ENGLAND AND THE NORTHERN WAR IN SOVIET HISTORIOGRAPHY: 1935-1950

by

STEPHEN SCHERER

Paper No. 104
1982

Professor Stephen Scherer has been teaching Russian and European history at Central Michigan University since 1969. His primary areas of research are Russian thought and Russian and Soviet historiography.

THE CARL BECK PAPERS IN
RUSSIAN AND EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES
William Chase, Acting Editor
4E-23 Forbes Quadrangle
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA
15260
The middle and late 1930s were years of severe change for the USSR. Stalin, in an effort to destroy any effective political opposition, completed his great purge. The Soviets, seeking to avoid an international conflagration, attempted to build collective security as a bulwark against their avowed ideological enemies, the Nazis. As a consequence of these domestic and international developments and the Party's reaction to them, the historical profession experienced profound changes as well. The State, which had formerly demanded that historians write Marxist history based upon class-struggle and socio-economic analyses exclusively, now ordered historians to produce more traditional and nationalistic interpretations of the past within the context of Marxism.¹

Historians responded favorably to the new directives of the regime regarding the quality of their work. Their creations were nationalistic in the extreme, stressing the progressive elements of tsarist autocracy, the heroic labors of Russia's historic leaders and her military diplomatic and cultural relations with the Western powers. Given this situation, it is understandable that some historians chose the Northern War as a topic. During this prolonged national effort against Sweden, then the predominant power in Northern Europe, Russia, under the energetic leadership of Peter the Great, achieved her long-sought foothold on the Baltic, set the stage for increased cultural contacts with the West and attained Great Power status.

In general, Soviet historians who treated the Northern War during the years 1935-1950 exhibited sharply divergent views of England's role in that war; they described England as either an aid to Russia in her struggle to subdue Sweden, or as an impediment to success in that same
effort. In addition the historical profession, as a profession, interpreted England's participation more or less favorably depending on the current international situation of the USSR. When the Soviets desired English support against Nazi Germany (1935-39 and 1941-45), historians stressed England's assistance to Russia during the war with Sweden. But when the Soviet Union was less positively disposed to England (1939-41 and 1946-50), historians emphasized English attempts to obstruct the Russian war effort. Three qualifying remarks should be added to the larger statements above:

1) this article is not an attempt to demonstrate the power of politics over scholarship in the USSR, that being already well documented, but rather an effort to show, using a specific historical issue as a case study, just how far political influence could go; 2) the fact that there was a pattern to the treatment accorded England's role in the war does not mean that all historians simply ignored or distorted the facts (though a few did), but that historians continued to write history in a most difficult political setting; and 3) despite the influence of politics on the writing of history, there was sufficient flexibility in the system, at least until 1948, to allow some historians to publish work at odds with the predominant viewpoint.

The most striking feature of Soviet work on the Northern war during the years 1935-39 was its relative lack of anti-English sentiments. The USSR during these years was trying to effect collective security and historians maintained a friendly posture towards England. They either ignored England's hostility towards Russia altogether, emphasized her contributions to the Russian war effort or discussed English opposition in reasonable diplomatic terms. A good example of this approach was the article "Poltavskaia Bitva" (The Battle of Poltava) which appeared
in the journal *Istorik-Marksist* (Marxist Historian) in April 1939. This article, by B. B. Kafengauz, asserted that at the opening of the war, Charles XII first forced Denmark to leave the Northern Alliance and then destroyed the Russian forces at Narva. Kafengauz did not even mention England's aid to Sweden during the siege of Copenhagen in 1700. The existence of this material assistance to Sweden is incontestable, yet Kafengauz chose to discuss Sweden's success against the Danes and subsequent triumph over the Russians without reference to English actions.

A similar interpretation marked Kafengauz's views of the period after Poltava, when Peter I was trying to rebuild the Northern Alliance. Kafengauz wrote simply that Russia concluded treaties with August II and Denmark and once more completed the Northern Alliance. In later years, Soviet historians attached particular significance to the fact that England labored assiduously to prevent the reconstitution of the Northern Alliance. But between 1935 and 1939, this negative view of England, though not absent, was not dominant.

