

Soviet Diplomacy: Waging and Winning Its Own War. Introduction to the Forum¹

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Abstract. This editorial introduces a series of papers based on presentations made at the “Soviet Diplomacy during World War II” conference held at MGIMO on June 30, 2023. It draws attention to notable aspects of Soviet diplomacy during the wartime period. First, it highlights the persistence of Soviet diplomats and their negotiating skills despite significant divergences in interests and approaches. Second, it discusses their ability to strike a careful balance between maintaining one’s position and employing flexibility and pragmatism to achieve the ultimate objective of victory over the enemy. Third, the article examines the history of international negotiations during the Second World War as an illustration of the clash between and interaction of prominent political figures, notably emphasizing how Joseph Stalin often outplayed his counterparts in this personalized “diplomacy of leaders.” The history of the Second World War eloquently shows that diplomacy is crucial both in times of war and in the transition to peace, as well as in the establishment of a new global order.

Keywords: Second World War, Soviet diplomacy, Joseph Stalin, USSR, world order

On June 30, 2023, MGIMO University of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted a research-to-practice conference titled “Soviet Diplomacy during World War II.” The conference was initiated by A.V. Torkunov, MGIMO Rector and a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the discussions confirmed the topic’s significant relevance.

At the opening, A.V. Torkunov conveyed greetings from Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov, who highlighted the crucial role of Soviet diplomacy in forming the anti-Hitler coalition, securing the second front opening, thwarting efforts to draw several states into the war on Nazi Germany’s side, and ultimately advancing the Great Victory.

¹ English translation from the Russian text: Barsky K.M. 2023. O sovetskoy diplomatii, kotoraya vela svoyu voynu i pobedu. Vstupitel'naya stat'ya. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* [MGIMO Review of International Relations]. No. 16 (6). P. 7-12. DOI: 10.24833/2071-8160-2023-6-93-7-12

The minister's message also stressed the urgent need to study Soviet diplomatic experience during the war, especially in the current context of renewed aggression against Russia by the collective West, which can be described as an "echo of the times."

In his introductory remarks, A.V. Torkunov underscored that alongside the Red Army's heroic efforts in defeating the enemy, the "diplomatic accompaniment of the war" was equally vital, involving cooperation with allies, neutralizing adversaries, and planning for post-war arrangements.

Overall, it is important to recognize that the diplomatic history of World War II has been extensively researched both domestically and internationally. However, shifts in geopolitical dynamics – such as the strategies pursued by the United States and its allies to reshape global power, eliminate rivals, suppress dissent, and maintain Western dominance; the use of hybrid warfare aimed at delivering a "strategic defeat" to Russia; information warfare targeting our country; efforts to erase Russian contributions; the gross vilification of Russia; and the rewriting of history, including that of World War II – compel us to reevaluate familiar facts with fresh perspectives.

The USSR's fight against Hitler's fascism and later Japanese militarism during the war represents a pivotal chapter in 20th-century international relations that must not be forgotten, regardless of attempts to do so. Beyond this, Russian society increasingly recognizes that the valor of the Soviet people, the Red Army, the home front workers, and the triumph of May 1945 form a crucial part of our historical memory and national identity. Consequently, today we refer to the Great Patriotic War, study it, and explore its various dimensions through new lenses, deeper understanding, and shifting emphases.

Diplomats also played a significant role in achieving the Great Victory. While their contribution should not be exaggerated, it would be equally mistaken to downplay it. Overlooking the role of Soviet diplomacy during the war would not only do a disservice to history but also ignore a crucial aspect of diplomacy, which undertakes important and complex tasks even in wartime. This understanding is particularly relevant today: diplomacy remains active during conflicts and wars, and studying this history allows us to reevaluate the efforts of our predecessors – the war-generation diplomats – and recognize their strategic insight, tactical decisions, and immense dedication. Furthermore, this knowledge can provide valuable lessons and skills.

One key lesson is the capacity and willingness to negotiate despite significant differences in interests and approaches. During the war, the anti-Hitler coalition countries demonstrated their ability to overcome deep inter-state and ideological conflicts to unite against a common existential threat in pursuit of shared goals. Achieving this unity required determination and initiative, qualities first and foremost exhibited by Soviet diplomacy. Our diplomats led the way, maintaining the initiative throughout the war and advancing decisions that served the collective interest.

The diplomatic history of World War II exemplifies an achievement grounded in military strength and informed by frontline realities, striking a careful balance between steadfastly defending one's position and exercising flexibility and pragmatism to secure the ultimate objective – victory over the enemy. This period clearly showcased

the superiority of the domestic diplomatic tradition and fully revealed the defining qualities of our diplomats: unwavering belief in victory, confidence in their cause, resilience and firmness, deep commitment, readiness for self-sacrifice, and formidable intellectual capacity.

