

THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION IN 1918 SEEN BY THE BOLSHEVIKS: SHORT AND  
LONG PERSPECTIVE

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the *konferenzleitung* Prof. Christoph Koch and to the *Berlin-Brandenburgische Auslandsgesellschaft* and his *hauptgeschäftsführer* Kilian Kindelberger for this kind invitation and the possibility to present my paper in the presence of distinguished and authoritative scholars of the First World War and the interwar period. Along with Professor Isabelle Davion I will not speak German but I hope dear organizers and colleagues will kindly pardon me for that. The theme of my paper concerns the subjective side of this “*aufbruch in die Moderne*” which we are speaking about. I would like to explore how the complicated and very unstable international global situation in 1918 [nineteen eighteen] was seen and perceived by the leading Bolshevik decision-makers in the field of the foreign policy: Vladimir I. Lenin, Georgy V. Chicherin, and Leon D. Trotsky. Mentioning the short and long perspectives in the title of my paper, I aim to stress its two-sided approach. However briefly it could be done, it seems important to include the Bolshevik views in 1918 [nineteen eighteen] (so-called “short perspective”) in the more extended frame of time and to analyse the heritage of this first year of the Bolshevik rule in the following Soviet foreign policy and subsequent perceptions of the world realities (what is called “long perspective” in this paper).

Besides clarifying some specific points concerning analysis of the international situation by the Bolshevik leadership, my paper aimed to stimulate the historical reflections on cross-country basis which overlap settled chronological limits: First World War, interwar period, Second World War. Though the idea of the “Second Thirty Years’ War” between 1914 [nineteen fourteen] and 1945 [ninety forty-five] seems deficient in some of its aspects, it attracts scholars’ attention more to the historical tendencies than to single events, howsoever great and tremendously important they could be.

Basing myself on the intention mentioned above, I’ll try to integrate the narrative of the Bolshevik survival during the Civil War and the intervention of foreign powers which was a traditional domain of the Russian history scholars into the more global context of the state-building and Empires’ disintegration after the First World War, in the context of changing “balance of power” in the world and the emergence of new actors and decision-makers who wanted to perturb the traditional rules of international game. Though reading some historical narratives could create an impression that the Civil War in Russia and the ongoing First World War in the West were nearly separate events, contemporaries felt the intermingling of the two

much more sharply and sometimes even predicted their long-term consequences. On 8th [eighth] March 1918 [nineteen eighteen], speaking to the Extraordinary Congress of the Russian Communist party of Bolsheviks (*R.C.P. (B)*) Lenin draw up a dramatic picture of coming century of wars and revolutions that seems to be not far from reality: the “violence will constitute a period of world history, a whole era of various kinds of wars, imperialist wars, civil wars inside countries, the intermingling of the two, national wars liberating the nationalities oppressed by the imperialists... This epoch, an epoch of gigantic cataclysms, of mass decisions forcibly imposed by war, of crises, has begun – that we can see clearly – and it is only the beginning”.<sup>1</sup>

The choice of sources which this paper is based on, was governed by the desire to explore the three main questions: first, how the analysis of the international politics was elaborated inside the Bolshevik leadership (hence the interest to interior official and private correspondence of the Soviet officials); second, how it was presented to the party members and to the outside world (hence the attention paid to the speeches and articles of Lenin and other Bolsheviks, and to the materials of the Party and All-Russia Central Executive Committee congresses); and, finally, how this vision was translated into interaction with other states (hence the interest to the diplomatic documents concerning, especially, the Soviet-German, Soviet-Polish and the Soviet-Chinese relations). I will begin by reviewing what was distinct in the situation of 1918 [nineteen eighteen] for Bolshevik perception of world realities, then I’ll pass to the particular traits of the Soviet analysis of global “balance of power” and the Soviet view on trends of international developments. As a conclusion, some general thoughts on the question of continuity and change in the Soviet foreign policy between 1918 [nineteen eighteen] and 1945 [nineteen forty-five] are proposed. To close these introductory remarks and remain academically rigorous, I would like to specify that all dates mentioned below are given according to the Gregorian calendar (so-called “new style” in the Russian tradition).

Year of 1918 [nineteen eighteen] was one of the crossroads of the Russian, European and international history. For Russia, this year marked by dissolution of All-Russian Constituent Assembly in January, signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty in March an execution of the Romanov family in July opened the period of fierce Civil War which continued till 1922 [nineteen twenty two] though some authors prefer to count its beginning already from 1917 [nineteen seventeen]. For Europe, this year halved by 11th [eleventh] November was also a period of great turbulence. First, turbulence during the war itself when the last German military successes in spring were reversed by the victorious *Entente* offensive started in summer, though the end of the war in

---

<sup>1</sup> Lenin, Vladimir I., *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij* [Omnibus edition of works], 5th ed. (hereafter – PSS), vol. 36 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1974), 48. English translation is given according to: Lenin, Vladimir I., *Collected Works* (hereafter – CW), vol. 27, transl. by Clemans Dutt, ed. by Robert Daglish, 4th Engl. ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/7thcong/09.htm>

1918 [nineteen eighteen] was hard to predict. I also mean the turbulence during the difficult period of transition between the war and the more or less solid stabilisation, the period of “peace without promise”, as British historian Michael Dockrill and J. Douglas Goold called it.<sup>2</sup>

Year of 1918 [nineteen eighteen] mattered also in the broader historical context. The decree on Peace of the 8th [eighth] November 1917 [nineteen seventeenth], the first Soviet decree passed on the following day after the successful October revolution, along with “the Fourteen Points” of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson is often regarded by scholars as a precursor and a harbinger of one of the future fundamental trends of the XXth [twentieth] century, i.e. [that is] the rising of the Soviet and American power and influence in the world politics, the coming demise of multinational Empires in Europe and in the Middle East, first of all, but the forthcoming disintegration of the British and French colonial Empires too. According to some scholars, even the conflict between the USA and the USSR, could be traced to the point between 1917 [nineteen seventeen] and 1918 [nineteen eighteen]. Wilson himself regarded his League of Nations project as in some a sort counter-proposal to the Soviet ideas. On 10th [tenth] December 1918 [nineteen eighteen], traveling to Europe aboard ocean liner *George Washington*, U.S. President is said to argued to the members of his think-tank, the ‘Inquiry group’, that “the poison of Bolshevism was accepted readily by the world because ‘it is a protest against the way in which world has worked’”. “It was to be our business at the Peace Conference, – author of the minutes continued, – to fight for a new order, ‘agreeably if we can, disagreeably if necessary’”.<sup>3</sup> Even “the Fourteen Points” themselves, the speech to the U.S. Congress made by Wilson on 8th [eighth] January, could had been stimulated by the telegrams sent in the end of 1917 [nineteen seventeen] by Edgar Sisson, the Petrograd representative of the U.S. Committee on Public Information, who urged President to denounce the German schemes in regard of Russia.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary scholars continue to underline the links between the events of 1917–1918 [nineteen seventeen – nineteen eighteen] and the future course of the international history. Canadian historian Michael J. Carley regards the October revolution as the beginning of the Cold War in world politics.<sup>5</sup> His American colleagues, Donald E. Davis and Eugene P. Trani, hold the same view, identifying the period of Wilson presidency as the “first Cold War” in the Soviet-

---

<sup>2</sup> Dockrill, Michael L. and Goold, J. Douglas, *Peace without Promise: Britain and the Peace Conferences, 1919–23* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Minutes of a meeting were taken by Inquiry member Isaiah Bowman. Cited it: Smith, Leonard V., *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 184.

<sup>4</sup> Tooze, Adam, *Vsemirnyj potop: Velikaja vojna i pereustrojstvo mirovogo porjadka, 1916–1931 gody* [Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916–1931], transl. by A. Gus'kov, ed. by E. Antonova (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Instituta Gajdara, 2017), 162.

