

Good

Book Review #5
Charles T. Evans
20 October 1986 HIEU 585 Mr. Hammond

Charles T. Evans

Browder, Robert P. The Origins of Soviet-American Diplomacy.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953. 256 pp.

If one word could summarize the absence of Soviet-American relations from 1917 to 1933, perhaps it might be "misunderstanding." Robert Browder in his work The Origins of Soviet-American Diplomacy examines the roots of this lasting "misunderstanding" that continued to plague relations between the two countries after the United States officially recognized Soviet Russia in November 1933.

After the November revolution, the United States refused to have any official contact with the Bolshevik government for a number of reasons: our high hopes in the Provisional Government, the Bolshevik belief in world revolution, the doubtful prospect of the Bolsheviks staying in power, the possibility that recognition would entail acknowledgement of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, poor communication and information from Russia, and, probably most importantly, just plain confusion. The American policy of nonrecognition was forcefully elaborated for the first time by Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby in a reply to an inquiry from the Italian Ambassador regarding America's attitude toward the Soviet-Polish war in August 1920: the U.S. "considered it impossible to 'recognize the present rulers of Russia'...[because] the regime was not based on popular support, but had come to power through 'force and cunning', and continued to maintain its position by 'savage

oppression' of all opposition. The Soviet government...had refused to fulfill its international obligations and was wholeheartedly pledged to world revolution."(pp. 16-17) This position was maintained by Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes throughout the 1920s.

Despite the official attitude of nonrecognition, Raymond Robins, head of the American Red Cross Mission in Russia, continued to explore the prospects of cooperation between the Bolsheviks and the U.S. during the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. President Woodrow Wilson, himself, sent a message to the Congress of Soviets, when it met to discuss ratification of the Treaty, saying that the U.S. would "avail itself of every opportunity to secure for Russia once more complete sovereignty and independence in her own affairs."(p. 6) Further, Wilson dispatched William Bullitt to Moscow in early 1919 to inquire into the possibilities of any agreement being reached. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover headed the American Relief Administration's response to Maxim Gorky's appeal for famine aid. Finally, Secretary of State Henry Stimson exchanged diplomatic notes with Maxim Litvinov regarding the Sino-Soviet dispute over the Chinese-Eastern Railway in 1929, pointing out that both parties had signed the Paris Pact in 1928. Clearly, the absence of official relations only made diplomacy more awkward. Besides this absence also affected Soviet-American trade. Although trade continued, especially after Amtorg was set up in 1924, commerce between the countries was hindered by credit problems, the American government's refusal to accept

Soviet gold, and its charges of dumping and the use of forced labor.

The combination of the Great Depression, the First Five-Year Plan, the situation in the Far East, and events in Germany provided the final impetus to American recognition of Soviet Russia, but Browder clearly indicates the fundamentally divergent perceptions on both sides that preceded and accompanied recognition. Soviet Russia, as it embarked on industrialization, saw increased trade as the primary gain of American recognition, and trade did rise and then level off in 1931; but with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the hope of obtaining American diplomatic support in the Far East took first priority. The Soviets, though, continued to hold out the advantages of increased trade to American businessmen and also interpreted American statements regarding the Japanese as supportive of Soviet diplomacy. In fact, the Soviets badly misread American public opinion. For the United States in the throes of depression, it was the prospect of expanded trade, which the Soviets encouraged, that appeared to be the primary advantage of recognition. Stalin's apparent abandonment of the cause of world revolution in favor of "socialism in one country" also appeared to Americans as a sign of a more acceptable government. Thus, by 1933 America saw recognition primarily in economic terms, which were grossly exaggerated, while the Soviets saw it in political terms.

Because of these disparate aims, Soviet-American diplomacy was in for a rude awakening from the very start. Litvinov,

Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, arrived in New York on 7 November 1933 for negotiations after President Roosevelt's personal message to President Mikhail Kalinin earlier in October. Official recognition was announced on 17 November after lengthy private discussions that were summed up in a series of exchanged letters, which are included in the book's appendix. The letters dealt with legal and religious rights of American citizens and diplomats in Soviet Russia, a pledge of noninterference and restraint from propaganda, and a loosely-worded memorandum on a possible debt settlement. Ambassadors William Bullitt and Alexander Troyanovsky were exchanged.

Any Soviet and American hopes for fruitful cooperation, however, were soon destroyed. The Soviets quickly became disillusioned with American isolationism and the lack of concrete trade arrangements. A resolution of the Export-Import Bank and Congress's Johnson Act both tied the extension of credit to any foreign country on the condition of debt payment. (Shades of SALT I?) The United States was disappointed by the failure of trade to grow, Soviet obstinacy in concluding a debt settlement, and the activities of the American Communist Party at the Seventh Comintern Congress in July 1935. Browder points out that the United States should have extended recognition only in exchange for concrete guarantees, especially given other countries' experiences in debt negotiations and with Soviet propaganda and considering the fact that the Soviets truly desired American recognition at the moment. They could

not afford a major diplomatic setback once Litvinov was in the United States. Elsewise, America should not have placed so much store in written promises that had proven worthless in other circumstances. Finally, the author notes President Roosevelt's belief in his ability to use personal charm in negotiations with Litvinov. Roosevelt's "gentlemen's agreement" with Litvinov only resulted in confusion and disappointment later. (Was this a precursor to Yalta?)

Browder has provided the reader with a short, generally well-written account of the unfolding of Soviet-American relations. (Among his sources are interviews with Louis Fischer, and William Phillips and Robert Kelley who were involved in the recognition process.) There are, however, a number of problems with this book. Though there is a seven-page bibliography, the author seems to have concentrated heavily on but a few sources, namely Foreign Relations of the United States and Maxim Litvinov, Vneshniaia politika SSSR: rechi i zaiavleniia, 1927-1935. There is also only one short citation of Fischer's The Soviets in World Affairs. Another drawback is Browder's extreme brevity on some subjects. For example, the previously cited message of Wilson to the Congress of Soviets merits a scant half-page of text. Probably the biggest disappointment for the reader is what will not be found in the book. In fact much of the book is spent analyzing the press in both countries to discover prevailing opinion. That is an extremely interesting exercise, but it leaves little time for extensive coverage. A list of subjects that remain undeveloped by Browder

Author

might include the following: the course of American intervention and its motives, Ludwig Martens' activities in New York, the presence of Boris Skvirsky in Washington, the Sisson documents, Raymond Robins' work in Russia, the Bullitt mission, Averell Harriman's manganese concession in Siberia, American technicians in Soviet Russia, John Reed, the American Communist Party and the Comintern, and the General Electric credit negotiations with the Soviets in 1929. Thus, one can see that there is much to be added and researched concerning this subject. Browder's work remains though a short, insightful examination of the origins of Soviet-American diplomacy.