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Stalin and Nazi Germany

Professor Tucker raises two very important but difficult questions. What were the overriding motives behind the zigzags of Soviet diplomacy in the 1930s, and what role did Soviet and Comintern policy play in the Nazi seizure of power in Germany? On the problem of Soviet foreign policy goals, Tucker suggests that Stalin sought to foster an interimperialist war, the end result of which would permit the territorial aggrandizement of the USSR. To bring about this war Stalin allegedly aided Hitler's rise by deliberately steering the policy of the Comintern and German Communist Party on a suicidal course. The Nazi-Soviet Pact, though not actually consummated until 1939, was supposedly implicit in Stalin's plans by 1933 or even earlier. Thus, in Tucker's interpretation the Second World War, the formation of the East European satellite bloc, and the bipolar nature of postwar world politics were foreseen, even foreordained, by Stalin as far back as 1928! These are imaginative but ultimately unsatisfactory answers to the questions posed above.

It is certainly true that Stalin, along with most Soviet leaders, feared war in 1927 and later. The Bolsheviks expected the worst from the encircling capitalist powers unless the European proletariat should come to their aid. Foreign intervention in the Russian civil war seemed to prove those fears correct. Even after the end of intervention and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the great powers, the Bolsheviks looked on the altered international situation as merely a breathing space before a renewal of the imperialist onslaught.

As Professor Tucker points out, Leninist doctrine held that a skillful manipulation of the antagonisms among the capitalist powers could temporarily prevent the imperialist states from uniting to smash the Soviet regime. The Rapallo agreement with Weimar Germany represented the foremost achievement of that strategy. The policy which Professor Tucker ascribes to Stalin, however, is altogether different from the traditional Bolshevik approach to Germany as well as to the capitalist state system as a whole. Leninist tactics called for the exploitation of rivalries among the imperialist states in order to divide them, but not for the provocation of major wars between the great powers. This latter course would expose the lone socialist state to the gravest danger. Even if the USSR managed to preserve its neutrality, and thus remain undamaged, the war might end with a clear-cut victory for one of the powers rather than the mutual weakening of them all. Neither an Anglo-French victory which would re-create the threatening situation that faced the Bolsheviks in 1918, nor, as actually happened, the spread of German power from Eastern Europe to the Atlantic coast was in the strategic interest of the USSR. The Soviet approach to the great powers, when stripped of its Marxist-Leninist jargon, was the traditional balance of power policy—a policy of caution, not of reckless gambling. Stalin in particular had always shown himself to be one of the most cautious of the Bolsheviks in assessing foreign-policy and revolutionary initiatives, as his opposition to the adventurist course in Poland during 1920 and in Germany during both 1921 and 1923 demonstrates.

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There is no evidence to show that Stalin knowingly set the Comintern and German Communist Party on a path which could only lead to the destruction of the KPD and the consolidation of a thoroughly totalitarian, militarily powerful Nazi regime. Professor Tucker implies that the "social fascism" line was crudely imposed by Stalin against the better judgment of most Bolsheviks and German Communists. Although the origins of the "left turn" executed by the international Communist movement in 1928 are complex, it is clear that powerful elements in both the Comintern apparatus and the KPD favored the new line. The previous "united front" policy, which involved Comintern attempts to cooperate with the non-Communist left, had proved barren of results and had also been resisted by some Communist parties, most notably the Bulgarians and the French. In practice, the "united front" strategy had been perilous because it involved the danger of slipping into revisionism (that is, the loss of revolutionary militancy) or of losing the initiative to the Social Democrats. By 1928 there were significant left-wing factions within the KPD and the International generally which were anxious to abandon the "united front." Stalin did not simply impose the new course on his unwilling comrades.

Neither Stalin nor the leftist faction of the KPD were apprehensive about the advent of a Nazi regime. They believed that the upheaval which Germany was experiencing would eventually result in a Communist victory. If Hitler did manage to seize power, his rule could not last long. Communist demonstrators carried banners emblazoned, "*Nach Hitler Uns*!" Even if a revolution failed to materialize in Germany and the *Führer*'s government survived, it would be the capitalists, aristocrats, and military men who, according to Marxist logic, would really hold power behind the scenes. These were the same elements which had championed the Rapallo orientation. It was not only Marxists who held the Nazis in such low regard. General von Schleicher, Alfred Hugenburg, Hjalmar Schacht, and German conservatives generally shared that view. Tucker implies, however, that Stalin foresaw the totalitarian grip in which the Nazis would hold Germany and the enormous military power which they would reestablish. In the context of the early 1930s such foresight seems highly unlikely. At that time France was the strongest military power in Europe and Great Britain boasted the most powerful fleet, while Germany was essentially disarmed. Even after German rearmament, the smashing victories of 1939–40 came as a surprise.