<sup>5</sup> Carley, Michael Jabara, *Silent Conflict: A Hidden History of Early Soviet–Western Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

American relations.<sup>6</sup> For the French scholars, René Girault and Robert Frank, the international history between 1914 [nineteen fourteen] and 1941 [nineteen forty-one] was largely the transition of power from declining Europe to the “newcomers”, as they call the United States, the Soviet Union and Japan.<sup>7</sup> Professor Adam Tooze, whose presentation tomorrow I attend with the great interest, made the rising of the American power, resulted from the events of the First World War, one of the key themes of his excellent “Deluge”. Finally, British historian Niall C. Ferguson, thinking about escalation of violence and totalisation of warfare in the XXth [twentieth] century, identified three big contributing factors, the prominence of ethnicity (or race), the collapse of Empires, and economic upheaval.<sup>8</sup> It seems that many traces of these transformations were already evident in the events of 1917–1918 [nineteen seventeen – nineteen eighteen].

The Bolshevik leadership shared the idea or rather perception that the historical momentum developing in these two years was unique and tremendous in its real and potential significance. In his often-cited speech in front of the Swiss labour youth made in Zurich on 22nd [twenty-second] January 1917 [nineteen seventeen], Lenin spoke up about the revolutionary prospects in rather ambiguous terms. On the one hand, he was optimistic, arguing against the pessimism caused “by the present grave-like stillness in Europe”. Europe, from Lenin’s point of view, was “pregnant with revolution”. On the other hand, Bolshevik leader was not so sure about timing of the latter: “We of the older generation may not live to see the decisive battles of this coming revolution”.<sup>9</sup>

Lenin remained uncertain about the exact timing of revolutions in other countries even after October 1917 [nineteen seventeen] but the seizure of power in Russia determined his priorities, i.e. [that is] to make the Russian revolution survive. On 7th [seventh] January 1918 [nineteen eighteen], during famous internal struggle between him and so-called “left communists” (Nikolai I. Bukharin and Alexandra M. Kollontai among others), Lenin wrote that “the position of the socialist revolution in Russia must form the basis of any definition of the international tasks of our Soviet power, for the international situation in the fourth year of the war is such that it is quite impossible to predict the probable moment of outbreak of revolution and overthrow of any of the European imperialist governments (including the German)”. In the

---

<sup>6</sup> Davis, Donald E. and Trani, Eugene P., *The First Cold War: The Legacy of Woodrow Wilson in U.S.–Soviet Relations* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Girault, René et Frank, Robert, *Turbulente Europe et nouveaux mondes 1914–1941* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Ferguson, Niall C., *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> PSS, vol. 30 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1973), 327–328; CW, vol. 23, transl. by M.S. Levin, Joe Fineberg et al. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jan/09.htm>

same time, he confirmed the credo “that the socialist revolution in Europe must come, and will come, [that] is beyond doubt”.<sup>10</sup>

In 1918 [nineteen eighteen] the Bolshevik leadership saw the international situation primarily through the lens of surviving in the struggle against the interior and foreign enemies. Though the events of ongoing World War and prospects of “world revolution” were so tremendously important for the destiny of the Bolsheviks, the Soviet resources to influence these processes were feeble. Perception of its own weakness went as a red line through the different Soviet estimations. On 1st [first] March, in an article published in “*Pravda*” newspaper, Lenin recognised that “the old army, which was familiar with conditions of modern warfare, no longer exists. [...] The Red Army is undoubtedly splendid fighting material, but raw and unfinished material. In order that it may not become cannon fodder for the German guns, it must be trained and disciplined”.<sup>11</sup> Two weeks later, Trotsky speaking as People’s Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs at the Session of the Moscow Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies repeated the same idea: “We were the first to raise the flag of revolt amid this bloody and black night of imperialist war, and it is hard for us, sometimes almost beyond our strength, to fight against the iron ring of enemies that surrounds us. Is it surprising if we are not accomplishing all that we wanted to accomplish?”<sup>12</sup> On 14th [fourteenth] of March, defending the inevitability of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty during the Extraordinary Fourth All-Russia Congress of Soviets, Lenin spoke about the period after February 1918 [nineteen eighteen] as about the epoch “of disastrous defeats, an epoch of retreat, an epoch in which we must save at least a small part of our position by retreating before imperialism, by awaiting the time when there will be changes in the world situation in general, when the forces of the European proletariat arrive...”<sup>13</sup> In January 1919 [nineteen nineteen], the Red Army Field Staff continued to cable to Moscow information about deplorable condition of the armed forces. The telegram of 27th [twenty-seventh] January ran as follows: “Situation with the artillery supplies for the newly formed detachments and field divisions is very unfavourable. According to Field Staff information, interior divisions have only 40 [fourteen] per cent of guns fixed by the regulations”.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> PSS, vol. 35 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1974), 244–245; CW, vol. 26, transl. by Yuri Sdobnikov and George Hanna, ed. by George Hanna (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/07.htm>

<sup>11</sup> PSS, vol. 35, 409; CW, vol. 27, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/03.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Trotsky, Leon D., *Kak vooruzhalas’ revolyucija* [How the Revolution was armed], vol. 1 (Moscow: Vysshij voennyj redakcionnyj sovet, 1923). See English translation in: *The Military Writings of Leon Trotsky*, vol. 1, transl. by Brian Pearce, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/military/ch03.htm>

<sup>13</sup> PSS, vol. 36, 97; CW, vol. 27, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/13.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Telegram from the Field Staff chief F.V. Kostyaev and the representative of Revolutionary Military Council S.I. Aralov to the Chief Artillery Department, 27 January 1919. Published in: Vladimir A. Zolotarev (ed.), *Sovetskoe*

Even significantly later, in the mid-1930-s the Soviet General Staff continued to acknowledge the weaknesses of the Red Army and especially of its technical branches during the first years of the Civil War<sup>15</sup>. Alexej I. Seljavkin, one of the organisers of the Soviet armoured forces during the Civil War, wrote in his memoirs that “1918 [nineteen eighteen] was, perhaps, one of the most difficult years during the history of the Soviet country. By the mid-summer, enemy gained three quarters of its territory. The Republic was encircled by fronts and looked like a besieged fortress, cut from the bread, coal and oil”.<sup>16</sup>

In this sense, one of the mysterious episodes of those days, the history of the Kremlin strongbox belonged to the chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, Bolshevik Yakov M. Sverdlov, could be read more pragmatically than it was often made by some Russian publicists and scholars<sup>17</sup>. Since March 1919 [nineteen nineteen], when Sverdlov died, this strongbox was opened for the first time in 1935 [nineteen thirty five]. It turned up to be a sort of little bank containing a huge amount of former Imperial money in gold (more than 106 000 [one hundred and six thousand] of rubles) and in paper (750 000 [seven hundred and fifty thousand]); there were also 705 [seven hundred and five] unspecified gold articles, as well as several passports issued for different persons.<sup>18</sup> When this information from the former Political bureau (*Politbureau*) archives was published in 1994 [nineteen ninety four], during the so-called “archival revolution” in Russia, Sverdlov was suspected to be a bribe taker. However, it seems more realistic to see this unofficial fund as a preparation to return to the underground struggle if the Bolshevik government would fail.

Besides the vital questions of winning the Civil War inside Russia and surviving in the hostile foreign environment, perception of the international situation by the Bolsheviks in 1918 [nineteen eighteen] was determined by series of internal factors. Taken together, they also underline the specifics of this first year of the Soviet rule. Internal situation in the *R.C.P. (B)*, renamed in the March 1918 [nineteen eighteen], was far from the unanimity and homogeneity of the Stalinist times. The diversity of opinions was greater, and the collective mechanisms and instruments of rule were stronger. If Stalin made *Politbureau* the central instrument of the Soviet decision-making which in reality only legalised his own will, Lenin preferred to use Council of

---

*voenno-promyshlennoe proizvodstvo (1918–1926 gg.): Sbornik dokumentov* [Soviet military-industrial production (1918–1926): Collection of documents] (Moscow: “Novyj hronograf”, 2005), 89.

<sup>15</sup> Voennno-vozdushnye sily (istoricheskaja spravka) [Air Forces (historical note)], s.d. [circa 1936]. In: *Rossijskij gosudarstvennyj voennyj arhiv* [Russian state military archive], 39352/1/34/4.

<sup>16</sup> Seljavkin, Aleksej I., *V treh vojnah na bronevikah i tankah* [Waging three wars on armour and tanks] (Kharkov: Prapor, 1981), 66.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example: Sopol’njak, Boris N. *Tajny Smolenskoj ploshhadi* [Mysteries of the Smolensk square] (Moscow: Terra–Knizhnyj klub, 2003), 250.

