

THE USSR DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD: POLITICAL-DIPLOMATIC ASPECTS

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Rezumat: În politica externă, în perioada interbelică, URSS s-a caracterizat printr-un realism care a utilizat forțele comunismului internațional în funcție de interesele primordiale ale stalinismului. În această perioadă, URSS a fost a treia putere industrială a lumii, după SUA și Germania. Instalarea național-socialismului în Germania a provocat o profundă schimbare politică atât din partea lui Stalin cât și din partea democrațiilor occidentale. Acestea au căutat să se apere de o nouă expansiune germană și s-au arătat brusc mult mai prevenitoare față de Moscova. URSS a fost admisă la Societatea Națiunilor și a semnat pacte de asistență mutuală cu Franța și Cehoslovacia. SUA au decis în fine să recunoască guvernul sovietic. La 23 august 1939, spre stupefarea întregii lumi, a fost semnat la Kremlin Pactul de neagresiune germano-sovietic, la care a fost atașat un protocol secret prevăzând împărțirea Poloniei între Germania și URSS.

Résumé: Dans la politique extérieure, dans la période de l'entre deux guerres, l'URSS s'est caractérisée par un réalisme qui a utilisé les forces du communisme international en fonction des intérêts primordiaux du stalinisme. En cette période-ci, l'URSS a été le troisième pouvoir industriel du monde, après les Etats-Unis de l'Amérique et l'Allemagne. L'installation du national-socialisme en Allemagne a provoqué un profond changement politique de la part de Staline, mais aussi de la part des démocraties occidentales. Celles-ci ont cherché se défendre d'une nouvelle expansion allemande et se sont montrées beaucoup plus préventives envers Moscou. L'URSS a été admise dans la Société de Nations et a signé des pactes d'assistance mutuelle avec la France et la Tchécoslovaquie. Les Etats-Unis de l'Amérique ont finalement décidé à reconnaître le gouvernement soviétique. Le 23 août 1939, vers la stupéfaction du monde tout entier, on a signé à Kremlin, le Pacte de non-agression allemand soviétique, auquel on a attaché un protocole secret qui prévoyait la division de la Pologne entre l'Allemagne et l'URSS.

Abstract: The foreign policy of the USSR in the interwar period was characterized by a realism that used the forces of the international Communism in accordance with the primordial interests of Stalinism. During this period, the USSR was the third industrial power in the world after USA and Germany. The installation of the National-Socialism in Germany caused a profound political change on the part of Stalin and also the Western democracies. These sought to defend themselves against a new German expansion and were suddenly much more forthcoming towards Moscow. The USSR was admitted to the League of Nations and signed mutual assistance pacts with France and Czechoslovakia. U.S. finally decided to

recognize the Soviet government. On August 23rd, 1939, to the amazement of the whole world, the German-Soviet non-aggression pact was signed in the (Moscow) Kremlin, pact which had a secret protocol attached, that provided for the division of Poland between Germany and the USSR.

Keywords: USSR, League of Nations, Europe, diplomacy, Germany, geopolitics

In 1921, Russia's situation seemed desperate: exhausted by war, with an economy on the brink of collapse, with an agricultural production representing 50% of that of 1913, while the industrial production collapsed in its turn. Five million people were sick with typhus, and several hundreds of thousands chronically suffering of hunger¹.

On February 6th, 1921 the Soviet Commissioner of Foreign Affairs, Cicerin, sent a confidential letter to the representatives of Soviet Russia in the United Kingdom, Germany and Czechoslovakia, in which the Soviet's support toward Germany was pointed out, including the Russians' support for the expansion of its Eastern border. The Treaty of Rapallo (April 16th, 1922) is significant in this respect².

On May 3rd, 1922 the signing of the secret Convention between the intelligence staffs of Germany and Soviet Russia took place in Berlin, a first essential step towards breaking the European isolation for both Germany defeated in World War I and the new Soviet state. This cooperation is not based on an identity of views or a real friendship, but on the identification of common interests³. The Locarno reconciliation (1925) with the Western states and the entry of Germany into the League of Nations (1926) determined Chancellor Gustav Stresemann to harmonize the German demands with the Soviet objectives. Germany could in no way be forced to participate in any military action against the USSR⁴.

