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Who Betrayed Whom? Franco-Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1932–1939

I recently reviewed a book on Neville Chamberlain's foreign policy where the author attempts to defend Chamberlain¹. You may remember that he was the British prime minister, who had good intentions. Some historians say he was the architect of British rearmament. Well, you know, some historians will say *almost anything* to get noticed. Chamberlain had to buy time to build up British military strength. He therefore looked the other way when Germany annexed Austria. And Czechoslovakia was an „unviable“ state; so it was alright to let it go. After all, it was only a question of self-determination to allow Herr Hitler to occupy the Sudeten territories.

You have all probably heard or read these lines somewhere in the past, but what caught my eye in this new book about Chamberlain, was the word „betrayal“. That's right „betrayal“: in August 1939 an unscrupulous USSR „betrayed“ the west in concluding a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany.“

I thought to myself, talk about pot calling kettle black. And then I remembered a 2009 resolution from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe which „equat[ed] the roles of the USSR and Nazi Germany in starting World War II“². This preposterous claim was made ten years after the publication of my book on the origins of the Second World War where I show the contrary to be true. I guess those OSCE politicians did not read my book. Anyway, what is history when it comes to politics?

Quite apart from my personal frustration as an author, you can imagine the reaction of Russian historians to this kind of statement equating the USSR with Nazi Germany in setting off World War II. After losses of nearly thirty million people, both civilians and soldiers, in resisting almost single-handedly the Nazi invasion of the USSR, this kind of statement was and remains hard to accept. A conference of Russian, Ukrainian, and other East European historians in Sevastopol in July 2011 roundly condemned the distortion of Soviet diplomacy during the 1930s and of the Soviet role in World War II³.

You've heard it before: World War II was about the falling out of the two pals, Stalin and Hitler, and the war of two „totalitarian regimes“. Britain and France in all this were merely innocent bystanders or victims. And of course if the conversation goes on long enough, the president of the Russian Federation,

1 Review of Stedman 2013, pp. 180–82.

2 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8133749.stm>.

3 Adopted by the *International History Conference Commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the Outbreak of 1941–45 Great Patriotic War (Sevastopol, June 15–17, 2011)*.

Vladimir V. Putin will come up for discussion. He's the new bad guy, villainized by the west. Western political cartoonists see him as a Soviet throwback with hammers and sickles in his eyes. Another cartoonist portrays him as the butler bringing breakfast into the Lenin mausoleum. „Rise and Shine sleepyhead“ is the cutline: Time to wake up Il'ich. Yet another shows the transformation of Putin into Stalin. Here is the use of history for political purposes, now aimed at blackening Russia and justifying its encirclement by the United States and its European allies, or should I say, European vassals? One really has to express admiration for the brazenness of US hypocrisy and double standards, pursuing the encirclement of Russia, involved in various intrigues in the Ukraine, Georgia and so on, waging overt and covert wars of aggression in the Middle East and in Asia, threatening China, and then suggesting that *Russia* is the aggressor state. Talk about pot calling kettle black. Are you sure you want to be American vassals?

What if we looked at the facts of the 1930s, leaving contemporary politics and Russophobia aside? Could we say that the USSR betrayed the west? In order to answer this question, let's start at the beginning.

The beginning means the 1920s when Germany and Soviet Russia were isolated pariah states. In 1922 they concluded the treaty of Rapallo. Most historians hold that the Rapallo was a solid economic, political, and military relationship. That's not true, but Stalin appeared to think, at times anyway, that it was a relationship which would endure for the foreseeable future. Maksim M. Litvinov, the deputy commissar for foreign affairs in the 1920s and commissar from 1930 to 1939, did not share this view. In 1927, for example, he warned that Rapallo would not last forever and that therefore the USSR could not afford to burn its bridges with Britain and France. In fact, Stalin and Litvinov had a row on this point, among others, in February 1927. Litvinov nevertheless defended Rapallo because Germany was the only European power with which the USSR had tolerable relations. But he was under no illusions about long term relations with Berlin; these were bound to weaken over time. It was inevitable. On the other hand, why hasten the process? We should delay the divorce for as long as possible⁴.

As was often the case, Litvinov was right and Stalin was wrong. In January 1933 Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, and Rapallo collapsed under an avalanche of anti-Soviet Nazi propaganda.

Hitler's arrival in power set off alarm bells in many places in Europe. What were France and Britain going to do? What was the USSR going to do? During the 1920s Soviet relations with France and Britain were strained to say

4 Litvinov to Stalin, no. 3064, secret, 21 Jan. 1927, *Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, Moscow (hereinafter AVPRF), f. 082, o. 10, p. 27, d. 2, l. 2; and Carley, 2014, pp. 272–79.

the least. With the United States, there were no official relations. Until 1933 the US government refused diplomatic recognition of the USSR. Litvinov called relations with the United States, a „silent conflict“. He might have used similar terms to describe relations with France and Britain. During the 1920s, anti-communism and the red scare dominated European politics and made better western-Soviet relations impossible⁵.

