

MODERN HISTORY

Russian Foreign Policy

“Soviet foreign policy was dominated by the desire to stand aside from the conflicts of the capitalist world” (**Overy**) however “a series of ad hoc (unplanned) responses and reactions to dynamic events” (Robertson) exposed the fact that “The leaders led isolated existences in émigré communities” (Pipes) and were unaware of Western culture.

Initially Russian foreign policy was totally disregarded as the Bolshevik thinking of an imminent world revolution plagued their mind. Early on, the 1917 **Decree on Peace** brought no response from the major powers fighting the war and the 1918 Treaty of Brest Litovsk showed Trotsky’s disregard of foreign policy as it would only be provisional, “*the inevitability of their eventual collapse*” (**Lee**) was expected. However as the prospect of world revolution diminished after the failure of Bela Kun in Hungary, and the Spartacist Group in Germany, Soviet need for trade led them to establish links with foreign powers. Once it was realized that a proletarian revolution in other countries was unrealistic, “World revolution” became replaced by “world isolation” particularly after the failure of the Red army to defeat the Polish, as a result of “*the capitalist nations being too strong and Russia too weak*” (**Lynch**).

Revolutionary pragmatism brought upon the realization that a peaceful coexistence with Europe was the only option for the moment, promoted by **Georgy Chicherin**. Thereafter, a policy of peaceful coexistence began to emerge, with Soviet diplomats attempting to end the country’s isolation, and concluding bi-lateral arrangements with ‘capitalist’ governments, culminated in the **Anglo-Soviet trade agreement of 1921** which was an attempt to divide the imperialist countries and prevent them from forming a capitalist bloc against Russia.

As Germany was isolated from the rest of Europe in the Treaty of Versailles, Lenin saw this as a situation that could be utilized, he believed that the communist revolutionaries would sweep away the hostile capitalist governments and end Russian isolation. **The Treaty of Rapallo (1922)** was central to the Soviet Union’s security. Each country cancelled any financial claims and granted each other full diplomatic recognition, an example of “*considerations not of aggression, but of defense*” (**Lynch**). This would enable Russia to “*concentrate on industrial growth in an attempt to create a balanced economy*” (**Lee**). The successful adoption of a capitalistic mentality culminated in the diplomatic recognition achieved in 1924 from Britain, France and Italy. The “Arcos Raid” and forged Zinoviev letter momentarily broke diplomatic relations, but they were repaired by 1930, an example of a “*counter blasts that meant international tension never wholly slackened*” (**Lynch**). Stalin’s rise power in the late 1920s brought upon the policy of ‘Socialism in One Country’ leading to better relations coinciding with a rise in economic and military collaboration with Germany.

The Great Depression in 1929 opened up trading between Russia and Britain and Germany as they put issues of immediate economic need to the fore of foreign policy decisions, the prime Soviet aim was still to avoid war and concentrate on internal, economic modernization. Stalin began the wholesale collectivization of agriculture, accompanied by a major program of planned industrialization. This new radical phase was a form of Social fascism, possibly determining Stalin’s rejection of pleas for joint action against Fascism – Nazism. Even though by 1932, the USSR was recognized as a European power, all foreign Communist Parties were made to concentrate their efforts in a struggle against their rivals in the working-class movement, ignoring the threat of real Fascism. The catastrophic effects of this policy, and the negative effect it had on Soviet security, was to be fully demonstrated by the victory of Hitler in 1933, followed by the destruction of the German Communist Party, the strongest in Europe.

Lynch argues that “[Stalin] failed to grasp that the strength and appeal of Nazism derived from its nationalism, which made it fundamentally opposed to Communism.”

The emergence of Japan and Germany as potential threats to Soviet security caused a change in Soviet foreign policy. From the start of the 1930s it was decided that “communism in one country” would be maintained by the Soviet Union’s giving its support to the Western notion of collective security and active participation by the League of Nations (1934), “*what other guarantees of security is there?*” (**Maxim Litvinov**). The new policy led to alliances with France and Czechoslovakia. In the League the Soviets were active in demanding action against imperialist aggression, at the 7th and last Congress of the Comintern, it appealed for a ‘popular front’ against fascism. The “Popular Front” formed during a period of goodwill between the Soviet Union and the West with established formal diplomatic relations. However it was a case of making it appear as such in order to insure Soviet survival and not abandon the ultimate goal of world revolution and the destruction of capitalism.

When Hitler marched troops into the Rhineland in 1936, Litvinov stressed the grave dangers lying in the future but was largely ignored by the West. Furthermore, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 again resorted Russia to isolation as Britain and France had failed to give support to the Popular Front government against the German backed Nationalists. **The Anti-Comintern pact made in 1936** between Germany, Italy and Japan was aimed directly at the Soviet Union and further backed Russia into a corner. **Ezhovschina** in 1917 had further disastrous international ramifications as France became more reluctant to cooperate with the Soviets, fearing that its own secrets would be passed straight on to the Germans. France and Britain however continued to give concessions to Germany, such as **the Munich agreement of 1938**. By May 1939, Litvinov was sacked and replaced by Molotov who favored a pro-German foreign policy. Russia embarked upon secret negotiations with the Germans.

Soviet foreign policy was essentially reversed in 1939 with the **Nazi-Soviet Pact**, “*the only clear goal policy was that of avoiding war*” (**Roberts**). By taking it Stalin could continue peaceful construction for nearly two years and strengthen his defenses, even though it was a “*last minute alternative, rather than a logical outcome of previous policies*” (**Lee**). “Breathing space” had been finally achieved and Russia turned its attention into building its armed forces. However the “Winter war” against Finland resulted in an expulsion from the League of Nations and the weakness of the army gave Hitler confidence to attack. In Sept 1940, Germany, Japan and Italy signed a **Three Power Pact**, which Stalin was invited to join, but refused, demanding the remaining Soviet demands be met. Stalin ignored Germany’s open preparations for **Operation Barbarossa** and continued to offer more Soviet military and economic concessions to Germany in an attempt to buy Hitler off. However Germany did invade the USSR in June 1941 in a massive artillery assault.

Soviet policy was always determined by the desire to protect the revolution against external enemies. The communists were prepared to adopt a pragmatic attitude towards foreign affairs in order to protect their own interests and diminish their technological inferiority. Although initially the “*Bolsheviks seized power not to change Russia but use Russia as a springboard for a world revolution*” (**Pipes**), all policies were turned to ensuring that the Soviet Union, regardless of the ideological or physical cost, survived.