This favorable view of England was also evident in an article written in 1938 by V. Andreev. In discussing the failure of the proposed Russo-Danish-Anglo-Dutch invasion of Sweden in 1716, he argued that the attack was not realized because of the vacillation of the Danish leaders. Again the effort to describe England favorably is clear in the light of later Soviet attempts to lay the blame for the failure of the invasion on English fear of growing Russian might and the threat it constituted for England. The most obvious case of Soviet reluctance to criticize England occurred towards the end of Andreev's article. Here he discussed the actions of the Russian fleet in the attack on Swedish shores in 1719 without once referring to the appearance in the Baltic of a hostile
English fleet under Admiral Norris. The English sent Norris' fleet to
the Baltic for the express purpose of harassing the Russians. On this
point English historians agree, yet Andreev did not even remark on the
presence of the English fleet. Beyond this Andreev was noteworthy for
his attempt to illustrate England's wartime assistance to Russia. This
military aid consisted of the Englishmen who served as officers in the
Russian navy and the sixteen battleships contributed by England to the
allied fleet which Peter I commanded for several days during the summer
of 1716.

A less positive, though historically more defensible, account of
England's role in the Northern War can be found in I. Barer's 1938 arti-
cle on Peter's foreign policy. Barer, who recognized that the War of
Spanish Succession coupled with the Northern War had complicated Euro-
pean affairs considerably, explained England's fear of Russia as a con-
sequence of Russia's growing naval presence in the Baltic. Along with
this he stressed that England acted in concert with other powers, es-
pecially Holland, in her efforts to oppose Russia and stop the Northern
War. While national rivalry and international concert were not justi-
fications for English actions they were at least understandable diplo-
matic explanations.

The reluctance of Soviet historians to report England's anti-Russian
actions during the Northern War disappeared between 1939 and 1941, the
years of the Nazi-Soviet pact. It now seemed more possible to portray
the English as opponents of Russia and, conversely, to depict the Prus-
sians (Germans) as Russia's traditional allies. The effort to illuminante
England's antagonism to Russia was manifest in Istoriiia Diplomatii (History
of Diplomacy) published in 1941. S. Bakhrushin and S. Skazkin, who
contributed an article on eighteenth-century diplomacy to this volume, declared that English intrigues among Russia's elites were responsible for the lack of unity between Russia and her allies during the proposed joint invasion of Sweden in 1716. They also argued that England openly joined Sweden against Russia in 1720 and 1721 when the English fleet tried to protect Swedish shores against Russian attack. Similar coverage of England can be found in an article by N. Ozarovskii. He underlined the hostility of England towards Russia when he mentioned, in a gratuitous fashion, English opposition to Russia during the Northern War. Along with this and in agreement with Bakhrushin and Skazkin, Ozarovskii pointed out the anti-Russian intervention of the English fleet in the Baltic in 1720 and 1721. These contentions, particularly the ones dealing with the actions of the English fleet during the last years of the war, were grounded in fact and yet by their emphasis on English enmity they reflected the altered Soviet attitude towards England.

The Soviet view of Prussia's stance during the war was also noteworthy at this time since the historical treatment accorded England appeared to be an inverse function of that accorded Prussia. Ia. Zutis, in an article published in Istoriik-Marksist early in 1941, declared that Russia and Prussia had jointly struggled to achieve their natural right to Baltic and Atlantic access. He went beyond this when he argued that the Russians and Prussians concluded an agreement on August 7, 1718, in order to consolidate their friendship and subsequently plan a joint action against the powers opposed to them. Zutis supported this pro-Prussian and anti-English view by stating that although England was able to pressure Sweden and Prussia to the conclusion of a separate peace in 1720, Prussia did not intend to quarrel with Russia to the advantage of England, Zutis finally
underlined the historic friendship and common interest of Russia and Prussia when reported that the Prussian king, by a special declaration in June 1720, asserted that his separate peace with Sweden had not violated the interests of Russia and specifically had not guaranteed the safety of Swedish possessions outside of Germany.  

