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Behind Stalin's Moustache: Pragmatism in Early Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917–41

MICHAEL JABARA CARLEY

It is all up-hill reexamining Soviet foreign policy, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. 'We now know' about Soviet foreign policy, one notable historian has said.¹ And if we know, we can close the book and not investigate further the conduct of Soviet international relations. We know who was on the right and wrong sides. You must have heard these lines before. If not, let me give you a few examples for the pre-World War II period.

For instance, we do not have to reexamine the Soviet role in coming of the Second World War. We know it was Stalin – evil, bloody, purging – the left-wing ideologue whose hands dripped with the blood of millions of victims of communism, who betrayed the wooing, well-intentioned Western democracies. Stalin, the communist dictator, courted Hitler, the fascist dictator, to make an anti-Western, anti-democratic pact, and it led to the beginning of World War II. Hitler invaded innocent Poland, and Stalin, no better than his German interlocutor, took his knife and fork to feast at Hitler's table, taking his slice of Polish territory and making his share of victims. After such evil conduct, how could the west have any constructive dealings with Stalin or the Soviet Union? As Robert Buzzanco put it recently in a now well known essay, this kind of reasoning justified United States postwar, cold war policy.² Of course, Buzzanco's paper was criticized on the American listserv *H-Diplo*, but then consider the source. Naturally, cold war reasoning required that Western public opinion forget the tremendous, indispensable Soviet

contribution to victory over Nazi Germany. Thirty million dead soldiers and civilians and widespread devastation did not count for much in postwar equations of power and ideology.

Other early Soviet policies and positions have been assessed with equal simplicity. Take, for example, the late, distinguished Adam Ulam. He said that early Soviet foreign policy was largely Comintern policy: there were Soviet–German relations and there was Comintern policy in China.³ Actually Soviet foreign policy was far more sophisticated and complex than this portrayal of it. These Soviet policies are becoming more familiar to specialists because of the partial opening of Soviet archives in Russia. I should mention here the work of Sabine Dullin, Gabriel Gorodetsky, Jon Jacobson, Timothy O'Connor, Geoffrey Roberts, T.J. Uldricks, among others.⁴

And yet Western 'cold war' assessments of early Soviet foreign policy still largely prevail. Should we continue to accept them? I think not. As an alternative I would propose that Soviet foreign policy was largely rational, pragmatic, and careful. And the West – notably, Britain, France, and the United States – did not fail to recognize Soviet pragmatism, but it failed to match it. This is essentially my reply to Professor Keith Neilson's question: what is behind Stalin's moustache?

A fresh examination of Soviet foreign policy in the period before the Second World War repays the effort. Let us start at the beginning: the October revolution, when the Bolsheviks seized power. The Russian army was collapsing, and the Bolsheviks made public declarations calling for peace and world socialist revolution. In March 1918 the Soviet government concluded the treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Central Powers. Russia's former allies, France, Britain, the United States, took a dim view of the Brest-Litovsk peace. Nor did they like the annulment of the Russian state debt and the confiscation and nationalization of private property held by foreign nationals. And yet in early 1918 some people in the French, British and American governments suggested that the Allies should help the Bolsheviks against Germany because they (the Bolsheviks) were the only force in Russia capable of putting up further resistance to the enemy. These were not all eccentrics on the fringes of power: British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and French General Ferdinand Foch contemplated such ideas. The Russian anti-Bolsheviks were pro-German; they said, or they were done in and represented nothing. The idea of cooperating with Soviet Russia floated, briefly. But in April–May 1918 the trial balloon was burst by those who saw the

Bolsheviks as dangerous revolutionaries who must be crushed before the bacillus of socialist revolution spread into Europe.