After this bad beginning, could Soviet-western relations improve, based on the centuries old principle that the enemy of my enemy should be my friend? The perennial question in the west became: „who is enemy no. 1“: Nazi Germany or the USSR? Would France and Britain get the answer right?

At first it seemed that they might. In France, in 1932, the Radical politician Édouard Herriot returned to power briefly – for six months. In 1924 it was Herriot’s first government which recognised the USSR. Herriot had an „*idée fixe*“ as he called it, or rather two. The *first* was that Germany would attack France again. He said this to Soviet diplomats during a visit to Moscow in October 1922⁶. In fifteen years he predicted, and he was only off by 22 months. The *second* was that France should re-establish in some form its pre-World War I alliance with Russia in order to deter a new German invasion.

The first step in this direction was the conclusion of a non-aggression pact with the USSR signed in November 1932. The Soviet side had first broached this idea in 1925. It only took the French government seven years to come around.

Herriot fell from power in mid-December, but was succeeded by Joseph Paul-Boncour, as *président du conseil* and foreign minister. His government lasted for a month, but Paul-Boncour remained foreign minister in the succeeding governments until the following year. He is an interesting man, a socialist in and out of the socialist party. What is important for this story is that he continued Herriot’s policy of strengthening relations with the USSR. He approved the sending of a military attaché to Moscow and he directed negotiations for a trade agreement with the USSR. Trade was often Soviet bait for better political relations.

In 1934 Louis Barthou succeeded Paul-Boncour as foreign minister and he too continued the policies of his immediate predecessors. Unlike them, Barthou was a conservative, centre-right politician who nevertheless reckoned that enemy no. 1 was Nazi Germany. Franco-Soviet relations therefore continued to strengthen in 1934.

Then catastrophe struck. On 9 October 1934 Barthou died by accident from a stray bullet wound received during the assassination of the Yugoslav king Alexander I. The perpetrator was an agent of the Croatian fascist Ustashi. Pierre

5 Carley 1914, passim.

6 Ibid., pp. 74–76.

Laval succeeded Barthou as foreign minister, and he at once set about to reverse French policy toward the USSR. Note the date: October 1934.

How did the Soviet government react to political developments in France and to Hitler's assumption of power? Was it alarmed by events in Germany? The short answer is yes, it was. Commissar Litvinov immediately rang the alarm bells.

From 1932 onward the Soviet government sought to improve relations not only with France, but with the United States, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia, Romania, even the usually hostile Poland. It also wished to maintain good relations with Italy and to minimize tensions, created by the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in the autumn of 1935. Litvinov called Soviet policy „collective security“, a name which had its origins in the League of Nations. Litvinov had some notions about using the League to restrain German aggression. I want to underline that Soviet policy was at this time anti-Nazi, *not* anti-fascist, in spite of propaganda to the contrary.

Litvinov was convinced of the aggressive aims of Nazi Germany, and warned both Stalin and his western interlocutors of the threat to European peace and security. He often taunted German diplomats, bringing up Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, his bestselling blueprint for German domination. German diplomats tried to dismiss Nazi rants against the USSR, but Litvinov usually responded with smile and a question. What about *Mein Kampf*?

Behind the diplomatic smiles, Litvinov was thinking about the recreation of the World War I alliance against Imperial Germany. It was a policy of containment and of preparation for war against Nazi Germany, if containment failed. To this end, Litvinov encouraged the improvement of relations with France, although he had his doubts about them because of French political instability.

By the way, Litvinov's policy was *Soviet*, not *personal* policy. In December 1933 the Politburo, Stalin's cabinet in effect, approved the starting of negotiations with France for the conclusion of a pact of mutual assistance and of a „regional mutual defence pact against German aggression.“ The Politburo also agreed to entry into the League of Nations, an institution which it had heretofore refused to join⁷. In 1933 and 1934 Litvinov's discussions with Paul-Boncour and with Barthou were positive and encouraging. Litvinov told Stalin that Paris was now their „most important“ embassy in the west. France had become the „pivot“ of Soviet policy, more important even than the United States⁸.

7 From Politburo protocol, 151, 19 Dec. 1933 (*Politburo* [hereinafter *Politbiuro TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i Evropa*] 2001, pp. 305–07).