The Soviet propensity to censure England and laud Prussia changed radically after the Nazi attack on the USSR in June 1941, and the conclusion of the Anglo-Soviet mutual defense pact in July of that same year. The Soviet political and military situation was now reversed and historians responded to the change. Soviet historians tended to identify Nazi Germany with Prussia and even Hanover, and the manner in which they condemned these two German states while praising England was revealing. The changed Soviet attitude towards Prussia's role in the Northern war was evidenced by B. B. Kafengauz in his book, Vneshnaia politika Rossii pri Petre I (The Foreign Policy of Russia during the Time of Peter I), published in 1942. Kafengauz contended that the Prussian King before the battle of Poltava (1709), "vacillated and awaited the outcome of the war in order that he might seize something for himself where he had neither sowed nor reaped." As if this censure were not bitter enough, he later characterized Prussia's separate peace with Sweden in 1720 as the act of a "rapacious and craven power." V. Bonch-Bruevich in an article published in 1943 concurred in this negative judgement. He stated that in the opinion of Peter I, the alliance of England and Russia was necessary to protect Europe from aggressive states like Sweden and Prussia, which were a menace to international order.

Though Soviet historians did not view Hanover as caustically as they did Prussia, they considered that the influence of Hanover played an
important part in the deterioration of Anglo-Russian relations. V. Semionov discussed this problem in an article in 1943, and declared that Anglo-Russian relations had remained good right up to the death of Queen Anne in 1714. The decline in relations, continued Semionov, occurred after George I, the elector of Hanover, ascended the English throne. He concluded that George I, who placed the interest of Hanover above all else, saw in Peter I a rival for influence in North German affairs. B. B. Kafengauz made this same point, though in muted fashion, in both _Vneshnaia politika Rossii pri Petre I_ and _Severnaia Voina i Nishstadtskii Mir (The Northern War and the Peace of Nystadt)._20

This adverse view of the activities of the German states, Prussia and Hanover, was accompanied by a favorable opinion of England's place in the Northern War. V. Bonch-Bruevich demonstrated that Peter understood the mutual interests of Russia and England and attached great significance to the friendship of the two states.21 V. Semionov made special mention of the technical and diplomatic aid which England rendered to Russia prior to the ascension of George I to the English throne. He attached great importance to the fact that England gave energetic diplomatic support to Russia in both the Turkish and Swedish questions.22 By 1717, Semionov argued, Peter I had become convinced that the intrigues of the Hanoverians had strengthened English suspicion and mistrust of Russia.23 Still, the dynastic policies of George I met "decisive censure" in English social circles, according to Semionov, and though England and Russia severed diplomatic relations in 1720, their economic relations continued to develop.24

While the treatment accorded England was generally favorable from 1941 to 1945, more objective and therefore more critical accounts of Anglo-Russian relations were not lacking. The works of B. B. Kafengauz and
T. K. Krylova stand out in this regard. Both Kafengauz and Krylova started with the assumption that national interest largely determines foreign policy in Great Power politics. As a result they discussed Anglo-Russian relations during the Northern War in terms of their conflicting economic and military interests, while admitting that at certain junctures the English offered substantial diplomatic and military assistance to Peter the Great. 25

With the end of World War II, hope grew that the cooperation and good will which had developed between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies in the face of the Nazi threat would continue to burgeon. But the expectation that battlefield cooperation would lay the groundwork for more amicable East-West relations soon proved to be false. Though signs of this postwar attitude towards the West appeared before the war ended, it was not until 1947-48, and the blistering attacks on Western culture by Andrei Zhdanov, that this bitterly anti-Western viewpoint was consolidated. A consideration of the postwar Soviet accounts of England's role in the Northern War will illuminate the degree to which this anti-Western campaign influenced the historical profession. A noteworthy feature of Soviet historiography during the immediate postwar period is that it exhibited two divergent interpretations of England's role. The first of these views was more favorable to England and seemed to be a vestige of the preceding years when Soviet historians wrote articles stressing the mutuality of Anglo-Russian interests. The second outlook was severely anti-English and subdued the pro-English viewpoint by 1948, though both attitudes existed in the first two years after the war.

