Adam B. Ulam

Expansion and Coexistence

Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-73

Second Edition

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When the first edition of this book appeared in 1968, the "new look" of Soviet foreign policy was just in the making. The invasion of Czechoslovakia had just taken place; the Kremlin was still puzzled—as was the rest of the world—by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, uncertain over how to respond both to the dangers and to the opportunities it presented for Soviet foreign policy. America's intervention in Vietnam had already ceased to be a cause of apprehension for Moscow, but the rulers of the U.S.S.R. were still undecided on how to exploit the attrition of U.S. power and prestige that resulted from America's disastrous policies in Southeast Asia. What the developments of the past few years have meant and what they portend for the future is discussed in the last, largely new, two chapters of this book. It is clear that 1971–72 marked the opening of a new phase in Soviet foreign policy—a departure from the old pattern at least as significant as what took place after Stalin's death in 1953, when his successors undertook a fresh assessment of the international situation. It is important that the possible consequences of this new posture of the U.S.S.R. in world affairs be carefully assessed. As for my own approach, I repeat what I said in the Preface of the first edition: "The student of Soviet affairs has as his first task to be neither hopeful nor pessimistic but simply to state the facts and tendencies of Russian politics. It is when he begins to see in certain political trends the inevitabilities of the future and when he superimposes upon them his own conclusions about the desirable policies of America toward the U.S.S.R. that he is courting trouble. To be sure, complete detachment is impossible, and the reader will occasionally find *hints* as to various Western sins of commission and omission in dealing with the U.S.S.R."

I have found no reason to change any interpretations and material in the bulk of the 1968 edition, but I have added certain facts that have recently come to light and that bear on Sino-Soviet relations between 1945 and 1960.

I should like to restate my gratitude to the Russian Research Center at Harvard, within whose congenial precincts I have done most of my work. I am especially indebted, as must be many scholars in this field, to two of its directors now, alas, no longer with us, the late Clyde Kluckhohn and Merle Fainsod. I recall with pleasure and gratitude many talks on Soviet foreign policy that I have had with my colleagues at the Center, especially Melvin Croan, now of the University of Wisconsin; Marshall Goldman, of Wellesley College; and Mark Pinon, now of the University of Tel Aviv. Along with many others, I have been a beneficiary of the Center's efficient organization, which is due largely to the labors of its successive administrative assistants Helen Parsons and Mary Towle. Karl Spiellmann helped me with the materials. Elisabeth Sifton was a vigilant editor of the first edition; Denise Rathbun, of this one.

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EXPANSION AND COEXISTENCE

I

THE SOURCES

1. *The Inheritance of the Past*

In the early part of November 1917, a *coup d'état* delivered political power in Russia into the hands of the Bolshevik Party. To a contemporary or to a pedantic historian, almost every word in the preceding sentence would have appeared inaccurate or calling for qualification. There was no *coup d'état* in the classical sense of the phrase, meaning the totality of the government being seized by a unified group of conspirators. Armed revolts in several urban centers, notably in the two capitals, Petrograd and Moscow, had destroyed what remained of the fading authority of the previous regime. Though the new executive, the Council of Commissars, was composed exclusively of members of the Bolshevik Party, it claimed to rule on behalf of the Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, an extra-legal and haphazardly elected body that was by no means exclusively Bolshevik and that was to be the legislative organ only until the convocation of the really representative assembly of the peoples of Russia: the Constituent Assembly. Again, "political power" is a most imperfect expression. Parts of the country were under foreign occupation. Large areas of what had been the Russian empire refused to recognize the authority of the new rulers in Petrograd and Moscow. The nature and extent of the Bolsheviks' control was subject to debate and dissension even within their

own ranks. Few among them thought of themselves as rulers in the traditional sense of the word; they were agents of a world revolution-in-the-making; their concern for affairs in Moscow or the situation of the Russian army was hardly greater than their attention to events in Vienna or opportunities for revolutionary developments among German soldiers.