The Weimar Republic will maintain relations with the USSR through the Treaty of Berlin, signed on April 24th, 1926, but the relative position of the two countries had already begun to change. The Locarno moment showed that Germany could not rely solely on Soviet support. On 25 January 1929, Germany and the USSR signed a Convention of Conciliation, but ultimately, the consequences of the

¹ Andre' Fontaine, *Istoria războiului rece*, vol.I, București, Ed.Militară, 1992, p.62. (The original edition: *Histoire de la guerre froide. I. De la révolution d'Octobre a la guerre de Corée. 1917-1950*, Paris, Seuil); Walter Consuelo Langsam, *The World since 1914*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1943, p.568; Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, Edinburgh, Birlinn Limited, 2008.

² J. A. S. Grenville, *The Major International Treaties. 1914-1973. A History and Guide with texts*, New York, Natl Book, 1975, p.11.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

economic crisis of the same year led to the end of the cooperation between the Germans and the Russians⁵.

In 1923, the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs was established, joint body of all Soviet republics. During 1924, a number of countries have recognized the political existence of Soviet Russia: the United Kingdom, Italy, Norway, Austria, Greece, Sweden, China, Denmark, Albania, Hungary⁶. In fact, the Soviets could not or did not want to recognize the sovereignty of other states. It seemed anachronistic to admit that a state must respect the sovereignty of other states. Initially, the Soviet diplomacy supported international relations at government level only, while at propaganda level, all possible means were not only permitted but encouraged. The Comintern communications addressed directly to the proletarian "brothers" "exploited" by the governments of capitalist countries were numerous.

When the states protested against these interferences of a political outsider, the Soviet officials resorted to sophisms, saying that the Bolshevik party was actually a private organization, for which the government from Moscow could not assume any responsibility. The subterfuge offered some justification to those states which, for some obscure reasons, thought it adequate to still maintain diplomatic relations with the USSR.

In 1926, many Western observers believed that the USSR was an artificial creation, which will not last more than five years, while I. V. Stalin himself stated (in 1931) that if the Soviets would not manage to reduce during a decade the huge technological gap that separated them from the West, the Soviets' motherland would collapse⁷.

Through a remarkable effort, the USSR had orchestrated (since 1933), an ample action of interference in European politics, which materialized in the occupation of the permanent seat in the League of Nations Council, left vacant by the withdrawal of Nazi Germany, in Geneva (1934). The Secret Council of the League had unanimously accepted USSR and there were only three abstentions. Switzerland, Poland and Japan protested, but without any effect. In 1934, Maxim Litvinov imposed the League of Nations the Soviet perspective on the definition of aggression. Proud of his country, Maxim Litvinov likened it to the League of Nations itself, considering the diversity of nationalities that made it up⁸. Louis Barthou was optimistic too, and believed that the USSR would ultimately be

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Michel Heller, Aleksandr Nekrich, *L'Utopie au pouvoir. Histoire de l'URSS de 1917 a nos jours*, Calman-Levy, Paris, 1985, p.647.

⁷ Andre' Fontaine, op.cit, p.68.

⁸ Genevieve Tabouis, *20 de ani de tensiune diplomatică*, București, Ed.Politică, 1965, p.208 (The original edition: *Vingt ans de "suspense" diplomatique*, Paris, A.Michel, 1958)

involved into a fruitful cooperation with the Western states. The failure to achieve an Eastern Locarno led the Soviets to sign in 1935 a treaty of mutual assistance with France⁹. Its provisions stipulated (among others) that the USSR was to observe the neutrality of Poland and the Baltic countries. The treaty entered into force on March 27th, 1936. On that occasion, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, Pierre Laval, seemed fascinated with I. V. Stalin's personality¹⁰.

The practical value of this diplomatic instrument was not appreciated in either France or the USSR. The Soviets wanted the Franco-Russian alliance to be independent of the League of Nations and to operate without having to be brought in advance before the Council of the League of Nations. France wanted the treaty to be registered with the League of Nations, so that it will not be able to provide a pretext for any aggression against Germany. According to the German diplomatic circles, the German-Soviet treaty was definitely null and void¹¹.

The USSR signed a mutual assistance treaty with Czechoslovakia (1935), but it could not be operational unless the French army would deploy soldiers in support of the Czechs¹². Moreover, in September 1938, in Munich, Hitler will sacrifice Czechoslovakia, without the USSR having any reaction. On the other hand, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the U.S.A., Spain, Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Luxembourg and Colombia (between 1933-1939) - represents an undeniable success of the Soviet diplomacy¹³.

