

Good
Book Review #4
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Beloff, Max. The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1929-1941. London: Oxford University Press for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1947, 1949. 2 vols.

This study of Soviet foreign policy by Max Beloff was written in the best tradition of British thoroughness--much similar to the painstakingly detailed writings of E. H. Carr. The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1929-1941 was published in the aftermath of World War II when it suddenly became apparent that a "scholarly, coherent, and comprehensive account, of the evolution of Soviet foreign policy"(p. vii) in the decade before the outbreak of the war was lacking. Since the Soviet Union emerged from World War II as a world power, the study of the prior history of Soviet diplomacy had gained added importance.

In reviewing this work almost forty years after its publication, there is clearly relatively little that is "new" or "revealing" in its contents. Though the general outline of Soviet foreign policy in this period has now long been established, Beloff's work remains the path-breaking treatment of this subject and a "must" for any student of Soviet diplomacy. The author consulted an extensive number of published sources and secondary works, which are listed in a valuable sixteen-page bibliography. Also included are valuable appendices on such topics as "Russia and Sinkiang" and "Russia and Mongolia."

Beloff notes a number of principles characterizing the study of Soviet foreign relations. Perhaps the most important is his reservation that for much of Soviet history the Western scholar lacks "the factual information necessary...[to]...proceed to an analysis of motives." (p. 385) Although much insight has been gained by the publication of memoirs and foreign relations documents from Great Britain, Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union, the motives of Soviet diplomacy still remain obscure in many cases. Often the Western scholar is forced by necessity to rely heavily on the Soviet press. On one hand, it is readily apparent that much of that press is merely propaganda to be disregarded by the Western scholar. On the other hand, because of authoritarian control of the media in the Soviet Union, the press remains an "intentional" reflection of the government's line at any point in time. A careful study of the press can "reveal the basic approach to problems of international affairs, the temper in which they are discussed, and the basic assumptions upon which the Soviet leaders conduct their affairs." (p. 387) Thus, there ALWAYS lingers a certain element of uncertainty in any study of Soviet diplomacy which must be born in mind by the reader.

In this study four other features of Soviet diplomacy emerge. First, Soviet policy is a combination of two apparently disparate elements: revolutionary Communism and realpolitik. One feature may temporarily predominate, as during the pursuit of the realpolitik policy of collective security, but the other aspect remains and may emerge at any

time, as the revolutionary side of Soviet policy appeared in the Baltic states in 1940, Second, because of the unique combination of an ideology with the traditional status of a great territorial power, the Soviets are bound to put the preservation of their regime above all other considerations. Third, because of an adherence to Marxism-Leninism, Soviet leadership will continue to perceive itself as threatened as long as other non-communist states exist. Finally, Soviet diplomats are able to manifest an "extreme flexibility of action which they have derived from the conviction of their own absolute righteousness." (p. 393)

Soviet diplomacy may be extremely adaptable and guided by "scientific" Marxist-Leninist guidelines, but it is not always correct or successful. In the period from 1929 to 1941, Soviet policy evinced numerous setbacks, complications, and major disasters, which in reality were not markedly different from those suffered by the West. The problem was that Soviet mistakes when combined with Western errors led the world to disaster. For example, Comintern policies in Germany directly abetted Adolf Hitler's rise to power with its resulting consequences, the least of which was the destruction of the German Communist Party. Other major Soviet miscalculations occurred later: inconclusive Soviet policy in the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938, miscalculation of Western resolve to defend Poland in 1939, overestimation of French ability to resist a German invasion in 1940, and the refusal to heed warnings of an imminent German invasion of the Soviet

Union in 1941.

Beloff distinguishes three major periods of Soviet foreign policy: 1929-1933, 1933-1936, and 1936-1941. Soviet diplomats, from 1929 to 1933, were confronted with three primary tasks: to cultivate friendly relations with the West in order to obtain the necessary economic assistance for the fulfillment of the First Five-Year Plan, to prevent the formation of any anti-Soviet bloc, and to extend the Soviet Union's security system with its neighbors. (Actually, these tasks may be seen as relatively constant features of Soviet diplomacy.) Furthermore, Beloff boldly states, "the Five-Year Plan provides the master key to every aspect of Russian policy in the years immediately following 1929." (p. 27) In fact, economic conditions dominated all international relations in those years, but the Soviet Union was especially in need of peace to carry out its large-scale plans of economic construction. Thus, Soviet preoccupation with economic needs may have led to an underestimation of political events. Interestingly, while official Soviet diplomacy mounted a minor "peace offensive," as evidenced by participation in the Geneva Disarmament Conference, Comintern policy swung leftwards to take advantage of a perceived revolutionary situation in the West.