<sup>18</sup> Report by People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs Genrih G. Yagoda to the Secretary of the Central Committee of VKP(b) Iosif V. Stalin, 27 July 1935. Published in: *Istochnik* [Source], 1(8) (January–February 1994), 4.

People's Commissars, the official Government of the Soviet Russia, known as *SNK* according to the Russian acronym, and the Central Committee of the Party.

In 1918 [nineteen eighteen], the apparatus of the Soviet foreign policy and means of Moscow's revolutionary and subversive action were in infant stage of its development. Such an important instrument as Communist International (*Comintern*) would be created only later, on 2nd [second] March of 1919 [nineteen nineteen]. The foreign communist parties were inexistant or rather feeble (as in the case of the Hungarian party formed in November 1918 [nineteen eighteen]). In his famous article "The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky" published in "*Pravda*" on 11th [eleventh] October and later expanded into separate booklet, Lenin complained *inter alia* that "Europe's greatest misfortune and danger is that it has no revolutionary party. It has parties of traitors like the Scheidemanns, Renaudels, Hendersons, Webbs and Co., and of servile souls like Kautsky. But it has no revolutionary party"<sup>19</sup>.

By the end of 1917 [nineteen seventeen], People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (*NKID*) who replaced the Ministry of the Imperial times was in rather deplorable condition. Though its staff numbered 126 [one hundred and six] persons and NKID was "the first Commissariat to be fully established"<sup>20</sup>, chief mission of this institution, according to Trotsky, was to help him to finish the "small business" – to publish the secret treaties and "to close the shop".<sup>21</sup> The appointment of Trotsky as the first head of NKID whose candidacy was proposed by Sverdlov witnessed the desire of the Bolsheviks to terminate the period of "classical diplomacy" and to inaugurate what new People's Commissar called "people's and truly democratic foreign policy".<sup>22</sup> With the appointment of Chicherin as successor of Trotsky, in provisional status at first, on 13th [thirteenth] of March 1918 [nineteen eighteen], ten days after the signature of Brest-Litovsk treaty, mood had changed and the tendencies of *Realpolitik* in NKID line became more pronounced.

One Soviet scholar, analysing Chicherin contribution to the Soviet diplomatic decision-making, wrote in the mid-1970s [nineteen seventies] that "next to Lenin himself, there was no single individual who left such a deep imprint as he on foreign policy formation during the early

---

<sup>19</sup> *PSS*, vol. 37 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1969), 109–110; *CW*, vol. 28, transl. and ed. by Jim Riordan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/oct/10.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Uldricks, Teddy J., *The Development of the Soviet Diplomatic Corps, 1917–1930*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Indiana University, 1972), 41.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in: Gorodetsky, Gabriel, 'The Formulation of Soviet Foreign Policy: Ideology and Realpolitik', in Gabriel Gorodetsky (ed.), *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917–1991: A Retrospective* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 31

<sup>22</sup> Address by Trotsky published on 23 November 1917. Cited in: Ostapenko, Aleksandr I., 'Ideja mirovoj revolucii i formirovanie Narodnogo komissariata po inostrannym delam RSFSR v konce 1917 – nachale 1918 g.' [Idea of world revolution and the formation of People's Commissariat of foreign affairs of RSFSR in the end of 1917 – beginning of 1918], *Prepodavanie istorii i obshchestvoznaniya v shkole* [Teaching history and sociology in school], 7 (September – October 2017), 9.

period of Soviet statehood”.<sup>23</sup> According to American specialist on the early Soviet foreign policy, “in 1918 [nineteen eighteen], under Chicherin’s leadership, the burden of relations with foreign governments and citizens was increasingly shifted away from the Council of People’s Commissars (and especially from the personal diplomacy of Lenin and Trotsky) to the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs”.<sup>24</sup>

Though his intelligence and integrity were really appreciated by Lenin, Chicherin, in fact, was not very powerful inside the Bolshevik hierarchy. Former Menshevik sometimes criticised for the lack of the leadership qualities, Chicherin became a member of the Central Committee of the Party only in 1925 [nineteen twenty five] and was often rivaled by his deputy Maxim M. Litvinov. Even in the absence of Comintern, NKID was not the only actor in the Soviet foreign policy decision-making, the latter remaining a competitive process in some sense. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Soviet foreign intelligence and subversive services, notorious later, were rather weak or not even existent in 1918 [nineteen eighteen]. The structure of the security services of the epoch mirrored the situation when the Kremlin put emphasis on the struggle against the internal enemies and opponents. The main tasks of *Cheka* (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission of *SNK*) created on 20th [twentieth] December 1917 [nineteen seventeen], were concerned with suppression of the counter-revolution. *Politbureau* founded the Foreign Department of *Cheka*, the ancestor of all further Soviet foreign intelligence services, only 3 [three] years later, in December 1920 [nineteen twenty], trying to take into account the Soviet mistakes during the war against Poland. So-called “Registration Department” of the Red Army Field Staff, the ancestor of the Soviet military intelligence, was organised in November 1918 [nineteen eighteen] but centered more on the counter-intelligence activities as well as on the tactical and operational rather than strategic and political intelligence.

In the same time, such important elements of the Soviet self-perception as the idea of “besieged fortress” and emphasise on the survival in the enemy environment were already present in 1918 [nineteen eighteen] and institutionalised in the creation of the Chief Department of border defence in March 1918 [nineteen eighteen]. Brief instructions issued by this Department in October of the same year concerned the measures during the border defence in war; they contained not only pragmatic “core” but also some ideological “cover”. Stressing the idea that only the order of the commander or the pressure from superior forces could justify retreat from the state border, these instructions emphasised that the latter is “our sanctity, it is the

---

<sup>23</sup> Chossudovsky, Evgeny M., ‘Lenin and Chicherin: The Beginnings of Soviet Foreign Policy and Diplomacy’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 3/1 (March 1974), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Uldricks, *The Development of the Soviet Diplomatic Corps*, 66.



flag of the border troops which must be guarded and protected to the last drop of blood”.<sup>25</sup> Speaking to the audience on 14th [fourteenth] of May Lenin depicted Soviet Republic as “a lone island in the stormy sea of imperialist robbery”.<sup>26</sup>

Analysing the Bolshevik perception of the international situation, it is appropriate to underline the question of the foreign policy staff. During the first year of the Soviet rule, the Bolshevik cadres who presumed to be well tried and ideologically reliable were in short supply and, oppositely, the role of the previous bureaucracy was greater. Meeting between Trotsky and the officials of the former Imperial Ministry for Foreign Affairs on 9th [ninth] November 1917 [nineteen seventeen] gave a good picture of confrontation between two different worlds with opposite conceptions and world-views. In his handwritten notes made in the 1920s [nineteen twenties], chief of the Legal Department of the Ministry Georgy N. Mikhailovsky, son of the famous Russian writer Nikolai G. Garin-Mikhailovsky, drew up rather characteristic picture of the meeting: “Jewish appearance of Trotsky, perfumed and frizzed, pale, with slim legs, who had low height and was sooner thin than thick, made such an impression in this undoubtedly the most aristocratic institution of Petrograd that it was hard to express it... Any resolutions... any theoretical discourses could not prove with such obviousness that takeover of power by the Bolsheviks was catastrophe...” Social and political hostility of Imperial elites to revolution and Bolshevism merged in the memoirs of Mikhailovsky with antisemitism and perception of Trotsky as a pretentious amateur with whom it was nearly impossible to compromise. An imprint of those revolutionary and “irregular” days wore also the fact that Trotsky came to this meeting without any guard, and later Mikhailovsky complained that the staff of Ministry did not use this supposed opportunity to kidnap the “Lion of Revolution” and even to kill him by hiding in the iron strongboxes where the secret diplomatic files were held. “The future dictator of Russia could not be found there very quickly”, wrote Mikhailovsky with bitterness in the soul.<sup>27</sup>

The diplomats of the dying Empire were among the energetic organisers of the anti-Bolshevik actions abroad. Creation of the so-called Russian political council in Paris in December 1918 [nineteen eighteen] where former Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei D. Sazonov and former Ambassador to France Vasily A. Maklakov held prominent positions, was in some sense a culmination of initiatives which began earlier at the local level. Thus, for example, the staff of the Russian consulates in a far-away Xinjiang on the North-West of China (remarkably, the news about the Nicholas II [the second] abdication in March 1917 [nineteen seventeen]

---

<sup>25</sup> Zyrjanov, Pavel I. (ed.), *Pogranichnye vojska SSSR 1918–1928: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* [Border defense troops of USSR 1918–1928: Collection of documents and materials] (Moscow: Nauka, 1973), 128.

