PART 2: RUSSIA IN THE POST-NAPOLEONIC WORLD

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How successful was Russian foreign policy from the Peace of Paris to its renunciation in 1871?

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Abstract: The Two Articles have sought to tackle the two most important areas of Russian history in the post-Napoleonic world. In Part One was presented Russia's hegemony of and leadership in Europe during the first four decades following the Napoleonic War when Russian power and prestige stood at its zenith. But, as the article argued, stagnant and backward political, economic and military factors had ensured Russia's enemies an overwhelming advantage in the Crimean War that broke out in 1853, so much so that by 1856 Russia had been brought to its knees and unable to defend her sovereign territory. Her power in the Black Sea and over Ottoman Turkey was stripped away, her naval power had been mauled, and she was left dangerously isolated and financially exhausted, entering the second half of the nineteenth century as a weakened second rate power, with Russia's fortune at its nadir. It is with this in mind that Part Two looks to examine Russian foreign policy in the following decades of the Peace of Paris in an effort to understand Russia's successful attempt to regain its Great Power position among the European nations with the renunciation of the peace treaty in 1871. How Russia had accomplished this, by what means, and to what degree of success, is the concluding theme to the Two Articles presented on Imperial Russia in the post-Napoleonic War.

“I understand only one policy,” announced Tsar Alexander III, “to exact from every situation all that is needed by and is useful to Russia…We can have no other policy except one that is purely Russian and national; this is the only policy we can and must follow.”(1) The decades between the Treaty of Paris in 1856 that ended the Crimean War to the renunciation of the treaty’s terms in 1871 were challenging times for Russia. Her defeat at the hands of a coalition of powers during the Crimean War shook the foundations of the Russian state. The Tsarist regime was under attack, a series of startling but ultimately disillusioning reforms were inaugurated and the tides of discontent and revolution rippled around the Empire. The domestic situation demanded a foreign policy that would prevent the humiliation and turmoil caused by the Crimean War by protecting Russian borders, while simultaneously regaining her position as a Great Power in the ‘Concert of Europe’. How successful these aims were, and the way in which Russia conducted her foreign policy in support of these, must be examined in conjunction with Russia’s actions in Europe, in Asia, and ultimately within her own borders. The degree of success that accompanied these policies were perhaps the most influential factors in considering Russia between her two major political events of the mid-late nineteenth century.
In the aftermath of the Peace of Paris, Russia stood as a defeated and humiliated power. Her aggressive designs upon the Ottoman Empire in 1853 triggered the formation of a coalition of powers that not only stopped the Russian advance along the Danube, but landed an army on the shores of the Crimea and invaded sovereign Russian territory, defeating all attempts to stop it. The fall of Sebastopol and Russia’s inability to defend its heartland exposed the weakness of the military and the inherent failure of foreign policy so closely bound to the Tsarist regime(2). When Russia was stripped of land and denied naval access to its very own shores around the Black Sea, the humiliation became synonymous with the competence of the Tsar as head of state. As the Slavophile Iurii Samarin declared: “We were defeated not by the external forces of the Western alliance, but by our own internal weakness.”(3) Prominent men like Boris Chicherin, professor of Law at Moscow University, began to question the usefulness of the autocratic regime altogether: “in an autocracy…the government is made up of conflicting elements who carry on a muffled struggle amongst themselves, and the supreme authority itself supports them in this…but this struggle is a futile waste of energy.”(4) The Crimean War not only questioned the ability of the Tsarist regime to defend Russia and uphold its interests, then, but also its competence as a form of government, and the Tsar as rightful head of the state - so interlinked were the Tsar and his role as commander of the Russian armies. Alexander II was quick to realise that something had to be done to protect his throne against the general dissatisfaction and outright discontent of the people in the wake of the Peace of Paris. It was decided that the Russian state needed reforming, not only to appease the people and secure his regime, but in order to bring the country inline with those of the West who so effectively crushed the Russian ability to defend itself(5). The first, and most significant, was the intended emancipation of the serfs: “It is better to abolish serfdom from above,” announced Alexander in 1856, “than to await the day when it will begin to abolish itself from below.”(6) Many more reforms followed, from the formation of judicial bodies and representative institutions to the encouragement of industry and the development of infrastructure. Russia was down, but not out. She was a revisionist power, and Alexander needed time to quell discontent and secure his regime by implementing his reforms and developing the resources of his country to regain Russia’s rightful place as one of the Great Powers(7). It was as a reaction to this need that Tsar Alexander and his foreign minister, Prince Gorbachev, set out to forge a foreign policy that would make sure Russia was kept well defended so that she could focus on internal problems, while simultaneously promoting Russia’s interests abroad - after all, success abroad, no matter how limited, would deflect attention away from internal problems(8).

