

RUSSIA AND THE GREAT WAR, 1914-1917

By Dr. OSKAR P. TRAUTMANN

The generation which still remembers the Great War frequently looks back and compares or contrasts the events of then and today. Future historians, we may be certain, will devote much time and energy toward the investigation of the similarities and differences between the Great War and present events.

The following story of Russia and the Great War is of particular interest as it was written shortly before the outbreak of the German-Soviet war. The author intended it to be a historical study and not a parallel to the present war. All the more interesting are the thoughts provoked by it when we read it now. Even the Russian names for the war of 1914 and 1941 are identical—"The Second War for the Fatherland." (The first was that of 1812 against Napoleon, the second in Tsarist terminology was the one of 1914. That war, however, is denounced by the Bolsheviks as an "Imperialist" war, and hence according to their reckoning the present war is the second one.) The present problems of Poland, of the Balkans, of Turkey and the Straits, of Russia's relations with Great Britain—they all loom closer when we remember their role in the last war.

The author is particularly well-equipped to write on international affairs as he has them at his finger-tips, being himself an eminent diplomat with almost forty years to his credit in the German diplomatic service. His first foreign post was the capital of the Tsars, St. Petersburg, and all through his career, be it in the Foreign Office in Berlin or in diplomatic positions abroad, he has preserved his enthusiastic interest in Russian problems and his knowledge of the Russian language. Last year, Dr. Trautmann published a book on the history of Russian foreign policy, for which, due to his position, he was able to use many official and private sources. The title of the Book is "The Singers' Bridge" after the colloquial name for the Tsarist Foreign Ministry located at the so-called Singers' Bridge in St. Petersburg.

Since 1921 Dr. Trautmann has been intimately connected with events in the Far East, first in Japan, and since 1931 as Minister and later as Ambassador to China. In the winter of 1937/1938 his prominent role in the discussion for a peaceful settlement of the Sino-Japanese conflict created much attention.—K.M.

CHANCE AND NECESSITY

A well-known surgeon, when lecturing on injuries to the arteries of the neck, used to tell his pupils that the World War might have been avoided if there had been a surgeon in the retinue of the assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Serajevo who had known how to stop a carotid haemorrhage by quick action. This anecdote shows the entire absurdity of placing importance on mere chance in history.

Ortega y Gasset has made some excellent observations about chance and history. He considers it impossible to foresee whether lightning will strike a tree with its fiery sword, "but we know that cherry-trees will never produce poplar-leaves." It is indeed an accident that a man of Caesar's peculiar mentality should have lived in the first century before Christ. A Roman of the second century B.C. could not have foreseen the individual destiny represented by Caesar's life; but he could

well have prophesied the dawn of a Caesarian era in the first century. Cato predicted quite accurately what was about to happen at that time.

According to Ortega we have grasped a situation historically if we have seen it arise of necessity from a previous one. This conception of necessity can be given not only a psychological but also an astrological-fatalistic meaning. Spengler quotes Napoleon's words: "I feel myself driven toward a goal that I do not know."

The historian is a "reversed prophet," and Spengler has predicted that the World War was only the preparation for a new Caesarian era for mankind. The accidents leading to its outbreak have no special significance; nevertheless the entire course of events has something psychologically inexorable. In this sense the words of the President of the Imperial Duma (the Russian Parliament), Rodsianko, are particularly characteristic. At the beginning of the war he addressed the historic meeting of the Duma on August 8, 1914, as follows: "We all know very well that Russia did not want a war, that designs of conquest are foreign to the Russian people, *but Fate itself has chosen to involve us in war.*"

SAZONOV

The man who held the tiller of Russian foreign policy when the Empire of the Tsars entered upon its greatest catastrophe, the World War, was Foreign Minister Sazonov. He impressed foreign diplomats with whom he came in contact as a sober, deliberate man, who, without wishing to shine by his wit, knew exactly what he wanted. On the other hand we know that he was a sickly, excitable man, filled with a burning Russian patriotism which almost bordered on fanaticism. He is credited with intellect—he had the face of a fox—but at the same time it is emphasized that he lacked judgment, admittedly a desirable attribute in a Foreign Minister. His career allowed him to develop in the seclusion of rather

insignificant positions. It is possible that he was only made Vice-Minister and later Foreign Minister because he was a brother-in-law of the Russian Premier Stolypin. He lacked knowledge of the Balkans and the Near East—the main issues of Russian foreign policy.