8 Litvinov to Stalin, no. 4238/L, 31 Oct. 1934, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, d. 117, p. 103, l. 221; and Krestinskii to A. A. Troianovskii, Soviet ambassador in Washington, D.C., 21 Aug. 1934 (*Otnosheniia 1934–1939* [hereinafter *SAO, 1934–1939*], pp. 200–04).

At the same time Soviet policy toward Nazi Germany hardened: „The increasing rearmament of Germany...“ Litvinov advised Stalin, „now leaves no doubt: foreign governments are only speculating on [when] Germany will be ready for war ...“

It was November 1934. Litvinov speculated that Germany would challenge France in the coming years. Nor would the absorption of Austria satisfy German ambitions. Poland might also be attacked. „Most likely of all, Germany will seek an outlet for its increasing military energy in the direction of the Baltic states, the USSR and the Ukraine across Romania, in other words ... the programme of which is outlined in the latter’s book *Mein Kampf*.“

For Litvinov it was not a question of *if* Hitler would make war, but only *when* and *where* he would make it. On 2 November 1934 the Politburo approved Litvinov’s recommendations, though if France was the „pivot“ of Soviet policy, it was a pivot which wobbled badly⁹.

France was not the only object of Soviet attention. Soviet relations with the United States also improved. In November 1933 after the election of Franklin Roosevelt as president, the United States extended diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union. Litvinov went to Washington, D.C. to meet Roosevelt and to conclude a „Gentleman’s agreement“ whereby the Soviet Union would agree to repay a portion of a war loan to the Russian Provisional Government in 1917 in exchange for an American „loan“, the terms of which were to be negotiated. Litvinov was encouraged by this beginning, though his mood soon soured because of State Department hostility and opposition to the loan¹⁰. During the interwar years the State Department was *always* hostile to the USSR and hoped for its demise. In spite of Litvinov’s disappointment, Moscow continued to pursue better relations with the United States.

Soviet diplomats also sought to improve relations with London, and at first they achieved modest success. Ivan M. Maiskii, the Soviet ambassador, and Sir Robert Vansittart, the permanent under secretary in the Foreign Office, began a series of conversations which permitted an airing out of mutual grievances. Nazi Germany frightened the British government, or elements within it,

9 Litvinov to Stalin, no. 4240/L, 1 Nov. 1934, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, d. 117, p. 103, ll. 227–30, and Politburo protocol, no. 16, 2 Nov. 1934, *Politbiuro TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i Evropa*, pp. 318–19.

10 Litvinov to Stalin, 25 Dec. 1933, *SAO, 1927–1933*, 2002, pp. 748–49; Litvinov to A. A. Troianovskii, 14 Mar. 1934, *SAO, 1934–1939*, pp. 57–60; Litvinov to Troianovskii, 3 Apr. 1934, *ibid.*, pp. 96–97; Troianovskii to Litvinov, 16 Apr. 1934, *ibid.*, p. 119; Troianovskii to Litvinov, 24 Jul. 1934, *ibid.*, pp. 187–89; Krestinskii to L. M. Kaganovich, secretary, central committee, VKP (b), 13 Aug. 1934, *ibid.*, pp. 193–195; Litvinov to Sovnarkom, 8 Oct. 1934, *ibid.*, pp. 241; Kh. S. Veinberg’s summary of Soviet-American negotiations, 14 Nov. 1934, *ibid.*, pp. 269–74; and Krestinskii to Troianovskii, 17 May 1935, *ibid.*, pp. 321–23.

including the influential Vansittart. It remained to be seen whether the fear of Nazism would be sufficient to overcome Tory aversion to the USSR.

In late 1934 the British Cabinet, encouraged by Vansittart, discussed the despatch of a Cabinet minister to Moscow to talk about better relations. He was up against Tories who were „shocked“ by the very concept of getting on better with the Soviet Union. Vansittart nonetheless made modest headway and was ably assisted by the enthusiastic Maiskii. We need to be more pro-active, Maiskii advised Moscow, in order to overcome anti-Soviet prejudices¹¹. There was hesitation on both sides, but the visit came off in the end. Anthony Eden, Lord Privy Seal, went to Moscow at the end of March 1935 where he met Stalin, Litvinov, and other Soviet officials. Not every foreign visitor got a meeting with Stalin. It is „absurd“ to think, Eden said, that European security could be assured without Soviet participation. Litvinov welcomed Eden with open arms. The butter on the banquet table was imprinted with Litvinov’s familiar line that „peace is indivisible“. By this he meant that there could be no peace in one part of Europe without peace in all of Europe. Peace, not war was Litvinov’s repeated refrain. He was plain spoken with Eden: „Never since the World War has there been such anxiety about the fate of peace.“ Litvinov did not mention Hitler, but it was clear about whom he was talking¹². It must have sounded a little exaggerated to Eden, but in hindsight who can say that Litvinov was wrong?