Leadership of Europe in the post-Crimean world passed from St. Petersburg to Paris, and for a time Napoleon III’s France occupied Russia’s role of supervising the settlement drawn up at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. France, however, was not a conservative autocracy, concerned with the preservation of sprawling, monarchical states(9). She was, in the eyes of the conservative eastern states, dangerously liberal and revolutionary, continuously changing her government. Under Napoleon III, for example, France dismantled her republic and changed, once again, in to an empire. To Tsarist Russia, indeed to all the conservative monarch’s of the east who depended on stability and security to preserve their thrones and the Vienna settlement of 1815, such revolutionary behaviour was a dangerous threat, likely to explode in the warfare that
engulfed all of Europe for over two decades under Napoleon III’s uncle(10). But Russia’s virtual isolation in 1858 was a perilous position for a power so vulnerable and troubled(11). It was this isolation, then, coupled with domestic considerations, that required Russian foreign policy to gravitate toward a strong partner, or coalition, in which Russia would remain secure and safe from future aggression and, in her current state, almost certain defeat. Furthermore, the years following the Peace of Paris in 1856 were bitter and vengeful ones in Russian minds. Her defeat and humiliation caused resentment and a changing of attitudes among official circles. Austria-Hungary, who in 1848 Russia had aided with an army of 100,000 men to restore order in Hungary after severe uprisings shook the Habsburg monarchy to its core, had contributed to Russia’s defeat in 1856 by siding with the allies(12). Mobilizing her army along the Galician border, she delivered an ultimatum to Russia that, due to continuous defeat in the Crimean peninsula and Russia's exhausted and broken war effort, could not be ignored. Despite France’s revolutionary nature, Russia’s vulnerable isolation, precarious internal situation, and demand for revenge, all combined to create a less than traditional movement for alliance with France - a shocking break with the conservative past(13).

It was not just French strength in comparison to the other powers - Prussia being relatively weak, though loyal, Britain back in her splendid isolation, and Austria-Hungary remaining unforgivable - that set Russia on a course of cooperation with France. Rather, eastern, monarchical suspicion of liberal, revolutionary France was far from unfounded. Indeed, soon after France had crushed Russian aggression in the Near East, she turned to Northern Italy in conjunction with the Italian states in an effort to expel the Habsburg’s from their holdings, and unite Italy - though the latter not being entirely Napoleon’s plan(14). “My policy is very simple,” declared Napoleon to the English ambassador in Paris, Lord Cowley, “when driven in to a war with Russia… I humoured Austria in the hopes that she would assist me in this great work. She failed me, and after peace was made, I looked to the amelioration of Italy.”(15) The failure Napoleon had in mind for his casus belli was the restoration of Poland. As with Italy, Napoleon believed it his grand mission to liberate the subjected people’s of Europe - just as his grand father claimed to do. For Russia, her foreign policy was not such a break with the past as the intentional support of liberal revolutionary across Europe, but rather the immediate redressing of the balance of Europe that the Tsarist regime believed was due in the face of Austrian treachery(16). When Alexander and Napoleon met at Stuttgart, they came to a general agreement to consult each other on all matters of European interest, and a pledge to avoid the sort of coalition forming that so ruined Russia during the Crimean War(17). When French and Piedmont troops thrashed the Austrians out of Italy in 1859, the Russians mobilized along the same Galician frontier that Austrian troops had so threateningly manned during Russia’s perilous days in 1855, and, pinning down a hundred and fifty thousand Austrian troops, contributed to the French and Italian victory(18). Stripped of her Italian territories and thoroughly chastened, the Habsburg monarchy was the first victim in Russia’s desire for revenge on those powers that brought her star crashing down. France and Russia cooperated further in the Balkans where, against the efforts of Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey, they helped unite the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in to a stronger Rumanian state, placed the pro-Russian Milos Obrenovic on the Serbian throne, and aided a revolt of the Montenegrins(19). With Russia’s two most hostile neighbours suitably dealt with for
their contribution in Russia’s defeat, she could look on the French entente as a success. In the most vulnerable post-Crimean world, Alexander and Gorchakov had managed to maintain strong ties with the pre-dominant power in Europe, used that relationship to chasten her unruly neighbours, and so subsequently kept Britain and France divided. Furthermore, Russia had done all of this without committing herself at all. When Napoleon desired for an actual military contribution from Russia in the Austrian war, the idea was politely brushed aside, and even the form of Russia’s benevolent neutrality would not be spoken of specifically(20). “Russia has no direct interest in the affairs of Italy,” wrote Gorchakov, “we have no desire…to pull chestnuts out of the fire for others, and our good friends will be surprised at the passive role they will see us playing.”(21) This was not realpolitik of the Bismarckian kind, but an honest desire for Russia to remain part of a secure and defensive relationship with a strong partner, while simultaneously being able to promote her own interests without getting too involved(22).

