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## THE FRANCO-RUSSIAN ALLIANCE (1891-1894) AND THE LIBERAL PUSH TO CZARIST RUSSIA

RENATA GRAVINA\*

### Summary

The article is a brief excursus on the triggers of the Franco-Russian alliance. The defensive agreement between France and Russia made possible for both to overcome an international isolation. But, especially for Russia, the alliance resulted in a general modernisation, as well as a beginning of a constituent institutionalisation looked upon favourably by the exponents of Russian political liberalism, whose march for freedom would have an apotheosis in the two-year period between 1905 and 1907. The Franco-Russian alliance dissolved within the interweaving of war and revolution known to recent historiography as the continuum of crisis of mobilization and violence. Franco-Russian's unresolved ambiguity among defensive, economic and cultural-ideological principles led on both sides to an irreconcilable coexistence of patriotic and liberal thrusts, particularly with the onset of World War I. Despite this, at the turn of the 19th century the Franco-Russian alliance became a vehicle for the living expression of Russian liberal thought.

**Key Words:** Franco-Russian Alliance; Russian Liberalism; 1905's Russian Revolution.

### Introduction: a Pact Against International Isolation

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Franco-Russian diplomatic alliance, concretely defined between 1891 and 1894, was realized. After centuries of either cultural and geopolitical mutual prejudices (Roccucci, 2020), the need to break out of the isolation shared by France and Russia led both nations to reshape their collective mentalities. In the years between the

18th and 19th centuries, indeed, a Russophobia and Francophobia had involved most members of the French and Russian intellectual elites. Besides, the alliance was an agreement required by the French search for an anti-Germanic ally (Nolde, 1936), and by the simultaneous exigency on the Russian side for a financial guarantor who could economically help the Empire in the great process of industrialization it intended to undertake. Affected by the Triple Alliance (1882), France realised that it was reduced to impotence. The consequences of the disastrous campaign of 1870, within the French defeat in Sedan, and the victory of Bismarck's Prussia, had eliminated any possibility of change in the French *status quo*. Any aspiration to change would have resulted in the repression of the armies of the Triple Alliance. On the other side, Russia, even though not directly threatened by the Triple, was aware that the Alliance was German-driven (Einaudi, 1897) and therefore opposed to Russian hegemony.

The Franco-Russian alliance appeared on the international horizon as, at the same time, the culmination of a history of mutual projections between France and Russia, and the beginning of a coercive bond also based on mutual diplomatic blackmail. Indeed, since the military agreement of August 1892, France was economically bound as a creditor to the Russian debt, and Russia as an anti-Germanic ally (Manfred, 1959).

### **The Franco-Russian Alliance and the Cultural hendiadys**

'Needless to say, France has had no other purpose since the fall of Bismarck than to always support Russia's policy' (Einaudi, 1897).

The truce marked by the Franco-Russian alliance represented a real renewal in international relations between the two nations (Carrère d'Encausse, 2019). France, according to the hendiadys formulated in the Age of the Enlightenment had interpreted Russian society as an innocent 'young population' (Valle, 2012), and, conversely, as a spectre of 'barbarism' in the context of the general European progress. After the Crimean War, in particular, the orientations of French intellectuals and travellers had mostly been fuelled by the belief in the Russian 'danger of expansionism' (Laruelle, 2004:242) and a widespread apprehension about Russia as a model of autocratic despotism (Valle, 2012). During the nineteenth century, the majority of French intellectuality had, so, lined themselves up with the general Russophobic propaganda advocating a firm opposition to Russian expansionist aims (Laruelle, 2004:247); although, in truth, even the deepest scientific France remained divided between Russophobia and Russophilia.

Besides, the Russian Empire had also nurtured a more than ambivalent feeling of attraction and repulsion towards France, seen as the homeland of freedom and a secularised and corrupt nation as well (Cassina, Venturi, 2008). The idea of an unwholesome France was especially argued in the mystical and accusatory writings of the exponents of the Russian religious Renaissance who had seen the spread of 'rationalist consciousness' and the 'separation from the state' (отшепенство от государства) like those hidden reasons for the triumph of Russian anarchy (*Проблемы идеализма*, 1902; Věhi, 1909). The co-existing duality aspect of admiration and terror felt by both representatives of Franco-Russian European elites seems particularly relevant in explaining the highly contradictory policy perpetrated by each nation. Apart from the political agreement, one of the characteristics of the Franco-Russian alliance was that it constituted an ideal and mutual pact actually realised also by individual personalities who nourished and self-fulfilled their conviction of acting in concert with each other. The political faith in the rightness of the prosecution of such a *Franco-Russian mission* was carried forward above all by the Russian wing, and in particular, by the exponents of the liberal area. Russian liberals were mostly convinced that they had found in