<sup>26</sup> PSS, vol. 36, 329; CW, vol. 27, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/may/14.htm>

<sup>27</sup> Mihajlovskij, Georgij N. *Zapiski: Iz istorii rossijskogo vneshnepoliticheskogo vedomstva 1914–1920* [Notes: From the history of the Russian Foreign ministry 1914–1920], vol. 1 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenija, 1993), 509.

reached Xinjiang more than a month later) began their energetic anti-Bolshevik activity already in February 1918 [nineteen eighteen]. The consulate in the city of Kashgar lobbied the local government to “continue the struggle against the Bolsheviks, telling it that the consulate believed that the Bolshevik takeover was only temporary, the Bolsheviks did not represent the real government of Russia, and the provisional government would soon return to full power. The consulate also assured the Kashgar authorities that the old political and economic agreements remained in force”.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, when we speak about the institutional and instrumental side of the question, how the Bolsheviks saw the international situation in 1918 [nineteen eighteen], it is necessary to take into account a problem of communication channels. In the situation of ongoing First World War and escalating Civil War, without the recognition of the Great Powers and hostility of former diplomatic cadres, Bolshevik connections with the external world were rather precarious. French historian Prof. Sophie Cœuré who explored the early French travelling to the Soviet Russia counted less than 45 [forty-five] men and women between 1918 [nineteen eighteen] and 1923 [nineteen twenty three]. She vividly depicted the difficulties in taking such journeys, difficulties which began at the stage of the visa deliverance, especially painful in the condition of Western non-recognition of the Soviet state, and continued during the adventures inside Russia and even after the return to home countries.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the majority of the Bolshevik assessments of the international situation in 1918 [nineteen eighteen] were made in the “irregular” conditions, in the heat of escalating Civil War and foreign intervention. By the summer of 1918 [nineteen eighteen], the Bolsheviks held chiefly the industrial regions of the Central Russia while the fringes of the former Empire and vast territories of Siberia and Far East were out of their control. Though they rarely closely coordinated their actions, the different anti-Bolshevik movements consisted of various social groups, originated from heterogeneous and often-opposite political trends and were spread on the wide geographical areas. The forces struggled against the Bolsheviks could be divided in several though sometimes overlapping categories. First, national movements: as, for example, Transcaucasian commissariat formed in November 1917 [nineteen seventeen] or Transcaspian provisional government founded in July 1918 [nineteen eighteen] both consisted of heterogeneous coalition ranging from Socialist-Revolutionaries (*esery*) and Mensheviks to nationalists and members of former Imperial bureaucracy. Second, the Cossacks troops located

---

<sup>28</sup> Share, Michael, ‘The Russian Civil War in Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang), 1918–1921: A Little Known and Explored Front’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62/3 (April 2010), 400.

<sup>29</sup> Cœuré, Sophie, ‘Mehanizmy diplomaticheskogo priznaniya SSSR Franciej v 1924 g. i razrabotka mental’noj karty Evropy po materialam francuzskih puteshestvennikov v SSSR’ [Mechanism of the Soviet diplomatic recognition by France in 1924 and the elaboration of European mental map according to the materials of the French travellers to USSR], in Anatolij P. Sal’kov et al. (eds.), *Rossijskie i slavjanskije issledovanija* [Russian and Slavic studies], vol. 10 (Minsk: BGU, 2015), 149–157.

from Don and Kuban regions in the South-West of Russia through Orenburg on the south of the Urals to the Far East. Third, the emerging forces of the so-called “Whites” ranging from the Volunteer Army in the Southern Russia led by General Lavr G. Kornilov from the end of 1917 [nineteen seventeen] and then by the General Anton I. Denikine as a part of the Armed Forces of South Russia, to the Omsk Government led by Admiral Alexaner V. Kolchak which was created in November 1918 [nineteen eighteen] if to name only few representatives of this movement. Forth, the left parties opposed to the Bolsheviks should be mentioned. They consisted not only of *esery* and Mensheviks but also of the “left Socialist-Revolutionists” who supported the Bolsheviks in November 1917 [nineteen seventeen] but organised the armed revolt in July 1918 [nineteen eighteen] in Moscow when the German Ambassador Wilhelm von Mirbach was killed. The simultaneous actions in the Northern Russian cities (Yaroslavl, Murom, Rybinsk), where the supporters of Boris V. Savinkov revolted, and in the Volga region, where the left *eser* Mikhail A. Muraviev, commander of the Red Army Eastern front, tried to organise insurrection but was quickly killed, amplified the scale of danger to the Bolsheviks. Fifth, there were a lot the foreign elements opposing the Bolsheviks as, for example, the Czechoslovak Corps whose soldiers and officers extended in March 1918 [nineteen eighteen] along the Trans-Siberian railway from Penza in the Volga region to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean, or different detachments of the Entente powers located from the North of Russia (in Archangelsk and Murmansk), through the Black Sea region (where the French and British actions were activated mainly after the end of First World War), to Caucasus, Turkestan and the Far East, the capital of latter, Vladivostok, being occupied by the Japanese troops in April 1918 [nineteen eighteen]. To complete a picture of heterogeneous anti-Bolshevik coalition, such foreign groups as the German and Turkish troops on the Caucasus in the summer of 1918 [nineteen eighteen], should be named. Though obviously this list is not exhaustive, it gives some impression of the Bolsheviks situation during 1918 [nineteen eighteen] when their “nucleus” of power in the Central Russian territory was encircled by the different hostile forces who, as it seemed, were close to crush the regime of Lenin and his comrades. Conventional phrase of the Soviet historiography about “the Republic circled by the fronts” seems rather accurate if to apply it to this period.

Two fundamental underlying processes aggravated the complexity of the Russian Civil War as a situation of military struggle between various social and political groups. First, the disintegration of the former Russian Empire that would be followed soon by the death of three Empires from the Central Powers’ coalition, and, second, the revolutionary transformation of social and political order in Russia itself effectuated by the Bolsheviks and potentially leading to upheavals in other countries and regions. Thus, strategic and geopolitical transformations, on the

one hand, and social and political revolution, on the other, combined to bring up “one of the most difficult periods in the history of human civilization”, according to one scholar’s estimate.<sup>30</sup>

“National factor” embodied in the principle of self-determination proclaimed as by the Bolsheviks as well as by Wilson was one of the important conceptional tools of the reconfiguration of European geopolitical space. In July 1916 [nineteen sixteen], a few months after the Eastern rising in Ireland stimulated a new round of polemics in the European Left on the principle of self-determination, Lenin proclaimed: “To imagine that social revolution is *conceivable* without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie *with all its prejudices*, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. – to imagine all this is to *repudiate social revolution*”.<sup>31</sup> In the beginning of 1917 [nineteen seventeen], returning to the question in unfinished booklet “Statistics and Sociology”, Lenin concluded that “on the whole, the proportion of the foreign-nationality population (i.e. [that is], not belonging to the principal nation of the given state) is 6 [six] per cent in Western Europe, and 7 [seven] per cent if we add the United States and Japan. In Eastern Europe, on the other hand, the proportion is 53 [fifty three] per cent!”<sup>32</sup> This should have eased the revolutionary upheavals in the region.

Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks differentiated between right to self-determination used as a tool of revolutionary struggle, on the one hand, and the self-determination applied in the *Realpolitik* of the Soviet state, on the other. Lenin always positioned himself as a pragmatist who made his decisions on the base of realities and not theoretical aspirations, however important they could be. In the beginning of 1918 [nineteen eighteen], during the struggle against the opponents of the Brest-Litovsk treaty Lenin castigated them as the people who proposed the policy answering “the needs of someone who is striving for an eloquent, spectacular and brilliant effect”. According to Lenin, “left communists” “completely fail to reckon with the objective relationship of class forces and material factors at the present period of the socialist revolution that has begun”.<sup>33</sup>

In January, during the same polemics, Lenin proclaimed, “no Marxist, without renouncing the principles of Marxism and of socialism generally, can deny that the interests of

---

<sup>30</sup> Manykin, Alexandr S., ‘Sistemnost’ v mezhdunarodnyh otnoshenijah: sodержanie, prichiny formirovaniya i jetapy razvitiya’ [Systemic basis of the international relations: contents, origins and phases of development], in Alexandr S. Manykin (ed.), *Vvedenie v teoriju mezhdunarodnyh otnoshenij* [Introduction to the international relations theory] (Moscow: MGU, 2001), 37.

