

Web 5.4

Case Study 5.3: Student commentaries: examples

Group 1's Commentary on the Overy passage

The article's assertion that Stalin's foreign policy focused on defence is well grounded, with Stalin favouring Litvinov's idea of Collective Security Against Fascism as the basis of his actions. Stalin primarily wanted to secure the safety of the Soviet Union, neglecting the World Revolution that classic Marxism centred on. Such ideas were expressed by M. Pankrashova and V. Sipols in "Why War was not Prevented", in which it is said that "...the only way to preserve the security of the USSR...was for the Soviet government to accept the proposal made...by the German government to sign a non-aggression pact..." Indeed, Comintern was not used to spread Communism as would perhaps have been ideologically sound, but was instead hijacked by Stalin as a means of securing the Soviet state and its interests.

On the subject of Soviet Foreign Policy, Overy appears to side with the German school of history, which states that Stalin maintained a preference for German alliance, and that Stalin aimed to see capitalism destroy itself via conflicts between capitalist powers.

Overy's assertion that the Nazi-Soviet Pact "...defied the logic of the confrontation between communism and fascism..." could perhaps be contested, when the ideological similarities of Stalinism and Nazism are considered. Both Stalinism and Nazism relied on totalitarian methods of control, and as Cambridge historian Martin Ruehl has argued, fascism had some form of left-wing revolutionary affinities, in terms of its reactionary, popular opposition to liberal democracy.

Group 5's Commentary on the Overy passage

Overy states that Stalin's ideological motivation is, in his rhetoric, world revolution. However in practice he never actually did anything to extend this cause – was following much more a course of socialism in one country. Although Stalin got involved in the Spanish Civil War, the overall input by the Soviet Union in the conflict was minimal. Stalin could've intervened much more and created a Soviet Satellite in Europe. However, he did not as he thought that having a Soviet Satellite near France could push France to take a more Pro-Nazi line as they could be afraid of Socialism spreading. However Bell takes a different school of thought on Stalin's foreign policy. He believes that the only reason that Stalin made a non-aggression pact with Hitler was not for any ideological reasons, but because Britain and France could not offer him anything, whereas Hitler could. This goes against Overy's idea that Stalin's policy was "defensive and reactive"; as it could be said that Stalin was actively pursuing Soviet interest by gaining more territory in Eastern Europe. However to contradict Bell's

view and in support of Overy the soviet historians Pankrashova and Sipols argue that "Under the circumstances the only possible way to preserve the security of the USSR... Was for the Soviet government to accept the proposal made by the German government to sign a non-aggression pact". This therefore supports Overy's view. However these Historians are undoubtedly biased as they were writing in Soviet Russia and had to follow the official Soviet line. This could then be used to attack Overy's view as he could be following the Soviet school of thought himself.

Hitler never hid his intent for a war with Soviet Russia, stating this in his book "Mein Kampf", with his thoughts of Lebensraum. Although sometimes rhetoric conflicts with actions, Overy agrees that Hitler had always intended to have a war with Russia, even stating that Hitler "longed for it". Hitler seemed to assert from the start, expressed explicitly in his Mein Kampf that he wanted 'living space' for what he considered to be the master race, and it could be argued that war was therefore an idea that he held when he thought of how to achieve this space. Richard Overy therefore seems to be justified in saying that Hitler had wanted war from the start, "to forge a tough new community of Germans".

Therefore, to conclude, although Overy mentions Stalin's ideology as being "defensive and reactive", it could be argued that he is wrong in this assumption and that actually Stalin followed a policy to directly advance Soviet interests.