The history of international negotiations during World War II is also notable for illustrating the dynamic interplay and strategic psychological maneuvers among key political leaders. It is widely recognized that in this personalized “diplomacy of leaders,” Joseph Stalin often outmaneuvered his counterparts. Nevertheless, the Soviet side consistently prioritized the goal of securing a collective victory over the enemy. Building on the example set by the Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences, the evolution of global diplomacy came to be increasingly shaped by high-level meetings.

Another reason for emphasizing the study of the diplomatic history of the Great Patriotic War is the pressing need to give this historical period greater prominence in education. At MGIMO, the teaching of Russian diplomatic history rests on a strong foundation: the course is mandatory at the Faculty of International Relations, delivered by highly qualified lecturers, supported by several reputable textbooks, and supplemented by an extensive selection of historical and memoir literature. Nevertheless, this remains insufficient.

It is important to acknowledge that some young Russians, including MGIMO students, influenced by the current severe deterioration in international relations and the radical shifts in global politics – amid blatant violations of fundamental international law and diplomatic norms by Western countries – sometimes begin to question the effectiveness or even the relevance of diplomacy. The example of World War II clearly demonstrates that diplomacy was, is, and will continue to be essential during wartime, in the transition from conflict to peace, and in shaping a new world order.

For some students today, the war that occurred 80 years ago feels like a distant event with little direct relevance to modern Russia or current international relations. There is sometimes a noticeable lack of engagement among young people in the 21st century with the events of the 20th century. While we live in the Russian Federation, it is crucial to remember that our state is the successor to the Soviet Union. Therefore, it is important for Soviet diplomacy to be understood – both historically and emotionally – as the diplomacy of their own country and homeland. This underscores the need to place special emphasis on teaching the diplomatic history of the Great Patriotic War.

The staff of the Soviet Union’s diplomatic missions abroad and the central offices of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (later the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) of the USSR – those who served in diplomacy during the harrowing war years – should stand as role models for future diplomats in managing complex and critical tasks under the most challenging circumstances. Despite their youth – many advisors, envoys, and even some ambassadors were only in their 30s and 40s – they performed their duties with exceptional skill. Today’s MGIMO students have a responsibility to prepare for future challenges not only by gaining knowledge but also by emulating the wartime generation of Soviet diplomats: building strong character, developing re-

silience to stress, learning to operate effectively under pressure, and being ready to undertake any mission.

The conference's exceptional value lay in its comprehensive focus on various aspects of Soviet diplomacy before and during World War II. It highlighted its activities in both the Western and Eastern theaters, addressed the struggle against historical distortion, emphasized the importance of incorporating the war topic into educational curricula, and underscored the mission of preserving the memory of the Great Victory and its heroes.

The most notable presentations were delivered by V.S. Khristoforov, Chief Research Fellow at the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences; N.A. Narochnitskaya, President of the Foundation for the Study of Historical Perspective and Member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation; K.M. Barsky, Head of the Department of Diplomacy (MGIMO); and D.V. Streltsov, Head of the Department of Oriental Studies (MGIMO). Other distinguished speakers included Professor V.O. Pechatnov of the Department of European and American Studies (MGIMO); Professors A.I. Kuznetsov, A.N. Panov, and V.F. Pryakhin of the Department of Diplomacy (MGIMO); Professor Yu.A. Dubinin of the Department of International Relations and Foreign Policy of Russia (MGIMO); Professor S.I. Lunev of the Department of Oriental Studies (MGIMO); Associate Professors A.A. Orlov and R.O. Reinhardt of the Department of Diplomacy (MGIMO); Associate Professor S.M. Monin of the Department of World and Russian History (MGIMO); Associate Professors Yu.P. Laletin and I.V. Dyachkov of the Department of Oriental Studies (MGIMO); Associate Professor I.E. Magadeev of the Department of European and American Studies (MGIMO); A.L. Chechevishnikov, Deputy Director of the Institute for International Studies; S.V. Tuzhilin, Expert of the Society for the Study of the History of Domestic Special Services; G.V. Kuznetsov, Deputy Director of the State Protocol Department at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; S.A. Ovsyannikov, Second Secretary of the First Asian Department at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and I.V. Demyanenko, Director of the Historical and Diplomatic Centre of St. Petersburg State University and Deputy Head of the Representative Office of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in St. Petersburg.

The conference received high commendation from the university leadership. A collection of conference papers will be published, supporting the upcoming celebrations of MGIMO's 80th anniversary in 2024 and the 80th anniversary of the Great Victory in 2025.

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Conflict of interests:

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