Eden replied in a cordial manner, but the British government was far from ready to sign on to Litvinov’s ideas. Like Soviet efforts in Washington, the attempt to improve relations in London went wrong. Litvinov and Maiskii thought Eden was „a friend“, but when he became Foreign Secretary at the end of 1935, he almost immediately put the brakes on better relations with Moscow. Anti-communism was the main obstacle¹³.

As in Britain, so it was in France. I said earlier that Pierre Laval succeeded the dead Barthou as foreign minister. Instead of pursuing of the policies of his three predecessors, Herriot, Paul-Boncour, and Barthou, he did the opposite seeking to undo their work.

Wait a minute, you might be thinking, Laval signed the Franco-Soviet mutual assistance pact in May 1935. Trouble was that Laval and many other French politicians said one thing and did another. As Talleyrand, the French diplomat, once remarked, „men employ speech only to conceal their thoughts.“

This was never truer than of Laval who dragged his feet on a mutual security pact with Moscow. The Soviet government began to worry and so did

11 Maiskii to Krestinskii, no. 26, 10 Jan. 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, d. 18, p. 106, ll. 1–3.

12 „Conversations in connection with Eden’s visit“, no. 137, Maiskii, 25 Mar. 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, d. 18, p. 106, ll. 29–43; also the text of Litvinov’s opening remarks with his corrections, *ibid.*; and Earl of Avon 1962, pp. 160–82.

13 Carley 1996.

French advocates of a Franco-Soviet rapprochement. They warned the Soviet ambassador in Paris, V. P. Potemkin, that Laval could reverse French policy¹⁴.

Negotiations continued in the early months of 1935 with Litvinov pressing for an alliance with teeth and Laval and the permanent officials of the Quai d'Orsay extracting them – one by one¹⁵. Litvinov was only carrying out the Politburo's directives asking for a French guarantee of the security of the Baltic states, vulnerable to German aggression, and immediate, automatic delivery of mutual assistance in case of war. The Politburo did not want a weak formula tied up in the League of Nations where it could be blocked by a single dissenting vote¹⁶.

On all points Laval refused to give way. He told Litvinov that he was „completely indifferent“ to the fate of the pact, and he told his friends that he felt like „a hounded dog“ in negotiations with Litvinov and Potemkin. Because Laval refused to support a Baltic guarantee, Litvinov withdrew a reciprocal offer of guarantee of Belgium, Switzerland and the demilitarized Rhineland. „On this point however the French immediately agreed,“ Litvinov later said¹⁷. The Soviet Union meant business, *but France did not*. There was not much left to the pact, when Laval and the Quai d'Orsay had finished with it, tied up in League of Nations procedures without automatic, immediate delivery of mutual assistance and without military provisions. I call it „the empty shell“.

Even after Laval agreed to a draft with Litvinov in Geneva in mid-April 1935, Quai d'Orsay officials tried to weaken its language¹⁸. In Moscow, the exasperated Politburo, or perhaps I should say Stalin, appeared on the verge of telling the French to go to hell. The Politburo advised Potemkin in Paris not to hurry negotiations since Moscow might not approve the draft treaty. We don't want to create „the illusion that we apparently need the pact more than the French ...“ To demonstrate its exasperation, the Politburo recalled Litvinov

14 Charles Alphand, French ambassador in Paris, nos. 444–46, 12 Oct. 1934, *Documents diplomatiques français* (hereinafter *DDF*), 1^{re} série, 10 vols. (Paris, 1964-1984), VII, pp. 718–19; and V. P. Potemkin, Soviet ambassador in Paris, to N. N. Krestinskii, deputy commissar for foreign affairs, no. 58, very secret, 25 Jan. 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, p. 164, d. 814, ll. 166–70.

15 René Massigli, deputy director, *Affaires politiques*, Quai d'Orsay, to Paul Bargeton (?), director, *Affaires politiques*, 15 Apr. 1935, MAÉ (*Ministère des Affaires étrangères*, Paris, ancienne série Z), Europe, 1918–1940, URSS, vol. 974, f. 26.

16 Litvinov to Stalin, no. 122/L, secret, 2 Apr. 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 113, d. 122, ll. 150–51; and Politburo protocol no. 24, 9 Apr. 1935, *Politbiuro TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i Evropa*, p. 322.

17 Litvinov to Ia. Z. Surits, Soviet ambassador in Berlin, no. 147/L, secret, 4 May 1935, AVPRF, f. 082, o. 18, p. 80, d. 1, ll. 52–49.