Some Bolsheviks were willing to contemplate limited cooperation with the west against Germany. Remember Lenin's famous quotation: 'cast my vote for taking potatoes and guns from the robbers of Anglo-French imperialism'. Here was the first grudging Soviet pragmatism towards the West.⁵

My point is that a pattern developed *early* in the Western-Soviet relationship between ideologues and 'realists', as Foreign Office Parliamentary Under-Secretary Sir Robert Vansittart would call them during the 1930s. During the interwar years anticommunist ideologues fought pragmatists for control of British, French and American policy toward Soviet Russia. Bolshevik revolutionaries also fought Bolshevik businessmen for control of Soviet policy toward the west. 'Dual policy' resulted in Soviet Russia, but what is less known, in the West, too. There were politicians, civil servants and businessmen in France, Britain and the United States, for example, who saw commercial and strategic advantages in better relations with Soviet Russia, then the Soviet Union. In France strategic questions mattered because the French feared German *revanche*. Édouard Herriot, the French Radical leader, went to Soviet Russia in 1922 and said as much to G.V. Chicherin, the Soviet foreign commissar.⁶ Britain had the English Channel and the United States had the Atlantic Ocean to protect their citizens against a revanchist Germany. But France had no such protection. Before the war tsarist Russia was France's most important ally. In the 1920s Herriot and others wanted to improve relations with Soviet Russia to reestablish a balance of power in Europe. And traders wanted better relations too in order to do business in what looked like an important emerging postwar market. They put pressure on the Allied governments to end the strangling maritime blockade around Soviet Russia and to allow trade and credit for trade with the Bolsheviks.

And on the Soviet side too there were pragmatists, a good many of them. The Communist International, the Comintern, was established in 1919 to spread world socialist revolution. The Bolsheviks were internationalists, but even here they were pragmatists of a sort, for the Comintern was the only way to fight back against Allied military intervention. In 1919 Soviet Russia could not attack the West by force of arms, but they could with revolutionary propaganda. The propaganda was dangerous, and the

interventionists feared it. The Comintern, while attempting to spread revolution, was also an instrument of self-defence.

The civil war petered out in 1921; it had been a bloody, merciless business fuelled by foreign intervention. Soviet Russia was ruined by war, civil war and the Allied blockade. The Soviet government had to rebuild, and the Bolsheviks recognized that they must buy and borrow in the West to build their socialist society. Here was an irony worth noting: the Bolsheviks needed capitalist goods – sewing needles, shoes, locomotives, machine tools – to rebuild. And they had to borrow capitalist money to trade. Russian socialism needed Western capitalism. The Bolsheviks learned quickly. Lenin called it peaceful coexistence. Bolsheviks made good businessmen. The Narkomindel, the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, and the NKVT, the People's Commissariat for Foreign Trade, became the bastions of Soviet pragmatism. Lenin, Chicherin, Maksim M. Litvinov, L.B. Krasin, Kh.G. Rakovskii, and even Stalin were among its most important proponents.

But the Comintern continued to foment revolution even though the foreign intervention and civil war had ended. Even though the prospects for world revolution were negligible, it was hard to abandon the instruments of world revolution. Bolshevik pragmatists accused Bolshevik revolutionaries of sucking ideas from their thumbs. The revolutionaries accused the Narkomindel of floundering in the ooze of opportunism.⁷

Bolshevik businessmen began to talk to and trade with their counterparts in the West. And trade increased, though it was not without difficulties. In fact, in many cases it was guerrilla war: Western businessmen might sell shoddy merchandise at high prices. When credit was available, it was dear. As long as you do not accept our rules for doing business, said these entrepreneurs of the West, we will cheat you, deny you cheap credit, and take you for every penny we can. Playing by Western rules meant indemnifying foreign nationals holding property in Russia before the revolution and recognizing and paying off the tsarist bonds held by the billions in the West. The 'burgler' had to 'give proof of repentance', said a British Cabinet minister.⁸ Bolshevik traders learned fast, exasperating their Western interlocutors, who at first must have thought they would be dealing with naive coffee house socialists. They were anything but naive, and they learned to bargain as hard as any Western trader. British businessmen, who knew a thing or two about sharp dealing,

accused the Bolsheviks of going too far, though what is too far in business? Lenin's exhortation – 'learn to trade' – might be roughly translated as 'gull them twice as much'. The anticommunist ideologues and their Comintern counterparts did not like this business pragmatism. But, ironically, Western ideologues were more successful than their Soviet counter-parts in blocking better relations.