The Soviet "search for collective security" marks the second period of Soviet diplomacy from ^{the} spring of 1933 to 1936. Considerations of defense became increasingly important to the Soviet Union in these years. Again three tasks confronted Soviet diplomats: to ensure that the "new threat" from the West

did not combine with the "old threat" from the East (p. 90), to prevent the forming of any capitalist coalition against the Soviet Union, and finally to avoid or delay the struggle with Germany. Maxim Litvinov, Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs, had read Mein Kampf and knew that German power would continue to grow until it embarked on a course of eastward expansion. Moreover, there were dangerous signs of willingness in the West to direct the Nazis in that direction. Thus, Soviet foreign policy worked in two directions: to revitalize and strengthen the League of Nations and to promote security pacts with France and Eastern Europe, e.g. an Eastern Locarno. In many ways Soviet policy was a failure. The League did not stop Italian aggression in Abyssinia, support Spain or Czechoslovakia later, nor oppose German rearmament. Because of stubborn Polish and Rumanian opposition, negotiations for an Eastern Locarno pact also failed. Lastly, the Franco-Soviet mutual assistance pact was essentially stillborn because of the failure to conclude a military convention and the French delay in ratifying the pact.

The "breakdown of collective security," 1936 to 1941, is the final period of Soviet diplomacy. In these years, Soviet security arrangements with France and Czechoslovakia collapsed, and the Soviet Union found itself increasingly isolated in the international community. Relations with the West were at times strained, despite a common danger in Hitler. It should not be surprising that there was no American ambassador in Moscow from June 1938 to August 1939. Similar coolness plagued relations

with Great Britain and France, and matters were not helped by low Western appraisals of the Red Army in the wake of the purges. Increasing frustration with Western appeasement of Germany eventually lead to the abandonment of the fiction of collective security and the signing of the Soviet-German Non-Agression Pact of 23 August 1939. Probably two of the more fascinating aspects of Soviet diplomacy in this period, which Beloff was unable to authoritatively explain, were Soviet policy in the 1938 Czechoslovakian crisis and German promotion of a Soviet-Japanese non-aggression pact.

Despite Beloff's division of Soviet foreign relations into three periods, there remain certain constant features of that policy through the decade. First, the West continued to mistrust Soviet intentions, as evidenced by wide fluctuations in trade with the Soviet Union and often cool relations. Second, the problems of the Comintern, Soviet propaganda, and communist activity in the West remained a sore spot in Western-Soviet relations. Third, the "debt" problem often resurfaced at inopportune moments. Fourth, German-Soviet economic relations continued despite public animosity between the two countries. Fifth, Poland, and to a lesser extent Rumania, maintained an ^{attitude of} unswerving hostility toward the Soviet Union despite Western pressure and the danger of Germany. Finally, for Soviet diplomats there remained a permanent connection between the dangers in the East and West.

Soviet diplomatic proposals from 1929 to 1941 were often constructive and reasonable: the project for partial,

proportional disarmament, the attempt to define aggression, the proposal to summon a four-power conference to develop a firm response to German pressure on Czechoslovakia, the appeal to redefine the tasks of the Non-Intervention Committee after its obvious failure, and the support of Spain, Abyssinia, and China in the League of Nations. The problem for the West was that these "new" Soviet proposals did not go far enough to outweigh the previous "insincere" record of Soviet diplomacy. The historian can not criticize Western leaders for not paying closer attention to Soviet projects given that record and the aftereffects of the Great War. For over a decade the Soviet Union had bitterly denounced the activities of the League, and now suddenly Soviet diplomats championed it as a bulwark against fascist aggression. The Soviet Union had contributed to the rise of Hitler and to the splintering of socialist parties in the West through its leadership of the Comintern but now promoted the "popular front." The Soviet Union had supported revolution in Hungary, Germany, and China. In essence, the series of events that led to the outbreak of the Second World War was partaken in by both the Soviet Union and the West. Neither's policies were vindicated by the outcome of that war: It was one of the "breaks of the game" that the Soviet Union survived in possession of Eastern Europe. Were the Soviets sincere in their proposals to the West for firm opposition to Hitler and a comprehensive system of collective security? Since the necessary internal records to decisively make such a judgement are lacking, the only evidence remaining is the

actual events of those years. In that respect, the question remains open because the West never undertook to test that sincerity by supporting the implementation of Soviet proposals.

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