

A Socialist in Wartime Russia*

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The book covers the period of Cripps' ambassadorship to Moscow and encompasses a crucial period in world history, when dramatic war time events took place : the German conquest of Europe, British struggle for survival and Russia's transformation from neutrality to active belligerence. The period also witnessed the emergence of Sir Stafford Cripps from relatively obscure but radical member of parliament to full cabinet rank the War Cabinet of 1942.

Sir Stafford Cripps is well known to us in India because of his famous, but abortive mission to India aimed to win Indian support for the war effort in exchange for an interim agreement for self rule and a promise of independence after the war.

The period 1939-41 witnessed a radical change in the balance of power. Britain had lost all her allies on the continent and had to reckon with the least welcome alternative of forging an alliance with the Soviet Union. Russia saw an erosion of the manoeuvrability gained by the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact; she was forced to contend with continuously changing circumstances such as the Winter War, annexation of the Baltic States, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina and frequent reorientation of relations with Britain and Germany.

The British Government's slow adaptation to changing circumstances and the lack of a clear definition of war aims, led to a situation where the diplomatic service had to assume a more than usual role in policy making. After the fall of Europe, the embassies in Washington and Moscow became the most vital legations abroad. It was at this juncture that Cripps was appointed Britain's ambassador to Moscow.

The origins of Cripps' ambassadorship could be traced back to 16 Sep 39, when he had warned of an impending Russo-German understanding if British negotiations with Russia were allowed to lapse. Cripps remained a staunch supporter of Russia through the 1930s. But his socialism was based on concepts of brotherhood, love, freedom, equality and the value of the human individual. His convictions were thus based more on the Bible and

* *Stafford Cripps' Mission to Moscow - 1940-42.* — by Gabriel Gorodetsky, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 361.

assortment of other humanitarian and egalitarian considerations rather than on *Das Kapital*. In fact, his original political thinking cutting across conventional party allegiances, his social origins and standing and eccentricities provoked conflicting and confusing picture by politicians of different convictions.

Cripps held the view that Soviet Foreign policy had turned from the idea of 'International revolution' to one of 'real politic' in which the safety and peace of Russia was the over-riding factor. He even construed Russia's invasion of Finland as a defensive act and the direct result of the 'ignominious neglect and distrust' of Britain and France towards Russia, after Munich. In this, his view was diametrically opposed to those of Churchill.

The period of Cripps' ambassadorship was quite eventful. His tenure was characterised by his endeavours to bridge the gap between Britain and Russia and prevent the latter from going over to the Germans. Although, a known friend of Russia his approach was pragmatic, so much so, that he fell foul with the host country and was not even accorded the normal courtesy of a formal send-off on his recall from the assignment. His performance could be best surmised from the tribute paid by Bagally, who was left in-charge on his departure: ".....to place on record, the regret that I and others who have served under (Cripps) feel the departure of one to whom we are indebted for constant kindness and consideration, as well as the tribute to his qualities which I have received from all quarters of the diplomatic corps.....diplomatic worlds change quickly, but I think Sir Stafford Cripps' appointment will long be remembered at this post".

Cripps rose to a prominent political position after his return from Moscow. His search for a revolutionary post war reconstruction clashed with Churchill's commitment to the war effort and of defending Britain's prewar order. Though a known left winger, Cripps got support from progressive conservatives both inside and outside the Cabinet including Churchill's Cabinet colleagues, notably Eden. He could no longer be excluded from the War Cabinet.

Cripps was a brilliant lawyer. The book highlights his overwhelming confidence in his own mental superiority, his ability to digest vast amounts of material and extract the gist, and his administrative ability.

An interesting and highly readable book which should be an asset to any Library.