With Maxim Litvinov's dismissal (May 3rd, 1939), the USSR foreign policy will experience an obvious change of registry. For some time there were doubts about the idea of collective security, the idea that stood at the base of Litvinov's conception. However, in fact, Litvinov had only translated into reality the policy established and approved by the Party and the Soviet government, and he as a person was important only because he had applied this policy with enthusiasm, being sincerely convinced of its success. On the other hand, not even he was completely satisfied with the immediate, practical results of this type of policy. Moscow wanted to impose the principle of indivisibility of peace, propagated through the concept of collective security-in fact a universal political ideal, difficult to reach, because of the national and international interest. Indirectly, the annihilation of the specific national spirit of each state was the goal. It is not accidental that most countries in South America later interrupted diplomatic relations with the USSR, as it appeared that the Soviet plenipotentiaries were

⁹ Michel Heller, Aleksandr Nekrich, op.cit, p.650.

¹⁰ J.A.S.Grenville, op.cit, p.132.

¹¹ Genevieve Tabouis, op.cit, p.253.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Michel Heller, Aleksandr Nekrich, op.cit, pp.649-651.

actually agents of the GPU, and the legations and embassies were converted into ammunition storages, torture chambers and shelters for agitators¹⁴.

Despite these reactions, it was impossible to infinitely ignore the USSR - genuine geographical subcontinent, owner of a remarkable economic potential. On March 16th, 1921 the friendship treaty between Soviet Russia and Turkey was concluded, document through which the Soviets recognized the northeastern border of the Turkish state¹⁵. The Western observers believed that the Soviet state had obtained a clear diplomatic success. The first President of the Republic of Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, was sympathetic towards the newly established regime in Moscow. In 1921, the Soviets concluded similar treaties with Iran and Afghanistan, with the purpose of weakening the British influence in India. They will be reconfirmed by the signing of a new treaty of nonaggression and neutrality with Turkey (1925) and by the conclusion of similar treaties with Afghanistan (1926) and Iran (1927)¹⁶.

In 1921 another diplomatic success of the Soviets was recorded - the signing of a commercial treaty with Britain. Moscow believed that (through this document) it attained two essential objectives: the strengthening and expansion of communist political power and the weakening of the so-called capitalist opposition, by creating a breach in the seemingly inexpugnable sanitary cordon. Soviet Russia was thus recognized de facto by the largest capitalist power of the world at that time, Great Britain, pragmatism having played this way a decisive role¹⁷.

Through the Treaty of Riga, from March 18th, 1921, the Soviet-Polish borders were established up to 1939. The same year, the Soviets recognized the independence of the three Baltic republics and Finland (former Grand Duchy of Tsarist Russia)¹⁸.

Between 1926 and 1937, the USSR concluded several treaties of nonaggression, the most important of these being that with Poland (1932). Similar treaties were concluded also in 1932, with France, Finland, Latvia and Estonia¹⁹. However Stalin said that a treaty with Poland would not involve any recognition or

¹⁴ Ștefan Ionescu, *De la Petru cel Mare la Stalin. Istoria unei Revoluții*, București, Ed. Cugetarea, D. Georgescu-Delafras, București, 1941, pp. 240-244.

¹⁵ J. A. S. Grenville, op.cit, p.77; Erik J. Zucher, *Turkey A Modern History*, London-New York, I. B. Tauris, 2009, p. 153.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp.130-131.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p.129.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.77; Robert Edwards, *White Death. Russia's War on Finland 1939-1940*, London, Phoenix,2007, p.17.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p.132.

warranty on the part of the Soviets concerning the Polish borders or the Treaty of Versailles²⁰.

The USSR concluded a convention with Japan in 1925, while since 1930 it had been offering effective support to China, with which it would sign a nonaggression treaty in 1937²¹. Thus, the USSR played both ends against the middle, even if we think to the fact that in 1935 a similar treaty was concluded with Manchukuo State - the Chinese province of Manchuria, de facto occupied by Japan²².

The treaties concluded by the USSR during this period stood under the sign of pragmatism, aiming especially at reaching an agreement with the West. However, the idea of triggering a world revolution, with the help of the Comintern was not abandoned either. It was actually a well-orchestrated duplicity, a continuation of the old imperial Russian diplomacy, except that now, the new Soviet regime had to win mainly time to crystallize and strengthen itself within its own borders.

The annexation intentions were hidden behind the official formulas, the pacifism and the availability to dialogue of the USSR, which were mere smoke curtains. As an actor of great talent, the USSR created the impression of openness towards the West, when in fact, the theme of peaceful coexistence of the two ideological systems amounted to only a truce.

