Georgi Vasilyevich Chicherin Biography

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Biography

The Soviet statesman Georgi Vasilyevich Chicherin (1872-1936) guided Soviet foreign policy in the years following the foundation of the U.S.S.R.

Born in Tambov Oblast in 1872, Georgi Chicherin was a member of the Russian aristocracy--an unlikely background for a future Bolshevik. After graduating from the University of St. Petersburg, he trained for and later joined the foreign service. During the Revolution of 1905, however, he became involved in the socialist movement, and in 1907 he left Russia. He spent the next decade abroad, mainly in England, where he agitated against World War I. The Russian Revolution of 1917 converted him to bolshevism, and the British jailed him as a "hostile alien" but allowed him to return to Russia early in 1918.

As the only Bolshevik with formal diplomatic training and experience, Chicherin was assigned the post of people's commissar of foreign affairs, succeeding Leon Trotsky. He was strongly in favor of establishing friendly relations with other countries, most importantly Germany, in order to enhance the stability of the Soviet regime. After the failure of the Soviet march on Warsaw in 1920 and the initiation of Lenin's New Economic Policy in 1921, Chicherin was able to pursue his policy of strong ties with Germany and advantageous ties elsewhere.

Chicherin's crowning achievement was the Treaty of Rapallo (1922), in which the pariah nations of the Soviet Union and Germany ratified mutually advantageous diplomatic, economic, and military agreements. Chicherin secured diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union from every major world power except the United States, and he was also successful in normalizing his country's relations with its Moslem neighbors, especially Turkey. He was not able, nor did he seek, to establish comprehensive ties, such as those with Germany, with other foreign powers; in fact, Soviet relations with many nations, notably England, remained very shaky. Chicherin's policies, however, did give the Soviet regime a needed degree of stability in international affairs and thus facilitated development of the New Economic Policy.

Chicherin avoided involvement in the intraparty dispute of the 1920s, but this conflict made his work at the Foreign Office difficult. Moreover, his failing health caused him to give greater power to his deputy Maxim Litvinov, and by the late 1920s Litvinov was in effect the director of Soviet foreign policy. Chicherin formally retired as commissar of foreign affairs in 1930 and spent the next years in semiseclusion. He died on July 7, 1936.