It is difficult to understand why Stalin would have connived at Hitler's triumph in Germany if it was to be something more than a prelude to a successful Communist revolution or a gaudy new cover for the rule of the old right. Professor Tucker argues that at least the "Nazis were not *Westler*s" and so were presumably more acceptable to Stalin than the Western-oriented SPD. On closer inspection, however, it is hardly possible to find a German political party whose rise to power would be more inimical to Soviet interests than that of National Socialism. In *Mein Kampf* and *Hitlers zweites Buch* as well as in innumerable public speeches Hitler had made it abundantly clear that the focus of his expansionist ambitions lay in the East—at the expense of Poland and the USSR.[1] As Professor Tucker himself notes, Stalin was unique among the Old Bolsheviks

1. See Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Diplomatic Revolution in Europe, 1933–36* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 12–14.

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in the importance he attached to matters of territory and national sovereignty. Would a man of such predilections have dismissed lightly Hitler's constant ranting about *Lebensraum* in the Ukraine? Of course, in the first few years after his rise to power, Hitler disclaimed any aggressive intent toward the Soviet Union.[2] This duplicitous diplomacy may indeed have raised false hopes in Moscow, just as it also fooled the Poles and the British, but Tucker claims that Stalin favored the establishment of a Nazi regime long before the disclaimers of mid-1933 (that is, from 1928 to 1933 when the most bellicose threats against the USSR were the stock and trade of Nazi orators).

Stalin would most certainly have preferred to continue the Rapallo relationship even with a Nazified Germany, ideological scruples notwithstanding. Hitler's megalomaniacal ambitions, however, precluded an extension of the Rapallo arrangement. It was in the interests of the Soviet state to support a revisionist Germany against the hegemony of Britain and France, but Hitlerite Germany was not revisionist like Stresemann's Weimar Germany. Conservative and centrist politicians of the Weimar regime had espoused limited goals that in no way threatened the USSR. They desired border rectifications and the reemergence of Germany as an equal in the community of great powers. Nazi Germany, in contrast, sought unlimited power and, most importantly, presented a fundamental threat to the very existence of the Soviet state. The *Führer*'s desire to push bolshevism back behind the Urals was no secret. Although Hitler at first partially masked his aggressive designs upon becoming chancellor, the broad outlines of his policy soon began to emerge. With the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, Hitler announced that his ambitions in the West were satisfied; future gains for the Reich would come in the East. From this point on, Hitler always presented himself to the Western powers as the champion of civilization against the barbarous hordes of Russia. The suspicious Russians, moreover, had plenty of evidence that many Western leaders hoped to deflect the Nazi menace eastward.[3] In this light the policy which Professor Tucker ascribes to Stalin makes little sense. Would Stalin intentionally have helped to create a mortal enemy of his regime? Even if Stalin had accurately foreseen (which seems highly unlikely) the outbreak of another world war which would pit a rearmed Germany against the Western democracies, it would have been a desperate gamble to support Nazi aggression in the hope of creating chaos and thus also the opportunity for Soviet territorial gains. Such a venture seems totally out of character for a cautious and realistic politician like Stalin.

Professor Tucker's theory of Stalin's grand design for territorial aggrandizement also fails to account for Soviet foreign and domestic policies in the 1930s. Although the Russians occasionally extended tentative diplomatic feelers toward Berlin, the major thrust of Soviet diplomacy in this period was clearly embodied in the collective security campaign.[4] Litvinov's eloquence at Geneva,

2. Ibid., pp. 77 ff.

3. See Lionel Kochan, *The Struggle for Germany, 1914–1945* (New York, 1967), chapter 4.

4. It is unfortunate that Professor Tucker has chosen not to extend his analysis of Stalin's foreign policy to include the conduct of Soviet diplomacy in the 1930s. He has, however, treated this subject in an earlier article. See Robert C. Tucker, "Stalin, Bukharin, and History as Conspiracy," in Robert C. Tucker and Stephen F. Cohen, eds., *The Great Purge*

