

Soviet Policy in the Early Phase of the Occupation

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Soviet “Expansionism”

The difficulty of placing Soviet policy toward Japan in the early phase of the occupation in historical perspective stems, I believe, from the pitfalls inherent in writing any history of international relations. In creating such a chronicle, we usually focus on the actions of only one side, attempting to uncover the logic of a nation's behavior from its actions. The tendency to cast the conduct of the country in question in terms of aggression or expansionism is a natural consequence of this approach.

Analyses of Soviet diplomatic behavior during the early Occupation period that focus on the U.S.S.R. alone all too easily come to the simplistic conclusion that it is a classic case of “expansionist” foreign policy. The argument goes something like this: On August 9, 1945, Stalin broke the neutrality pact between Japan and the U.S.S.R., entering the war only days before its end. On August 12, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov demanded that the United States accept a joint occupation under the dual command of Marshal Vasilevsky and General MacArthur. (The Americans refused to comply.) On 16 August, Stalin demanded that

the Kurile Islands and the northern half of Hokkaido be included among the areas that were to surrender directly to the supreme commander of the Soviet forces. (Although President Truman agreed on August 17 to let the U.S.S.R. have the Kuriles, the Soviets were not allowed to take surrender of Hokkaido's northern half.) In the latter part of September, after finally assenting to the Far Eastern Advisory Committee-centered consultative regime proposed by the United States, the Soviet Union changed its mind and began to call for the establishment of a control regime in a move to apply the German model to Japanese occupation policy. The problem of Allied troop dispatchment is also viewed as fitting the pattern. The Soviet Union wanted to send troops to Japan to conduct a separate-zone occupation such as that carried out in Germany, but was not willing to place its own expeditionary force under the command of General MacArthur.

However these acts may be interpreted, historians tend to see them as evidence of an aggressive policy toward Japan. They even try to prove the existence of a Far Eastern arm of Soviet expansionist policy by pointing out, in addition, that in the end the U.S.S. R. did take possession of the Kurile Islands. They then proceed to place the early phase of the occupation of Japan, seen as an arena of the interplay of forces in the Cold War, in the rigid old framework of Soviet expansionism vs. American status quo-ism, the forces of aggression vs. the forces for peace.

It hardly needs noting that the recent trend in interpretations of the occupation of Japan are affected by developments in the second Cold War sparked by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which has

fostered a mood of Soviet-phobia. What I wish to do here is to examine whether it is viable to treat the history of Soviet policy toward Japan in the early phase of the occupation simply within the paradigm of Soviet expansionism. It is possible, I believe, that the image we have of Soviet foreign policy at that time may be the unhappy result of a one-sided approach to the history of international relations in which Soviet behavior is taken out of context and in which the United States is referred to only in terms of what Washington did in response.

Understanding Soviet Diplomacy

To grasp the logic of a country's behavior, one must view its actions not from the standpoint of their cause, but in terms of results. Essentially, what I am suggesting is that a country's behavior must be understood in the context of the dynamic interplay of international relations. When viewed in this manner, we shall see that the true logic of Soviet diplomacy in the immediate postwar period is far more complicated than the simplistic image outlined above.

In considering Soviet foreign policy in the early occupation period, we should first note several characteristics peculiar to postwar Soviet foreign policy that had already manifested themselves. This was, first of all, the time when the Soviet Union first began to conduct itself consciously as a superpower or polar power in foreign affairs. Any great power that has built up its strength relative to other countries strives to use that strength to expand its influence among surrounding states. Immediately after the end of

hostilities, that general tendency is given further impetus by internal forces intent on securing a share of the spoils of war. The Soviet Union, having joined the great powers during World War II, labored under the “original sin” of great power diplomacy from the outset in its postwar foreign policy.

Secondly, Soviet superpower diplomacy in most cases had more in common with European-style closed-door, sphere-of-influence diplomacy than with American’s open-door imperialist diplomacy, no doubt resulting from the traditional Soviet complex regarding national security. Nevertheless, Stalin’s postwar diplomacy shows an interesting duality. On one hand, it shared something with Chrchill’s imperialist scheme for the break-up of power in the Balkans. Through his efforts to fragment power in Eastern Europe (including the Balkan states) and to secure international recognition of Soviet preponderance in Poland, Bulgaria, and Rumania, he managed to put Soviet anxieties about its security to rest.