<sup>31</sup> *PSS*, vol. 30 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1973), 54; *CW*, vol. 22 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jul/x01.htm>

<sup>32</sup> *PSS*, vol. 30, 356; *CW*, vol. 23, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jan/00d.htm>

<sup>33</sup> *PSS*, vol. 35, 248; *CW*, vol. 26, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/07.htm>

socialism are higher than the interests of the right of nations to self-determination. Our socialist republic has done all it could, and continues to do all it can to give effect to the right to self-determination of Finland, the Ukraine, etc. But if the concrete situation is such that the existence of the socialist republic is being imperiled at the present moment on account of the violation of the right to self-determination of several nations (Poland, Lifland, Courland, etc.), naturally the preservation of the socialist republic has the higher claim”.<sup>34</sup> Earlier, on 26th [twenty-sixth] December 1917 [nineteen seventeen], Joseph V. Stalin, holding then the position of People’s Commissar of Nationalities, “proposed to exclude bourgeois regimes from exercising the right of national self-determination. The workers, he said, might be given this right, but not the bourgeoisie, for ‘the brotherhood of nations is only possible under socialism’”<sup>35</sup>. The possibilities of further “faked self-determinations” organised by the Germans in order to “go beyond the Brest stipulations”, seriously frightened Chicherin in July 1918 [nineteen eighteen]. In a paper presented to the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets, People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs made allusions to German attempts to stage such self-determinations in Dvinsk (Daugavpils in Latvian) and in some parts of Belorussia<sup>36</sup>.

To sum up, the Bolshevik leadership approached the principle of self-determination with mixture of pragmatism and ideology. This principle used as a tool of revolutionary struggle against the Empires was not translated into the dogma of the Soviet foreign policy but when its application corresponded to the Soviet interests, it could be adopted readily and quickly. Even Stalin’s idea could be interpreted in this light: creation of socialist states based on self-determination was the best of two worlds combining ideological principles and strategic interests of Moscow. In the end of November 1918 [nineteen eighteen], after the defeat of Germany in the First World War and denunciation of Brest-Litovsk Treaty, when the prospects of regaining previously lost territories seemed promising, Lenin instructed the Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Armed Forces Ioakim I. Vacetis: “With the advance of our troops to the west and into the Ukraine, regional provisional Soviet governments are being created to strengthen local Soviets. This situation has a positive side to it, in that it deprives the chauvinists of the Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia of the possibility of seeing in the movement of our troops an occupation...” Lenin demanded Vacetis to support “the provisional Soviet governments of

---

<sup>34</sup> PSS, vol. 35, 251; CW, vol. 26, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/07.htm>

<sup>35</sup> Debo, Richard K. ‘Nationalism and Empire in Eastern Europe’, *The International History Review*, 5/1 (February 1983), 119.

<sup>36</sup> Chicherin, Georgy N., *Stat’i i rechi po voprosam mezhdunarodnoj politiki* [Articles and speeches on international politics], ed. by Lidiya I. Trofimova (Moscow: Izdatel’sтво social’no-jekonomicheskoy literatury, 1961), 39–40.

Latvia, Estonia, the Ukraine and Lithuania but, obviously, only if they are Soviet governments”.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, Socialist republics along the Western Soviet border could be useful in dual sense: first, as springboards for the new revolutions in Europe in the case of the Soviet powerfulness, second, as a protective screen in the case of weakness. Commenting the discussions in Moscow in December 1918 [nineteen eighteen] about the future Lithuanian–Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (*Lit-Bel*), formed later in February 1919 [nineteen nineteen], one scholar wrote that the whole purpose of the Soviet policy “was not to fight the *Entente* directly as would have had to be the case with Germany, but rather to erect buffers to protect Russia from Europe and divert its attention from Russia; yet these buffers would not screen Europe from Soviet influence”.<sup>38</sup>

It is to note also that in the beginning of 1919 [nineteen nineteen] the strategic situation itself remained so unsettled in the Eastern Europe that it precluded clear-cut decisions about implementation of the right to self-determination. The telegram by Fedor V. Kostyaev, the chief of the Red Army Field Staff, dated 15 [fifteen] February 1919 [nineteen nineteen], gives a good picture of this uncertainty in the region where the borders were changing rapidly. Having described the current line of fronts and having suggested the further advance to Brest-Litovsk and Rovno which could provoke Poland to declare the war, Kostyaev asked the instructions how far his troops could go and what future Eastern frontiers of Poland were supposed to be<sup>39</sup>. The position of Moscow itself remained ambiguous in this time. In contrast to the Soviet military and the Polish communists, Chicherin was frightened by eventual consequences of the Soviet-Polish war and tried in vain to stop the escalation began by the Polish offensive in Belorussia in February 1919 [nineteen nineteen]<sup>40</sup>.

Besides the ideas of sovietization of the former Imperial territories, the Bolsheviks didn’t abandon also the aspirations to reintegrate these eventual new republics into the common economic (and eventually political) space with the Soviet Russia. Speaking to the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in July, Chicherin stressed the idea that Moscow should secure the non-interference of Germany in the economic relations “between Russia and those states which had formerly created one economic unity, the Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic provinces, Caucasus”.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Telegram from Lenin to Vacetis, 28 November 1918. Published in: G.A. Belov et al. (eds.), *Direktivy Glavnogo komandovaniya Krasnoi Armii (1917–1920): Sbornik dokumentov* [Directives of the Chief Commandership of the Red Army (1917–1920): Collection of documents], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1969), 179.

<sup>38</sup> Blank, Stephen, ‘Soviet Nationality Policy and Soviet Foreign Policy: The Polish Case 1917–1921’, *The International History Review*, 7/1 (February 1985), 122.

<sup>39</sup> Narinskii, Mikhail M. and Artem V. Mal’gin (eds.), *Sovetsko-pol’skie otnosheniya v 1918–1945 gg.* [Soviet-Polish relations in 1918–1945]. vol. 1 (Moscow: Aspekt-press, 2017), 28.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 25–27. See also: Pavlova, Mariya S., *Litva v politike Varshavy i Moskvyy v 1918–1926 godah* [Lithuania in the politics of Warsaw and Moscow in 1918–1926] (Moscow: Aspekt-press, 2016), 25.

<sup>41</sup> Chicherin, *Stat’i i rechi*, 49.

Nevertheless, for the most part of 1918 [nineteen eighteen] the Bolsheviks had to deal more with curtailment of the territories under their control than with aggrandisement. In the West, evident strategic retreat of the emerging Soviet state as compared to its Imperial predecessor was embodied in the Brest-Litovsk Peace. This retreat didn't result from a single act, Bolshevik "betrayal" according to the views of contemporary and subsequent critics, but from the more fundamental trends, as from the previous Russian defeats during the First World War that witnessed the structural weaknesses of Empire, as well as from the crucial Bolshevik decision to quit the war, the latter being indispensable for the winning support for the Revolution inside. Even before the Brest-Litovsk such steps as, for example, recognising the Polish right to independence by the Russian Provisional Government on 29th [twenty-ninth] of March 1917 [nineteen seventeen] (though it was supposed that Poland would remain in the military alliance with Russia), the creation of the Ukrainian People's Republic on 20th [twentieth] November as a component of the supposed Federation with Russia, the declaration of independence by Parliament of Finland on 6th [sixth] December (it was recognised by *SNK* on 31st [thirty first] of December)) and, finally, the declaration of independence by the Parliament of Bessarabia at the night on 24th [twenty-four] of January 1918 [nineteen eighteen] followed soon by the union with Romania seen by Moscow as the Romanian annexation – all these and other events before the Brest-Litovsk indicated important traces of the new strategic configuration which was emerging in the East of Europe as a result of the Russian strategic retreat.