The pro-English attitude appears in an article by V. Bonch-Bruevich published in 1946 in Voprosy Istorii (Problems of History). This article
was similar in tone to the aforementioned wartime work by the same author and declared that Peter I considered a union with England most important for the final victory over Charles XII. T. K. Krylova's "PoltavskÃ­a pobeda i Russkaia diplomatiia" (The Victory of Poltava and Russian Diplomacy) also contained positive comments concerning the English war effort. This article appeared in 1947 and though it was not simply a panegyric to England it made significant mention of the English contributions to Russia's success. Krylova first referred to England positively when she asserted that England, in the years 1708-1709, invariably rendered material support to Russia in one very important question, the preservation of peace with Turkey. She did not stop, however, at this single commendation of English action during the war. In her discussion of the mutual defense pact concluded between George I, Elector of Hanover and heir to the English throne, and Peter I in July 1710, Krylova commented that the English supporters of the Hanoverian dynasty, the Whigs, were amicably disposed toward Russia. Though this statement was only an aside, and not indispensable to the article, it signified that Krylova was not making a special effort to ensure the English diplomatic stance vis-a-vis Russia following the Battle of Poltava.

Krylova likewise gave favorable treatment to the Northern Neutrality of 1710 and England's part in establishing it. She argued that the Northern Neutrality offered several advantages to Russia including the recognition of the Northern Alliance by England and Holland and the establishment of a new political balance in Europe based on the de facto abolition of the treaties of Travensdal (1700) and Altranstadt (1706). Krylova concluded that the result of Russia's diplomatic activity in
1709-1710 was that England and the Great Alliance in toto exchanged the alliance with Sweden for unity with her enemies. The articles of Bonch-Bruevich and Krylova were not fulsome in their praise of England. Their objectivity, however, makes it necessary to classify them as pro-English, for in comparison with postwar Soviet examinations of the Northern War, they were decidedly favorable to England. Articles of this ceased to appear after 1948 when Party criticism of the historical profession made it clear that pro-Western accounts of the past were unacceptable. This attack, a part of the larger anti-Western campaign initially led by Andre Zhdanov, was directed in the main at the Institute of History, the most prestigious entity in the Soviet historical profession. The Institute, its publications and some of its members were censured for their "bourgeois" approach to history; history was a "party" science and so had to maintain a "party" stance on all issues. It is important to note that the attack was made in part on Institute publications responsible for carrying interpretations of England's role in the Northern War which were at odds with the dominant one of their time. For instance, the journal Istoricheskie Zapiski and the collection Petr Velikii were singled out for criticism in the autumn of 1948. T. K. Krylova's scholarly contributions on Anglo-Russian relations had appeared in these publications both during and after WWII. This does not mean that the harsh treatment accorded these works was solely the result of their publishing Krylova's articles. Still, it suggests that the books and journals which published objective historical interpretations of the Northern War were the ones which would be out of step with the Party's expectations in general.

The anti-English outlook which emerged immediately after WWII and came to dominate the field by 1948 was far more severe than the negative
view which had surfaced in 1939-41, the years of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. In some cases Soviet historians even disregarded the facts as they tried to demonstrate that England had been a conscious and consistent foe of Russia. Razgrom Karla (The Destruction of Charles), authored by A. Markevich and published in 1946, is an outstanding example of this type of work. In it Markevich argued that England began to aid the Swedes more actively after the destruction of the Swedish army at Poltava.\(^3\) This statement distorted things considerably, as England was still involved in the War of Spanish Succession in 1710 and so was unable to aid Charles. In passing it is worth remarking that Markevich's interpretation was controverted by the contents of a letter written by the English Secretary of State to the English Ambassador to Denmark in May, 1714. In this letter Secretary Bromley declared to Ambassador Pulteney that, "the Queen has not made any actions to aid Sweden in the struggle because the parties in the war are her common friends.\(^4\) The point here is not that Markevich should have been aware of every source concerning the Northern War, but that he denigrated England's role in the war without offering any plausible supporting evidence.

