The Tsar Legacy: Russian Foreign Policy in the Mediterranean Area from the Romanovs to Putin¹

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This paper aims at offering an analysis of the attempts of Russian empire before, and the Soviet empire later, until to now, to exert its influence in the Mediterranean area. Drawing also from Russian archival sources, the relations between the Soviet Union and Russia, on one side, and some countries in the Mediterranean or Adriatic areas, like former Yugoslavia or Syria, will be examined. Part of the historiography, firstly Soviet and then Russian, continued to maintain a theory, according to which Stalin's foreign policy choices were made as a sheer reaction to English and American challenges in the region which goes from the Adriatic to the Persian Gulf. According to others, Stalin's foreign policy was formed during and immediately after World War II and was dictated by Stalin's personal ambitions, reinforced by the victory over Nazi Germany. However, the documents consulted until now allow for a new approach and a new evaluation of the events. The picture that emerges from an analysis of the new documentation is more complex than what could have been imagined. The clarification of the objectives and actions to be undertaken in various European countries, where communist regimes were intended to be established, was dictated by pragmatic considerations and by the development of the situation in the various countries under the Soviet influence. In addition, the USSR indirectly aimed at influencing foreign as well as internal policy in countries, such as Italy, which did not belong to the Soviet sphere.

Keywords: Russian Empire, Soviet foreign Policy, Stalin, Adriatic Sea, Yugoslavia, Persian Gulf, Cold War, the Soviet-Yugoslav Split

The present paper aims at analysing the attempts of Russian and Soviet Empire to exert its influence in the Mediterranean area from Stalin's era to Putin. In recent years historical research has been enriched by numerous sources coming from archives of the former Soviet Union. Although Russian collections of manuscripts are not always available for political reasons, they are nevertheless a major source of information regarding certain aspects of modern history, which are little or only partially known. The present article, based both on Russian and British documents as well as on published literature on the subject, concentrates on Soviet foreign policy and on the relations between the USSR and Yugoslavia during the Second World War and on the eve of the Cold War. The information obtained from Russian archives has resulted in our substantially reinterpreting the events behind the creation of the Eastern Bloc and the institution of communist regimes in

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Eastern European countries and is a remarkable contribution to the analysis of political instruments and alliances of which the USSR made use to extend its influence in the Mediterranean, in particular, in the Adriatic Sea.

The picture that emerges from an analysis of the new documentation is more complex than what could have been imagined, particularly as concerns the Soviet era and the Stalinist period. Until the early 1990s Yugoslavian, Russian, and Western scholars based their research on relations between the USSR and Yugoslavia and on the extension of Soviet interest towards the Adriatic, drawing from selected data, aimed at propaganda or at endorsing a convenient version for the USSR and the international communist movement. In other cases, they founded their studies on testimonies or memoirs of famous Yugoslavian government representatives who more or less had the same aims (Kardelj, 1980; Vukmanović-Tempo, 1971; Djilas, 1962; 1985). On the other hand, after the Second World War, following publications on Serbian emigration to the West, a contrasting version became prominent which discredited the USSR and the communist movement (Nikolić, 1999).

Part of the historiography, firstly Soviet and then Russian, continued to maintain a theory, according to which Stalin's foreign policy choices were made as a sheer reaction to challenges in the region which goes from the Adriatic to the Persian Gulf—first coming from Germany and later from the USA and Great Britain (Hasanli, 2003; 2005; Hasanli & Zubok, 2007)². According to others, Stalin's foreign policy was formed during and immediately after the Second World War and was dictated by Stalin's personal ambitions, which were reinforced by the victory over Nazi Germany (Volkov, 2000; Zubok & Pleshakov, 1996; Pechatnov, 2006). A fundamental contribution regarding this topic was presented in the publication of collections of documents which finally shed light on aspects which had not been studied properly (Bukharkin, 1998; Vuiošević, 1992; Petranović & Zechević, 1988). In addition to these documents, interesting contributions by historians such as Mikhail Narinsky, Leonid Gibiansky, and Vladimir Volkov have helped to clear up the complex picture of relations between the USSR and the countries of South-Eastern and Central Europe, in particular Yugoslavia (Naimark & Gibianskii, 1997; Gibianskii, 1987; 1997; 1998a; 1998b; 2002).

