

Russia's foreign policy between 1918 and 1939



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The treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on March 3 1918 in modern day Brest Belarus to declare the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from the First World War. The treaty was signed between the Soviet Union and the quadruple alliance that consisted of Bulgaria, Turkey Austria-Hungary and Germany. On one hand the Soviet Union was represented by a delegation of Bolsheviks while the other countries had was represented by their respective foreign ministers.

The Soviet Union had been driven to the decision due to an ongoing civil war and the poor performance of her forces in the war. The end of the war through the signing of that treaty marked a very significant period in the history of Russia's foreign policy until another treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany was put down in 1939. This paper will thus discuss the goals that were laid out by the Soviet Union in between the signing of the first treaty and the second one. Again the paper will analyze how successful the adopted foreign policy was in this period.

Discussion The Brest-Litovsk treaty fulfilled one of the objectives of the Bolshevik revolution; ending the war foreign forces. However, the terms were of the treaty were humiliating in great ways as the Soviet Union ended up losing about a quarter of her population and a large section of her mineral deposits. This treaty also led to the attainment of full sovereign status of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Poland with the designated monarchs denouncing their thrones. These territories were ceded to Germany (Goldstein, Fry & Langhorne, 2004).

Despite having benefited from the treaty, Germany was quick to denounce the Brest-Litovsk treaty just after eight and a half months on November 5 1918. Following this denouncement, Germany withdrew her forces from the gained territories. This thus created a power vacuum in these territories. The Bolshevik Russia feared that the "un-proclaimed" territories could be rich grounds for anti-Bolshevik forces. This fear combined with the bitterness of some Russian citizens for the Bolsheviks acceptance of the Brest-Litovsk treaty heightened tension in the country.

Such tension further weakened the Bolsheviks agenda of spreading Bolshevik-like revolutions across Europe (Goldstein et al 2004). Before signing of the treaty, the Soviet Union was facing a lot of pressure from the civil war pitting the principal Bolshevik Red army and the anti-Bolshevik army popularly known as the white army. Many foreign armies were in support of the white army which laid a strong foundation for enmity between the Bolshevik controlled Soviet Union and the rest of the world.

The Bolshevik Red army under the Bolshevik party had gained popular support from the country's citizenry as the party had promised to end the war with the foreign armies. Western leaders feared a red-army-win as there were expectations that the leader, Vladimir Lenin, had been openly in support of communism and spreading it worldwide. Consequently, as calm returned to Russia with the end of the revolution, the western world remained quiet prompting the eastern power bloc to remain quiet also with no active foreign policy temporarily (Christian, 1997).

However, the communist regime in Moscow under the Bolsheviks had expressed interests in maintaining their hold in Russia and spreading communism in Europe and the rest of the world through political revolutions that would call for restructuring of governments both politically, socially and economically to fit their objectives. This led to the establishment of the Comintern which was a shortening of Communism international. The Comintern was charged with the role of spreading communism in the world and at the same time acting as a defensive tool against foreign propaganda.

In one of its most vocal pronouncement, the Comintern declared that, " we shall establish workers' and soldiers' councils in Berlin and Warsaw, in Paris and London, and the might of the Soviets will one day extend throughout the whole world. " the Russian Polish war saw the brave attempt by the Comintern to export revolutionary ideas into Poland (Legvold, 2004). From the onset, the Bolshevik government had portrayed an impression of lasting peace with her neighbors.

Lenin realized that the war with Germany and her allies had weakened her armies and therefore realized that the best policy was to seek peace to avert an eventual fall of the Russian army. This implies that the peaceful foreign policy adopted during this stage was only to buy time for further expansion into Europe. Legvold (2004) says that the Bolsheviks initial foreign policy was to reject the past and any relations to it. The administration denied that it was an heir to traditions and policies of past regimes. The regimes foreign policy was mainly based the success of the country's domestic policy.

According to Legvold (p, 124) " the regime would seek to create a federation of soviet republics that in Lenin's version would be based on equal voluntary, open membership that would attract other members. " the regime also pledged open arms to revolutionary refugees from outside and dispatching revolutionary proconsuls in all directions in order to seal its porous frontiers which the regime suspected had been responsible for sipping of government secrets leading to the poor performance of her armies in the first world war.