The Brest-Litovsk Peace, the "obscene treaty", according to current expression used also by Lenin himself<sup>42</sup>, fixed the loss of several important territories on the Western and Southern flanks of the new state as compared to the Russian Empire, namely, the loss of Finland, the Baltic provinces, parts of contemporary Belorussia, the Ukraine, parts of Transcaucasian region. On the 14th [fourteenth] of March, defending inevitability of the Treaty in front of the Fourth Extraordinary All-Russian Congress of Soviets Chicherin tried to show that both sides of the "deal" refused all indemnities and, thereby, if the Brest-Litovsk was Peace with annexations but it remained Peace without contributions<sup>43</sup>. However, additional secret Soviet-German agreement signed on 27th [twenty-seventh] of August, after murder of Mirbach and a new crisis in the Soviet-German relations, compelled the Soviet Russia to pay a contribution of 6 [six] billion marks partially covered by two so-called "golden echelons" consisted of more than 93 [ninety three] tons of gold sent to Germany.

The Brest-Litovsk Treaty clearly showed how the events of the First World War in Europe, on the one hand, and Revolution and Civil War in Russia, on the other, were interlinked.

---

<sup>42</sup> See, for example: Kotkin, Stephen, *Stalin*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 259.

<sup>43</sup> Chicherin, *Stat'i i rechi*, 29.

Though the Eastern front ceased to exist in the strict sense of the word, it continued, however, to attract and pin down the German and Austrian troops. According to scholars' estimates, in August 1918 [nineteen eighteen] there were 53 [fifty-three] German and 26 [twenty] six Austrian divisions in the East as compared to 194 [one hundred and ninety four] divisions in the West in July, 61 [sixty-one] of the latter being reserve divisions of lower quality<sup>44</sup>.

In a significant manner, the Bolshevik perceptions of international situation depended on the assessments of "balance of power" between the two enemy alliances. As in other cases, these estimates were a mixture of pragmatism and ideology. Lenin thought that, despite all the intensity of struggle against each other, as *Entente* as well as Central Powers were imperialist coalitions who shared a common anti-Soviet stance. On 8th [eighth] of March 1918 [nineteen eighteen], in front of the Party Congress Lenin spoke about "various combinations of imperialist powers that will inevitably enter into various alliances in the epoch of tremendous state-capitalist and military trusts and syndicates". On 29th [twenty ninth] of July, presenting his position at a Joint Session of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee, the Moscow Soviet, Factory Committees and Trade Unions of Moscow Lenin tried to reveal the vast scale of the supposed imperialist designs: "And now, when these separate links have become quite clear to us, the present military and general strategic position of our Republic has been fully revealed. Murmansk in the North, the Czechoslovak front in the East, Turkestan, Baku and Astrakhan in the South-East – we see that practically all the links in the chain forged by British and French imperialism have been joined". Such current expressions as "Anglo-French imperialism" or a preference to speak more about *Entente* as a whole than about the strategies of its different members, underlined the tendency of Moscow to see the anti-Sovietism as a factor that united different imperialist powers. Furthermore, if in July 1918 [nineteen eighteen] Lenin saw the ongoing World War primarily as the conflict between Anglo-French and German imperialism, in November he hinted that behind "old" Britain and France the new leader represented by the United States was emerging: "In recent months, and in recent weeks, the international situation has begun to change sharply; now German imperialism is almost completely defeat ... It turned out that American imperialism was ready, and a blow was struck at Germany. A totally different situation has arisen"<sup>45</sup>.

Nevertheless, a conception of more or less united Western imperialism coexisted with the idea of fierce contradictions that teared apart the states which opposed the Soviet Republic. In

---

<sup>44</sup> Narotchnizky, Aleksej L., 'La Russie et l'Europe en 1918', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 16/1 (Janvier – mars 1969), 32.

<sup>45</sup> PSS, vol. 36, 48; vol. 37, 7–10, 156; CW, vol. 27, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/7thcong/09.htm>; vol. 28, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jul/29.htm> and <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/nov/06a.htm>



August 1918 [nineteen eighteen], Lenin underlined not only the evident struggle between *Entente* and the Central Powers but forecasted U.S.-Japan war in future, latter being characterised by him as “inevitable”.<sup>46</sup> In July, Chicherin, sometimes being more attentive to the diplomatic subtleties than the Party leadership, attracted the attention of the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets to the differences between the British and French approaches: “The English government, in contrast to the French one, not only didn’t close their borders to the representatives of the Soviet authorities but also entered into the business relations with citizen Litvinov, authorised representative of the Russian Soviet Republic”.<sup>47</sup>

In the field of practical policy, the Bolshevik leadership often differentiated between various Western countries and had a specific set of ideas concerning each Great Power. The case of Soviet-German relations in 1918 [nineteen eighteen] seems especially interesting in this sense. Bolshevik leadership’s attitude to Germany partly resembled the behaviour of moth in front of a flame. On the one hand, Germany was nearly a magnet and a model country for transition to socialism. In May 1918 [nineteen eighteen], Lenin who was impressed by the German war economy and characterised it as “state capitalism” thought that “Germany and Russia have become the most striking embodiment of the material realisation of the economic, the productive and the socio-economic conditions for socialism, on the one hand, and the political conditions, on the other”.<sup>48</sup>

However, Germany did not only attract but frightened as well. The proximity of the German troops to the vital centers of the Soviet state and the possibility of the new German offensive were especially dreadful to the Bolsheviks who had plenty of enemies in 1918 [nineteen eighteen]. The telegrams sent by the Soviet plenipotentiary representative in Berlin Adolf A. Ioffe during spring and summer summarised the Soviet dilemma rather aptly. In May, reacting to Chicherin instructions “to entice the Germans by the real advantages which they could obtain from peace with us”, Ioffe depicted two tendencies in the German foreign policy: first, a tendency to “weaken Russia decisively” fearing her reentry in the war, and second, a tendency to obtain economic advantages in Russia. In July, in a cable to Trotsky Ioffe explained his attempts to convince the German military who, according to the Soviet diplomat, were the nearly absolute masters of the country, to cooperate with Moscow: “... I am stubbornly trying to prove ... that if they take by themselves they will obtain nothing because we will destroy everything. But if they follow the policy of peace, we’ll give a lot ourselves”.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> PSS, vol. 37, 66.

<sup>47</sup> Chicherin, *Stat’i i rechi*, 53.

<sup>48</sup> PSS, vol. 36, 300; CW, vol. 27, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/may/09.htm>

<sup>49</sup> Cited in: Zubachevskij, Viktor A., ‘Geopoliticheskaja situacija na vostoce Central’noj Evropy nakanune i v period raboty Parizskoj miroj konferencii’ [Geopolitical situation in the Eastern part of the Central Europe on the eve

In general, Bolshevik estimates of the “balance of power” transformation in Europe followed the changing course of the First World War and remained volatile as the international and strategic situation itself. Lenin and Trotsky did not burn the bridges with the former Russian Allies as quickly as it could seem. Even in February 1918 [nineteen eighteen], Lenin was ready to enter into the negotiations with the French military officers, Captain Georges Sadoul and Lieutenant Guy de Lubersac, on the question of possible French assistance in the military measures against Germany. In the “Letter to American workers”, published in August, Lenin recalled that “when in February 1918 [nineteen eighteen] the German imperialist vultures hurled their forces against unarmed, demobilised Russia... I did not hesitate for a moment to enter into an “agreement” with the French monarchists”. Speaking about this “agreement” with de Lubersac, Lenin meant “certain services that French army officers, experts in explosives, were ready to render us by blowing up railway lines in order to hinder the German invasion”.<sup>50</sup>

Lenin’s mood which was fixed in the “Theses on the present political situation” written on 10th [tenth] of May and approved by the Central Committee of the Party three days later, had already changed. He stressed that “although we do not in general reject military agreements with one of the imperialist coalitions against the other in those cases in which such an agreement could, without undermining the basis of Soviet power, strengthen its position and paralyse the attacks of any imperialist power, we cannot at the present moment enter into a military agreement with the Anglo-French coalition”. Lenin argued that London and Paris aimed primarily to divert the German troops from the West by “the advance of many Japanese army corps into the interior of European Russia”, which was an “unacceptable condition”. The Bolshevik leader hoped that “the Japanese advance can be paralysed more easily (or can be delayed for a longer time) than the threat of the Germans occupying Petrograd, Moscow and a large part of European Russia”.<sup>51</sup>

In July, Lenin paid more attention to the Anglo-French threat to the Soviet Republic than to the German one. On 29th [twenty ninth] of July, he emphasised, “whereas from the West, German imperialism continues to stand as a military, annexatory, imperialist force, from the North-East and South of Russia, British and French imperialism has been able to dig itself in and is making it patently obvious to us that this force is prepared once more to plunge Russia into imperialist war, is prepared to crush Russia ... British and French imperialism has won a big victory, and, surrounding us on all sides, it is doing its utmost to crush Soviet Russia”.<sup>52</sup>

---

and during the Paris Peace conference], in Ivan I. Kostjushko (ed.), *Vostochnaja Evropa posle Versalja* [Eastern Europe after Versailles] (Saint-Petersburg: Aletejja, 2007), 74.