In the United States it was people now long forgotten or nearly so, who pressed for better relations: for example, Boston lawyer Meyer Bloomfield, governor of Indiana, J.P. Goodrich, senators Smith W. Brookhart, William E. Borah, Joseph Irvin France. They tried to move the United States towards trade and political relations with Soviet Russia in the early 1920s. The State Department considered these advocates to 'have swallowed the Bolo bait, hook and sinker'.⁹ They lacked credibility. The United States did not recognize the Soviet Union until 1933.

The Soviet government had better luck in Europe. The French started to flirt with Soviet representatives in 1922 and 1923. Herriot, politicians Paul Painlevé and Anatole de Monzie, the future Italophile appeaser, were the most important advocates of better relations. The French president Alexandre Millerand and the premier Raymond Poincaré were not interested, but elections were coming in 1924 and Franco-Soviet relations were an election issue.

In Britain, the die-hard Tories were itching to pick a fight with the Bolsheviks, and the foreign secretary, Lord Curzon actually did in 1923. The Foreign Office, the Home Office and the India Office were bastions of anticommunism. On the other hand, traders like Arthur G. Marshall and the Labour Party wanted better relations with the Soviet Union. Trade was the main motivator. After elections in late 1923 Labour formed a minority government early in the new year (1924), and recognized *de jure* the Soviet Union. The Tories came back to power later that year in an election marked by the scandal of the so-called Zinoviev letter – a forgery it turns out, as the Soviet government claimed all along.¹⁰

As Anglo-Soviet relations were deteriorating, Franco-Soviet relations improved when a centre-left coalition led by the Radical Herriot won national elections in the spring of 1924. Herriot formed a centre-left government which recognized the Soviet Union in late October 1924. But the split continued in France between pragmatists and ideologues, as it did elsewhere. The ideologues held the upper hand.

In 1926 the United States rejected an offer of negotiations from Krasin, who was an important Soviet advocate of better relations

with the West. More than a debt settlement was involved, said Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg: it is 'a question of principle'. 'We cannot recognize a régime whose very foundation principle is ultimately to bring about the overthrow of every foreign government by revolution' (October 1926).¹¹

Revolution was brewing in China, and the Soviet government and the Comintern lent a hand. Britain had vital trade interests in China, and British notables in Hong Kong, among others, were calling for military action. Things were so hot in London that Austen Chamberlain, the foreign secretary, often had to calm down his senior officials and clerks who were spoiling for a fight with the Soviet Union.¹² The Chinese revolution became a proxy war between Britain and the Soviet Union.

Litvinov often said that the Narkomindel had nothing to do with the Comintern, nor did it want to. This was quite true, but all important matters of policy (and many unimportant ones too) ended up in the Politburo, the pinnacle of power in the Soviet Union, so that Narkomindel disavowals, while true technically, expressed the wish, not the reality. And the Politburo appeared willing to sacrifice relations with Britain to pursue its Eastern policy. It did sacrifice them, but the Chinese revolution failed. Britain broke off diplomatic relations in the spring of 1927, and British civil servants threatened to deny government contracts to British firms who continued to trade with the Soviet Union.¹³

While Soviet relations with Britain deteriorated, the Soviet government still hoped to improve relations with France. Soviet policy was motivated by the desire to be on acceptable terms with at least one of the Western powers (apart from Germany), so that they would not form an anti-Soviet bloc. In 1926–27 a Franco-Soviet conference took place in Paris to resolve economic and political issues. The Soviet government offered what were probably the most extensive concessions on the tsarist foreign debt that it ever made during the interwar years. Sixty million gold francs per annum for 60 years in exchange for trade credits. They asked for \$250 million over three years, but finally lowered this figure to \$120 million. The French government rejected what it considered to be a serious and acceptable Soviet offer.