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Moscow's continued attempts to secure firm bilateral alliances with Paris and London, and the Comintern's "popular front" tactic all testify to the genuine Soviet desire to contain Nazi aggression. Tucker contends that these Soviet approaches to the Western powers were merely ruses designed to demonstrate to Hitler the importance of a Russo-German pact. If the collective security initiative was only a sham, it is hard to explain the dogged persistence of the campaign. At the time of the Franco-Russian treaty of mutual assistance and also during the negotiations with Britain and France in the spring and summer of 1939, the Soviet side continually insisted on detailed, binding military commitments. Deputy Foreign Commissar Potemkin's anguished outburst to the French ambassador in the wake of Munich—"My poor friend, what have you done? As for us I do not see any other outcome than a fourth partition of Poland."[5]—also evidences the sincerity of Soviet efforts toward collective security and the reluctance with which that policy was abandoned.

The results of the Great Purges also seem to argue against Tucker's theory. If Stalin always intended to form an alliance with Hitler, why did he eliminate precisely those elements in the Foreign Commissariat most closely identified with a pro-German orientation of Soviet foreign policy (for example, Krestinskii and Karakhan), while sparing a number of diplomats whose hostility to the Nazis was legendary (Litvinov, Maiskii, Kollontai, and so on)?[6] Similarly, if Stalin had been attempting to instigate a major interimperialist war since 1928, a war in which the Soviet Union would participate during the later stages, then 1937–38 was a singularly inopportune time to decimate the Red Army officer corps, the technical intelligentsia, and the party apparatus.

Unfortunately, the student of Soviet foreign policy in the 1930s has rather little evidence with which to work. The most important sources, the archives of the Politburo and the Narkomindel, are unavailable. In their absence, Professor Tucker has relied on a painstaking exegesis of Stalin's few published statements in an attempt to reconstruct the general secretary's view of the international situation. But Stalin's words are subject to varying interpretations. Tucker claims, for example, that Stalin's use of the phrase "socialist encirclement" indicates that as early as 1926 he was already planning to establish Soviet domination in Eastern Europe. It seems logical, however, to construe Stalin's words in quite a different way. He was speaking about the conditions under which socialist Russia would be secure from capitalist threats. Would the addition of Rumania or even Poland to the Soviet camp guarantee the USSR against external danger? No. It seems more likely that by "socialist encirclement" Stalin meant the addition of one or more industrially developed powers to the socialist commonwealth.

Professor Tucker is not the first to suggest that, contrary to all the overt claims of Soviet diplomacy between 1934 and 1939, Stalin secretly intended to

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Trial (New York, 1965), pp. ix–xlviii. Here Tucker argues that Stalin never supported the collective security campaign which was supposedly adopted by the Politburo against his will.

5. Robert Coulondre, *De Staline à Hitler* (Paris, 1950), p. 165.

6. See Teddy J. Uldricks, "The Impact of the Great Purges on the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs," *Slavic Review*, 36, no. 2 (June 1977): 187–204.

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form an alliance with Nazi Germany all along, though Tucker's version presents this argument in its most imaginative and sophisticated form.[7] In the final analysis, however, all of these attempts to revise the traditional picture of Soviet foreign policy in the 1930s founder on the lack of evidence. Since the inner workings of the policy formulation process in the Kremlin remain hidden, the scholar has at his disposal only the public record of Soviet diplomatic activity, as well as his own logical reconstruction of the international conditions and policy alternatives facing the Politburo. The public record shows that, aside from a few tentative advances toward Berlin, Litvinov and his colleagues at the Narkomindel devoted themselves tirelessly to the struggle to secure collective guarantees against Fascist aggression. Furthermore, Professor Tucker's suggestion that Stalin deliberately fostered the Nazi menace, which was a danger to the Soviet Union above all, strains the reader's credulity. The Nazi-Soviet Pact represented not, as Tucker would have it, the fruition of Stalin's decade-long diplomatic policy, but the failure of that policy—a bitter alternative forced upon the Russians by the bankruptcy of the collective security campaign.

7. Also see Robert M. Slusser, "The Role of the Foreign Ministry," in Ivo Lederer, ed., *Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven, 1962), pp. 214–30; George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin* (New York, 1961), pp. 288–91, 296; and Sven Allard, *Stalin und Hitler: Die sowjetrussische Aussenpolitik, 1930–1941* (Bern and Munich, 1974).

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