France a true shore to bring Russia into the fold of the democratic powers (Маклаков, 1947). Conversely, the French, even those invested with an idealistic afflatus, remained much more faithful to French governmental patriotism. Including individual diplomats, French were much more influenced by a political realism concerning the real fate of Russia in the waning parable of the Russian Empire (Leroy-Beaulieu, 1990).

### **The Impetus for Russian Liberalism**

The Franco-Russian agreement turned into a deep economic bond of dependence, particularly of Russia on French credits. Precisely because of that, France, in order to ensure the solvency of its ally, took an interest in Russian institutional stability (Long, 1975). French President Georges Clemenceau demanded a constitutionalisation of the Russian debt, the idea being that new loans would have to be officially recognised by the government (Berelowitch, 2007:379). Especially to the delight of Russian reformists, the Franco-Russian agreement indirectly became a lever to force the autocracy to proceed more expeditiously on the path of institutions or, at least, towards what Weber described as a kind of pseudo-liberal process (Weber, 1906). The alliance gave also a broad impetus to the formation of the Russian liberal environment. For their part, Russian liberal politicians, such as Vasily Maklakov, Peter Struve (Rosenberg, 1974), pondered that through the alliance, a liberal Russia would be able to express itself. Such a free Russia, with an external support, thus, a libertarian impetus from France, would have induced the autocracy to start the process of institutional reform (Leontovitsch, 2012). Besides, the *institutional reform dream* was the same that had been demanded by exponents of Russian constitutionalism and liberalism throughout the 19th century (Gravina, 2022:38). It is no coincidence that the main liberal journal, Освобождение, was published in Stuttgart and later in Paris (Gravina, 2022:45). From the Liberation Union, indeed, it emerged the main nucleus of the unique future Russian liberal party: Конституционно-демократическая партия (Gravina, 2022:51). Moreover, the movementist exponents of the Liberation Union maintained a close relationship with European reformism (Франк, 1956). In particular, this was the case with philosophers such as Nikolai Berdyaev, Peter Struve, Sergei Bulgakov former legal Marxists turned to idealism, and among the promoters of the Liberation Union in 1903.

Between 1905 and 1907, within the framework of the Franco-Russian alliance, Russia's 'original' 'liberal drive' had been consummated. On 17 October 1905, the Tsar had signed the manifesto that acceded to the centuries-old desire for fundamental rights (a degree of civil liberty - Гражданская свобода) and a parliament. The representatives of the institutions believed that they would finally be able to draw up political proposals to be discussed in the assembly, because 'without the approval of the Duma in Russia no laws could be enacted'. According to Vasily Maklakov, 'autocracy capitulated' when in '1905' Russia had entered into a 'constitutional regime', because the 'edifice' that would be based on the principle of 'national sovereignty' was born. However, despite the fact that the political regime had formally changed, the Tsar and his collaborators regarded it as 'null and void' (Leroy-Beaulieu, 1990).

### **The Mobilisation of Social Forces**

According to Renouvin, the utilisation of human capital and energies to assist the war effort during the conflicts that swept across Europe was matched by an autonomous organisation of *social forces* into various forms of representation. Human capital was combined as well as with the

emergence of new political parties and a massified public opinion (Renouvin, 1962). As the alliance with France was in the process of consolidation, there had been a strong mobilisation of social forces in Russia; a shift of human force induced by both the military alliance and the national process of militarisation and modernisation of Russia. The social mobilisation in Russia led on the one hand to the birth of political parties and workers' soviets, and on the other to a deepening of that process of radicalisation that from 1905, due to the explosive coexistence of modernity and backwardness, inaugurated the Russian revolutionary era. The shift of social forces stimulated by the alliance with France, manifested its dark side through the unlimited expansion of nationalist and pacifist social movements that began to represent a factor of instability not foreseen at the beginning of the Franco-Russian agreements (Gravina, 2022: 76). Renouvin calls *deep (or side) forces* what he considers to be the structuring factors that determine the foreign policy of states, whether it be geography, demography, nationalism, or economic conditions (Guieu, Sanderson, 2012:169-178). Among the effects of the huge social forces displacement occurred because of the Franco-Russian alliance, it happened, for example, a process of resistance to international capitalism which saw the newly formed Franco-Russian relationship as merely the perpetuation of the dominance of financial interests. In this case the alliance had created the *deep forces* as a self-produced internal enemy.

