

UNDERSTANDING THE COLD WAR

A Study of the Cold War in the Interwar Period

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The historical literature about the Cold War is vast and ever expanding. Numerous historians and analysts have offered their account of the breakdown of cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. Yet, surprisingly few have examined Soviet Russia's relations with the West prior to World War II in the context of the development of the Cold War. Of all the histories of the Cold War, only three include the period from the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 to the formation of the Grand Alliance in 1941. Although this twenty-four year period has been described by historians in the context of the origins of the second world war or the foreign policies of individual nations, no one has yet published a detailed analysis of this period, based on primary materials, from the point of view of the development of the Cold War. This is what I shall do in the following pages, with particular emphasis on the years 1937 to 1939.

The term "Cold War" has come to denote the conflict between Russia and the United States which developed at the end of World War II. Yet, the post-1945 cold war cannot be properly understood except within the context of a much broader period of history. The "Cold War", as I define it, is a conflict and hostility between the Soviet Union and the capitalist nations, particularly in the West, which proceeded from the very moment the Bolsheviks triumphed in Russia in 1917. In fact, for the three years following 1917, the Cold War was actually a "hot" war, during which foreign nations including Japan, France, England, and the United States sent troops and military aid to Russia to assist the anti-Bolshevik forces in the Russian Civil War.

During the inter-war period, Russia and the West were engaged in a cold war, but Russia was in such a state of extreme weakness and domestic uncertainty that, at least until 1938, she was not a major diplomatic concern of the Western nations. With the coming of the second world war, the Cold War went through several contrasting stages in rapid succession. In 1938 and 1939 the Cold War was waged between Russia, who sought to alter the status quo in Europe in her favor and against the designs of Hitler, and Britain and France, who sought to accommodate Hitler and thus affect changes in Europe unacceptable to Soviet interests and needs. When cooperation with Britain and France proved unattainable, the Soviets chose a temporary alliance with Hitler, which enabled the German dictator to attack Poland and thus start World War II. During the following two years, Russia was the non-military ally of Britain's and France's enemy, and, indeed, the latter two almost went to war with the Soviets over Finland. When Hitler attacked Russia in the summer of 1941, an alliance mothered by necessity was formed among Britain and Russia, and, in a few months, the United States. The war completely changed the status quo in Europe and throughout the world. The United States replaced Britain as the paramount world power, and thus was left to face the second greatest world power at the end of the war, Soviet Russia. Russia, while suffering more devastation and human losses in the war than any nation in any war in history, had established a military presence in Eastern Europe and was determined to maintain that area as her sphere of influence. Perhaps the central issue involved in the post-1945 phase of the Cold War was that of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. The United States refused to accept a new status quo in which Soviet influence would be predominant among the nations of Eastern and Central Europe; ostensibly, the

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United States argued that the Soviets must allow the peoples of Eastern Europe to choose their own leaders and systems of government, and held this up as the price for postwar cooperation. As the Soviets seemed to grow stronger in their determination to control this area of Europe, U.S. policy proceeded on the assumption that Russia was a potential enemy, threatening American security. The Soviets, while at first willing to accept face-saving formulas in the shape of minor compromises and electoral facades, insisted on predominance in Eastern Europe as the sine qua non of postwar cooperation; they defended their position in terms of the needs of Soviet security and pointed out the failure of the West to allow democracy to function where it did not suit western interests, such as in Greece, Spain, and Latin America.

No one has disputed Soviet security needs at the end of World War II. Russia had been invaded twice in 25 years through her geographically undefensible western frontier; if she were to be in a position to resist future invasions, she could not allow a return to the former status quo, that is, she would have to control the European corridor through which she had been invaded. Of course, many have argued that imperialistic or territorial aims and not concerns about security were what motivated the Soviet leaders at the end of the war, and that an expansionist-minded Russia posed a real threat to world peace. Some have argued that Russia's heavy-handed and anti-democratic means of securing her position in Eastern Europe, for whatever motives, left the West no choice but to oppose the expansion of Soviet influence in Europe.

The contemporary as well as the historical debate on this issue has been intense. Historians have devoted thousands of pages to analysis and

exposition of the post-1945 Cold War in Europe. It is thus distressing that so little attention has been focused upon the pre-World War II Cold War in Europe, for the former cannot be properly understood without reference to the latter. Russia's position throughout and at the conclusion of World War II was directly related to the diplomacy which preceded the outbreak of the war, and her foreign policy in 1945 was doubtlessly very much influenced by her experiences leading up to her alliance with Britain and America. The United States was not in a comparable position in 1945, because she had had no major diplomatic dealings with Soviet Russia until the war. In the pre-war years, Russia's principal antagonist in the Cold War was Britain; as a result of the war, the United States replaced Britain in this role. Thus, perhaps ironically, in dealing with the Soviet Union after 1945 the United States had to pay the price for Britain's pre-war diplomacy. The situation was one which neither side could have avoided; Russia could not ignore the lessons of the past simply because she was now dealing with America instead of Britain, and the United States could not erase the consequences of a past policy for which she was not responsible.