18 Litvinov to Commissariat for foreign affairs (NKID), highest priority, 18 Apr. 1935, *Dokumenty 1958–2000* (hereinafter *DVP*) XVIII, pp. 292–93; Potemkin to NKID, immediate, 20 April 1935, *ibid.*, pp. 295–96

from Geneva¹⁹. According to Laval, it was just a tiff over wording, but it was much more than that²⁰.

The pact thus teetered on the brink of doom. Stalin did not trust the French, but no Soviet diplomat did. V. S. Dvlgalevskii, Potemkin's predecessor in Paris, had once said that you could never trust the French when it came to an agreement – even in the presence of stenographers²¹.

In late April 1935 Litvinov returned to Moscow, meeting with Stalin and the Politburo to calm the exasperation. Better the empty shell of a mutual assistance pact, he reasoned, than none at all. The pact faced strong opposition inside and out of France. Britain, Italy, Germany, and Poland all opposed the pact. So it was the shell or nothing, and the shell was still worth something in that it would hamper the formation of an anti-Soviet bloc and discourage France from composing with Germany. This latter observation was ironic: the French used the reverse reasoning to justify their adherence to the shell, that is, it would discourage the Soviet Union from composing with Hitler.

„Our security,“ Litvinov advised Stalin, „rests in the first place exclusively in the hands of the Red Army. For us, the pact has primarily political importance, lessening the chances of war not only from the side of Germany, but also from Poland and Japan.“ The Soviet ambassador Potemkin thus signed the agreement in Paris, with Laval, on 2 May 1935. And Laval went off to Moscow to visit with Stalin. After all, he said, „We had to sign something.“²²

On 3 May, having learned of the signature of the Franco-Soviet pact in Paris, Edvard Beneš, the Czechoslovak foreign minister and soon to be president, called in the Soviet minister in Prague to discuss an agreement mirroring the Franco-Soviet pact²³. Beneš asked for amendments: „Czechoslovakia can offer help only in those cases where such help is also offered by France.“ The Soviet Union had no common border with Germany, and in the case of war Czechoslovakia would quickly be defeated unless France entered the fighting against Germany. Once again, Litvinov advised Stalin to agree: having come this far, it would be hard to refuse to proceed. The two-faced Beneš's real motive, as he told the French in April, was that he did not wish to go further than France in his commitments to the Soviet Union. The Czechoslovaks wanted

19 Potemkin to NKID, highest priority, 20 Apr. 1935, *DVP*, XVIII, pp. 296–97; Politburo protocol, no. 24, 20 Apr. 1935, *Politbiuro TsK RKP(b) i Evropa*, p. 325; and Politburo decision, 21 Apr. 1935, *ibid.*, p. 326.

20 Alphand, nos. 261-63, *résumé*, 22 April 1935, *DDF*, 1^e, X, pp. 384–85.

21 Dvlgalevskii to Litvinov, 3 May 1931, *DVP*, XIV, pp. 306–09.

22 „On negotiations with France“, not signed, but by Litvinov, nd, sent to the Politburo on 22 Apr. 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 113, d. 122, ll. 179–82; Litvinov to Maiskii, no. 146/L, secret, 3 May 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 106, d. 16, ll. 5–6; and *Prieme* 2008, pp. 160–61.

23 „From a record of conversation of... S. S. Aleksandrovskii with ... E. Beneš“, 2 & 3 May 1935, *Dokumenty* 1973-1978, III, pp. 106–107. See also Ken 1996/1997.

the same „narrow“ terms as the French, Litvinov warned, and these circumstances „compel us to be cautious.“²⁴

On 4 May, the Politburo approved the text of the pact but with the inclusion of a stipulation that Soviet aid to the victim of aggression was conditional on France also rendering such aid²⁵. The French did not want a pact with teeth; the Czechoslovaks did not want one without France, and under the circumstances neither did the Soviet Union. The position of France was key: if it did not render assistance, Czechoslovakia would be left isolated. The pacts of 1935 were thus a poor foundation on which to withstand German aggression.

Litvinov also conducted negotiations with Poland and Romania to create his anti Nazi-alliance. With the Poles, it was a waste of time in spite of Litvinov’s blunt warnings about their vulnerability to German invasion. The Polish government systematically resisted Soviet efforts to build an anti-Nazi alliance right up to August 1939.

Litvinov made similar approaches to Romania. There he had a little better luck with Nicolae Titulescu, the Romanian foreign minister. Titulescu maintained good relations with Litvinov, and supported the conclusion of the Franco-Soviet mutual assistance pact. When the pact ran into trouble in Paris, he intervened to obtain French agreement. If the pact were not concluded, he told Litvinov, Hitler would achieve total victory and would cause governments in the Danube basin to gravitate toward Berlin²⁶. Unfortunately, Titulescu had his own agenda and his own problems. The *agenda* was Bessarabia, which Romania had seized from Soviet Russia in early 1918; the *problem* was the political right in Bucharest which feared and hated the USSR.

