The Russian Foreign Ministry and the Alliance with Germany, 1878-1884: A Reappraisal

The Russian government's decision to join the Three Emperors' Alliance of 1881 followed on the heels of a resounding diplomatic setback. Having defeated Turkey in the short but costly Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), and having drawn up a profitable peace treaty at San Stefano, Russia consented to come to Berlin in order to resolve the Eastern Crisis at a general European congress pledged to act with "justice" and "equity" for all. But the Western powers were not inclined to allow the Treaty of San Stefano to stand. Led by Great Britain, they were determined to protect their interests in the East and to undo the Russian gains in the Balkans, especially in Bulgaria. As a result, the Congress of Berlin (June 13—July 13, 1878) denied the Russians the fruits of San Stefano and gave them instead the much more limited Treaty of Berlin. Although the outcome was a public humiliation for which Germany was ultimately blamed, barely a year later Russia was negotiating an alliance with both Germany and Austria.

The temptation has been great to explain this curious development as a further indication of Russian dependence on Otto von Bismarck and his new German state. Bismarck's impact on international relations is certainly beyond question, and traditional historiography consistently portraits Russia reacting in one way or another to the German chancellor and his policies. Thus, the tradition runs, if the Russian government hoped to protect its interests in the Straits or the Balkans1 or to prevent the rise of a hostile European coalition,2 it could do so only with the help of Germany. If, on the other hand, the Russians expected to protect themselves from the machinations of the unpredictable Bismarck, they could do so only by binding Germany to Russia in a close alliance.3 Indeed, the tradition neatly complements Bismarck's own view that his influence was paramount in bringing Russia into the Three Emperors' Alliance. There is more truth than error in the theme that Russia's interests could best be served by means of an accommodation with the German powers. The traditional tendency, however, to concentrate on Russia's need to deal with Bismarck and in particular on the roles played by Bismarck, the Russian foreign minister, Prince A. M. Gorchakov, and the Russian emperor, Alexander II, has obscured two aspects of the entire question that merit consideration. First, the role of the Russian Foreign Ministry itself has been overshadowed. The actual decision to join Germany and Austria in an alliance was neither Gorchakov's nor Alexander II's; it was rather a decision of subordinate members of the Foreign Ministry. The decision was reached in the presence of and without consideration for intensely anti-German public opinion, obstructionism on the part of the foreign

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minister, and vacillation on the part of the emperor. Behind the decision lay deep concern over Russia's international position and growing alarm over her domestic crisis. The former was responsible for the decision to seek the alliance, the latter for a second decision of great importance, namely to renew the alliance virtually unchanged in 1884. Secondly, the circumstances surrounding the crucial decision to join the German powers in a new alliance suggest that in this instance, during a time of foreign and internal crisis affecting the very autocracy of Russia, foreign policy was not being directed or dictated from above but was being formulated and carried out by the Russian bureaucracy itself.

The appearance of deterioration in Russo-German relations following the Congress of Berlin was deceptive. Public opinion in Russia placed the blame for the humiliation at Berlin on both Germany and Bismarck, but only gradually. The foreign minister, Prince Gorchakov, carried on a public campaign of denunciation against his old enemy, Bismarck, but in reality his only aim was to divest himself of the tainted image of Berlin. It would soon appear that Gorchakov was far more intent upon shifting the blame to his own assistant at the Congress, the Russian ambassador to London, Count Peter Shuvalov, than upon blaming even Bismarck or upon repairing the damaged relationship with

4. See the following: W. L. Langer, European Alliances and Alignments (New York, 1931), p. 171; Stephen Lukashevich, Ivan Aksakov 1823-1886, A Study in Russian Thought and Politics (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 141; Irene Gruning, Die russische öffentliche Meinung und ihre Stellung zu den Grossmachten 1878-1894 (Berlin, 1929), pp. 60-61. The Panslavists led the campaign against the Congress and its results. They first blamed Russia's own statesmen, and their fiery leader, Ivan Aksakov, came near to calling Alexander II a traitor. But as the actual details of the Congress became better known, they began to aim their criticism at Bismarck. Despite a tradition of Russo-German friendship and despite Bismarck's promise to do what he could to protect Russia's interests at the Congress, the suspicion spread that the German chancellor had not been Russia's friend at all but had used the Congress to engineer her diplomatic defeat. The outbreak of tariff disputes between Russia and Germany heightened these suspicions, and the situation was not helped when the German and Austrian governments placed quarantines on trade and travel to and from Russia in the name of containing the plague which broke out in Central Russia in 1878. The tardiness of the German and Austrian governments in removing the quarantines after the plague had dissipated was seen by many Russians as a legacy of the Congress of Berlin. For accounts of the tariff disputes and the plague, see Sigrid Kumpf-Korfes, Bismarcks "Draht nach Russland" (Berlin, 1968), pp. 5-8, and H. Heibronner, "The Russian Plague of 1878-1879," Slavic Review, XXI, 1 (March 1962), 89-112.

5. The strained relationship between Gorchakov and Bismarck culminated in 1879 in an open feud of great bitterness. Gorchakov had been angered and humiliated at the Congress of Berlin and he seemed to place all the blame on Bismarck. Diplomatic gossip whispered that he had expected to cap his career with a great triumph at Berlin and to retire afterwards to everlasting fame. Instead, he was saddled with the Treaty of Berlin which he treated like a curse, calling it the "darkest page" of his entire life. See B. Waller, "Bismarck and Gorchakov in 1879: The Two Chancellors' War," in K. Bourne and D. C. Watts, eds., Studies in International History—Essays Presented to W. Norton Medlicott (Hamden, Conn., 1967), pp. 219-235. See also S. K. Bushuev, A. M. Gorchakov (Moscow, 1961), p. 107.

The German ambassador to St. Petersburg, General von Schweinitz, reported that Gorchakov, then in his eighties, was refusing to retire in defeat and was proclaiming it his "patriotic duty" to remain in office at "this moment of foreign and domestic crisis." See Schweinitz to Bismarck, 27 February 1879, German Foreign Ministry Archives, Russia, No. 61, I, 56-60. [Referred to hereafter as GFM].