a communistic hegemony over Europe. Finally, the British government decided to contact the Russian government in an effort to stop Hitler. The policy of the French government was completely subordinated to that of England. On April 11, Lord Halifax informed the Russian ambassador that England was prepared to negotiate an anti-aggression pact against Berlin.

The preliminary proposals were received by the Russian Foreign Office on April 16. They contained the following provisions:²⁵ (1) supply of Russian raw material to her neighbors; (2) the use of the Soviet fleet in the Baltic Sea; and, (3) indirect aid (militaristic) to the victim of aggression by the Army of the Soviets. England further suggested that the Soviets' entry into the war be contingent on the entry of England and France to relieve the fear of double dealing on the part of England and France.

The Soviets countered with a proposal that constituted a genuine military alliance of a defensive nature. In the words of Yakhontoff:

. . . that an effective pact of mutual assistance against aggression, a pact of an exclusively and defensive character, be concluded between Great Britain, France and the USSR;

²²*Documents on International Affairs*, (London, 1938), I, 99.

²³Simonds and Emeny, *op. cit.*, p. 700.

²⁴D. J. Dallin, *Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy* (New Haven, 1942) p. 1.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 21-25.

that a guarantee attack by aggressors be extended by Great Britain, France and USSR without exception. . . .²⁶

The British proposals were unacceptable to the Russians inasmuch as France, Great Britain, Poland and Rumania had guaranteed themselves against aggression; Russia had been requested to guarantee Poland and Rumania from aggression; Poland and Rumania did not want the troops of the Soviet Union on their territory; and, the agreement suggested by the British Office was without reciprocity and equality.

The proposals offered by Soviet Union were unacceptable to Great Britain. Chamberlain's government was desirous²⁷ of friendly relationship with the Soviet government, but above all, Chamberlain desired to preclude intimate and binding agreements. He viewed with apathy pro-Soviet policy.

The dilatory tactics of Chamberlain suggest that France and Great Britain were trying to orient Germany toward the East. Welles states, "The agreement confirmed the conviction that the western powers strove to keep Germany from the West while turning her to the East."²⁸ While Wards states emphatically: "The allies were asking Russia to fight their war against Germany."²⁹ Most evidence indicated that France and Great Britain were unwilling to offer any commitment which would guarantee territories or states adjoining the Soviet Union.

The intransigent position of Poland and Rumanian against the troops of the Soviets invading their land to combat aggression provided excellent camouflage for the British position. The equivocation of Chamberlain was obvious to Stalin and many diplomats of the West who were opposed to the vacillating policy of England and France. In addition, the position of the Baltic states created a series of problems for the big powers. The Baltic states were fearful of losing their independence in the event of a war in which Russia participated. One June 7, 1939, Latvia and Estonia signed³⁰ a pact with Germany.

In the meantime, the Soviet policy was in a state of transition. It was being transformed from collective security to defensive isolation and aggression. This change was first made apparent in the commercial relation of the

²⁶Yakhontoff, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

²⁷*German White Papers*, (New York, 1940), p. 63.

²⁸Sumner Welles, *The Time for Decision* as quoted by Laeseron; *Russia and the Western World*, New York: 1945, p. 194.

²⁹Barbara Ward, *Russian Foreign Policy, Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs* (Oxford, 1940), p. 28.

³⁰D. J. Dallin, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Soviet Union and Germany which took a new course in 1939. In 1939, the Soviet Union concluded or renewed a series of commercial agreements with her neighbors, including France, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Italy. A trade agreement³¹ was also concluded between the United States and the Soviet state.

The most important agreement affecting Soviet international position was reached between the USSR and Germany. This agreement provided³² a 200,000,000 RM financial credit to the Soviet Union was supposed to place orders within the next two years and Germany was to purchase goods from the Soviet Union valued at 180,000,000 RM during the two-year period.

The Soviet leaders maintained that the commercial agreement with Germany did not indicate any radical change in their policy. Stalin remarked: "We stand for peace and strengthening of business relations with all countries. That is our position as long as these countries maintain like relations with the Soviet Union and as long as they make no attempt to trespass on the interests of our country."³³

When Germany saw that Great Britain and France were ready psychologically to defend Poland and to stop her expansion, except in the East, with the possible risk of war, she was desirous of a free hand to deal with the West. Ribbentrop, then, became the chief exponent³⁴ of rapprochement with Russia. He determined to convince Hitler, the chief opponent of Russia, of the feasibility and desirability of an understanding with the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Russians were tired of the delaying and dilatory tactics of the West. In reference to a speech made by Stalin as early as March 11, 1939, Davies remarks: "Even more significant he charged that those two countries in their own interests were inciting Germany to attack the USSR; that their purposes in this was selfish, to enable them after the combatants had exhausted themselves to intervene "in the interest of peace" and dictate the conditions of peace solely on the bases of their own interests."³⁵

During the time of the Moscow-West Conference, there was also a Berlin-Moscow Conference in the Russian capital. These two conferences lasted almost two months. On May 1 of that fateful year, the great exponent of collective security against aggression, Litvinov, resigned³⁶ as Secre-

³¹*Bulletin on the Soviet Union*, Vol. 4, Nos. 16-17, 1939, p. 33.

³²*Loc. cit.*

³³*Loc. cit.*

³⁴*Readings in Twentieth Century European History*, Edited by Alexander Baltzley and A. William Salomone, (New York, 1950), pp. 446-447.

³⁵J. E. Davies, *Mission to Moscow* (New York, 1941) pp. 437-438.

³⁶Simonds and Emeny, *op. cit.*, p. 689.

tary of Foreign Affairs, and was succeeded by Molotov. This was a clear-cut signal for the West and the rest of the world that the Soviet Union had embarked on a policy which would startle the world. On August 23, 1939, the German-Russian Non-Aggression Pact was signed.** (New York, 1939) pp. 135-136.

The signing of this treaty had a serious effect on all of the great powers of the European world. For Great Britain—it was her greatest diplomatic defeat. For France—it meant that she was the only great power on the continent which must stop Hitler. For Germany—it meant that she would not have to fight a war on two fronts at the same time. For Russia—it signified: (1) removal of the threat of the capitalistic countries against her; (2) removal of the fear created by the Anti-Comintern Pact; (3) giving Stalin a free hand in the Baltic theater; and, (4) putting the Soviet Union in a favorable bargaining position.³⁷

Finally, it appears that the action of the Soviet Union was not a result of genuine duplicity on the part of the Russian leaders. On the contrary, the equivocation of the West, especially Great Britain, with its avowed apathy for the Soviet System made inevitably a change in the foreign policy of the Soviets. Consequently, the signing of the Pact with Germany by the leaders of Russia was viewed as a better alternative than the British proposals; so the Soviets chose the Germans.

**For complete text—See: *The British War Blue Book*, No. 9 (New Foreign Affairs, Vol. 18, October 1939 to July 1940, pp. 203-04.