On Bessarabia, Titulescu wanted Soviet recognition of Romanian sovereignty. Litvinov was willing to offer de facto recognition in exchange for a mutual assistance pact. Titulescu was interested in discussing the possibilities, but he was hampered at home by anti-Soviet conservatives and fascists.

Almost everywhere in Europe Litvinov made offers only to run into overt or covert opposition. Then, the Spanish civil war broke out in July 1936, which made matters worse. Why worse you might ask? The civil war became the arena of competing ideologies: right v. left, communist v. fascist. It exacerbated French and British fears of the spread of communism in Europe, and it drew

24 Litvinov to Stalin, no. 144/L, secret, 3 May 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 113, d. 122, l. 184; „*Note du Directeur politique adjoint, Conversation avec M. Benès*“, Massigli, Geneva, 18 April 1935, DDF, 1^{er}, X, pp. 361–62; and Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 148/L, secret, 4 May 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, p. 164, d. 814, l. 106.

25 Politburo protocol no. 25, 4 May 1935, *Politburo TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i Evropa*, p. 326.

26 E. E. Gershel'man, principal secretary, NKID, to Stalin, no. 138/L, secret, 10 April 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 113, d. 122, ll. 163–66.

Hitler and Mussolini closer together thus dashing Litvinov's hopes to attract Italy into an anti-Nazi alliance.

There was more bad news almost unnoticed in the early months of the Spanish civil war. The Romanian foreign minister Titulescu resigned at the end of August 1936 because of political intrigues against him and criticism that he had ventured too close to Moscow. The Spanish civil war aroused anxieties about communism even in Bucharest. The resignation of Titulescu was another blow to Litvinov's policies²⁷.

Stalin was furious about French and British weakness and wanted to support the Spanish Republicans, since Hitler and Mussolini were backing the fascists. Litvinov worried, fearing that Soviet aid to the Republicans might undermine collective security, already very fragile.

On 7 September, Litvinov wrote to Stalin, advocating a renewed effort to consolidate the Soviet Union's pacts with France and Czechoslovakia. There is, he noted, a „defeatist mood spreading not only in France but in Czechoslovakia ... furthered ... by the failure to consolidate the Franco-Soviet and Czech-Soviet mutual assistance pacts ... If we want to counteract the defeatist mood, we should in my opinion at least demonstrate our readiness for negotiations on the military realisation of the pacts.“

First steps, would include sounding out the French; indicating to Prague Soviet readiness to proceed; and asking the Commissariat for Defence to prepare for talks.

Litvinov repeated what he had already said in November 1934, more convinced than ever of the Nazi threat to peace and security in Europe. „Has not the time come,“ he proposed to Stalin, „to raise the question of uniting a powerful defensive bloc? I have in mind a consolidation of existing pacts and alliances in Europe directed against Germany and other revisionist countries.“ Litvinov named France, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Turkey. Such a grouping of powers might encourage Germany „to come to its senses and to change its policies“, and would attract other smaller countries. „There is not the slightest doubt,“ Litvinov wrote, „that Hitler's efforts were leading to the creation of an opposing coalition to resist the USSR ... *The chances of realizing such a bloc have significantly increased of late* [author's emphasis] ...“ This last observation was a reference to Spain, and Litvinov asked for directives. The Politburo approved the proposed initiative on 20 September 1936, though the formulation of approval was unenthusiastic²⁸.

27 Jean Payart, French chargé d'affaires in Moscow, no. 276, 2 Sept. 1936, *DDF*, 2^e, III, pp. 329–31.

28 Litvinov to Stalin, no. 3693/L, 7 Sept. 1936, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 16, d. 1, p. 114, ll. 193–96; Kaganovich to Stalin, 14 Sept. 1936 (Stalin 2001, pp. 676–68); and excerpt from Politburo protocol, no. 43, 20 Sept. 1936, *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoj istorii*, Moscow, (RGASPI), f. 17, o. 162, d. 20, l. 78.

There was plenty of opposition in Britain and France to closer relations with Moscow. The Soviet ambassador in Paris broached the topic of general staff talks with French officials. By the way, Laval was forced to resign in January 1936, and the Popular Front of Socialists, Communists, and Radicals had won the spring elections. Socialist Léon Blum became premier. Instead of celebrating, Litvinov worried that the left's, especially Communist, electoral success, would frighten the right and provoke a movement toward fascism²⁹. He was right to worry.

On Litvinov's instructions, the Soviet Ambassador Potemkin broached the subject of staff talks with Blum and others. Blum and his air minister Pierre Cot were favourable but the war minister, Édouard Daladier, and the French general staff were adamantly opposed. In reaction Cot threatened to resign which forced Daladier to relent a little.