Markevich again ignored the facts when he described the activities of the English ambassador at Constantinople. He contended that the ambassador did everything in his power to destroy the Peace of Pruth (1711).\(^5\) This interpretation of England's role at the Porte was shared by L. A. Nikiforov who argued in 1950 that the role of England in unleashing the Russo-Turkish War in 1711 was indubitable.\(^6\) Such an argument found no support in the wartime work of Soviet historians\(^7\) and it was at variance with the position of the English historian J. F. Chance as well. Chance, who wrote a series of articles on the Northern War for the English Historical Review,
demonstrated that the English Ambassador to the Porte worked hard to preserve the peace between Russia and Turkey from 1709 to 1712 and further that Peter I himself was well informed about these efforts. 38

Nikiforov's anti-English tone was also clear in his discussion of the Northern Neutrality (1710). In his opinion the neutrality was hostile to the interests of Russia because it was meant, without doubt, to restrain the penetration of the Northern allies into Sweden's German possessions, to guarantee these possessions for Sweden, and to check the success of Russia and her allies. 39 Nikiforov therefore argued that the neutrality conventions were organized by England and her allies to aid Sweden and harm Russia. In his effort to censure England, Nikiforov neglected the fact that, while the neutrality prevented the Northern Alliance from attacking the Swedish army in Pomerania, it also prohibited the Swedes from launching an attack from their Pomeranian base.

The proposed Russo-Danish-Anglo-Dutch attack on Swedish shores in 1717 became the target of some anti-English bias after the war as well. V. Mavrodin, writing in 1948, claimed that this joint invasion of Sweden failed as a result of the intrigues of the English, who feared the growing might of Russia. 40 This line of argument was in serious conflict with that of English historian J. J. Murray who wrote in the Journal of Modern History that the Swedish invasion failed because Peter withdrew. 41 It appears that Peter did withdraw and this view is strongly supported by J. F. Chance, who contended that Peter for military reasons, retired from the Swedish invasion although his allies pressed him to carry out his part in the operation. 42 Though both Murray and Chance admitted the validity of Peter's military and logistical reasons for withdrawing, neither of them attributed the failure of the invasion to the machinations of the English.
Not all of the anti-English discussions of the Northern War contain such blatant misrepresentation as those just examined. In an article concerning the Aland Island peace talks between Russia and Sweden late in the war K. Sorina disclosed that the friendly impulses of Russia toward England in 1718 were received with clear mistrust by the English ministers. Later in the same years, wrote Sorina, the English suggested an exchange of representatives and sent Admiral Norris to Russia; Norris, however, was not sent to conclude any real agreements with Russia but only to palaver. Finally, Sorina asserted, though the conduct of the English during Norris' trip to Russia in the summer of 1718 suggested that they did not desire serious talks with Russia, the Russians charged their representative, Veselovsky, to seek a genuine rapprochment with England.

An article such as this contrasted sharply with the works which appeared during WWII when historical articles emphasized the common bonds or the honest differences between Russia and England. But in the postwar period, when the cultural and military menace of the West became an idee fixe in the USSR, only a view which stressed English perfidy would do. This is not to say that Sorina's article distorted the historical facts, as did the work of Markevich and Nikiforov, for it focused on that part of the Northern War characterized by genuine English antagonism toward Russia. The significance of the article is that it appeared in 1947, rather than in 1943 when the wartime alliance between England and the Soviet Union encouraged a more favorable historical view of Anglo-Russian relations.

The above considerations suggest several conclusions. First, it is remarkable that an arcane question such as England's role in the Northern War, however suitable for study after the mid-1930's, should have been so
influenced by contemporary politics. It had, after all, little to do with the Revolution or the domestic economic and social developments which led to the Revolution, themes understandably close to the hearts of a revolutionary leadership. All of this helps to illustrate the degree to which contemporary politics came to dominate all historical scholarship.