Probably he was excellent as Vice-Minister, just the man to deal with foreign diplomats: "Tel brille au second plan, qui s'éclipse au premier." But he did not possess the strength and the spiritual independence which the helmsman of a great empire should have had in such fateful times. Soon foreign policy under him was no longer determined in his Ministry, but by his Ambassadors and Ministers, Hartwig in Belgrade, Tcharykov in Constantinople, and Isvolsky in Paris.

THE STRAITS

Did Sazonov really have no great leading idea for the foreign policy of Russia? This one cannot maintain, but his thinking lacked originality. He wanted to let the political situation mature gradually, and to prepare everything for the day when Russia could carry out her historic task, that is, control of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. First of all, Germany had to be rendered innocuous by discussions of a political nature, which, however, remained vague, and by economic concessions. Meanwhile the Balkan territory was prepared in such a way that Russia had only to press the button for the Balkan nations to march against Turkey. When this coincided with a complete understanding of Russia with France and England, the moment of realization had, according to Sazonov's ideas, arrived.

Sazonov was counting on the inner weakness and early disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The Tsar was apparently of the same opinion. He once spoke to the British Ambassador Buchanan on this subject and divided up the inheritance. For Germany he had reserved the German pro-

vinces of Austria as booty. Buchanan ventured to say to him that such changes in the map of Europe could hardly be made without a general war. It seems that the Tsar had never thought out the final consequences. Of all the leading men, the Russian Prime Minister Kokovzov was the only one to consider a European war as the greatest possible national disaster for Russia. He did not manage to stay in office very long; hence in the end there was no counter-weight to the patriots. As for Sazonov's feelings towards Germany, he has said in his memoirs that no one can love Germany: it is sufficient not to hate Germany. On the other hand Buchanan has testified that he was a staunch friend of England and a loyal and enthusiastic collaborator in the Anglo-Russian Entente.

HEADING FOR THE CATASTROPHE

Such was the man Sazonov who guided Russian foreign policy at a time when the French Ambassador in Vienna wrote illuminatingly about the state of Europe: "The feeling that the nations are moving towards the battlefields, as if driven by an irresistible force, grows from day to day". Sazonov, too, yielded to this mood. Even the German Ambassador at the Court of the Tsar expressed the opinion that, of all personalities who could be considered for the post of Russian Foreign Minister, Sazonov was still the best. This shows that by now circumstances had become more powerful than the men who guided the destinies of the nations.

Maeterlinck has written a book about termites. In it he describes a species of these industrious insects which, in many years of painstaking toil, ingeniously construct a habitation for their people. Then, more or less periodically, an inexplicable movement appears in the swarm of termites, a kind of revolution, and the whole ingenious construction is senselessly destroyed by the builders themselves.

Mankind, impelled towards the battlefields, was approaching a similar catastrophe. Would things have been different if, in place of Sazonov, there had been some other Russian Foreign Minister? From Gortchakov through Giers, Lobanov, Lamsdorff to Iswolsky and Sazonov there ran a logical chain of development, which at that moment it was no longer possible to interrupt. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had its own life, its own spirit. The men who, some by chance, some by the logic of events, stood at the head of the State, were subject to this spirit.

"C'EST LA GUERRE EUROPEENNE"

When Sazonov entered his office in the Foreign Ministry on the morning of July 24, 1914, Vienna's ultimatum to Serbia, the result of the assassination of the Austrian heir-apparent, had already become known in St. Petersburg during the night. It had caused tremendous excitement. "C'est la guerre européenne," were Sazonov's words to his aide, Baron Moritz Schilling. These words show something of the astrological nature of the events of those eight fateful days. Everything we see unfolding before us in a breathless rushing back and forth was nothing but the "mise en scène" of a great historical drama, as General Dobrorolsky, Chief of the Mobilization Department of the Russian General Staff, put it. If we take into account that the characters of the chance actors of this drama were already determined, we can understand that the end of the drama was a certainty.

Whole libraries have been written about the question of where the guilt for the outbreak of the war lay. This is understandable, for the guilt-clause in the Treaty of Versailles made a study of this question appear imperative. But in examining the outbreak of the war from the stand-point of Russian politics, we will not discuss the question of guilt. We will simply observe events.

A diplomat once said that there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral

policy, but only a good or a bad one. And only results can decide whether a policy is good or bad. From this point of view the entry of Russia into the European war was the greatest stupidity ever committed by the statesmen of a country in a decisive hour.