Yet, as we now know—and it was forcibly brought to the awareness of the Bolsheviks themselves within a few months—the immediate and the most important consequence was that they became the rulers of Russia, heirs of the Tsars. What was the nature of this inheritance?

The Russian empire entered the ranks of the Great Powers early in the eighteenth century during the reign of Peter the Great. The almost continuous wars of the century enabled Russia to push Turkey out of Europe except for the Balkans. The two previous claimants to the domination of the east, Poland and Sweden, were by the middle of the century reduced to the status of third-rate powers; at its end, Poland ceased to exist, and the major part of the territories of the once great Polish Lithuanian state, which at one point early in the 1600's had threatened to turn Russia proper into a satellite state, went to the empire of the Tsars. Unlike the expansion of many European powers in the eighteenth century, Russia's was not only political but also, and predominantly, ethnic in character. Most of the territory Russia claimed from Poland was inhabited by Ukrainian and Byelorussian peasants close to the Great Russians in their language, professing for the most part the Orthodox religion, and among whom no upper or middle class had as yet arisen to claim a national distinctness. In Asia proper, beyond the Urals, Russian expansion ever since the sixteenth century had encountered but sparse nomadic tribes, and, finally, a treaty toward the end of the seventeenth century with China had legally secured the vast areas of eastern Siberia.

The conditions of the late eighteenth century were, then, favorable to the creation of that type of Russian nationalism which with amazing tenacity survived till the Revolution and, its makers would have been shocked to foresee, was to make its quite explicit resurgence under Stalin. In its territorial extent, Russia was the largest country in Europe. There was no power to check her expansion into Asia to the shores of the Pacific, at least not until the end of the nineteenth century and the emergence of modern Japan. In the south, Russia's territorial drive around the Black Sea encountered the two moribund empires Turkey and Persia, neither of which alone was capable of stopping the progress of Russian arms and influence.

Many elements of Russia's great historical fortune in the eighteenth century were to weigh heavily on her destiny well into our days. She became an Asiatic as well as a European power. The process of modernization that accompanied her emergence on the world stage was primarily

the work of the government, largely designed to increase the state's military potential, and it was almost totally unaccompanied by the emergence of that middle class which in the West was already becoming the main vehicle of progress and/or revolution.

Even more important was the birth of the nationalism that colored so much Russian history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. "That which stops growing begins to rot," said a minister of Catherine the Great. The tendency toward territorial expansion and nationalism went hand in hand in the history of most major European states, but already in the beginnings of Russian imperialism we begin to encounter some fairly unique elements of this association. Predating Peter's reign and going back to the earliest days of Muscovy, there is the notion of the historical mission of the Russian nation as the representative and defender of eastern Christianity as against Catholicism and also (and especially) as against Islam. The concrete expression of this mission was the goal of expelling Turkey from Europe and regaining Constantinople and the Straits for Christendom.

From the beginning, this expansionist nationalism was not free of certain compensatory elements, to use a modern term. Russia's vast territories and her military power were felt by her rulers to offset her acknowledged cultural and social backwardness as compared with the West. Applying a historical parallel with caution, there is at least a shadow of resemblance between late eighteenth-century Russia, and her German-descended dynasty and her largely German civil and military bureaucracy, pursuing national and religious expansion, and the first generation of Bolsheviks, so many of them of Jewish, Polish, and other non-Russian origin, devising plans of political and ideological conquest. If one probes deeply enough, even in the eighteenth century one finds the seed of the populist rationale of imperialism that was used quite openly though incongruously by Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century and that has been a cornerstone of the official Soviet position: Russia's partitions of Poland were represented as a legitimate reclamation of Russian-speaking peasants suffering from national as well as religious oppression at the hands of their Polish landlords.

In brief, it was not entirely historical fancy and propagandistic needs of the moment that made Stalin in the 1930's abjure the dogmatic Marxian classification of imperial Russia and claim continuity with certain elements in the policies of Ivan the Terrible[1] and Peter the Great. It was also a belated acknowledgment that November 1917 had not wiped the slate clean, that underneath the new language, for all the new cult and the new ruling class, there were some fundamental links with the imperial past.