At first glance, this would seem an implausible outcome. Why would the notoriously tight-fisted French bourgeoisie push away the proffered Soviet gold? The reply must be internal politics and anticommunism: national elections were to take place in the spring

of 1928, and the centre-right government of Poincaré ran an anticommunist campaign to discredit and split the French left. The Poincaré government could not conclude an important economic agreement with the Soviet Union which would favour the electoral chances of the left. It may come as a surprise, but anticommunism in the 1920s was virulent. In 1926–27 anticommunism was white hot in Britain and France. But de Monzie, the chief French negotiator, defied instructions from Premier Poincaré to stop the talks. Instead, Monzie sought a debts-credits agreement with his Soviet interlocutor Rakovskii in the summer of 1927. His plan was to present Poincaré with a *fait accompli* forcing the French government to accept an agreement or risk alienating French bondholders and losing the 1928 elections.

In a story now coming fully to light, thanks to the opening of Soviet archives, a Byzantine struggle took place inside the French government between Monzie and Poincaré. Monzie tried to finesse a Soviet agreement in spite of Poincaré's adamant opposition. This was impossible. In the end, the Poincaré government expelled the chief Soviet negotiator, Rakovskii, to kill the Franco-Soviet negotiations. On 4 September 1927 an inspired right-wing press campaign began in Paris intended to drive the Soviet *polpred* out of his embassy and to rupture relations with the Soviet Union. Diplomatic relations continued, though barely, but Rakovskii was recalled. Here was a case where the Soviet government made important concessions rejected by France in an early cold war atmosphere of red-baiting electoral politics.¹⁴

These circumstances poisoned Franco-Soviet relations for the next five years. And Chicherin, who for a long time had tolerated setback after setback in pursuing better relations with the West, finally lost patience. In the early months of 1928 Chicherin had several serious confrontations with the French ambassador Jean Herbette. In April they had a dangerous argument. Herbette had had the temerity to criticize the Soviet press for its harsh treatment of France and to accuse the Soviet Union of making military preparations against its neighbours. For Chicherin this was too much. 'I expressed my indignation', he said, 'France is armed to the teeth', and you are threatening us in Eastern Europe. Herbette accused the Soviet Union of planning aggression; Chicherin replied that the Soviet government planned only to defend itself. 'But if you don't like that', Chicherin added, 'may I refer you to what the Spartan Leonidas said to the Persians [at Thermopyles] when they demanded his arms. "Come

take them”, he said.’ ‘I was struck’, Herbette later reported sanctimoniously, ‘by the intensity of [Chicherin’s] anger.’¹⁵

Franco-Soviet relations remained strained until 1932, but Anglo-Soviet relations improved briefly in 1929 when a new minority Labour government returned to power and renewed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Subsequent Anglo-Soviet debt negotiations dragged on until 1932, but led nowhere. The Soviet Union had commenced its first five year plan in 1928. The failure of trade and credit negotiations in the West, the failed Chinese revolution, and the Soviet ‘war scare’ in 1927, appear to have contributed to the Soviet Union’s decision to build an industrial infrastructure on its own. The Soviet government lost interest in concluding debts–credit agreements in the West.

In Britain the early cold war atmosphere continued in spite of the Labour minority government. Tory red-baiting in the House of Commons impeded pursuit of a trade agreement. One Foreign Office official wrote that if the British anticommunist press called ‘a truce in the long range bombardment of Moscow ... [h]alf their “copy” would go’ (January 1930).¹⁶ A new foreign secretary, Sir John Simon, heard this observation from Foreign Office officials:

It is one of the unfortunate legacies of the War that Anglo-Soviet relations have become a subject of the most acute internal political controversy ... From being a pre-war enigma Russia has become a post-war obsession ... a matter of party strife at most of the post-war appeals to the British electorate. So long as one section of opinion, even if a small one, hitches its wagon to the Soviet star, and another longs for nothing so much as the star’s eclipse, the task of reducing Anglo-Soviet relations to normal remains hopeless [November 1931].¹⁷

In the 1920s trade was the main motivator of Western–Soviet rapprochement. In the 1930s it was security. In the 1920s German *revanche* was merely a French *cauchemar*; in the 1930s it became a Soviet *koshmar* as well. Hitler came to power in 1933, and Nazi Germany rearmed at breakneck speed. France became interested in better relations with the Soviet Union, and Herriot, again, led a government which signed a Franco-Soviet non-aggression pact (in late 1932). Economic relations also improved and by 1934 the French government was willing to talk about a Franco-Soviet mutual assistance pact. A conservative French politician, Louis Barthou,

conducted negotiations with then foreign commissar Litvinov. They were both interested in closer relations.