In the context of the Franco-Russian alliance and the possible expansion of Russian liberalism, the mobilisation of social forces became an instrument for the maximum expansion of social radicalism, as it induced polarisation. Indeed, the mobilisation was initially a factor for the more autonomous organisation of society, but later the consequences of this mobilisation escaped the control of the parties and the government and became an appendage to the easy unleashing of anarchy, one of the aspects most feared first by the Tsar but later also by the exponents of the Russian Constitutional-Democratic Party and in general by all moderate forces who would rather seek a compromise with the monarchy and not a revolution.

### **The Double Level of the Franco-Russian Alliance**

The Franco-Russian relationship was structured on levels which did not always converge: on the one hand the financial and institutional entanglement that became more and more complex. The Russian ally, from the war with Japan in 1904 onwards, was less and less able to guarantee political and economic stability. On the other hand, by the formation of mixed circles, it was, conversely, strengthened a cultural relationship. Those Franco-Russian cultural circles (Берберова, 1997) lived a deep mutual debate on the process of Russian liberation compared to that of the French revolution (Berelowitch, 2007). This latter debate on the iconography of the French Revolution, in turn, split into two branches, one recalcitrant, and the other emulative. For Russian opponents of French mythology, like Nikolai Berdyaev, did not look favourably on the Franco-Russian alliance; a capitalist, anti-statist, secularist alliance, such as they saw unfolding before their eyes. The 'French revolution and its decadence were conceived by the Russian orthodox or Uniatist Francophobes as chastisements from God', as the unveiling of secularisation, and the witness of the 'bourgeois enslavement of the human spirit'. According to the Russian francophobes, as unhappy consciences (Cassandras) of the secularisation process that had affected Europe, starting in France and spreading to imperial Russia, the final outcome of the revolutionary process in France was being the affirmation of 'philistinism' (Бердяев, 1918: 355-160). The emulators of French libertarianism were, conversely, mainly the political exponents of the Конституционно-демократическая партия (Tchoudinov, 2008). Jules Patouillet stated that intellectual relations often prevailed over political ones (Patouillet, 1919:41). The watershed for Franco-Russian relations was 1905. Indeed, in the aftermath of the First Russian Revolution, Russian and French liberals and socialists no longer looked at the other side only as an economic-military factor, but found themselves allies in the

march towards freedom. After 1905, the process of cultural rapprochement that originated between the elites thanks to the alliance, generated Franco-Russian common political objectives in defence of the 'European liberation movements' (Берберова, 1997).

### **The Franco-Russian Alliance in the Context of the World War**

The Franco-Russian alliance in the combination of war and revolution that swept through Europe and the international community especially after 1914 determined what Holquist called the *continuum of crisis* (Holquist, 2002: 1-11). The difficult entry into the world conflict, an eventuality that both France and Russia tried to avert, nonetheless redetermined a new and stronger imbalance in the alliance. By the start of the world conflict, Russian and French patriotism had taken priority over the universal principles of freedom affirmed by the French Revolution. Thus the political-financial aspect and reciprocal blackmail once again prevailed over cultural relations. The II War war affected the cultural sphere of the alliance, somewhat previously safeguarded and separated from the political and economic plan, due to the formulation of a genuine war propaganda (Forcade, 2016). In fact, after 1914 a patriotic and nationalist wave led to such propaganda on both sides, that the libertarian cultural alliance between the countries was downgraded in relation to the need for victory in the European war. French militarist and patriotic rhetoric, in particular, became evident when Russia was swept up in the fatal whirlpool of war and revolution. The crack in the reliability of the Russian ally on the French side became evident in 1915, and more definitively, from February 1917 onwards (Foch, 1931). Precisely because of the combination of war and revolution at home and abroad, Russia was unable to hold the eastern front firm (Golovin, 1931). This was viewed with the greatest apprehension by diplomats, the military and the French government, despite the different solutions attempted to remedy this deficiency (Gravina, 2022: 69; 137).