Take one step forward, he calculated, in order to take two steps back. For Daladier and his generals, the strategy was to stall, stall, stall, without offending Moscow³⁰. French foot-dragging prompted skepticism and caution in Moscow though Stalin did not need more evidence to doubt the French. They can't be trusted, he said, but then who in Moscow trusted the French?

Nevertheless, Soviet officials in Paris continued to talk to their French counterparts, though to no avail. The French general staff was not interested, the more so since the British adamantly opposed staff talks. The French would not then go to the toilet without British consent. Given the circumstances, Litvinov's ideas must have looked increasingly quixotic in Moscow. How long would Stalin tolerate such a dangerous situation?

Everywhere Litvinov sought to build, he built on sand. In February 1937 he explained to his ambassador in Washington, that it was important to strengthen relations with the United States before the outbreak of war, and it was vital to bring France and Britain into a Soviet-American rapprochement. He did not call it a „Grand Alliance“, as Churchill would later do, but that in effect was what he had in mind³¹.

Consider the dates of all these events. The State Department turned against better relations with Moscow in 1934; so did Laval. Eden's halting of better

29 Conversation with Mandel, Potemkin's *dnevnik*, no. 124, secret, 26 March 1936, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 20, p. 167, d. 828, ll. 84–79; „Conversation with Herriot“, Potemkin's *dnevnik*, no. 192, secret, 26 April 1936, *ibid.*, ll. 124–120; and Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 3613/L, secret, 4 May 1936, *ibid.*, ll. 10–9.

30 Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 33/L, secret, 4 Feb. 1937 (mistakenly dated 1936), AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 21, p. 169, d. 837, ll. 14–13; and deputy chief of staff General Victor-Henri Schweisguth's journal, entries of 8 Feb. & 19 March 1937, *Archives nationales*, Paris, *Papiers Schweisguth*, 351AP/3.

31 Litvinov to Troianovskii, 13 Feb. 1937, *SAO, 1934–1939*, pp. 533–34; and Litvinov to Troianovskii (instructions for a meeting with Roosevelt), 21 Jun. 1937, *ibid.*, pp. 566–67.

relations with Moscow began in February 1936. Titulescu was forced to resign in August 1936. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935 and the rush to support the Spanish fascists in July 1936 killed Litvinov's hopes of keeping Italy on side. And Poland of course, what can one say about Poland? It signed a non-aggression pact with Germany in January 1934, and sought to spoil Anglo-Franco-Soviet cooperation until the beginning of the war in September 1939. But even without Polish obstruction, the French, British, and U.S. governments *all* rejected Soviet overtures before the first Stalinist show trial in August 1936, and long before the purges of the Red Army high command in mid-1937.

Yet historians often refer to the purges as a principal cause of the cooling of western interest in military cooperation with the USSR. Let's be clear, the purges were a useful pretext for decisions already taken for other reasons. With a few exceptions, western politicians and civil servants did not care a pin about the old Bolsheviks shot by Stalin's executioners. They *were* disturbed by the attack on the Red Army high command, but this was because they could no longer take for granted a Soviet military counterweight to Germany.

At the beginning of 1938 Litvinov was discouraged: all the partners to his would-be coalition against Germany had fallen away one by one. He had nothing to show for his efforts, a failure all too obvious to Stalin, who understood that the Soviet Union had no allies and was exposed to danger.

The remarkable thing is that Litvinov persisted in his efforts to woo the French and British, though with greater caution than before. Once burned, twice shy. It was just as well because the news in 1938 was dire. The war was going badly in Spain. On 13 March 1938 Germany annexed Austria without a shot fired. Hitler could then attack Czechoslovakia from three directions. Litvinov warned that Czechoslovak president Beneš might cave in to pressure from Berlin. It would be his undoing³². Litvinov's observations proved to be quite to the point, but the toughest criticism against France came not from Litvinov, but from his deputy commissar Potemkin, who had returned from the Paris embassy. In early April, he wrote to his successor Ia. Z. Surits:

„In spite of the extremely tense international situation, the French government has not changed its position of indecisiveness, inaction, and credulity in the face of events, creating a direct threat to the general peace and a direct threat to France itself. Neither the German seizure of Austria, nor the critical position of Czechoslovakia ... nor the appearance of German and Italian troops on its own Spanish frontier ... have forced France to wake up, to think about, and even to do something about its own

32 Litvinov to Aleksandrovskii, no. 5147/L, secret, 26 March 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, p. 149, d. 166, ll. 4–7; and Litvinov to Surits, no. 5130/L, secret, 19 March 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, p. 148, d. 158, ll. 15–19.

security ... As in the past, they do not take their eyes off England, in which they see their only hope of defence. As before, they do not want to understand that the very first show of decisiveness, firmness, and independence of French foreign policy, as it was during the time of Louis Barthou, would immediately compel the high-handed aggressors to come to their senses, would remind England of the danger of its own isolation and would encourage all the healthy forces of democratic Europe in the struggle for peace.“

Echoing Surits' own opinions, Potemkin reckoned that France was finished unless it changed its ways.