Litvinov promoted 'collective security', which meant in effect formation of a broad based Soviet alliance with France and Britain to deter Nazi aggression or defeat it, if deterrence failed. But Barthou was assassinated in October 1934 and he was succeeded by Pierre Laval, who immediately put the brakes on negotiations. Laval preferred a settlement with Nazi Germany, and was a strong anticommunist who feared the spread of communist revolution into the heart of Europe.

Note the date: October 1934. Laval eventually signed a mutual assistance pact with Stalin in Moscow in May 1935, but only because the dead Barthou's inertia carried negotiations forward and because Hitler left Laval no choice. Laval made promises about military staff talks and French war supplies for the Red Army, but the French government did not keep Laval's promises.

As these events unfolded in France, the British government – surprisingly, one might think – began to show a greater interest in a Soviet rapprochement. This movement was promoted by a civil servant, not a politician, Sir Robert Vansittart, the influential Foreign Office permanent under-secretary. He aimed for security against Nazi Germany, and he used trade and credits as a means of strengthening the political rapprochement. Vansittart had the help of the Tory renegade and former die-hard, Winston Churchill, who started seeing the Soviet ambassador in London Ivan Mikhailovich Maiskii in 1935. Churchill became Maiskii's advisor, supporting the formation of a grand alliance between Britain, France and the Soviet Union. In March 1935 Anthony Eden, then Lord Privy Seal, went to Moscow to meet Stalin in a much publicized meeting. Both Litvinov and Stalin gave strong signs of interest in closer relations. But Eden became foreign secretary in December 1935 and immediately put a stop to the rapprochement, which was dead by February 1936.¹⁸

Note the date: February 1936. Again the reasons were ideological: fear of war, communism and revolution. Eden and his colleagues made no effort to hide them. And the Board of Trade and the Banque de France also intervened to stop a Soviet rapprochement.¹⁹ This was at a time, by the way, when British military estimates of the Red Army were positive and improving.²⁰ Hence, the struggle for control over French and British policy

continued as it had from the first days of the October Revolution between ideologues and 'realists'.

October 1934 and February 1936 are key dates, coming *before* the Popular Front elections in the spring of 1936, before the Spanish civil war broke out in July, and well before the Stalinist purges of the Soviet high command in 1937. The blood purges of old Bolshevik revolutionaries also began in earnest in the summer of 1936, but the French and British governments did not care about old Bolsheviks, with a few exceptions.

Anglo-Franco-Soviet relations went downhill from there to reach rock-bottom during the Munich Crisis in September 1938. Munich was a bitter experience for the Soviet government; it destroyed what little belief remained in Anglo-French willingness to oppose Nazi aggression. Henceforth, the Soviet Union would maintain its support of collective security, but with deep mistrust and cynicism and a determination to lock their putative Western allies into commitments from which they could not escape, as France had done at Munich.

The last chance for Western-Soviet rapprochement before the outbreak of the Second World War came in the spring and summer of 1939. This chance too was lost, and it was Stalin's responsibility by most accounts, though not by mine.²¹ I have taken a different view of these negotiations in *1939: The Alliance that Never Was and the Coming of World War II* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999; London: House of Stratus, 2000). I wrote that the interwar divisions between anticommunist ideologues and Vansittart's 'realists' continued through 1939, and indeed until 1941. Once again the anticommunist ideologues, with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in the lead, sabotaged the conclusion of an anti-Nazi grand alliance.

At first it did not seem as though Chamberlain could do so. The Tory renegade Churchill and the former prime minister, David Lloyd George, fought for a Soviet alliance in parliament and in the press. According to early Gallup polls, British public opinion strongly favoured an alliance. Some members of Cabinet and the deputy chiefs of staff said Britain needed 'to get the Soviet in'. The stalwart Vansittart celebrated the death of British appeasement. The way seemed clear to negotiate a grand alliance with the Soviet Union.

