

Very good

Book Review #3

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Fischer, Louis. The Soviets in World Affairs. London:  
Jonathan Cape, 1930. 2 vols.

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Louis Fischer, in this invaluable study of Soviet diplomacy through 1930, concludes that the foreign policy of Soviet Russia is "largely a function of Soviet internal conditions and of Bolshevik principles." (p. 10) In practice, these two determinants often collide yet at other times reinforce each other, i.e. Bolshevik revolutionary propaganda directed at the workers of the capitalist world frequently complicated the carrying-on of normal diplomatic relations that supported the domestic needs of the Soviet regime. The example of Soviet foreign policy as a function of internal conditions could be seen in the need to undertake the Brest-Litovsk negotiations and in the attempts to end foreign intervention because peace was needed to enable the Bolsheviks to consolidate their rule. The desire to win official diplomatic recognition was later undertaken due to the necessity of purchasing industrial equipment abroad to aid the reconstruction of the Soviet economy. Lastly, the "War Scare" in 1927 was used against Trotskii<sup>v. p. 3.</sup> and the "left opposition" at home. The impact of the Bolshevik principles of propaganda and revolution--principles which usually worked at cross-purposes to traditional diplomacy--on Soviet foreign policy could be seen in a number of examples: Soviet support and sponsorship of

the Communist International (Comintern), Soviet aid sent to British workers during the ~~General Strike~~ and miners' strike in 1926, and Mikhail Borodin's activities in China in the 1920s.

The exceptional importance of this work lies in Fischer's personal friendships with Georgii Chicherin, Maksim Litvinov, Christian Rakovskii, Leo Karakhan, et al. and the numerous discussions that he had with them concerning Soviet Russia. Fischer notes that all or parts of the manuscript were read by, among others, Chicherin, Borodin, Theodore Rothstein, Dr. Herbert von Dirksen, and H. Bruce Lockhart. Furthermore, the author had exclusive, and still unequalled, access to Soviet diplomatic archival material, including the captured archives of Admiral Kolchak's Siberian regime, and ~~to~~ Litvinov's and other Soviet diplomats' personal archives.

The Soviets in World Affairs is a sweeping work written in a grand, journalistic, captivating style that succeeds in placing Soviet activities in the larger context of international diplomacy in the 1920s. Though the reader might suspect Fischer of sympathetic attitudes towards the Soviet regime, an allegation repeatedly denied by the author, he remains fair and impartial in judging both the failures and successes of the Soviets in the world arena. For example, Fischer perceptively observed in 1930, when the book was published, "a mounting indifference [of the Soviet regime under Stalin] in foreign affairs and for revolutionary possibilities," (p. 822) as Stalin was increasingly preoccupied with domestic concerns with the accompanying negative

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implications for future Soviet relations. His conclusion as to the possibilities of future international Soviet successes was also realistic at the time. Fischer noted that their immediate prospects were extremely limited largely because "Moscow disposes very few means of putting pressure on foreign countries." (p. 831) Because of a number of inherent weaknesses, the Soviets relied, and would continue to do so, on a policy of "support the feeble," as ~~the author quotes~~ Chicherin <sup>said</sup> (p. 827), and indeed, it was in relations with Weimar Germany, Turkey, Afghanistan, Persia, and even China that the Soviets were most successful.

Though Fischer's work provides an unparalleled insight into the motives and actions of Soviet diplomats in the 1920s, the account, unfortunately, suffers from some important drawbacks when read over half a century later. First, since Fischer was not aware of the eventual outcomes of many events taking place in the late 1920s, his description of them is at times sketchy and inconclusive. Second, many of the events that Fischer dealt with in the book were common knowledge to the reader of 1930, e.g. Locarno, ~~and thus required little elaboration~~ but the reader in 1986 could use a more extended treatment of many of these events. Third, there is a conspicuous lack of treatment of Comintern policy in the book. Fourth, although the author maintains in his Introduction the importance of Soviet internal conditions as a partial determinant of foreign policy, there is relatively little treatment of the Trotsky-Stalin rivalry and its effects on

foreign policy, with the exception of China, or of other Soviet domestic affairs. The author can be excused, however, on the grounds that the book already numbered over eight hundred pages, but it clearly reveals that the student of Soviet foreign policy is still lacking a comprehensive, detailed, readable treatment of the first decade. Fischer remains the most important work towards this end.

