

*New Zealand and the Soviet Union*  
*Reviewed by Andrew Little.*

*New Zealand and the Soviet Union 1950-1991: A Brittle Relationship.*

A. C. Wilson.

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By 1950, the USSR was almost at its zenith. Its role alongside the allied forces at the end of World War II had won it a grudging and temporary reprieve from more hostile attention to its domestic apparatus and global intentions. In 1950 it was a world power politically, economically and intellectually.

Soviet history since October 1917, with its planned and command-driven economy (ironically the ultimate attempt at rational comprehensive decision making that underpins modern western business models today) combined with its physical size, its satellite states, and its scientific and technological advancements put this huge, single country in direct competition with the West.

By 1950 New Zealand, a nation of barely 2 million people and heavily dependent on agriculture and its principal customer the United Kingdom, seems unlikely to have been of much significance to the emerging super power. Dr A.C. Wilson's comprehensive and highly readable account of New Zealand's relationship with the Soviet Union reveals the relationship to be hardly one of insignificance or irrelevance. Indeed, for New Zealand the Soviet Union was an important and ever-growing export market. To illustrate, by the 1970's the trade imbalance between the two countries was 37 to 1 in New Zealand's favour.

The book focuses on the official (i. e. government to government) relationship. The real complexity in the relationship, however, was managing the tension created by the commercial need or desire to pursue important trade opportunities and the political need to appear to the electorate and allied states to regularly denounce the Soviet state and what it stood for. Dr Wilson's account demonstrates the difficulty in trying to disentangle government relations from the commercial relationships and also person-to-person and other institutional relationships, principally within the trade union movement.

The New Zealand government played a critical role in fostering commercial relationships, mainly in dairy, wool and fisheries. Trade steadily grew throughout the period as indicated earlier. During the 1960's, under Keith

Holyoake's premiership, "commercial openings were pursued more vigorously than before".

New Zealand was part of the Western group of nations that feared or resented the growing power and influence of the USSR. After all, it represented a social and economic system and a set of values at odds with the arguably more market and freer West (ironically, during much of the time covered by the book the New Zealand economy was highly regulated and based on a high level of direct state involvement. Indeed, by the mid-1980's, Labour Prime Minister David Lange described the New Zealand economy as having the efficiency "of a Polish shipyard"). In international fora, such as the UN General Assembly, the USSR unhesitatingly supported African and other states struggling to throw off the shackles of colonialism and to assert their independence. This invariably meant aligning against the West on many issues.

Dr Wilson carefully illustrates how successive New Zealand governments on the one hand happily promoted trade and a genuinely healthy diplomatic relationship, and on the other publicly talked up anti-Soviet rhetoric. Politicians of all hues were not immune from playing the anti-Soviet card when it suited. Whether it was National's Sid Holland, Keith Holyoake or Rob Muldoon, or Labour's Walter Nash, David Lange and to a lesser extent Norman Kirk and Bill Rowling, the principal role that anti-Soviet rhetoric played was to curry favour with allies and, domestically, to taint or marginalise organisations (usually trade unions, their leaders or political parties) aligned with Moscow. The height of anti-Soviet paranoia was probably evident in 1975 and the election campaign of that year with the famous Dancing Cossacks political advertising.

Perhaps the book treated a little too lightly the impact and influence of some of the non-government relationships, especially those conducted through trade unions. The influence of Soviet ideology at the time was significant and the extent of travel exchanges was also not insignificant. But then it is likely that the amount of official material (or at least disclosable material) on this aspect is small, so any oversight is understandable.

Often one way for countries of the west to demonstrate their bona fides to both the domestic audience and to allies was to put pressure on local Soviet diplomats. Although public allegations of spying were rare enough here, there were, nevertheless, some dramatic incidents. In 1962, Holyoake expelled two Soviet diplomats for spying. During Kirk's leadership, there was the unedifying incident of the arrest and trial of Dr Bill Sutch on sedition charges.

Rob Muldoon famously expelled the Soviet Ambassador in 1980, allegedly for supplying funds to that Prime Minister's *bête noir*, the Socialist Unity Party. Dr Wilson suggests the reason for this expulsion had less to do with the

conveyance of funds to a political organisation and more to do with international anger at the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and New Zealand's decision not to join a trade boycott.

For David Lange, the anti-Soviet rhetoric provided a welcome counterpoint to the tensions created by his government's anti-nuclear legislation and the concomitant pressure on the ANZUS relationship.

Dr Wilson's account is an excellent chronological journey through the key turning points and issues of our relationship with this once powerful nation. He successfully weaves the political, diplomatic, commercial and private realms of the relationship for a very informative read.