On the other hand, however, Soviet policy was compatible with Roosevelt’s global policy of securing control by Allied powers of strategic bases throughout the world to prevent the resurgence of militarism in Germany and Japan. The location of the Kurile Islands in this connection should not be overlooked. The secret provision of the Yalta agreement of February 11, 1945, which ceded the Kurile Islands to the U.S.S.R., is often seen as indicating that Franklin D. Roosevelt knew nothing of the historical circumstances or strategic significance of ceding the Kurile Islands when he “thoughtlessly” consented to grant Stalin’s demand. Sometimes added to this is the plausible explanation that Roosevelt, who died only a month later,

was already suffering from impaired judgment.

Actually, however, the United States had already discussed and repeatedly confirmed its agreement to turn the Kurile Islands over to the U.S.S.R. at the meetings held in Yalta on February 4, 8, and 10. Moreover, in October 1943--prior to the Cairo and Teheran conferences and a year and a half before the Yalta conference --Roosevelt himself had stated that the Kurile Islands ought to be turned over to the Soviet Union. I would also stress the fact that the Kurile Islands had a dual significance for both the United States and the U.S.S.R. They were important firstly as strategic bases that the Allies felt they had to be in control of in order to prevent Germany and Japan from turning once again to militarism following the end of the war. Other such strategic bases included Dakar and Bizerte in Africa and the Ryukyus, Ogasawaras (Bonin Islands), and Guam in East Asia. Secondly, and this is more widely known, the Kuriles were prime examples of the booty of war--the lever used to secure Soviet participation in the war against Japan.

In any case, we must bear in mind that the Soviet Union at the time of the Yalta conference was considered by the United States a comrade who would support the postwar world order as Roosevelt and his advisers envisioned it and a nation that could be expected to cooperate in translating that vision into reality. The Kurile Islands were regarded as among the keys in sustaining that amicable relationship. This is why the United States (or, more specifically, the U.S. military) included in its scheme for the postwar world order a plan to set up a military base on one of the Kurile Islands, even as it decided to hand over the island chain to the Russians. The plan to

build a U.S. military base in the Kurile Islands appears in SWNCC (State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee) documents and was discussed as early as May 1945. On August 16, 1945, Stalin demanded the revision of Truman's General Order No. 1, dated August 15, to include the Kurile Islands among the territories that were to surrender to the supreme commander of the Soviet Far East forces in accordance with the Yalta agreement. Truman, in an August 17 reply to Stalin agreeing to the revision, asked in return for the right to establish an air base for military and civilian use somewhere in the Kuriles, preferably in the central area. He did this out of recognition of the key role the Kurile Islands played in the security scheme of the postwar world order. The exchange between Stalin and Truman came to a temporary settlement with the United States obtaining from the Soviet Union the right to maintain an air base in the Kuriles in return for its promise to actively support the permanent Soviet occupation of the entire Kurile chain. For both superpowers, the Kurile Islands were strategic footholds in the postwar effort to counter the expansionist threat of former enemies Germany and Japan. In this sense, the islands, destined to be ceded to the Soviet Union, were a key link in the alliance that supported U. S.-Soviet coexistence.

The third notable aspect of postwar Soviet diplomatic style was also observable, albeit to a greater extent, in the more recent Andropov and Brezhnev regimes. This is the way in which the decision-making machinery of Soviet diplomacy embraces two foreign policy lines that are in a subtle sense potentially antagonistic. This unobtrusive duality in Soviet diplomacy can be seen in the

differences between the responses of Stalin and Molotov to U.S. Secretary of State James Byrne's "A-bomb diplomacy."

The same duality in Soviet leadership manifests itself in the tortuous diplomatic exchange regarding the system under which Japan would be administered that transpired between the United States and the U.S.S.R. On October 24 and 25, 1945, Averell Harriman, the American ambassador to the Soviet Union, conducted two days of intensive talks centering on the Japan issue with Stalin at the latter's villa at Gagri. At these talks, Stalin expressed the following ideas with regard to policy toward Japan. First, the system of administration should follow the Balkan pattern, not the German pattern. In other words, the United States should take charge of the occupation single-handedly instead of having all the Allied powers send troops to Japan for a joint occupation. Second, he thought that some kind of control mechanism ought to be set up to consider basic issues in government such as revision of the constitution and the type of political system to be adopted. In the establishment of such an apparatus, he thought, the ultimate authority should be vested in MacArthur, in the same way that ultimate authority in the councils of Rumania and Bulgaria was vested in the Soviet commander. It would be best from the standpoint of MacArthur's maintaining the ultimate authority if the other Allied powers did not send any troops to Japan.