During the Cold War, the clarification of the objectives and the actions to be undertaken in various European countries, where communist regimes were intended to be established, was dictated by pragmatic considerations and by the development of the political situation in the various countries under the Soviet influence. In addition, USSR indirectly aimed at influencing foreign as well as internal policy in countries, such as Italy, which did not belong to the Soviet sphere.

In some respects, some objectives of the Soviet foreign policy have been borrowed from the tsarist Empire, in particular the aim at reaching the control of the Mediterranean area. The Tsarist Empire was a typical "continental Empire", which at the same time was the largest state in the world and a European power, although if compared to European countries it was very backward from a socio-political and economic point of view. The Tsarist regime had survived the 1905 Revolution and the defeat against Japan, with whom the Tsar managed to sign a peace treaty, losing relatively few territories. Anyway, the defeat with Japan that shocked the Western powers, had clearly demonstrated the weakness of the Russian Empire.

² About the Soviet attempt to extend its control over Iran and Turkey, see Jamil Hasanli, *Juzhnyi Azerbaigian: Nachalo Kholodnoi voiny* (Baku: Adilogly, 2003); Hasanli, *SSSR-Turtsiia: Poligon kholodnoi voiny* (Baku: Adilogly, 2005); Jamil Hasanli and Vladislav Zubok, "La prima crisi della guerra fredda: Mosca e il petrolio iraniano (1943-1946)", *Ventesimo Secolo*, 6(13) (2007), 11-44.

As regards the beginning of the 20th century, Russian foreign policy was conditioned by the accession of Russia to the Entente with France and Great Britain; by its aggressive attitude towards the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires; and by the traditional expansionist policy of Russian autocracy, aimed at obtaining an outlet to the Mediterranean Sea (Zaslavsky, 1995, p. 51). These were also the reasons why the Russian Empire entered the war in 1914. The Russian participation at war was useful both for attacking the two Empires and eventually defeating them, and for reaching the Mediterranean, becoming a trusted ally of Serbia. All these plans were not realized since, according to Victor Zaslavsky, “the history of the last years of Russian Empire is the history of a regime in decomposition, unable to govern, that did not want to either reform or voluntarily leave the power, dragging to the edge the entire country” (Zaslavsky, 1995, pp. 51-52). So the history of the Russian Empire and its end is strictly connected with the First World War, which encouraged and facilitated the outbreak of the Revolution. On the other end, in terms of domestic policy, through the entrance at war the Russian leadership aimed at cracking down once and for all the revolutionary movement and the strikes. So a huge number of young people were mobilized; a state of emergency was declared in industry; strikes were prohibited, and demonstrations of enthusiastic patriotism were organized.

Anyway, all these efforts did not help in avoiding the epilogue of the Empire. The Brest Litovsk Treaty on 3 March 1918 signed by the Revolutionary Russia and the Central Empires put an end to the war, but represented also a real break with the Western powers. On the ideological level this break was marked by the decree about the land to peasants and the abolition of the private property.