The Nazis' coming to power in Germany will change the foreign policy of the USSR, thus the Eighth Congress of the Comintern (1935), ratified the popular front policy, which would be applied (since 1936), in France and later in Spain. On the other hand, the hostility of the conservative Western societies towards the Soviets did not cease, although, initially, some saw in Stalin's homeland, an interesting social experiment, with a formidable military potential²³.

Others were more skeptical and felt that the executions ordered by Stalin among the elite of the Red Army would have drastically reduced its shock force²⁴.

In 1939, the reserves that the USSR could mobilize were 16 million people, given the fact that the military service lasted between four and five years, period during which soldiers were entitled to only a single furlough. Their food rations consisted mainly of soup and black bread, receiving also a monthly pay of 50 rubles, while a general's pay was closer to 7,000 rubles per month. The most important Soviet weapons of the interwar period were the MiG-15 airplane (exceeding 1000

²⁰ *Ibidem*; Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p.247.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p.133.

²² *Ibidem*; K.Haushoffer, *Le Japon et les Japonais. Geopolitique du Japon*, Paris, Payot, 1937, p.217.

²³ Georges Bonnet, *Vingt ans de vie politique. 1918-1938. De Clemenceau au Daladier*, Paris, Fayard, 1969, p.147; Stephen Koch, *Double lives: spies and writers in secret Soviet war of ideas against the West*, University of Michigan, Free Press, 1994.

²⁴ R.Girault, M.Ferro, *De la Russie a l'URSS, L'histoire de la Russie de 1850 a nos jours*, Paris, Nathan, 1989, pp.176-177.

kilometers per hour, and whose engine was the result of modifying the British Rolls-Royce Nave engine) as well as the T-41 light tank, which weighed 25 tons and was equipped with a 76 mm cannon²⁵.

When he became People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR (May 14th, 1939), Vyacheslav Molotov claimed that the USSR military potential was clearly superior to that of 1921 and consequently, the Soviet state had to assume a more important international role²⁶.

In terms of population, the USSR had in early 1939, 170,467,200 inhabitants, out of which the Russian ethnics represented 47.5%²⁷.

In 1937, 55% of the USSR population was made up of farmers working in kolkhozy and sovkhozy, while the workers and clerks represented 35%²⁸.

In 1939, the Soviet society was one of a rather conservative type, cultivating an undeniably Russian nationalism. Peter the Great, Alexander Nevsky and Ivan the Terrible became outstanding mythological figures. Stalin's rejection of modern music and the inclusion of significant proportions of Russian music in the repertoires of opera houses and theaters can be considered an aspect of this nationalist reorientation²⁹.

George Kennan observed that since 1936, the Soviet Union had engaged in a massive rearming program, within which the idea of collectivization and the various five-year plans were the key elements. The suspicion against the capitalist world was still the feeling that prevailed in the Soviet society. Supporting peace, until its own military force would be strong enough, represented (in Kennan's opinion) another feature of the Soviet foreign policy. Kennan believed that through its history and specificity, the USSR could not be governed in the modern and European sense³⁰.

In October 1938, the Soviet vice-minister of foreign affairs, Potemkin, told the French ambassador Coulondre that the Westerners, through what they agreed in Munich on September 29th, 1938, had actually condemned the USSR to the tendency of participating in a new division of Poland³¹.

²⁵ Robert Pinoteau, *La Russie d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, Les Iles d'Or, 1953, pp.232-240.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p.35 și urm.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p.39.

²⁹ A. Bergson, *The Structure of Soviet Wages. A Study in Socialist Economics*, Harvard University Press, 1944, p.81.

³⁰ George F.Kennan, *Memoirs. 1925-1950*, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1967, pp.70-71.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

After the Munich Agreement, the Soviet government resumed its actions to releasing a simple statement which was a formal protest against the German annexation³².

Without getting their hopes high, the Soviets generally reasoned this way: England and France fear Germany, therefore, they are ready to give it a free hand in Eastern Europe, the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia being significant. In the view of the Soviet diplomacy, the Westerners would have liked the worsening of the Soviet-German relations, in order to profit of the mutual erosion of both powers, detail reminded by Stalin from the rostrum of the XVIII Congress of the CPSU, on March 10th, 1939.

Under these circumstances, the USSR had to avoid any conflict with Hitler, hoping to close a deal with Berlin and the Nazis concerning the areas of influence in Eastern Europe, despite the repeated anticommunist statements of the latter. Given the existing international situation in March 1939, Stalin established CPSU's tasks concerning foreign policy: continuing the policy of peace and strengthening the economic relations with all countries; avoiding the involvement of the USSR in war conflicts, determined by the instigators; increasing the combat capacity of the Red Army and Red Fleet; amplifying internationalist ties of friendship with the workers of all countries whose interest is to maintain peace and friendship between peoples³³.