In the following pages I will present an account of the diplomatic maneuverings of Britain and Russia in Europe during the interwar years, with particular emphasis on the period 1937 to 1939, when the most significant diplomacy took place. I would like the reader to understand that I have not attempted to analyze the origins of the second world war or describe, in a systematic or complete manner, the policies of Hitler and Mussolini. I am dealing with the interaction of Britain, France and Russia in the context of the development of the Cold War. Within this framework it is often

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necessary to explain each country's foreign policy toward the fascist states, but only as it relates to the Cold War. This is particularly true in the case of Britain, whose policy under Neville Chamberlain was to accommodate Hitler's ambitions in Europe, which meant excluding Russia from European affairs and, in effect, assisting Hitler in his pursuit of a possible attack on Russia.

Chapter One provides a brief account of the years 1921 to 1936, the period which prefaced the important diplomacy of 1937 to 1939. The Russians emerged from their civil war in 1921 in a precarious domestic and foreign position; they faced mammoth tasks of reconstruction, virtually alone in a world of nations hostile toward their new government, so hostile as to have made a significant military contribution to the efforts to overthrow that government. The capitalist nations, particularly Britain, France and the United States, all shared a profound distrust of the Bolsheviks and a deep fear of communism. Most of the governments in the West anticipated the downfall of the Bolshevik government in Russia, and feared that the example of a successful communist revolution in the world, in addition to the activities of the Comintern, spelled danger for the "democratic" way of life. Although the Cold War was a relatively insignificant factor in world politics during the period described in Chapter 1, it was during this period that the foundations were laid for the time when relations between Russia and the West would profoundly affect the rest of the world; Soviet Russia successfully industrialized, Stalin secured his position as the uncontested leader of his country, Hitler came to power in Germany, the West experienced the economic chaos of the great depression, and the League of Nations, largely under Britain's lead failed to preserve peace and instead became an instrument for the appeasement of fascism.

Chapter 2 begins with the coming to power of Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister in 1937. In this chapter I will explain and analyze the great conflict between British and Soviet policies in Europe up to March 1939, when Hitler embarked on aggression of a new type. It will be necessary to describe and understand the infamous British "appeasement" policy. Although it is difficult to speak with equal assurance about Soviet policy because of the virtual absence of primary documentation from Soviet archives, I believe it is possible to reach an understanding of the fundamental Soviet aims and intentions.

Chapter 3 closely examines the period from March to August 1939. The Anglo-Soviet diplomacy of this period is of vital importance and, I believe, has not yet been adequately described or understood, especially within the context of the development of the Cold War. I will document how the Soviets put forth to Britain and France a serious proposal for an alliance to oppose Hitler and create a new European order which would recognize Soviet interests in Eastern Europe; how the British, still convinced of the necessity if not the rightness of appeasement, schemed to deny the Russians a place in Europe but still to use the shadow of Soviet power in a final effort to come to terms with Hitler; how Britain and France finally became determined to stand up to German aggression by insuring that Eastern Europe and Russia would bear the burden of fighting the Axis.

If there is a lesson in this story it is that the highest morality of international politics is that of national self-interest. Britain felt it in her interest to appease Hitler, to keep Soviet Russia out of Europe, and to make sure that other nations, particularly in the east, would eventually absorb the fury of Hitler's war machine. Such cold calculations, while



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they may offend the delicate morality of critics, defenders and scholars, are the realities with which national governments must deal in protecting their countries. It is ironic that Britain's interwar leaders, particularly Chamberlain, who spoke endlessly of moral displays and missions, created for themselves a situation in which traditional morality would have to be almost wholly sacrificed to the pursuit of basic self-interest. Russia's policy was also dictated by self-interest, but it is a tragedy, or at least an irony, of history that the Chamberlain government did not fully realize that the British shared a common interest with the Russians in opposing Hitler. The British suffered from a unique blindness in dealing with the Soviets, and failed to recognize that the Russians, too, could have national interests so great that their achievement involved the question of national survival or destruction. The point is that, although British and Soviet perceptions of their respective vital interests were almost irreconcilable, it was the Soviet perception that was more realistic. Of course, it is impossible to say what would have happened had the British followed a different policy; what did happen was that a world war ensued in which the Russians paid by far the highest price in blood and devastation. Prior to the war they insisted they would not pay such a price simply to preserve a European status quo which was stacked against them, but Britain and France refused to agree to a change in Europe which recognized or permitted Soviet predominance in Eastern Europe. When Russia was finally forced to fight Hitler, she again made it known that she was doing so not to preserve the old order, and at the end of the war she was finally in a position to guarantee that she received what she felt was her due.

In this way were the contours of the postwar world shaped by the diplomacy of pre-war Europe.