At times Fischer approaches the realm of clear-sighted prophesy in his treatment of Soviet diplomacy, which only serves to reinforce the need to study the formative years of Soviet foreign policy. Reading the following statement fifty-six years later shows the bridgeability of the time span: "To be sure, the Communist theorist foresees a day when capitalist America and Communist Russia will stand opposed to one another--the great giants of a coming generation. But that eventuality is distant, and politics in 1930 is not made with 1980 in mind." (p. 762) Might one ask: Is 1930, in turn, studied with 1980 in mind? Speaking of prevailing European attitudes at the time, Fischer wrote:

Europe generally admits that a new world war would bring revolution to Eastern Europe and as far, at least, as Vienna. Europe suspects that in the event of war, workers at home will oppose their capitalist governments and seek to convert international into civil war as the Bolsheviki did in 1917.

Fischer and Europe were wrong on the methods, not foreseeing Stalin's future innovations in Soviet diplomatic tactics, but were accurate in their appraisal of the results. Finally, Fischer comments on the Soviet attitude towards disarmament in

the 1920s--an attitude that is equally applicable today. The Bolsheviks intuitively, and realistically, distrusted Western talk of disarming. Furthermore, the Soviets resented Western rejection of their proposals for complete, general disarmament as worthless, oversimplistic, insincere, pure Soviet propaganda. The challenge had been given by Moscow: "If they think we are 'bluffing'...why not test the 'bluff' by trying a little bit of disarmament." (p. 758)

It was Lenin, who by his domination of Soviet foreign relations from 1917<sup>to</sup>/<sub>1</sub>1922, established clear guidelines for Soviet diplomacy based on Bolshevik conceptions of the imperialist world. There are a number of characteristic features, but "the strategy of defense was perhaps the most marked" (p. 462) one--a policy to divide and weaken any potential united front against Soviet Russia by "exploiting the contradictions between capitalist governments and within capitalist countries." (p. 461) Lenin was also willing to compromise if absolutely necessary, e.g. Brest-Litovsk, but could be equally adamant when the situation required<sup>it</sup> and permitted<sup>it</sup>, e.g. after the assassination of the German Ambassador Mirbach. These two tactics were evident in Soviet approaches to the Entente when economic advantages were dangled in front of Western eyes. The Soviets made moderate proposals that revealed a willingness to compromise on difficult financial matters, e.g. their proposals to William Bullitt in 1919, but also insisted that their offers were only acceptable for a limited time--another feature of Leninist policy. These offers served

as an effort to exploit disagreement both within allied countries and between governments over the correct business policy to be followed in dealing with Soviet Russia. Lenin also attached little importance to territorial losses and gains or national prestige. Finally, a cornerstone of Leninist foreign policy was friendship for the countries of Asia, which took both economic and political forms, in order to group around Moscow the awakening peoples of the East in a joint struggle against imperialism.

Probably the most interesting chapters in the book deal with the years before the Treaty of Riga (1921) which formally ended the Soviet-Polish war and signalled the end of civil war and foreign intervention. Fischer does a truly outstanding job in describing the gripping events of those years and the behind-the-scenes intrigues carried on by oil magnates. Another fascinating chapter deals with Borodin's work in organizing, inspiring, and directing the Chinese revolution.

Fischer's book remains an important and lasting contribution to the study of Soviet foreign policy. He has written extensively on international relations, and two of his works received prizes: The Life of Lenin (1964) and The Life of Mahatma Gandhi (1950). Fischer was correspondent for the Nation in the Soviet Union from 1923<sup>to 19</sup>36 and later in Spain and India. He remained a respected authority on the Soviet Union until his death in 1970.