Russia’s ride across Europe on the back of French power was always a precarious situation. A complete break with traditional foreign policy going back forty-years, the French entente may have seemed a smarting success to deeply humiliated Russian diplomats, but in reality it was a period of foreign policy that displayed Russian weakness, more than a resurge in power - a reflection, as always, of Russian internal circumstance. While France and Russia roamed about the European stage, supporting revolution and redrawing the sacred map of Europe, once upheld so vigorously by Nicholas I, the unification of so many states in to nations had a rippling effect. In 1863, the Poles of Russia erupted in to revolt and could only be suppressed with great brutality. France, champion of liberties - and with her Polish plans still unfulfilled - was one among many nations to sympathize with the instigators(23). Russia, ever mindful of the devastating effects of coalitions, was threatened in her most sensitive spot. The Polish province not only constituted a politically volatile area within the Russian Empire, but also a strategically vulnerable one. As her foreign policy during this post-Crimean period demanded security and defence in a time of radical and unstable internal reform, Russia could not afford to become isolated once again(24). A report in 1863 by the Minister of War stated: “This situation, which is extremely unfavourable to us must, as far as possible, be eliminated by publishing in Europe…of the best work of the Russian press on this topic.”(25) The desperation to avoid isolation from hostility by the other powers was a consistent theme in foreign policy after the Crimean War. “The foreign press which was so hostile to Russia in 1863,” continued the report, “is now much more restrained and we can boast that this favourable change has, to a significant degree, been brought about by this lithographed publication.”(26) If the Tsarist regime managed to successfully avert Western hostility, it did not succeed in maintaining the French entente. Though defence and foreign opportunities were a large part of Russian policy during this period, as Alexander was to state in 1881, “we can have no other policy except one that is purely Russian and national.”(27) An area as sensitive to Russian minds as the Polish province could not, at all costs, be threatened. Fortunately for Russia at this time, the issue was shared by Prussia, that loyal state during the Crimean War. “The Russian and Prussian courts note that the events which are taking place in Poland,” declared the Russo-Prussian Convention in 1863, require “mutual cooperation”(28). Furthermore, the two powers would allow their respective “frontier
to be crossed to pursue rebels who have crossed from one country into the other.”(29) A further secret article agreed on political cooperation and information sharing. Prussia, at this stage, did not have the strength or influence of France, but in the face of growing French antagonism and dominance it would prove a loyal counterweight, practical guard for Russia’s western frontier, and supporter for Russia’s ultimate goal of regaining her place among the Great Powers by wriggling free of the humiliating shackles of the Peace of Paris(30). Russia’s flirtation with France, although it had, for a time, secured Russia, chastened Habsburg power, and aided her interests in the Balkans against the Ottoman Empire, it had also severely altered the balance of power in Europe to Napoleon’s favour, encouraged revolution, and ultimately caused major disruption within Russia’s own borders - the one thing Alexander and Gorchakov had aimed to prevent.