Having conferred with Stalin, Harriman began, with the approval of Washington, to draft the "authority clause embodying the concrete terms that would provide for a system of administration in Japan. But at this stage Molotov made a demand that superseded

the agreement reached between Harriman and Stalin. He tried to attach a proviso to the granting of supreme authority to MacArthur. His aim was probably to invoke the principle of unanimous agreement among the four major Allied powers--i.e., the principle of veto rights. This is in fact how Secretary of State Byrnes interpreted it at the time. The difference between this diplomatic action on the part of Molotov and Stalin's proposal made in Gargri can be understood as a manifestation of the friction generated by the delicate coexistence in the Kremlin of conciliatory and confrontational lines in policy toward Japan.

But one wonders why Stalin, Molotov, and other Soviet decision-makers settled on the curious policy that the Soviet Union should not send troops to Japan, but leave the whole occupation up to the United States. This policy is "curious," however, only if one adheres to the logic that Soviet postwar foreign policy was premised on expansionism or great power diplomacy.

Because of the assumption of Soviet expansionism, the explanation given for the U.S.S.R.'s decision not to send troops and take part in the occupation is bound to be a curious one. William Sebald, head of the Diplomatic Section of SCAP, 1947-52, fell into that trap. He came to the conclusion, without sufficiently substantiating it in historical facts, that the Soviets demurred because MacArthur assigned them a heavily-bombed portion of central Honshu surrounded on both sides by American forces. Catherine R. Edwards, unfortunately, supports this argument by citing portion of Sebald's memoirs, *With MacArthur in Japan*, (?). Theodore Cohen's *Remaking Japan: The American Occupation*

As New Deal (Herbert Passin ed., 1987) takes the same approach on this point.

Change in Soviet Policy

This question, moreover, leads to others. Why, although it approved the idea for a Far Eastern Advisory Commission (FEAC) proposed by the United States, did the Soviet Union turn around in early September and oppose the U.S. draft for establishing the FEAC, and continue thereafter to raise objections to the American design for the machinery of the Japanese occupation? What had happened to amiable relations between the United States and the Soviet Union in September and October of 1945? What brought about the change in the Soviet Union's policy toward Japan?

The first clue to the answers to these questions lies in that was happening in Japan at the time. Conservatism and reactionarism were on the rise that autumn. On August 15, 1945, Japan, having agreed to the terms of the Potsdam Declaration, unconditionally surrendered to the Allied powers, promising to set up "in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people...a peacefully inclined and responsible government". The Allied--i.e., American--occupation policy, as set forth in SWNCC-150, called for the utilization of the existing Japanese administrative machinery in carrying out the occupation of the country. As a natural consequence of this indirect administration, it was the old ruling class, minus the military, that formed the core of the postwar political world. Higasikuni Naruhiko, Japan's first postwar prime minister,

was of imperial blood, his successor, Shidehara Kijuro, was a baron, and Yoshida Shigeru, substantial coauthor of the memorial Prince Konoe Fumimaro presented to the Emperor in February 1945 expressing fear of the threat of “communization of Japan and Soviet expansion in Japan, had been a member of the prewar oligarchy.

As the old guard recovered its strength in the fall and winter of 1945, it began to fan anticommunist feeling and encourage U.S.-Soviet confrontation. Using the Soviet “threat as a rallying call, it forged an alliance with the GII-centered anti-Soviet faction of SCAP in an attempt to seize the political initiative camp coincided with the rise of what might be called the “conditional surrender faction” in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government offices. Together, they set out to revise the constitution in accordance with the ideas and under the guidance of the old liners. This would assure the continuance, virtually without change, of the system as it had functioned under the Meiji Constitution, pivoting as before on the notion of the divinity of the emperor.

Konoe was commissioned by the Emperor to draft a revised constitution, and he began to work in collaboration with Professor Sasaki Soichi after visiting MacArthur on October 4. Around the same time, Prime Minister Shidehara ordered a separate effort to revise the costitution under the leadership of Matsumoto Joji, a Minister of State. But, as George Atcheson, head of the Office of Political Advisors of SCAP, wired Byrnes in Washington on October 24, the work of constitutional revision was intended only to preserve the power of the old guard by keeping the Emperor-centered Meiji constitution virtually intact.

Watching these developments unfold, the Soviet Union, and the American occupation authorities as well, naturally became very ill at ease. For the Soviets, the ascendancy of anti-Soviet elements combined with the continuation of the Meiji constitutional system could only be viewed as a burgeoning threat potentially dangerous to Soviet security. Stalin expressed his apprehension on this account more than once. *Pravda* also carried repeated warnings about the Japanese situation. For Soviet diplomats, the form of the postwar Japanese political system and the issues of constitutional revision and democratization were matters of the greatest concern.