### **The Franco-Russian Alliance as a Universal Struggle for Freedom**

The Franco-Russian alliance contributed to unleashing the movement of *social forces* that invested Russia and Europe in the process of modernisation and industrialisation. In the late 19th and early 20th century the dynamics of *deep forces* fully involved international relations (Renouvin, 1959). Within the contradictory manifestations of deep forces, however, Franco-Russian *psychological relations* realised that dialectic of the legacy between European collective mentalities. According to Pierre Renouvin the season of the Franco-Russian alliance had been the main reference point for the utopian realisation of freedom in Russia (Renouvin, 1959). The exponents of Russian libertarianism, and later the representatives of the constitutional-democratic party (Kadets), saw France as an economic and political ally and as the iconic term for freedom and democracy they had lacked. The Russian libertarian idea developed first at home, and then within the liberal political emigration in Europe (especially in France). The numerous opportunities for dialogue between diplomats and Franco-Russian associations favoured the conviction of some Russian liberals, notably Peter Struve and Vasily Maklakov, that they were united with the French in the common struggle for universal democracy and the liberation of peoples (Scherrer, 2008). The trust in the French twinship placed by the Russian side to varying degrees (Carrère d'Encausse, 2019), however, did not always match the French vision (Tchoudinov, 2008). Certainly, the common struggle for freedom that had invested the international community in 1905 came to an end in the meshes of patriotism that divided diplomats and patriots in the name of national interest after 1914.

The perception of an ideal alliance between France and liberal Russia was not only

interpreted otherwise in France and Russia, but was translated differently by the individual personalities involved in this diplomatic affair. In this regard, it is interesting to compare the Russian diplomacy undertaken by actors such as Vasily Maklakov, who was sent in 1917 to Paris as ambassador and after October went on to organize the liberal activities of Russian émigrés and the diplomacy carried out by Joseph Noulens and Stephen Pichon, respectively, French Ambassador to Russia, and French Foreign Minister in 1917 (Gravina, 2022:137). Liberals, such as Pichon and Noulens, supported the idea of an all-out fight against Bolshevism practically until the official recognition of Soviet Russia by the French government (in 1924) showing the depth of the economic ties that had bound France and Russia since 1891. Besides, the two diplomats were part of the network of French shareholders in Russian debt. But the French had neither the intention, nor the power, to help Russia by force to re-establish dominance. Definitely, Russian liberals sought dialogue and consensus in French liberal circles, but they were countered by a section of French radical diplomacy symbolised by d'Anselme and Clemenceau for whom, especially since 1918, alternatives to the Russian bulwark had to be sought outside Russia because since then it was part of the 'post-Brest-Litovsk universe'.

### **Conclusions: the Franco-Russian Alliance as a Backbone for the anti-Czarist Constitutional Libertarian Movement**

As a defensive, economic, political, cultural pact, the Franco-Russian alliance represented an important antechamber for the expression of the Russian liberal idea (Pipes, 2005). To some extent this was achieved, in particular through a kind of constitutionalisation of the debt to France by the Russian autocracy.

However, the exponents of the Russian Liberation Union and later the apologists of liberal Russia (Rosenberg, 1974) used the season of the alliance that began in 1891-94 even as a real possibility of establishing a stable relationship with France, as the emblem of the French revolution (Tchoudinov, 2007), and the friendship of free peoples. It was rather on the second point that the misconception of the Russian liberals was more bitter. The negative course of the war on the Russian side induced the French to nurture national patriotism. Moreover, the idealist of a Franco-Russian common stand for freedom had mainly been conducted by Russian and French individual diplomatic personalities. Despite inconsistencies and disagreements, until 1921 (the year of the end the Russian-Polish War) the French supported anti-Bolshevik Russia and the Liberals even in their idealistic fight against Leninist propaganda.

In spite of the contradictory origin, development and end of the Franco-Russian alliance, it was a real detonator for the Russian liberal march between 1905 and 1907. The downward parabola of Russian liberalism and the crisis of confidence on the part of the French ally in Russia's hold on the alliance basically coincided with the very failure of the hypothesis that a free Russia could really prevail in Russian Empire.

After 1914 it became clear that the liberal Russian parabola would become dangerously intertwined with the course of the World War and this made Russian liberals prey both to radicalism as well as the combination of war and revolution in the *continuum of crisis*.

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\***Renata Gravina** - Fellow in History of Russia, Central and Eastern Europe at Sapienza University of Rome  
email: [renata.gravina@uniroma1.it](mailto:renata.gravina@uniroma1.it)