RUSSIAN SENTIMENT

Has Sazonov at least the excuse that he only put the match to the fire that others had laid? One cannot deny that the war was popular in many circles of the Russian people. It was called the "second war for the fatherland" and given a similar significance to that of the war of 1812 against Napoleon.

Under the last three Russian Tsars relations with Germany had constantly deteriorated. The creation in itself of a powerful German Empire did not, according to the ideas of many Russian statesmen, correspond to the real interests of Russia; the Austro-German alliance, and the support given to the Austrian policy in the Balkans by Germany, had led to growing ill-feeling toward Germany. This ill-feeling was fanned by France. The Franco-Russian alliance, originally born of Russia's fear of political isolation, had become, almost from the beginning, an instrument of French rather than of Russian policy. In 1871 Renan had advised the French: "attiser la haine toujours croissante des Slaves contre les Allemands, favoriser le pan-slavisme, servir sans réserves toutes les ambitions russes." This advice had been followed, and this method had gradually directed Russian thought—formerly by no means anti-German—against Germany.

THE RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA

The Russian intelligentsia in its political thinking felt much more attracted to the democratic ideals of the West than towards Prussianism. In the latter the Russian liberals saw a likeness to their own government. The Russian socialists saw in Germany only the stronghold of reaction, which was abetting Russia's own autocracy.

Hence there were no bonds of sympathy to be severed in order to familiarize the minds of the people with the idea of war with Germany. Here, too, the inner-political ideas of liberal Russia must not be disregarded. The manifesto of October 1905, designed to give to the Russians those basic rights which the people of the rest of Europe already possessed for generations, had, through the reactionary measures of Stolypin and his successors, shrunk to insignificance. After a period of dull despair the Russian intellectual saw in war an opportunity to gain for the people through the "Union sacrée" of people and government, that freedom of which they were being deprived. The Bolshevist-revolutionary circles, too, felt that war formed the only possible basis for a revolution; their leaders, however, were abroad and had no influence on the course of events.

The leading circles in society and high officialdom, which influenced foreign policy, had been won over to the extreme course, after the going of Kokovzov had freed them from restraint. Under the pressure of political events even the rightist groups of the Duma gave up their sympathies for Germany.

The old military bonds formerly connecting Germany and Russia had long since been loosened. Military circles looked towards friendly France. Russian Grand Dukes had gone to the French borders and had inspected the fortifications of Lorraine which were directed against Germany. Many years before the war, Russian maneuvers had been openly designed on the plan of a war against Germany and Sweden, and even foreign military attachés had been invited to attend. When a Japanese military commission visited Russia in the spring of 1914, it could observe hatred for Germany everywhere in the officers' messes.

PAN-SLAVISM

With few exceptions the press had been anti-German for many decades.

It was more or less under the spell of nationalistic and Pan-Slavistic ideas, or it was opportunistic and without convictions. Pan-Slavism, rekindled by the events in the Balkans, had injected into the sentiments of Germans and Slavs a strong feeling of antagonism which really did not exist between the two peoples. One can well say that no one has understood the Slav temperament better than the Germans, whereas it has always remained foreign to the English and French.

Now the loves and hates, antipathies and sympathies of nations, however great the influence they may exert emotionally, are not, as a rule, decisive factors in politics. That they should lead to a war seems absurd. It is the opposing political interests which lead to conflicts between nations. Was it insoluble, this problem of conflicting interests in the Balkans between Russia and Austria, and Russia and Germany? Sazonov apparently thought so. Through his policy he had attained positions in the Balkans the relinquishment of which would have been equivalent to a humiliation. Sazonov was ready to risk a fight, and he believed that the advantages would be on the side of Russia.

WAR AIMS

By the war aims of a country one can recognize whether the war was justified. What were the war aims that a Russian statesman could have in relation to Germany? Giers, one of Sazonov's predecessors, had realized long ago that the destruction of Germany's position as a power could never be in the interest of Russia; but Sazonov had forgotten this great truth. Even the question, whether the dissolution of the Austrian Empire were in the true interest of Russia, would probably still have been denied by Gortchakov. Apparently Sazonov never even considered this. The whole war policy of the Entente during the war has shown that Russia, with no political ideas of her own, became in

the end entirely the tool of French and English politics.

The best criticism of Russian war aims was pronounced by the great Russian Statesman Witte in his conversation with the French Ambassador Paléologue at the beginning of the war: "And then, what are the conquests that are dangled before our eyes? East Prussia? Doesn't the Emperor already have far too many Germans among his subjects? Galicia? Why, that is full of Jews, and then, from the day on which we annex the Polish territories of Austria and Prussia we would lose all of Russian Poland . . . What else do they let us hope for? Constantinople? The return of the Cross to St. Sophia's, the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles? That is so crazy that it is not worth wasting time over it."