“Russia has been unified for a long time in her greatness and her national unity,” announced Gorchakov’s chief assistant, “her territorial security is perfectly in order due to her defensive resources…What is now necessary is the development of her internal life…Her foreign policy should thus be purely preventative and defensive.”(31) With Russia’s period of diplomatic adventurism ending in a self-defeatist explosion, she settled down to a period of estrangement from European affairs. Russia was never isolated, of course, for she was a continental power and did not possess the complete withdrawal abilities of Britain, for example(32). Her extensive and vulnerable frontiers demanded a capable partner, and until the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, this is what Russia received in the guise of Prussia. But just as in her French alliance, the mutual cooperation between Russia and Prussia was to prove, in the end, counterproductive. “I was convinced,” recalled N. P. Ignatev, Russian ambassador to Constantinople from 1864 to 1877, “that our diplomacy should pursue…The abrogation of the Treaty of Paris. The honour and dignity of Russia should be satisfied by restoring her rights to ownership of the Black Sea coast and her dominance in the Black Sea itself by the return of the areas ceded in 1856.”(33) Ignatev was not alone in his opinion, for despite the defence and security of Russia, the prime aim of foreign policy during this period was to be free of the deep humiliation of 1856, and return once again to the European stage as an equal. The benevolent neutrality shown to Prussia throughout the 1860’s in her conflicts with Denmark and Austria-Hungary were part of that refrained policy of the 60’s that enabled Russia to court favour and trust for when the time came to renounce the Treaty of Paris, and more specifically the Black Sea clause. Until that time could be revealed, the 1860’s, remained a period of restraint and passivity in Russian foreign policy. Tsar Alexander II began implementing the first of his Great Reforms, and thus there could be no disruptive, external forces. But that is not to suggest that a forward foreign policy could not be pursued. Indeed, Russia took on a revived imperial role from the 1860’s, as she looked east, rather than west, for her fortunes. For if she found it necessary to remain impotent in Europe during this period, it did not mean that she had to remain completely passive.