The modern era in Russian history is dated from 1815—the end of the

[1] Here, one may say, Stalin injected certain personal predilections.

Napoleonic wars—when the empire emerged as the first power on the Continent and an arbiter of Europe's destinies at the Congress of Vienna.[2]

The settlement in Vienna included one provision that was to weigh heavily on Russian foreign policy and, indeed, on domestic policy, too. Russia emerged as the main beneficiary of a new partition of Poland, her share now including territories purely Polish in population, with Warsaw, the country's former capital. This purely Polish territory (but not the largely non-Polish areas of the old Polish state annexed to Russia in the eighteenth century) now received autonomous status, being joined to Russia through the person of the emperor, in this case Alexander I. The autocrat of Russia was to be a constitutional monarch of Poland (just as he was in Finland, acquired previously from Sweden), a situation which, granting the past history of the two countries, was bound to prove untenable. From our perspective, it is also easy to see that the Polish question was bound to tie the hands of Russian policy-makers for decades to come. The empire acquired a vested interest in suppressing nascent European nationalisms in subjugated or divided countries. A common interest in preventing the restoration of Polish independence tied Russian policies to those of Austria-Hungary and, especially, of Prussia, a situation from which the empire was not fully emancipated until the end of the century. By then, however, Prussia had established the German empire, which replaced Russia as the main power on the Continent.

Not until the Soviet period was Russian foreign policy to bear so pronounced an ideological character as it did during the forty years between the Treaty of Vienna and the death of Emperor Nicholas I in 1855. Its aims were to freeze the status quo in Europe not only insofar as the territories of the powers were concerned but also the general social and political order. This attitude recalled again a refrain that will be repeated in Russian history—a reaction to internal developments which in the opinion of its rulers represented a threat both to the territorial cohesion of the empire and to its autocratic system. Once an enlightened autocrat who had toyed with the ideas of abolition of serfdom and bestowal of the rudiments of constitutionalism, Alexander I became, after 1815, increasingly suspicious of liberal ideas. Nicholas I, on his accession in 1825, was greeted by an attempted *coup d'état*—the Decembrist revolt—which was a delayed echo of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. It was the first example of the infectiousness and explosive power of Western ideas of liberty. (The nucleus of the plot was among aristocratic Guards officers who had imbibed of the culture of France and England.) The iron curtain that was designed

[2] This date would be disputed by Soviet historians. In their Marxian classification scheme, the modern "capitalist" period of Russian history begins with the emancipation of serfs in the 1860's, the previous period, going far into the past, being classified as "feudal."

to keep out Western ideas and institutions (it included such modern features as the establishment of a secret police with a network of informers, and absurdly detailed censorship of literature and what there was of the press) was accompanied by an aggressive foreign policy which in Nicholas' reign attempted to range Russia's power on the side of conservatism and repression in any part of Europe. The Polish uprising of 1830, which was suppressed and followed by the abolition of Poland's autonomous status, led to a convention of 1833 in which the monarchs of Russia, Austria, and Prussia promised mutual help in the case of not only external but also internal threats to their power. The great revolutionary years of the Continent, 1830 and 1848, found the Russian empire ready to intervene militarily on the side of reaction in places as distant as Belgium and Italy. This intervention finally materialized in 1849 when, at the request of the Habsburg monarchy, Russian troops helped to crush the Hungarian national revolt. A bit more than a hundred years later, Russian troops were to re-enter Hungary to suppress a popular uprising and to re-establish a regime dependent upon a foreign power.

It was seen by the more perceptive observers at the end of Nicholas' reign that the ideological encrustation of the regime and what might be called the Russian national interest were in clear conflict. Russia's economic and social development lagged far behind the West, then in the full throes of the industrial revolution. Eventually even the military strength of the autocracy was to suffer because of its clinging to obsolete policies, while its support of receding reaction was to leave the empire isolated in the international arena. With the defeat in the Crimean War, the ideological phase of Tsarist Russia's foreign policy came to an end. The natural sympathy of the emperors and of the majority of the bureaucrats who in their name ruled the empire until World War I was bound to remain on the side of reaction and, in international politics, on the side of states that professed monarchical and conservative principles. But, after 1856, those considerations were no longer the *decisive* element in Russia's foreign policy.

