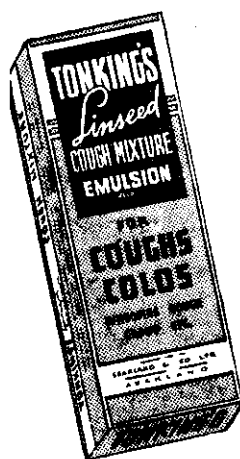


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TWO SIDES TO A CURTAIN

(In this, the third of his series of talks on foreign affairs in the BBC's Third Programme, A. J. P. TAYLOR gives his views on British policy towards the Soviet Union.)

PRESENT policy in relation to the Soviet Union—well, so far as there is one—I should say is something like this: find out what the Russians are doing and tell them not to. The first part of the injunction is not easy to carry out; therefore, the second seems to me executed all the more zealously. We refuse to allow Russia at the Straits the security which we have at Gibraltar and the Suez Canal; we oppose the Yugoslav claims at Trieste; we oppose the Bulgarian claims to an outlet on the Aegean; we protest against the Rumanian elections; we even seek grievances against the indubitably democratic government of Czechoslovakia. The Americans can, at any rate, reinforce their protests with action; they can threaten to starve those countries who do not play according to American rules and do not accept what is called the spiritual and democratic way of life. We protest for the sake of protesting.

This policy might make sense if the British Government was projecting a war against Russia as the advance guard of America, that atomic, spiritual power. But it would be idiotic to suppose that the British Government is projecting any such thing. Its motive, so far as it has one, appears to be the belief that no agreement can be reached with the Russians so long as they are in their present mood of suspicion and isolation and that, therefore, before anything can be done, the Russians have to be convinced that their present policy will not work. "Suspicious of us?" we say. "How absurd. We'll soon cure you of your suspicions by giving you something to be suspicious about."

BUT I think it puts it in the wrong light to talk as if British policy in regard to Russia has, for the most part, a motive or a consistent plan. It simply continues, in my opinion, the distrust of everything Russian which has been a constant element in British policy for more than a century. At the Congress of Vienna, after the defeat of Napoleon, Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary, said he would never be a party to assisting "a Calmuck prince to overrun Europe." Now look at the pictures of the rulers of Europe in 1814, at present on show at Burlington House, and compare the picture of the Tsar Alexander with the pictures of the Emperor of Austria or the King of Prussia. What on earth led a British Foreign Secretary to describe the most intelligent, cultivated, and attractive ruler of his day as a Calmuck prince? Why, he was a Russian—that's explanation enough. Take any episode of international relations you like, from the Congress of Vienna to the present day, and you will find that British diplomats have applied to Russia standards that they would not apply to any other Great Power: have always believed the worst of Russian policy and have always behaved worse themselves as a result. I believe that

there is a historical explanation of this hostility and distrust: the Russians were the only Power who could expand their Empire and even threaten British interests, say in India or China, without having to cross the seas. Look at the difference with France: the French were often a nuisance in Egypt or in central Africa or in Siam, but they had to cross the seas to get there and, so long as we had command of the seas, they had to give way in the last resort. But sea-power could not stop Russia's advance across Asia. In other words the wickedness of Russia in the eyes of the rest of the world consists simply in this: she was, and is, a truly independent Power. She could not be brought to heel by sea-power in the past and she cannot be brought to heel by the atomic bomb now.

UNABLE to subordinate Russia to the Anglo-Saxon way of life, we take it out of the Russians by blaming them for all our difficulties: for instance, we try to make out that the present impoverishment of Germany, due to the German effort to conquer the world, is caused—or at least aggravated by the Russian unwillingness to restore an easy-going German capitalism.

But it may be said that British policy has no choice. Quite apart from our economic dependence on America, which compels us to mortgage our future prosperity and to commit our young men to America's military plans, and however unfounded our suspicions of Russia were in the past, this time they are well-founded. Russia, it is said, has taken the place of Germany as the great aggressor Power. Whenever I hear people talk like this, I call to mind the judgment passed on British policy after the first German war: "We treated the Germans as though they were English and the French as though they were Germans." I won't say whom we are treating as though they were English now; but it is obvious that we are transferring to the Russians all the faults that we once saw in the Germans—a mistake, I believe, as gross and likely to be as terrible in its consequences as when we made it with the French.

IN my opinion, an opinion that is solidly based on known facts, Russia has neither the power nor the will to follow an aggressive policy. The friends of Russia, and the Russians themselves, have done Russia great harm by exaggerating Russian strength. Russia conducted a great defensive war, the greatest in history, and at the cost of sacrifices without parallel destroyed the bulk of the German army. But she is not an industrial giant as America is; there is only one giant in the world to-day. At present the productive power of Russia is about on a level with our own; and Russia has not got the reserves of centuries of wealth on which we can still draw. Russia could, no doubt, wage another defensive war if she had to; a war of aggression is not within her grasp, and it is not within her will either.