Marxist ideology predicted a worldwide revolution of the working class and eventually a utopian (ideal) society that would operate without the administrative function of the state system ("the withering away of the state"). When the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1917, they had to deal with the issue of communism's introduction into only one country. As a result, the USSR had to recognize the international state system and make an effort to take its place within the system. Soviet foreign policy was based on two tenets. One of these was the belief that the communist revolution would spread to the rest of the world as fellow proletarians renounced their nation in favor of the class with which they shared the struggle against the bourgeoisie. The second tenet underpinning Soviet foreign policy was that capitalist nations were determined to destroy the new socialist state and its borders and internal security must be defended vigorously.

The realization that worldwide revolution was not imminent led Lenin to take a practical approach in foreign affairs after 1917. Peace had to be secured to consolidate the gains of the revolution. Powerful German troops still faced a Russian army that was ill-equipped, ill-fed, and unwilling to fight any longer. Hence, on March 3, 1918, Lenin accepted the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, after humiliating and economically devastating agreement. The decision to sign the treaty was rationalized as securing the political survival of the state, so that it would eventually be able to promote revolution abroad. This treaty would be overturned by the Treaty of Versailles, even though Russia was not present at the negotiations.

After the war, the new Soviet government was preoccupied with eliminating the resistance of royalist forces and foreign intervention in order to consolidate its power. But, in March 1919, Lenin established the Communist International (Comintern) to further the Soviet goal of world revolution. Through a network of foreign Communist parties, Lenin hoped to counteract allied intervention in the USSR's civil war and strengthen the Soviet state. Revolutionary propaganda, labour strife, protest movements, and some version would be the tactics used against the capitalist world. By 1920, the Comintern structure identified Moscow as the leader in a worldwide system of Communist parties. A characteristic feature of Soviet foreign policy was its acceptance of Communist doctrine, and its attempts to conform to Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Diplomacy

George Chicherin became commissar of foreign affairs in 1918 and held that position until 1930. His responsibility was to establish diplomatic relations between the USSR and other major powers -- at the same time stabilizing its position in the world power structure. The first step in securing the Soviet state on the international level came in April 1922, when the Soviet and German foreign ministers, signed the Treaty of Rapallo. The treaty provided for diplomatic relations and economic cooperation between the two states. Germany was thus the first major country to officially recognize the new Soviet state. The Treaty of Rapallo provided for the mutual repudiation of war costs and damages, expansion of trade between the two countries, and above all, a German promise of economic assistance to the Soviet Union. In return, the USSR would allow Germany to conduct military manoeuvres on Soviet soil. This involved the testing of military equipment and training of troops, and was therefore in violation of the Treaty of Versailles.

The significance of the relationship between Germany and the Soviet Union at the international level must not be ignored. It ended the isolation endured by both states and undermined the French attempt to ensure Germany's complete adherence to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Great Britain accorded the Soviet Union full diplomatic recognition in January 1924, but a red scare in the fall of the same year, and the subsequent election of a conservative British government, ended relations until 1930. China recognized the USSR in May 1924 and made far-reaching concessions in Manchuria and Outer Mongolia. However, the death of Sun
Yat-sen and the succession of Chiang Kai-shek shifted China’s foreign overtures to the Western powers, and Stalin finally broke off relations in 1927. A Sino-Soviet tie became possible after the Japanese expansion in Manchuria in 1931, as both China and the Soviet Union braced themselves against the threat of Japan.

Despite Trotsky’s warnings of the dangers of fascism, Stalin continued his relationship with Germany. The Treaty of Rapallo was renewed in 1931. Stalin identified German Social Democrats as enemies of communism, and he actually supported Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 by encouraging the German Communist Party to side with Hitler. At the end of 1933, however, Hitler ended military cooperation with the Soviet Union. He also acted to create a single party state. The German Communist Party fell in the process, which gave Stalin some forewarning of the future.

Concerned about this change in the relationship, Stalin began to look to the west for potential allies, particularly France. He especially wanted to prevent any collusion between France and Germany that would allow Germany to expand its eastern territories. On September 18, 1934 the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations, after France pressed for its inclusion. On May 2, 1935 France and the USSR signed a Treaty of mutual assistance.

A similar treaty was signed between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia two weeks later. Stalin was attempting to secure his position. The Treaty pledged him to assist Czechoslovakia only if France first took action in fulfillment of its obligations to Czechoslovakia.

Throughout the 1930s, suspicion regarding Stalin’s motives prevented the Western powers from cooperating fully with the Soviet Union. Although they were concerned with Hitler’s rise to power, they continued to fear communism. The United States recognized the Soviet Union after Franklin Roosevelt came to power in 1933; but the Western powers’ general attitude toward the Soviet Union remained one of suspicion and mistrust. This vacillation finally drove Stalin to reopen ties with Germany. After Britain’s guarantee to Poland in March 1939, and aware of Poland’s anti-Soviet attitude, Stalin began talks with Germany. On August 23, 1939 the talks were formalized in the Nazi Soviet Non–Aggression Pact. This agreement pledged that each nation would remain neutral in the event of war. A secret protocol provided for the partition of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union. This would allow the Soviet Union a buffer zone if Hitler attacked Poland. It would also allow the Soviet Union to reclaim the neighbouring Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Both Hitler and Stalin were acting out of expediency. For Stalin, this agreement offered some assurance of security on the Soviet Union’s western border and allowed him to strengthen his beleaguered armed forces and prepare for war.

In April 1941, the Soviet Japanese neutrality pact was signed. Japan had begun its war in Asia by occupying parts of China. It had, however, been deterred from expanding into the Soviet Union as the red Army was able to maintain the Manchurian and Mongolian borders. Stalin encouraged the Japanese to look southward rather than to the Soviet Union for the fulfillment of their imperialist ambitions.

The Nazi Soviet Alliance gave Stalin a false sense of security. He ignored warnings of a German attack from Churchill as well as his own intelligence sources. It was not until Germans had been on Soviet soil for eight hours that Stalin finally had knowledge that gravity of the situation. Some 3.2 million German troops poured into the Soviet Union on a 1600 km front. Although the Soviets had seven times as many tanks and four times as many aircraft as the Germans, they had lost most of their skilled officers in the purges of the 1930s. Only 7% of red Army officers had advanced military training. The Germans relied on the superior training of their forces, plus the shock effect of a surprise attack. “Operation Barbarossa” - launched by the Germans against the USSR on June 22 - 1941 at last for Stalin to look to the west. The “Grand Alliance” between the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States would soon be forged in an attempt to defeat Hitler.


1. What was the basis of the new Soviet government’s foreign-policy?

2. What was the purpose of the Comintern?

3. What were the terms and the significance of the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922?

4. Explain the foreign-policy negotiations of the 1930s that culminated in the Nazi Soviet pact of August 23, 1939.

5. What were the advantages to Germany and to the Soviet Union of the Nazi Soviet pact?

6. Why was the Soviet Japanese neutrality pact signed in 1941? Explain what each country hoped to gain.