The sixty-nine years that separate the death of Nicholas I from the world war display many themes of continuity with the Soviet period. The historian's retrospect is of course conditioned by the catastrophic collapse of the empire in 1917. Yet he must grant that those years, with their uneven progress, punctuated by violence and revolution, laid a foundation for modern Russia that was to prove strong enough to survive a military defeat and a ruinous civil war. The immediate post-Nicholas period was one of great internal reforms which, it is not too much to say, transformed Russia from a backwater of Europe into a modern civilized country. It is perhaps hard to swallow this conclusion when one keeps in mind that even at the end of the generation of reforms, at the assassination of Alexander

II in 1881, Russia possessed no national parliament and no responsible government. But the same period saw the abolition of serfdom, the institution of a modern judicial system, and a score of hardly less fundamental changes. Even the period of reaction that followed it and lasted until the Revolution of 1905 saw tremendous progress in the economic sphere. Beginning far behind the countries of the West, Russia soon approached a rate of industrial growth equal to that of the leaders: the United States and Germany. It was this race to catch up with the modern world—Russia's great economic and cultural dynamism set against the lingering traces of social and political backwardness—that set the stage for the revolutionary drama.

An analyst of foreign policy taking a retrospective look in 1914 to the 1880's and 1890's would have found the country's resources and commitments overextended. It was, to be sure, an age of imperialism, and the rounding out of earlier conquests in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Far East was a logical development which did not involve Russia in a conflict with a major power. But further territorial ambitions in Persia and Afghanistan brought an aggravation of Russo-British tension, a constant feature of international politics until the Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907. The fate of the two buffer states was again to be a source of conflict and intrigue between Soviet Russia and Great Britain and to continue to be so until the latter's Asiatic empire passed into history. Nor had the Crimean War put a stop to the Russian pressure upon the Turkish empire. The struggle for spheres of influence in the Balkans and the feeling, wide-spread in Russia, that the Balkan Slavs were, because of their ethnic background and Orthodox religion, entitled to special protection by the great Slavic power involved the country in this veritable cauldron of European politics, which was eventually to provide the occasion for the world war and catastrophe.

The same retrospective look would have revealed dangerous tendencies in the whole rationale of Russian foreign policy. The principle of legitimism and conservatism as the basis for intervention in the affairs of others had become obsolete and unavailing by the middle of the nineteenth century. But in its place, militant nationalism provided a rationale for a pushful foreign policy. The most farseeing of the imperial statesmen, such as Sergei Witte, the great advocate of industrial development in the 1890's and prime minister after the 1905 Revolution, realized very clearly that Russia could only lose by an overambitious and expansionist policy. The empire was already vast. There was a multitude of internal problems calling for solution and peaceful development. Foreign adventures and wars were bound to aggravate the internal sores, illuminate the still existing social and political weaknesses of the regime. It could not escape attention that each of Russia's wars and defeats, minor though they were by our contemporary

standards, was followed by the heightening of internal tensions. The defeat in the Crimea opened a period of reforms but also of revolutionary currents which in a sense never subsided until 1914. In the Balkan war of 1877–78, Russia defeated Turkey, but the subsequent pressure of the Great Powers at the Congress of Berlin robbed her of most of the fruits of the victory; the revolutionary wave crested and in three years brought the assassination of Alexander II at the hands of the terrorists of the People's Will. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia's ambition to dominate Manchuria and northern China finally encountered resistance, and the Russo-Japanese War vividly revealed the empire's weakness and internal instability. The previous defeats had been followed by revolutionary currents, this one by a full-fledged revolution from which the monarchy and the established order of Russian society never really recovered.