Although Russia had been an Asian power since Peter the Great, her territories did not extend beyond Central Asia. Indeed, with the exception of the British in India and the French in Indo-China, there remained a vast power vacuum from the Moslem Khanates to Korea. When Russian fortunes declined in Europe and her bid for
Constantinople was thwarted by the Western powers, her armies were released in to the East. The Prussian alliance kept Russia’s European flank secured and acted as a counterweight to a much weakened Austria-Hungary, especially after her defeat by Prussia in 1864(34). There were many factors that influenced the spectacular conquests of the east, so stark compared to Russia’s position in the west. Out on the periphery of Empire, Russian foreign policy was dictated far more by the men-on-the-spot than by the Tsar in St. Petersburg, as one contemporary observed: “A positive fever for further conquest raged among our troops - an ailment to cure which no method of treatment was effective…those of the officers who were entrusted with any sort of independent command carried into effect their individual schemes.”(35) A general’s own theory of empire and imperialism were coupled with every man’s desire to gain the kind of glory Russia had been denied in Europe: “It was, indeed, impossible that such desires should be resisted when by gratifying them it was possible for a lieutenant in four years to become a general.”(36) As was most common in this period, internal factors in the Russian system mostly formed foreign policy. The first of these was commercial, for the encouragement of industry as part of Alexander’s Great Reforms required the opening up of new markets for raw materials, and their export value as a destination for Russia’s newly manufactured goods. The great Asian thrust of the 1860’s and onwards was, the War and Foreign Ministries agreed, for “commercial and political benefits to the Russian empire.”(37) The opening up of new markets went hand in hand with securing the vulnerable and extensively open borders of the Russian steppe lands. Indeed, when the drive towards Persia and Afghanistan had been completed by the 1880’s, the breadth of conquest was so large, incorporating all of the Central Asian khanates such as Turkestan, Khiva, Bokhara, Kokand and the Transcaspian lands, that fears were aroused in far away Europe, so much so that Gorchakov was impelled to issue a justification: “The position of Russia in Central Asia is the same as the position of any civilised state which comes into contact with a semi-barbarous people,” he explained, “the interests of frontier security and of trade relations always require that the more civilised state acquires a certain power over its neighbours.”(38) Despite European concerns, mostly from the British - mindful as always of Russian thrusts toward India - Russian expansion continued at a spectacular rate. Lands were acquired diplomatically from both China in the treaties of Aigun and Peking, and Japan with the partition of the Sakhalin and Kurile islands(39). By 1870 Russia’s frontier reached the Pacific coast and spread down toward the Korean border. That Russia had become an Asian power just as much as a European one was powerfully demonstrated by the new naval base of the aptly named Vladivostok, ‘Lord of the East.’(40) But if it seemed as though Russian foreign policy had emerged triumphantly in the east, the actual situation was just as much a failure as it had been in the west. Newly acquired Far Eastern possessions were far too isolated in the still premature age of railway construction for them to sustain any impressionable Russian growth, as colonists were put off by the 45 day journey by ship and the one year route over land, and subsequent Chinese and Korean immigrants established themselves in overwhelming numbers(41). Undeveloped colonies remained cut-off, and agricultural prospects unrealised. Furthermore, the lack of a sizeable merchant marine and the poorly developed infrastructure of the Siberian and Far Eastern territories retarded trade and restricted the opportunities offered by Asian markets(42). Although Vladivostok would become a great port by the turn of the century, during the period between the Peace of Paris and the Russo-Turkish War, there was neither the capital nor the labour to develop it as a substantial base for Russian military power. And ultimately, Russia was never
free from its European policies. When Cherniaev, ‘the Lion of Tashkent’, invaded the fertile lands around Suzak, Colonel Verevkin worried that “Suzak’s conquest…would be wonderful, but I fear it might lead to unpleasant queries from St. Petersburg and cause a furor in the political world…because of our tense relations with England.”(43) Governor Bezak reinforced fears for the Suzak expedition: “I promised the foreign minister not to start hostilities in Central Asia during tension with the western powers.”(44) Though her conquests were efficient and vast, Russia’s Asian expansion was more spectacular to the popular imagination than as a successful foreign policy to counteract the failures and humiliations suffered in Europe since Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War. Though heroes were made out of men like Cherniaev, pan-Slavists and supporters of a grand, Russian expansionist policy were far more concerned with European policy than they ever were about the dusty wastes of the Asian steppes(45).