The Soviet anxiety that the resurgence of the old guard in Japan was tantamount to a threat to its national security is understandable considering the history of imperial Japanese aggression against czarist Russia and later the U.S.S.R. The same fear for national security, albeit of a more intense degree, set the foundations of the Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe early in the postwar period. It was first manifested in the Soviet support of the Lublin administration in Poland, and later in the attempt to back pro-Soviet administrations in Bulgaria and Rumania.

At the time, the Soviet Union had two security-related demands, fulfillment of which is considered crucial to a U.S.-Soviet alliance. First, Moscow wanted to seize the initiative in Rumania and Bulgaria. Japan would leave to the Americans. Second, it demanded that the other Allied nations tolerate Soviet intervention in Japan to the extent that England, the United States, and the others were allowed to intervene in Rumania and Bulgaria. The Soviet intervention in Japan should not consist of the sending of an

occupation force or any other military involvement, but of making a final check on more fundamental problems such as the nature of the Japanese political system.

For these reasons, Stalin, in expressing Soviet views concerning Japan at his villa in Gagri, gave almost the same amount of time to the issue of political organization in Rumania and Bulgaria as to the "Japan problem," attempting to secure, through Harriman, American understanding of Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe. While insisting that the Soviet Union be given a part in the control machinery of the Japanese occupation, Stalin repeatedly impressed upon Harriman the conviction that Japan ought to be left to MacArthur and the United States. Harriman, in full understanding of Stalin's assertions, advised Byrnes and Truman on several occasions that the creation of a system of U.S.-Soviet coexistence in East Asia was an essential condition for peace and security in the postwar world.

Regrettably, however, for Harriman and the faction that, like him, favored a conciliatory attitude toward the Soviets, American policy toward the U.S.S.R. was inherently inclined in the opposite direction and showed every sign of becoming more so. The rise of the pro-confrontation faction had at this time left an indelible mark on American policy-making circles. This did not come to pass simply because Truman and his advisers were more strongly anticommunist and anti-Soviet than Roosevelt and his administration before them. Rather, the problem was that anticommunist "hawks" within the Republican party, Dulles and Vandenberg included, and Democratic hawks such as Tom Connally, played,

under the guise of bipartisan diplomacy, a role in the Truman administration foreign policy decision-making that cannot be ignored.

Dulles in the San Francisco and London conferences in 1945, and Vandenberg and Connally in the Moscow and Paris conferences from 1945 to 1946, respectively, attempted to check the implementation of Byrnes' appeasement policy, favoring, instead, one of non-appeasement. Their basic objective in these efforts, which gives some indication of the magnitude of their role, was the revision of the Yalta agreement itself. In effect, these Americans tried to invalidate the series of Yalta decisions governing territory from Poland to the Far East, from the Oder-Neisse line to the Kurile Islands. At the very least they were bent on modifying those decisions so that the terms would be more advantageous to the United States.

Interestingly, these moves on the part of Dulles, Vandenberg, and others overlapped with the postwar American Soviet policy of Byrnes, Stimson, Harriman, and other advisors within the Truman administration who were relatively sympathetic with the conciliatory line. In fact, the latter group wanted to make the atomic bomb, acquired through the success of their country's nuclear development program, the principal weapon of postwar diplomacy and tried to obtain through that means the desired Soviet commitment to the "open-door policy", thereby extending the "American world order" from Eastern Europe to the Middle and Near East, Manchuria, and even to the Soviet Union itself. We can find symbolic examples of these efforts in their long-championed dream of an internationalized Danube, the idea of breaking up the Soviet Union into 15 republics,

and the movement calling on the Soviet Union to implement the open-door policy in Manchuria.

In any case, this series of anti-Soviet diplomatic offensives on the part of the United States exacerbated the Soviet Union's security complex and made it all the more stubbornly determined to see that the global order envisioned at Yalta and the agreements made there be brought to reality. For the Soviets, Yalta did not stand only for conditions for continuing the U.S.-Soviet alliance; it had also functioned to relieve their anxieties regarding security. Gaining possession of the Kurile Islands and preventing the ultra-nationalistic constitutional system from emerging in Japan had increasingly taken on meaning for the Soviet Union as conditions for peace in the Far East.

In other words, the Soviet occupation of the Kurile Islands and the satisfactory revision of Japanese constitution were already destined at the beginning of the postwar period to function as conditions for coexistence in the Far East. In the four decades since the end of the war, movements for revision of the constitution and return of the Kurile Islands to Japan have repeatedly appeared, hand in hand with revivals of the theory of the Soviet threat. The fact that these movements are central to the attempt to construct an alternative history of the postwar period more than anything else attests to the validity of the foregoing analysis.