

## Witte: Eurasian Development vs. the Versailles System

Currently, the world is facing the worst strategic crisis of the century. That crisis is not a little tied up with the events of the 1862-1915 period, which was the span of Count Sergei Witte's active political life within the Russian Imperial government under the Romanovs. Witte was more than an "actor" in those events: strategically speaking, he actively organized against the creation of the Versailles System, which was crystallized from 1914 to 1918, but had its roots much earlier than that. Witte, as one of the great statesmen of Europe, worked to move Eurasia in a direction away from war, and towards a lasting and progressive peace. Consequently, the publication of his complete *Memoirs* in English, is a welcome event, particularly for those who are trying to understand how the world got into its current mess and what might be the way out of it. And, of course, it is indispensable for Russians who are now struggling with the question of "whither Russia?" in the coming weeks and months.

This first full-length English edition of the *Memoirs*, has been ably translated by the noted historian Sidney Harcave.

Witte tells his story, not, as Harcave's footnotes would try to persuade us, with an eye to self-aggrandizement, but with an eye to posterity. By the time the *Memoirs* were written (1907-1912), Witte could see where the follies of Czar Nicholas II were leading, and he also could see World War I looming on the horizon. His hope was, that by writing the *Memoirs*, he would not merely set the record straight regarding his role in Russian government, but that a future generation might learn from them.

The *Memoirs* have as their continuing theme, the difference between policies which lead to war, and those which can lead not only to war avoidance, but to an economic Grand Design for the entire land area known as Eurasia.

Witte's ability to make proposals on

such a grand scale to the various Czars, to Bismarck, to Kaiser Wilhelm, to the French, and to anyone else who would listen, was due to his mastery of the economics of the American System through his study of the works of Friedrich List, which he also translated into Russian. Although Witte is best known for his proposal for a railroad system which would extend from Paris to Vladivostok, and for the planning and construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, his discussion with Kaiser Wilhelm demonstrates the quality of thought which Witte exercised in his diplomacy:

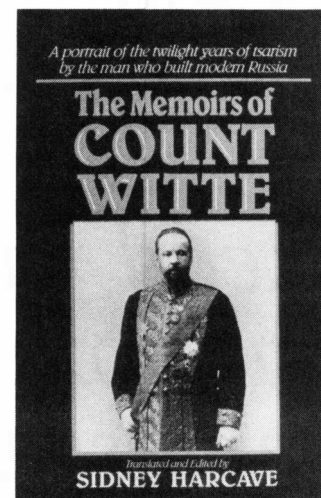
"Imagine, Your Majesty, the European countries united in one entity, one that does not waste vast sums of money, resources, blood, and labor on rivalry among themselves, no longer compelled to maintain armies for wars among themselves, no longer forming an armed camp, as is the case now, with each fearing its neighbor. If that were done, Europe would be much richer, much stronger, more civilized, not going downhill under the weight of mutual hatred, rivalry, and war.

"The first step toward attaining this goal would be the formation of an alliance of Russia, Germany, and France. Once this were done, the other countries of the European continent would join the alliance."

Unfortunately, Witte's program was not heeded, either by the Kaiser or by the Czar, and soon Europe was on the path to World War I.

Witte also gives us an insight into court life, and how the creation by Nicholas II of a reactionary court camarilla based on favoritism and personal prejudice—something which, Witte notes, neither Alexander II or Alexander III would have tolerated—led Russia's last Czar to make the decisions which resulted in tragedy both for his own family and for Russia.

The court camarilla, as reported by Witte, had Nicholas' tacit approval for its anti-Jewish pogroms, as well as its assassinations and attempted assassinations against leading figures who



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had in some way displeased either the extreme right or the Czar. It was this grouping which also played on Nicholas' personal vanity, to convince him that Witte was out to depose him and take over as prime minister of a constitutional government. The word "constitution" was such anathema to Nicholas, that when Nicholas did agree in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution to certain reforms, Witte had to call the first attempted Russian constitution, "Fundamental Laws." Even then, Witte knew Nicholas would take the first opportunity he had, to either weaken those laws, or renege on them completely.

It is not often that the memoirs of a great statesman, one as self-conscious about his responsibility to his nation and the world, as well as to posterity, as Witte, are made available in such an extensive form. Witte's method of solving Russia's problems and his profound commitment to peace based on economic development for the world, are a lesson to be learned by those searching for solutions in a world in which the British-inspired Versailles System no longer functions.

—Denise Henderson