Stalin's observations suggested that at world level, the USSR would have to maintain an almost total isolation, but his statements must also be decrypted in the sense of not breaking completely the relations with France and Britain. On the other hand, it was clear that Stalin and Molotov had no confidence in the UK and France and were not enthusiastic about the idea of an alliance with these states. Even if such an alliance would be concluded, the USSR would not be sustained more than Poland was, when the English assurance had been put to test. Without strong military commitments on the part of France, Great Britain and Poland, the offered alliance presented no interest to the Soviet leaders. It is clear that, (starting) from April or May 1939, Stalin thought of a last-minute deal with Hitler, if such commitments could not be obtained. Finally, preferring the proposals (of course, much more pragmatic and precise) of Nazi Germany, the USSR would choose Hitler, who wanted war.

Stalin considered Hitler a pragmatic and therefore, the foreign policy of the Soviet Union would become more pragmatic in its turn. Thus, the Soviet diplomacy, based on ideological principles, would ignore the dominant points of the party dogma, subordinating all to the pursued goal. The closeness to Nazi Germany, materialized in the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 23rd, 1939) would be later

³² Jean Elleinstein, *Staline*, Paris, Fayard, 1984, p.246; Walter Consuelo Langsam, op.cit, p.597.

³³ Isaac Deutscher, *Staline*, Paris, Gallimard, 1953, pp.514-517.

identified by the Soviet leaders as a natural gesture, which represented only the wish of the USSR to obstinately follow its own interests³⁴.

Thus, it was shattered an image, which even some of the Westerners had considered at some point true: that of the Soviet state which articulated its foreign policy oriented by the moral standard of principles. The foreign diplomats accredited in the USSR were anxious about what they called Russia's amazing power of expansion. There was a collective frenzy, an increasing militaristic atmosphere, the rediscovery of a Slavic patriotism, which in 1917 appeared buried for good under the heap of Bolshevik slogans. The concern of the state regarding the army and the weapons factories seemed greater than ever. The editorial, cinematographic and theatrical productions brought forth the heroic figures of the Russian history, the youth was inoculated a kind of national pride that evoked for the historians the Tsars' period, when the name "Mother Russia" was equivalent with the image of the Virgin Mary. Restless times seemed to lie ahead, and the USSR did not want to miss what the leaders called the great encounter with history.

In 1940 the USSR had the largest machine-building industry in Europe. Within 15 years, 9,000 new industrial units were built. Only during a single year (1940) the Soviets produced 18.3 million tons of steel, 31 million tons of oil and 166 million tons of coal³⁵.

It is difficult to understand the psychological motivations that determined some of the Westerners to see in the USSR the alternative to the democracies considered anachronistic. The rejections, prejudices, mistrust will persist, but next to the desire to decipher, to know and better understand the inner springs of the giant mechanism called the USSR. But, the actual details of these springs would be proven almost impossible to know during the interwar period. Ability and obscurity would be the essential advantages of the great Eastern Empire, enhanced also by an imaginative propaganda. Finally, it should be noted that Communist Russia had two leaders, both with a strong personality: Lenin and Stalin. Both of them proved cruelty but also an unquestionable practical intelligence. Lenin did not get to act for too long, as he died in 1924. Stalin would become the prototype of the Asian despot, who would ingeniously know how to use the advantages of modernity. The USSR could have been perceived not only as a prison of peoples, but also as a mythical territory of the lovers of equal rights. The Soviet secret services painted,

³⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomația*, București, Ed. All, 1998, p.320. (The original edition: *Diplomacy*, New York et al. Simon&Schuster, 1994)

³⁵ Alexander Werth, *Un corespondent englez pe frontal de est*, București, Ed. Politică, 1970, p.80; Adam B. Ulam, *A History of Soviet Russia*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1976, pp.142-154.

up to a point, a false image, in which the tones of light, brotherhood, harmony and peace seemed real.

The Spanish Civil War, the annexations in Poland, Finland and Romania as well as the annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will obviously outline the true face of the USSR. And yet, Nazi Germany represented the main danger in Europe around 1939. The sinister verbosity of Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, his bellicose paranoia, seemed much more frightening than the question marks about the real attitude of the leaders in the Kremlin. Those who weighed in the balance of evil the National-Socialism and the Communism decided then that the National -Socialism was a far greater danger. In fact, both "-isms" were equally anti-human.