<sup>50</sup> PSS, vol. 37, 55; CW, vol. 28, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/aug/20.htm>

<sup>51</sup> PSS, vol. 36, 323; CW, vol. 27, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/may/12.htm>

<sup>52</sup> PSS, vol. 37, 8; CW, vol. 28, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jul/29.htm>

Though the Soviet “appeasement” of Germany continued during the summer of 1918 [nineteen eighteen] and was embodied the new agreements in August, the German defeats on the Western front changed the strategic situation in the East of Europe as well. On 22nd [twenty-second] of October, Lenin warned the All-Russia Central Executive Committee that “now, when Germany is being torn apart by the revolutionary movement at home, the British and French imperialists consider themselves masters of the world. They are convinced their chief enemy is the Bolsheviks and the world revolution. The more the revolution develops, the more the bourgeoisie rally together”. Nevertheless, Lenin, a firm partisan of dialectics in history, on 25 [twenty-fifth] of December did not lose a hope and was already formulating the basis of many future criticisms of the Versailles treaty: “The cause that led to the collapse of German imperialism is again clearly perceptible in the case of Anglo-French imperialism. The latter has imposed peace terms on Germany that are far worse, far harsher than those, which Germany imposed on us when concluding the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty. In doing so, Anglo-French imperialism has overstepped the bounds and this will later prove fatal”.<sup>53</sup>

In 1918 [nineteen eighteen], while the First World War continued in Europe, the Western vector of the foreign policy remained the priority for the Bolsheviks. Meanwhile, even the mere geopolitical position of the Soviet state, as in the case of its Imperial predecessor, dictated to look not only at the West but at the East as well. This basic Western-Eastern dichotomy revealed itself in the internal structure of NKID that comprised, besides the Secretariat, two key subdivisions that were called Department of Relations with the West and those one dealing with the East<sup>54</sup>.

NKID supposed that Soviet anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist conceptions and deeds would greatly enlarge possibilities and opportunities of new Oriental policy. Such steps as “Appeal to the Muslims of Russia and the East” issued on 3rd [third] December 1917 [nineteen seventeen], the renouncement of different Russian Imperial privileges in Iran, China and Mongolia were aimed to demonstrate the novelty of the Soviet diplomacy in the East. In December 1918 [nineteen eighteen], Chicherin deputy Leon M. Karahan even disputed with *Cheka* about the treatment of the Chinese citizens by the latter because the Soviet security service sometimes equated them to the foreigners from the enemy countries. Soviet diplomat urged to stop such this practice arguing that the “Chinese citizens as well as the citizens of other Oriental countries could not be counted in Russia as members of bourgeois classes and could not be considered as bearing a responsibility for the policy of their corrupted governments even in

---

<sup>53</sup> PSS, vol. 37, 118, 396; CW, vol. 28, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/oct/22a.htm> and <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/dec/25.htm>

<sup>54</sup> Vygodsky, Semen Iu., *U istokov sovetskoi diplomatii* [At the origins of the Soviet diplomacy] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoy Literatury, 1965), 32–33.

the smallest degree. The Soviet government makes all possible to attract the Asiatic democracy to the common struggle against the imperialism”.<sup>55</sup>

The Oriental policy was important for the Bolsheviks in dual sense. First, they could use it as an instrument to promote the world revolution through the struggle for national independence. Grandiose schemes of beating the world imperialism from its supposed “soft points” in the Asia which periodically emerged during the Soviet Union history were already current in 1918 [nineteen eighteen]. On 24th [twenty forth] of January, during the meeting with the Chinese diplomats in Moscow, the Russian orientalist Evgeny D. Polivanov who was Trotsky deputy in NKID rather frankly explained his position. According to the Chinese minutes, Polivanov characterised the European war as a “tragedy” but a tragedy, which could led to the “national liberation”: “From my point of view, – he continued, – even now the mutual hatred between England, Japan and America is evident. Soon the war between them is also possible. In its turn, this war may cause the revolution in Japan and we should use this moment. But as the beginning, it is necessary for us to stimulate an action of India against England and to help India to gain its independence”.<sup>56</sup>

The second main reason of the energetic Eastern policy by the Bolsheviks resided the Soviet positions in the West. Difficulties in promoting the revolutions in the key Western powers stimulated Moscow to channel the revolutionary activity in the East; the latter being in some sense a compensation of the Soviet weakness in Europe. In August 1919 [nineteen nineteen], thinking about the consequences of the Soviet Hungarian Republic defeat and concluding that the Red Army “couldn’t yet had a major weight on the European scales”, Trotsky recommended to the Central Committee of the Party to shift the center of the revolutionary activity in the East: “The road to Paris and London lays through the towns of Afghanistan, Punjab and Bengal... the road to India could be easier and shorter for us at this moment than the road to the Soviet Hungary”.<sup>57</sup>

My concluding paragraphs would deal with the “long perspective” of the Bolshevik perception of international situation in 1918 [nineteen eighteen]. As Professor Vladimir O. Pechatnov from MGIMO-University wrote, “the basis of the Soviet strategic culture was formed during the Revolution and the Civil War”.<sup>58</sup> The lasting effect of these founding years on the

---

<sup>55</sup> Gromyko, Andrej A. et al. (ed.), *Dokumenty vneshnej politiki SSSR* [Documents on the foreign policy of the USSR] (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1959), 599.

<sup>56</sup> Cited in: Krjukov, Vasilij M., ‘K voprosu o “peregovorah NKID s poslannikom Lju Czinzhjenem” (1917–1918 gg.)’ [Discussing the question of “NKID negotiations with the minister Liu Jingren” (1917–1918)], *Obshchestvo i gosudarstvo v Kitae* [Society and State in China], 42/2 (September – December 2012), 64–65.

<sup>57</sup> Adibekov, Grant M. et al. (eds.), *Politburo CK RKP(b)–VKP(b) i Komintern: 1919–1943 gg. Dokumenty* [Political bureau of CC RCP(b)–All-Union CP(b) and Comintern: 1919–1943. Documents] (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004), 30.

<sup>58</sup> Pechatnov, Vladimir O., *Sovetskaja vneshnjaja politika* [Soviet foreign policy], unpublished manuscript (in author’s possession).

following Soviet actions on the international scene in the interwar period and during the Second World War seemed to manifest itself principally in three forms: first, in the conception of the “besieged fortress”, second, in the attitude to so-called “imperialist powers” and, finally, in the understanding of the ways and means to provide the Soviet security.

The growing Stalinist domination in the Soviet foreign policy since the end of 1920s [nineteen twenties] strengthened all these continuities. For Stalin, born in 1878 [eighteen seventy-eight], the years of the Revolution and the Civil War were crucial as a springboard to the “high politics” of the Bolshevik party and the Soviet state.<sup>59</sup> Before 1917 [nineteen seventeen], he organised strikes in the Caucasus, was imprisoned several times and in absentia was included into the Central committee of the Party but his influence before the February Revolution was significantly weaker than after it. The events of the Civil War, especially the defense of Tsaritsyn in June–September 1918 [nineteen eighteen], had an important impact on the formation of Stalin’s entourage; many people who went with him through Tsaritsyn battle (Kliment E. Voroshilov, Semyon M. Budennyj, Jefim A. Shhadenko, etc.) became key members of this “Stalin’s team”, which American historian Sheila Fitzpatrick researched recently<sup>60</sup>.