Second, despite the political strictures they had to face, historians continued to write history. In doing this they avoided, with several exceptions, distortion of the facts. Rather they emphasized such developments as would fit their work within acceptable limits or chose topics which facilitated the writing of history and the meeting of current political needs simultaneously. While this may not seem heroic, it surely underlines the professional commitment of Soviet historians. Finally, until 1948 and the wholesale Party criticism of the Institute of History, several historians, most notably T. K. Krylova, were able to publish rather objective accounts of England's role in the Northern War in the Institute's books and journals. That they did so implies that the Institute had at least a tenuous autonomy within the Soviet historical profession right up to the Party's postwar re-assertion of ideological control.
FOOTNOTES


2. B. B. Kafengauz, "Poltavskaya bitva" (The Battle of Poltava), Istorik-Marksist (Marxist Historian), 1939, #4, p. 45.

3. Ibid., p. 56.


5. Ibid., p. 55.

6. For a discussion by an English historian of these events see J. F. Chance, "The Northern Pacification of 1719-1720," English Historical Review, 1907, pp. 694-725.

7. Ibid., One can find a similarly positive view of Russia's English contacts during the reign of Peter I in A. V. Shestakov's Kratkii Kurs Istorii SSSR. Shestakov, commenting on Peter's embassy to the West in 1697-98 remarked that, "The most advanced countries in Western Europe at that time were Holland and England... In England he (Peter I) perfected his knowledge of ship-building. He spent about two years abroad and learned a great deal." A. V. Shestakov, Kratkii Kurs Istorii SSSR (Brief History of the Soviet Union), (Moscow: 1937), pp. 74-79.
8. I. Barer, "Vneshnaia politika Petra I i obrazovanie Russiiskoi Imperii," (The Foreign Policy of Peter I and the Formation of the Russian Empire), Istoriicheskii Zhurnal, (Historical Journal), 1938, #6, pp. 43, 46, 47, 52.


10. Ibid., p. 270.


13. Ibid.


16. Ibid., p. 72.

17. V. Bonch-Bruevich, "Iz neopublikovannoi perepiski Petra I s Katskim Koroliom Frederikom IV," (From the Unpublished Correspondence of Peter I with the Danish King Frederick IV), Istoriicheskii Zhurnal, 1943, #11-12, p. 84.


19. Ibid., p. 50.


23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., p. 48.
25. Concerning economic and military differences see: Kafengauz, Vneshniaia politika . . . , p. 64; Severnaia Voina . . . , pp. 29-30; T. K. Krylova, "Rossiia i 'Velikii Soiuz'"; (Russia and the Great Alliance') Istoricheskie Zapiski (Historical Notes), 1941, #13, pp. 87, 123. On the question of diplomatic and military assistance see: Kafengauz, Severnaia Voina . . . , p. 483; Vneshniaia politika . . . , pp. 65-66; T. K. Krylova, "Rossiia i 'Velikii Soiuz'", pp. 104-5.

26. See notes #17 and #21 above.

27. V. Bonch-Bruevich, "Iz neopublikovannoi perepiski Petra pervogo o Soiuzе s Angliei," (From the Unpublished Correspondence of Peter I concerning the Alliance with England), Voprosy Istorii, 1946, #8-9, p. 105.


29. Ibid., p. 136.

30. Ibid., pp. 165-66.


35. A. Markevich, Razgrom Karla, p. 111. The Peace of Pruth was concluded between Peter I and Turkey in the summer of 1711, after Peter’s disastrous campaign against the Turks. Peter wanted to preserve the peace so that he could continue his struggle with Sweden in the north.


40. V. Mavrodin, Petr Pervyi, (Peter I), (Leningrad: 1948), p. 239.

41. J. J. Murray, "Scania and the Northern Alliance," Journal of Modern History, (July, 1944), p. 90. It should be recalled that V. Andreev, in his 1938 article on the activities of the Russian fleet during the Northern War attributed the failure of the 1716 invasion to the indecision of the Danish leaders.


44. Ibid., p. 66.

45. Ibid., p. 72.