Nor was France the only target of Potemkin's ire; he also singled out Poland which was „helping Hitler in his actions against Czechoslovakia.“ Germany was pushing Poland toward war with the Soviet Union. „Hitler is counting on the inevitable crushing of Poland by our troops,“ wrote Potemkin: „When we have occupied some areas (*oblasti*) of Poland, Germany will do the same from its side. Basically fulfilling Germany's plan, Poland itself is preparing its fourth partition and the loss of its national independence.“ This was *not*, however, an objective of Soviet foreign policy, for Potemkin advised Surits to launch a press campaign in Paris, „explaining the traitorous role of [Józef] Beck [the Polish foreign minister] and the fate awaiting Poland, if it continues further along the path marked out for it by Hitler.“³³

I am not going to get into the events of the Czechoslovak crisis during the spring and summer of 1938. I have written a lengthy essay in English, also translated into Russian, on this subject³⁴. Suffice it to say that in view of all the western rebuffs of Soviet proposals, Litvinov and especially Stalin were extremely cynical about western intentions. It was only natural. The French and British accused the USSR of being unreliable, but once again this was Mr. Pot calling Comrade Kettle black.

The last chance for an anti-Nazi alliance came in the spring and summer of 1939³⁵. Suffice it to say, that in April 1939 Litvinov proposed a last chance political and military alliance to France and Britain which they rejected without wanting to seem to be doing so. It was no secret what was going on. The iconic British political cartoonist David Low did a series of cartoons during this period showing Chamberlain dragging his feet toward Moscow.

If you were Stalin looking at these developments, or any other Soviet leader for that matter, what else could you think? We have been trying for six years to organise collective security, a defensive alliance against Nazi Germany. No one

33 Potemkin to Surits, no. 6200, secret, 4 April 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, p. 148, d. 158, ll. 25–30.

34 Carley 2010.

35 Carley 1999.

is interested, not the United States, not Britain, not France, certainly not Poland, not Romania, not anyone. Imagine a football or soccer coach with a losing record over six years. If you were the team's general manager, would you keep him on, or sack him and look for someone else who could win? „Litvinov has done what he could do,“ Stalin must have thought, „but he is too soft, and he is not taken seriously in the west. I need to make a change.“

This is why Stalin sacked Litvinov in early May 1939 and named V. M. Molotov to replace him. Molotov, Stalin's loyal hatchet man, did not like Litvinov and was glad to see him go, even if for a few months he continued Litvinov's policy of negotiating with France and Britain. Incredibly, they still dragged their feet, especially the British, and of course the French would do nothing without the British. Even cartoonist David Low could see what was going on: the Germans were waiting in the wings for their turn to talk to Molotov. If Low could see what was going on, so could Stalin.

At the end of July Molotov advised the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Berlin that he was prepared to entertain offers from the German government. And why not? At the end of July the French and British governments finally decided to send delegations to Moscow to discuss an alliance against Nazi Germany, but they came in an old, slow freighter, without plenipotentiary powers, or in the case of the British without any written credentials at all.

„They're not serious“ was Stalin's reaction, and who can say he was wrong? Well, you know the rest of the story. Ribbentrop came to Moscow and signed the non-aggression pact in the early morning of 23 August.

Did Stalin have better, more realistic options? It is hard to say, though second guessers do not doubt. Hindsight is always so clear.

If you had been in Stalin's boots, what would you have done? Maybe sack Litvinov, but tell Molotov to keep on negotiating with the French and British, while holding off the Germans. „Paris and London will feel the heat,“ Stalin could have reasoned, „and in the meantime we'll stall in Berlin.“ Let's say Litvinov's policy without Litvinov. Risky certainly, because who could count on Chamberlain and Daladier? Too risky, as it turned out. Stalin lacked Litvinov's clarity of vision to pursue such policy.

Nevertheless, it is hard to fault Stalin for concluding the non-aggression pact: after all, the French and British governments had tried and failed to conciliate Hitler at various times but especially at the Munich conference in 1938. Incredible as it may seem, Britain and France never really wanted a genuine anti-Nazi military alliance with the USSR. You can see why I ask the question who betrayed whom in the 1930s, and why I think France and Britain, not the USSR, were the main guilty parties.

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