The failure to trigger a revolution in Poland in 1920 marked a turn in Russia's foreign policy. Oudenaren (n. d.) says that this together with less than expected hostility towards Bolshevism force Lenin to adopt a policy of coexistence. The Lenin administration established trade ties and even attained de jure recognition from a number of countries. This was however accomplished after the signing of a number of treaties asuch as the Rapallo treaty and the Versailles Treaty. However, such treaty did not make the Comintern abandon her ambition of spreading communism all over the world.

In October 1923, the Comintern backed an unsuccessful uprising in Germany. Unfortunately, the death of Lenin in 1924 meant that the Comintern was faced with less government support and different ideologies thereby marking another phase of Russia's foreign policy. Joseph Stalin took over as the new leader of the Bolshevik Russia. He adopted a completely new attitude towards the western world as he had witnessed the stabilization of capitalism as depicted in the failure to establish a communist revolution in Poland and Germany though he still believed that the system was doomed to fail.

To impart his thoughts on his new direction of Russia's foreign policy, Stalin published an article titled "The October Revolution and the Tactics of the Russian Communists." In this article he proclaimed postponement of the term revolution. Instead he announced his plan of developing and growing the Russian army which would be a strong back up for spreading communism in the future. This army was to be developed in a way it would endure prolonged international pressure which had been the main reason that the Lenin administration gave up the First World War and ceded territory and resources to Germany.

Again, Stalin realized that it was incapable to make a strong army without first growing his economy that respect; efforts were also directed at growing the economy with the declaration of the New Economic Policy (Christian 1997). The western world viewed Stalin as somehow moderate and Trotsky as the permanent revolutionary. Indirectly, they thus supported Stalin in order to help him triumph over Trotsky. This ushered in an era of dual policy in foreign relations. The west was much aware of the strategic importance of investing in a mineral rich Russia while the Bolshevik were impressed with the idea in that they knew how to trade dirty.

The west realized this and was quick to complain with Stalin reiterating "learn to trade." As time went by, the west was tiring of uneven trade with Russia. In 1926, Britain broke down relations with Russia on claims of supporting communist ideologies in Britain though this claim is greatly refuted. In fact this breakaway created a war scare all over the world. Contrarily, Russia was supporting Chiang-KaiSek a non communist activist in China. Unfortunately, this ally turned against communists in China and

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massacred them throwing the Comintern into confusion and eventual break away with the leader (Christian 1997).

Trotsky who had acted as head of foreign affairs since the reign of Lenin was blamed for the trade relation breakaway and thus Stalin laid him off, somehow bringing another era of foreign policy ideologies in Russia. Stalin borrowed his foreign policy idea from the opposition. Seemingly the new face of foreign affairs in the country and the global recession at that time contributed in changing the Cominterns foreign policy in that foreign policy movements should be revolutionary.

Against all expectation, this strategy did not work as the communist movements attacked moderate socialist parties allowing fascism to grow with devastating results such as the Nazis gaining power in Germany in 1933 (Christian, 1997). In 1930 another commissar of foreign affairs, Maxim Litvinov took over the Comintern in Russia. He recognized the threat of a Nazi Germany and Japanese expansion with the conquering of Manchuria. Therefore, Russia resulted into seeking for defensive alliances such as with France in 1932. In addition to this Russia joined the League of Nations after receiving diplomatic recognition by the US.

In the new look Russia, the Comintern abandoned its revolutionary ideologies and encouraged foreign communist movements to seek broader alliances with left wing groups. This was later to be named as " Russia's great retreat of the 1930s. In Germany also, Hitler was wary of a great confrontation and hence accented to the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 as a defensive tactic Oudenaren (n. d.). The objective of the communist Russia remained

the same since the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty in 1918 to the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939.

The basic idea was to spread communism to other nations in the belief that capitalism was doomed to fail. Unfortunately, this strategy was not properly executed as the Bolsheviks lacked consistency in their policy. The belief in communism as the dream of spreading communism all over the world would go on and intensify during the cold war than before the World War II. As such, the Comintern did not achieve its objective of spreading communism all over the world. On the other hand, it achieved some success in establishing alternative ideologies to governments through foreign communist movements (Christian 1997).