The Pan-Slavistic war aims of Russia collapsed immediately, when, at the beginning of the war, the Russian steam-roller failed to make any headway. Nothing more was said of the Slav brothers or of East Prussia. Finally there was nothing left but the Dardanelles and Constantinople. But even this objective became more and more unreal as it could not be attained by Russia's own efforts. It was necessary to bring in mysticism to justify the continuation of the war for this aim. St. Sophia in Constantinople was glorified as the central idea of Russian religious life, while the purely military fight to win her had to be taken into the bargain—or was even commended—as a necessary preparatory step towards the realization of the religious ideals. Russian policy had been sacrificed to a romantic idea which was no longer based on any genuine economic or political interests.

"NOW YOU CAN SMASH YOUR TELEPHONE"

From the confusion of those tumultuous days before the World War we will pick out one single instance. We know that on July 29 partial mobili-

zation against Austria was proclaimed in St. Petersburg. Orders had also been given for general mobilization but were countermanded at the last moment by the Tsar because of a reconciliatory telegram from the Kaiser.

There was great excitement in Russian military circles over this order and counter-order. It was feared that a partial mobilization would only confuse the carrying out of general mobilization. The Chief of the General Staff Yanushkevitch was determined to make one more effort with the Tsar on the following day to obtain a general mobilization.

Since the Tsar did not react to representations made over the telephone and also refused to receive Yanushkevitch, Sazonov came to his assistance and forced from the reluctant Tsar, after an hour's conversation on the afternoon of July 30, the order for general mobilization—which meant war. Sazonov's telephone conversation from the Peterhof Palace at four o'clock in the afternoon, in which he informed Yanushkevitch of the Tsar's decision, has become famous for his last remark: "Now you can smash your telephone." A second countermand of the order was now impossible.

SAZONOV AND THE TSAR

Sazonov himself has described this historic scene, at the same time revealing the motive which caused the Foreign Minister to intercede for this fateful decision of the Tsar. The Tsar was silent at the utterances of his Minister. Then he said, with a hoarse voice that betrayed deep emotion: "This means sending hundreds of thousands of Russians to their death. How can one not recoil before such a decision?" Whereupon Sazonov replied that the Tsar would be answerable neither to God nor to his own conscience nor to the future generations of the Russian people for the bloodshed which would be caused by this terrible war, forced on Russia and the whole of Europe by the evil designs of her

enemies. For those enemies were resolved to ensure their power by subjugating Russia's natural allies in the Balkans and by destroying the historic influence of Russia in that territory, all of which would mean abandoning Russia to a miserable existence entirely dependent on the despotism of the Central Powers.

It was a poor cause, especially since Austria had declared that she had no intention of disturbing the sovereignty and integrity of Serbia. The Balkans had already lived through so many phases. There had been a time when Austria had made a political vassal of Serbia under King Milan, and after the assassination of King Alexander a complete reversal had taken place. Why could Sazonov not wait? Had the Austrians taken up arms when Russia had completely changed the *status quo* in the Balkans in 1877?

Sazonov was afraid that Russia might come too late with her mobilization measures. He did not want to "confuse" his allies. Apparently he was animated by the urge toward the battlefields. So we have to record the case, probably rare in history, where a Foreign Minister—who, after all, should up till the last moment make every effort to avoid war—accelerated the decisions leading to war and released the terrible machinery that started the avalanche rolling.

The American historian Fay, in his book on the origins of the World War, emphasizes in his last chapter that it was above all Russia's general mobilization being carried out while Germany's efforts at mediation in Vienna were still going on, which brought on the final catastrophe by causing Germany to mobilize and to declare war.

Russia saved France by her offensive in East Prussia, which could not be carried out fast enough for the French, and the Russian people were then driven on again and again to greater efforts by the Allies whenever these found themselves in danger. Russia got no thanks for it, only reproaches.

THE LURE OF CONSTANTINOPLE

When in Russia the dream of the march on Berlin had faded, and the sufferings of the Russian people intensified, when the first whispers were heard in Russia that one was only fighting for the Allies, England realized that a new impetus was needed to keep Russia's policy in line. This "stimulus for the continuation of the war till victory," and till the complete exhaustion of Russia, became forthwith the object of the untiring attention of British diplomacy. The King of England casually remarked to the Russian Ambassador Count Benckendorff: "As for Constantinople, it is obvious that it must belong to you." Now began Sazonov's diplomatic task of utilizing this British hint. It was supposed to give Russian diplomacy the possibility of explaining to the people, with a semblance of justification, why it had drawn Russia into this disastrous war.