The First World War completely undermined the system of empires and it was clear to all governments that Europe and the world would not go further in the manner before 1914. The birth of the new state which in 1922 was named USSR, and its novelty as a political phenomenon in the European tradition, forced the Bolsheviks to deal with domestic politics and leave for the moment any attempts at territorial expansion for the time being. From its beginning the Bolshevik leadership aimed at strengthening the power and at eliminating the so called enemies of the Revolution, replacing the old Empire with a new one, which inherited from the tsarist Empire, the system of concentration camps, and the repressive methods, transforming the regime from an authoritarian into a totalitarian one. After Lenin's death, the problem of succession aroused and it is significant that among the three contenders Nikolai I. Bukharin, Lev Trotsky (Lev D. Bronshtein), and Iosif Stalin (Iosif V. Dzhugashvili), the latter, the commissioner for nationalities, emerged. The first real problem for the new Socialist State was to maintain control, with all means, over the hundreds nationalities of the former tsarist Empire. Furthermore, “the dominant position of Russians, *primus inter pares*, in Soviet society scarcely needs to be demonstrated”, anyway “Russian hegemony within the tsarist Empire was seriously compromised by the revolution” (Zaslavsky, 2005, p. 99). According to Lenin, it was the task of socialism to promote the internationalization of economic, political, and cultural life. He recognized the need to struggle against Great Russian chauvinism and against the legacy of tsarist nationalism and militarism. But in the late thirties and particularly during World War II this attitude changed decisively, and state policy on the national question underwent a sudden shift towards Russification. “The reasons for the shift are evident. The Russians, who constitute the biggest ethnic group in the country, populate compactly the largest part of the USSR and also form a considerable part of population in almost all national republics” (Zaslavsky, 2005, p. 99). The Russians gave the major contribution to the industrialization and to the war. So, at the end of the thirties, along with the Russification the militarist and imperialist politics of the tsarism was taken up again.

Even Stalin, interested in consolidating the Soviet State, gave a little importance to foreign policy and to plans of expansion of the Socialist State. Many scholars agree on the defensive character of Stalin's geo-political doctrine: only after consolidating the Revolutionary State, Stalin aimed at enlarging the Soviet borders and at expanding the communist model in other states. The defensive approach of foreign Stalinist policy changed gradually through a series of bilateral agreements, among which the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 (or "Pact of non aggression") which definitely broke the balance reached in Europe with the Treaty Peace of Versailles, and which allowed Nazi Germany to start the war in Poland, and the Soviet Union to get some territories, included the Baltic States, and half Poland, thanks to a war never declared. The alliance between Germany and USSR broke when Stalin asked Hitler to get the control of some Turkish ports on the Black Sea and the Straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, which were both an area of interest for Nazi Germany (Volkov, 2000, pp. 11, 35ff). This request clearly demonstrated the intensions of the Soviet leadership to reach the Mediterranean Sea. The German attack to the Soviet Union, in June 1941, changed the position of the USSR which had to face the invasion without any defensive plan. As a matter of fact, thanks to Russian documents we know that Stalin had ordered the General Staff of the Red Army to prepare a plan of attack against Germany.

During WWII the Soviet Union sustained the partisan movement in Yugoslavia. In numerous meetings held in Moscow with representatives from Belgrade, details of the line of tactics that would be followed by Soviet diplomacy were clarified. The evolution of the Balkan framework was one of the issues touched upon, in particular in Greece and Bulgaria, and above all the situation in Italy. At the beginning of the Cold War, and till to 1948, the year of rupture with Moscow, Yugoslavia became a trusted ally of the Soviet Union. Stalin called Tito the "bastion of USSR in the Mediterranean", and Tito offered Stalin the port of Trieste in Italy. Secondly, Russian documents show that the Yugoslav Communist Party became an important ally to influence the Italian communist party, at least till to 1948.

The rupture between Stalin and Tito in 1948 depended on the different ways of conceiving foreign policy: "Adventurism" and the "unscrupulous" politics of the Yugoslavs towards Italy and Austria, aimed at pushing the communist forces to revolt against local governments, were not supported by Stalin. Another example of the different attitude towards Allies and the politics in the Mediterranean Sea was represented by the civil war in Greece, erupted soon after the end of the Second World War, which risked destabilizing the relations between the USSR and the Allies and leading to a war which the Soviet Union was not prepared for (Zaslavsky, 2002, p. 33). So the Kremlin was very cautious about the situation in Greece. During the war it was through the Yugoslav Communist Party that Georgi Dimitrov—secretary of the Comintern until May 1943 and leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party—got information about the situation in occupied Greece; in particular he asked about the Greek partisan movement: the EAM (the national Liberation Front) and its military branch, the ELAS (the Greek People's Liberation Army), which was controlled by the KKE (the Greek Communist Party). Dimitrov and Stalin were also interested in the relations between the communists and the other forces of resistance, like the EDES (the National Republican Greek League) which at the beginning of the resistance was the major group. In some cases, as in Yugoslavia happened, these forces (the communist and the nationalist ones) were mostly interested in fighting each other, than against the occupiers, for the further control of the country. Anyway in June 1944 the Central Committee of the KKE, by means Tito asked Stalin to help the Greek resistance with equipment and weapons, specifying that the shortage of weapons and ammunition would