Synthesis of ideological and pragmatic reasoning marked the Bolshevik perception of the Soviet state as “besieged fortress” in the hostile imperialist environment as during the Revolution and the Civil War when it was born, as well as after these events. The capitalist West which supposed to be inherently hostile to the lone Socialist state was at the same more powerful than the latter. The idea of the vulnerability amplified by the size of the Soviet Union and the extent of its borders made Stalin and its entourage always cautious or even paranoid about possible menaces and dangers as inside, as well as outside the country. It could also serve as an argument in the bureaucratic and political struggle. In January 1925 [nineteen twenty five], beating against the reduction of the Red Army, Trotsky deputy Mikhail V. Frunze, who soon replaced the disgraced People’s Commissar, noticed that the military authorities had to reduce the overall number of troops “only because of the financial considerations. Basically, due to the length of our borders and many possibilities of operational directions we should have the army of 1 [one] million during the peace time”.<sup>61</sup> Remarkably, the figure was close to the Imperial army that numbered in the beginning of the XXth [twentieth] century 1.1 [one point one] million of soldiers and officers.

---

<sup>59</sup> Khlevniuk, Oleg V., *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, transl. by Nora Seligman Favorov (New Haven: Yale UP, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Fitzpatrick, Sh., *On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015).

<sup>61</sup> Anderson, Kirill M., et al. (eds.), *Reforma v Krasnoj Armii. Dokumenty i materialy. 1923–1928 gg.* [Reform of the Red Army. Documents and materials. 1923–1928], vol. 1 (Saint-Petersburg: Letnij sad, 2006), 314–315.

In the mid-1930s [nineteen thirties], Stalin tried to reduce the external danger to the Soviet “fortress” by the means of “collective security” and treaties with the capitalist countries though confidence to the latter remained low. “Internal balancing” by the means of industrialisation and building-up of the Red Army remained the main instruments of reducing the external vulnerability. In April 1935 [ninety thirty five], commenting the ‘Eastern Pact’ idea, Litvinov, while being People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs, wrote to *Politbureau* that “it is not appropriate to place in the pact too much expectations as the real military assistance concerns. As earlier, our security remains exclusively in the hands of the Red Army”.<sup>62</sup>

Even after partial return of the former Imperial territories and acquisition of Bukovina in 1939–1940 [nineteen thirty nine – nineteen forty], during the initial phase of the Second World War in Europe, feeling of the Soviet vulnerability remained acute. During 1941 [nineteen forty one], before the outbreak of the Soviet-German war in June, Stalin was extremely cautious trying not to provoke Adolf Hitler and even using some means of “economic appeasement” which resembled the similar actions of Moscow in 1918 [nineteen eighteen].

While the image of “besieged fortress” was the obverse, an idea of the united anti-Soviet front was the reverse of the same coin. During the interwar period, the Soviet military and political elites often thought that such a “front” could be constructed easily with the British and the French help by the limitrophe powers of the so-called “sanitary cordon”. In the detailed paper under the title “The Future War” prepared by the Intelligence Department of the Red Army Staff in 1928 [ninety twenty eight], three scenarios of the eventual conflict were summarised. First, an attack by the limitrophes supported by the British and French supplies while Germany remained neutral; second, the same attack of limitrophes but assisted by the armed forces of the Western Great Powers; finally, the wide-scale offensive against the Soviet Union by limitrophes in the West, by Britain through Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan, and by the Chinese warlords and Japan in the Far East.<sup>63</sup> Even in October 1943 [ninety forty-three], after the great victories at Stalingrad and Kursk salient, People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav M. Molotov protested against the plans for post-war federations in Central and Eastern Europe and said to his British counterpart, Anthony Eden, that such plans “resembled to the Soviet people the policy of sanitary cordon which was directed, as it is known, against the Soviet Union...”<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Cited in: Narinskii, Mikhail M., ‘Otnosheniya mezhdru SSSR i Frantsiei. 1933–1937 god’ [Relations between USSR and France, 1933–1937], in Andrej Yu. Mel’vil’ et al. (eds.), *SSSR, Frantsiya i evolyutsiya Evropy v 30-e gody* [USSR, France and the evolution of Europe in the 1930s] (Moscow: MGIMO, 2003), 73.

<sup>63</sup> Tuhachevskij, Mikhail N., et al. IV Upravlenie Shtaba RKKA (1928 g.). *Budushhaja vojna* [Future war]. Series: Antologija otechestvennoj voennoj mysli [Anthology of the Russian military thought], vol. 11 (Moscow: VAGSh VS RF, 1996), 56–60.

<sup>64</sup> Gromyko, Andrej A. et al. (eds.), *Sovetskij Sojuz na mezhdunarodnyh konferencijah perioda Velikoj Otechestvennoj vojny, 1941–1945 gg.* [The Soviet Union on the international conferences during the Great Patriotic War, 1941–1945], vol. 1 (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1978), 180.

In the Soviet foreign conception, imperative to use contradictions between the imperialist Powers was attributed to Lenin and thus acquired a status of dogma in course of time, though there wasn't so much specifically Soviet in it. Finally, it was not Lenin who authored "*divide et impera*" principle. In general, the Soviet diplomatic thinking in 1920s [nineteen twenties] and 1930s [nineteen thirties] often oscillated between the two extremes: on the one hand, acknowledgment of the dangers caused by the supposed Imperialist encirclement in which security services were keen on, and, on the other hand, NKID diplomatic attempts to maneuver in order to split the emerging or supposed anti-Soviet coalition. In this sense the "Grand Alliance" of the Second World War was rather unexpected but happy result for Moscow though even more so for London and Washington. In May 1941 [nineteen forty-one], Stalin thought that Rudolf Hess flight to Britain meant that the Anglo-German coalition was ready to appear but, in a month, Kremlin was on the way to the alliance with the Whitehall. Summarising the "style of NKID diplomats' thinking" during the Second World War, Russian historian Georgy P. Kynin and his German colleague Jochen Laufer wrote that it was based on "a firm belief in the existence of antagonistic contradictions between Socialism and Capitalism, and those ones between the capitalist countries themselves".<sup>65</sup>

Combination of real and perceived dangers amplified by the Soviet ideology made the achievement of security one of the chief and the most difficult tasks. The heritage of Civil War marked by the policy of creating Socialist republic along the Soviet borders left a deep imprint. It was felt even in the different context of the post-Second World War period when the Soviet state became much more powerful than in the first year after the Revolution.

To sum up the main ideas of this paper, it could be argued that the Bolshevik perception of the international situation in 1918 [nineteen eighteen] could be placed in three chronological frames. Viewing from the "short" perspective, the ideas of Lenin and his comrades were a specific component of the conceptual transformation at the end of the First World War, which paralleled the real reconfiguration of the European geopolitical and social space itself at this time. Regarding this historical moment from the "long" perspective of the Soviet history, the year of 1918 [nineteen eighteen] left serious impact on the basic ideas and principles of the Soviet foreign policy and diplomacy. Finally, as a suggestion for further research, it could be fruitful to place the Bolsheviks in 1918 [nineteen eighteen] in a deeper historical context, in the *longue durée* of the Russian history. Viewing from different angles, many Soviet strategic reflexes interlocked with traditional traits of the Russian foreign policy. As it was hypothesized

---

<sup>65</sup> Kynin, Georgii P. and Laufer, Jochen, 'Introduction', in Georgii P. Kynin, Jochen Laufer (eds.), *SSSR i germanskii vopros: Dokumenty iz Arkhiva vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [USSR and the German question: Documents from the Archive of foreign policy of the Russian Federation], vol. 1 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1996), 25.

in recent research on the Stalin's diplomatic correspondence during the Second World War, his "phenomenal ability to suspect" his Allies was related not only to the Bolshevik ideology of class struggle but also to "traditional Russian complex in regard to "perfidious West""<sup>66</sup>. In some sense, this heritage remains with us even nowadays. Thank you for your attention.

October 2018

---

<sup>66</sup> Pechatnov, Vladimir O. and Magadeev, Iskander E., *Perepiska I.V. Stalina s F. Ruzvel'tom i U. Cherkhillem v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Dokumental'noe issledovanie* [Correspondence between I.V. Stalin, F. Roosevelt and W. Churchill during the Great Patriotic War. Documental research], vol. 1 (Moscow: Olma Media grupp, 2015), 19.