Yet this lesson, which was not lost upon Stalin in 1939—that an oppressive political system risks more than military defeat in a war—continued to be ignored by the majority of the empire's policy-makers. In fact, a strange fatalism appears to have enveloped the internal-external policy nexus of the empire. An aggressive foreign policy was believed to be a remedy for the internal ills. In the 1870's, it was a wave of national enthusiasm, in which the critics of the regime shared, which pushed Alexander II into the Balkan war on behalf of the "brother Slavs." In the beginning of the twentieth century, the prospect of a conflict with an upstart Asiatic state was considered lightheartedly by the Tsar's ministers. It would be a splendid little war that would go far to relieve the internal pressures for reforms and a constitutional regime.

The Soviet period will show us a regime being capable for the most part of distinguishing between propaganda and policy in its foreign relations, perceiving that its ideology and the national interest are not always synonymous. It is clear that Soviet sophistication and skill in such matters was largely a product of the lessons learned from the Tsarist period. If, in Nicholas I's reign, Tsarist statesmen conceived their duty to preserve the political status quo and expanded their country's resources and prestige in that enterprise, then in the following period an opposite but equally dangerous principle guided their activity. It would be an exaggeration to say that Tsarist Russia, still the bastion of autocracy in the late nineteenth century, conducted a revolutionary foreign policy. But certainly it was a foreign policy designed to overturn the existing territorial status quo, favoring what might anachronistically be called "wars of liberation" of the Balkan Slavs against their Turkish overlords, and professing sympathy with the alleged plight of the Slavic inhabitants of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Conscious Panslavism, the desire to unite all Slavic nations under Russian leadership, was not a mainspring of Russian foreign policy, much as it enjoyed a vogue in certain intellectual circles. But it was an undertone

of the diplomatic struggle with Austria-Hungary, now Russia's main rival in the Balkans, and it was an eloquent extension of the theme of Russian nationalism and its age-long struggle against Germany's eastern expansion. Like future Soviet solicitude for the victims of colonial oppression, the Tsarist concern for the Slavs had a paradoxical and ironic aspect. Tsarist Russia—the "prisonhouse of nationalities" as Lenin called it—was the main beneficiary of the suppression of Polish independence. The rising national consciousness among another Slavic people, the Ukrainians, was also being suppressed by the government in St. Petersburg. Many of the "oppressed" Slavs, such as the Czechs, Slovenes, and Croats under Habsburg rule, enjoyed political freedoms and a standard of living above those which were the lot of the *Russian* people. Even the Slavic nations in the Balkans, upon being granted statehood, were endowed with constitutions and parliamentary government, something which was not introduced in Russia until 1905–6. Those paradoxes were not obscured, as during the Soviet period, by a superbly functioning propaganda machine and a world-wide movement that adopted Russia's cause as its own.

The complicated strains of Russia's foreign and internal problems culminated in the 1890's in her alliance with France. On the face of it, the alliance was as yet another paradox. The bastion of autocracy in Europe was linked in a diplomatic and military agreement with the state that epitomized republican and democratic principles. It meant a breach and possible war with the one power that next to Russia stood for the legitimist and conservative political outlook: imperial Germany, with whose ruling house the Romanovs had age-long connections. Yet, for both states, the alliance represented a successful effort to break out of international isolation. The chronic conflict with Austria-Hungary had finally led to severance of the Russo-German alliance. Another nineteenth-century rival of the empire, Great Britain, was also at the time in conflict with France over a variety of colonial problems. The Franco-Russian alliance was a prelude to impressive investments and loans from France which at times, as after the 1905 Revolution, were to save the Tsarist regime from virtual bankruptcy. But to the more conservative and farseeing of the Russian statesmen, the alliance promised no benefits. It involved Russia in the explosive Franco-German confrontation, and it made probable an eventual military struggle with the greatest power on the Continent. The wisest among them deplored any undertaking to expand Russia's foreign commitments.

The alliance brought the empire no benefit in those periodic crises which every few years for a generation before 1914 threatened to trigger off a world war. There was no obligation—indeed no possibility—for France to intervene on Russia's side in the Russo-Japanese War. Had not another war come to pass within a few years, Russia's defeat might well be described now in history books as a blessing in disguise. The war and the 1905