have affected all Greek future politics (Ulunian, 1994, p. 101f)³. In October Dimitrov proposed to Viacheslav Molotov (the Soviet minister of Foreign Affairs) to help “even morally” the EAM and the ELAS⁴, because he perfectly knew that a direct help should have not been possible since the position of Greece has been already decided by Stalin and Churchill in Moscow, and this position was in the Western bloc (Resis, 1978). In December 1944 the British intervened in Greece in support of the government of Georgios Papandreu against the ELAS resistance forces which, after the end of the Nazi occupation, had refused to surrender their weapons and had started a real civil war to overthrow the government.

In this fight the Greek partisans had Tito’s support but not Stalin’s one. Yugoslavia asked Stalin to help the communists fighting against the right-wing government, but Stalin denied any support to Greek communists, because it risked destabilizing the relations between USSR and the Allies and leading to a war which the Soviet Union was not prepared for yet. Furthermore, a possible support by the Kremlin to the Greek communists should have led to a review of the position of the European countries in the opposing blocs, including Poland. The Kremlin had all interests in maintaining control of its sphere of influence. For the same reason, Stalin was irritated by the Yugoslav rebellion which revealed aspirations for independence.

Commenting on the situation in Greece, on 10 January 1945, in a telephone conversation with Dimitrov, Stalin declared:

I had advised that a similar struggle should not be undertaken in Greece. The ELAS men were not to leave the Papandreu government. They have undertaken an action for which we lack the strength. Apparently, they were counting on the fact that the Red Army would descend to the Aegean Sea. We cannot do that. We cannot send our troops to Greece. The Greeks have done a foolishness. (Anderson & Chubarian, 1998, p. 78)

As we can see, Soviet foreign policy was aimed at maintaining the status quo established at the Conferences of Teheran and Yalta, but at the same time it was directed to find allies in order to influence internal politics of European states. Defending Soviet interests, under Stalin and the communist leadership, was a priority.

The same can be said about the new Russian Empire under Putin’s guide. It would be interesting to talk about the charisma of some leaders, such as Putin. As regards foreign policy, the decisions taken, such as the war in Syria, and all the proposals made by the Kremlin, show how Putin is interested in becoming a mediator between the West and the East, between USA and rouge states, such as Iran and Syria, with whom Russia is allied. The war in Syria represents the will of Moscow to defend Russian interests in the Mediterranean area. As concerns Putin’s internal policy, many scholars have called it “soft authoritarianism”, which, in line with tsarist and Soviet policy, is aimed both at maintaining the borders of the new Russian Empire and the control over nationalities (inside the Empire) and at preserving its interests in the Mediterranean Sea and in the Pacific Ocean.

³ See the telegram sent by G. Siandos to A. Dzimas on 12 June 1944, in Artiom Ulunian, *Kommunisticheskaia partiia Gretsii. Aktualnye voprosy ideologii, politiki i vnutrennei istorii. 1941-1956* [The Greek Communist Party. Current issues of politics and internal history] (Moskva: Fond grech. Issled, 1994), p. 101f.

⁴ *Pis'mo G. Dimitrova i L. Baranova V. Molotovu o natsionalno-osvoboditelnom dvizhenii v Gretsii*, 21 oktjabrja 1944g [Letter by Dimitrov and Baranov to Molotov about the National Liberation Movement in Greece, 21 October 1944], RGASPI (the Russian State archive of Socio-political History), fond 495, case 74, file 178, p. 6.

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