Sazonov demanded Constantinople and the Straits; he stressed these demands by threatening to resign and by emphasizing the "conséquences incalculables" which might arise from a refusal by the Allies. Delcassé, the French Foreign Minister, who was at first stunned by Sazonov's demands, could not refute such arguments. He was afraid that, if Sazonov resigned, a change might take place in Russian policy, and that the efforts of "German Agents" in St. Petersburg to conclude a separate peace with Germany might succeed. French policy, albeit reluctantly, followed that of England and agreed to the Russian demands.

England had clearly understood the situation from the beginning, and, as we have seen, it was she who had taken the initiative. One could only make the Russians pay as dearly as possible for this unavoidable concession. According to Grey's memoirs, England was convinced that after the loyalty of the Tsar toward the Allies that of Sazonov was the corner-stone of Russian policy. From Petrograd had come the demand for an agreement

containing the promise of Constantinople to the Russians, accompanied by a hint that it was absolutely necessary in order to save the situation as well as the policy of Sazonov, and in order to avoid grave complications, i.e. the conclusion of a separate peace. This was no bluff, the danger was real. The force of facts was irresistible.

England knew that, with the bait of Constantinople, she held Russia in her power, and that the latter would soon have to choose between either retaining the advantages of this pact and bowing to the will of her Allies, or betraying her Allies, which, according to Churchill's words, she could not do. That was the vicious circle in which Sazonov found himself.

THE END OF SAZONOV

The downfall of Sazonov was brought about by the Polish question, which was the subject of violent controversy in Russian public opinion, and which Sazonov wanted to solve by declaring Poland's autonomy. He only wanted to forestall the Central Powers, unconscious of the unreality of his idea. After all, Russia had militarily lost the greater part of Poland, and furthermore, leading Russian circles had doubts as to whether the restoration of even a limited Polish sovereignty would really be of benefit to Russia. Many Russians who thought deeply about the Polish problem may have realized that it could really only be solved in co-operation with Germany.

We know that the French and British Ambassadors made an eleventh hour attempt to save Sazonov. Heavy clouds were hanging over Russia, and, even though the Entente diplomats were not afraid that Russia was heading for a separate peace, they nevertheless believed that with the going of Sazonov a new spirit would insinuate itself into the Foreign Ministry. This spirit could, should military successes not be forthcoming, become dangerous to the policy of the Entente.

THE END OF OLD RUSSIA

It is an idle question whether, at this time, Russia could have been saved by a separate peace with Germany. The Tsar, for one, could never have brought himself to make such a weighty decision. He had "vowed before God" not to make peace as long as there was a single enemy soldier on Russian soil, and he was afraid his eternal salvation might be jeopardized if he should fail to keep his word. Moreover he was a fatalist; he believed in the decrees of destiny. When things went wrong, instead of offering resistance he would say that God had willed it so, and resign himself to God's will. He was surrounded by mystics, charlatans, and doubtful politicians; the Tsarina ruled him with her fanatic will; neither in domestic nor foreign politics could he think of anything to save the situation. And even if, after the resignation of Sazonov, he had wanted to change the course of Russia's foreign policy, he could hardly have avoided a revolution, at least a palace revolution. His fate was really inescapable.

The indications that a great revolution was brewing became increasingly serious. The scarcity of food assumed alarming proportions, public opin-

ion became more and more agitated, the Army could no longer be relied upon; there was no possible bridge leading to the Duma and the people, no bridge that could have saved the autocracy. In September 1916 the French Ambassador Paléologue dined with Kokovzov and the industrialist Putilov. Kokovzov declared: "We are facing revolution." The last act of this terrible drama of Russia was approaching:

"Last scene of all

That ends this strange eventful
history."

The assassination of Rasputin was the first stroke of lightning which lit up the coming storm. The assassination was staged by the leader of the extreme Right, Purishkyevitch, and by a few Grand Dukes and relatives of the Imperial House. It was a useless, typically Russian effort to save the autocracy.

Rasputin had not only predicted his own horrible death, but also the destruction of old Russia: "I see many tortured people; I see not individuals but whole multitudes, I see masses, mountains of corpses, several of the Grand Dukes, hundreds of Counts. The Neva will run red with blood." His prophecy was to come true.