Though Russia’s immediate foreign policy aims of defence and security were achieved in Europe during the 1860’s, her support of Prussia and self-imposed estrangement from the continent to focus on domestic issues and Asian expansion left a volatile power vacuum in central Europe(46). The German Wars of Unification and the rise of Germany as the leading military power in Europe was to have grave, unforeseen consequences for Russia. But through the eyes of contemporaries it was an opportunity not to be missed by a revisionist and waiting Russia, seeking quietly the moment to finally cast off the shackles of the Peace of Paris. Under the direction of Bismarckian realpolitika, Prussia had managed to hoodwink Europe through her victories against Denmark and Austria-Hungary in the 1860’s to unite the splintered and various German principalities under her own leadership. Russia’s policy was one of continued support and benevolent neutrality, to not only earn a lengthy respite from the European scene to focus on internal development, but also for Prussia’s own support when the time came to renounce the Treaty of Paris(47). When Bismarck managed to bait Napoleon into declaring war in 1870, Prussia’s last obstacle to German unification was removed. German troops poured across the Rhine and swept down on to Paris, which fell to a superior mobilization of resources, and artillery, in 1871 - the Prussian king being proclaimed Emperor during the peace talks(48). Russia’s part in Prussian success was undoubtedly significant. By remaining neutral, Austria was kept back from any ideas of coming to France’s aid, and enabled Prussia to focus all manpower on her Western frontier. “Prussia will never forget,” gushed the new German Emperor, William, “that she owes it to you that the war has not taken on extreme dimensions.” In reply, Alexander wrote back: “Let the friendship which unites us assure the happiness and glory of our two countries.”(49) While the rest of the world stood aghast and pondered the defeat of the strongest continental power, Russia finally realized the ambitions its foreign policies had long been grasping for. Europe, declared Gorchakov, “was lifted from her hinges by this war”, and the state of Europe necessitated a major conference on important matters of moment, including those dealt with in the Treaty of Paris(50). Finally, with France occupied, Austria-Hungary in no position to resist, Britain isolated and Germany willing, Gorchakov, at the Tsar’s request, sent out a circular to all Russian embassies abroad: “The Tsar…declares that he can no longer consider himself bound by the undertakings in the treaty of March 1856, insofar as they limit his sovereign rights in the Black Sea.”(51) Furthermore, the ambassadors were “to make it clear that the Tsar has in view solely the security and dignity of his empire…He desires only to preserve and strengthen peace.”(52) Russia’s renunciation of the Black Sea clause was confirmed,
in the absence of practical resistance, at the London Conference in March of that year, where a new Straits settlement was written up to accommodate Russia’s new position. Russian foreign policy had ensured the success of the Tsar’s daring fait accompli in fostering ties with Prussia and supporting her by amassing 300,000 troops on Austria’s border during the Franco-Prussian war. Russia’s part in the unification of Germany guaranteed her that triumphant power’s support and protection at the beginning of the 70’s, allowing the Tsar to inform Europe, in the Great Power manner, that the dignity of his empire was too important to take notice of the terms dictated to it, as a defeated power, fifteen years previously. But Russia had unwittingly stood by why a power even greater and more militarized than France emerged on to the European scene, and in an even more menacing position, politically and geographically, than any of the Great Powers were. Tsarist Russia was now confronted with a powerfully united Germany, and Berlin, not Paris, London, or St. Petersburg, would dictate European affairs - a course that would ultimately topple the Romanov dynasty.

Cosmetically, Russian foreign policy in the period between the Treaty of Paris in 1856 and the renunciation of its terms in 1871 seemed to be conducted with success and reinvigorated power. Her immediate alignment with France allowed Russia the blood-free ability to take part in the stripping of Austrian and Ottoman power in Italy and the Balkans respectively. French power was strong and projective enough to keep Russia from being isolated and in danger of coalition hostility that had so ruined it in the Crimean War. But the encouragement of revolutionary movements and the support of a liberal and opportunistic France led to Russia’s own disturbances and troubles in the Polish uprising of 1863, which was crushed only with much difficulty and effort. The break with France and European-wide concern for the revolt’s suppression left Russia dangerously isolated and surrounded by hostile powers, having suffered through Russia’s adventurous foreign policy in the years since her defeat. But once again Russia found a protector and partner in the form of Prussia, whose policies and government were more satisfactory to Russia than France had ever been. From 1863, then, Russia enjoyed a withdrawal from European affairs in the security of Prussian cooperation to focus on internal reforms and expansion across Asia, which was conducted with astounding success and the incorporation of countless conquests. But once again, these were artificial successes. Having left the continent to Prussia, Russia did nothing to control or prevent Prussian success at the expense of her weaker neighbours. Furthermore, her Asian gains could not be properly utilized and were never as profitable as envisaged, while the ideological whims of the pan-Slavists were far more concerned with the Slavs of the Balkans than the Moslems of Asia. Finally, Russian opportunism during Prussia’s defeat of France in 1871 allowed for the creation of a new, dangerous, and ultimately destructive military power, while Russia looked on in encouragement. Though finally regaining her prestige and position as a Great Power with the renunciation of the Black Sea clause that had so humiliated her for the fifteen years since her defeat in the Crimean War, Russian foreign policy had continuously unleashed unwitting forces that were, ultimately, far more damaging than her immediate aims of security from isolation and defence of Russian territory, and the pursuit of Russia’s most treasured interests. Within a generation, St. Petersburg’s subservience to Berlin became unbearable: “In case of war between France and Germany,” announced Alexander III, “we must
immediately throw ourselves upon the Germans…We must correct the mistakes of the past and crush Germany at the first opportunity.”(53)

Footnotes


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