In April 1939 Litvinov offered the French and British an eight-point proposal for a tripartite political and military alliance. At the Foreign Office senior officials Alexander Cadogan and Orme

Sargent derided Litvinov's proposals, though the Foreign Office was more receptive to agreement later in the spring and summer, as the danger of war increased. In France the premier Édouard Daladier and his foreign minister, Georges Bonnet, were interested in Soviet offers but, except for a three-week period in April, they followed a British line. Bonnet was a die-hard appeaser and Daladier a waverer who inclined to the British; these two were a weak foundation upon which to base a strong policy of alliance with the Soviet Union. In their three weeks of timorous foreign policy initiative the French even made a counter-offer to the Soviet government for a roughly sketched tripartite alliance, far weaker than Litvinov's proposals. Two Soviet officials – Ia.Z. Surits, the Soviet ambassador in Paris, and V.P. Potemkin, the deputy commissar for foreign affairs – thought this opportunity should be seized, and the French proposals accepted as the basis for negotiations to finesse Chamberlain's well known opposition. It seemed that the ideologues were finally on the run, and yet the negotiations in 1939 failed.

In early May Stalin sacked Commissar Litvinov, the main Soviet proponent of an anti-Nazi alliance, and replaced him with V.M. Molotov, the old bloody Bolshevik and Stalin's right arm. The Soviet government made its greatest negotiating error when Molotov rejected advice to take up the French proposals. But the Soviet side calculated that French were following a British line, and that it was therefore the British with whom the Soviet government must negotiate. Potemkin and Surits argued that the Soviet government could successfully lever the French proposals into an alliance close to what Litvinov had proposed. Molotov, and Stalin behind him, were not inclined to such subtlety and finesse, and in doing so *they* played into Chamberlain's hands. Negotiations were tough and Chamberlain put obstacles in the way. He was prime minister: he had great influence even when he held a minority position in Cabinet, and he was good at political finesse, manoeuvre and sleight of hand. Daladier and Bonnet did not have the confidence or determination to assert a strong French hand to counter Chamberlain. This too might have led to the prime minister's defeat.

1939 has not gone unchallenged.²² Many of the historian-critics of Soviet foreign policy hold that Stalin preferred an alliance with Nazi Germany from the very beginning. Collective security was merely a front, part of a cynical two-sided policy. What the Soviet

government did was not important; what really counted was what Stalin thought in the darkest recesses of his mind. And Litvinov was Stalin's 'tool'.²³ He was the smiling whorehouse piano player – a good musician, but not his own master. The man who called the tunes, Stalin, was on the second floor and out of sight. Soviet foreign policy was Comintern policy; it pursued world revolution and sought to dupe the West into helping to make it. How could the West ally with bloody, duplicitous Stalin, the purger, or with the government founded by Lenin, the 'mass murderer' and destroyer of 'fledgling Russian democracy'.

In the pages of this journal Keith Neilson has taken up some of the same arguments, though without the cold war bile. He opines that the evidence does not sustain the main lines of my argument. I am surprised, for I would say that the evidence is overwhelming. What are the main lines exactly? One is that Western anticommunism was the major obstacle to an alliance against Nazi Germany. Anti-communism was nothing new in 1939. On numerous occasions during the interwar years the anticommunist ideologues successfully opposed political and economic negotiations with the Soviet Union. 1939 was the endgame of the interwar years when peace and Western security were in their greatest danger. Even then, ideologues like Chamberlain and Bonnet feared victory over Nazi Germany shared with the Soviet Union, as much as they feared defeat at the hands of the Wehrmacht. I have pointed out this irony before. The French and British governments calculated that they must have the Soviet Union on their side to defeat Nazi Germany. It was essential even in a minimalist role supporting an Allied blockade and supplying Poland and Romania on an 'Eastern' front. But the victory guaranteed by Soviet support also risked to enhance Soviet prestige and to spread Soviet communism into the heart of Europe. These calculations hampered the 1939 negotiations more than British security concerns in the Far East, as Neilson contends. European security had to come first; the threat in the Far East was serious, but not life threatening. And US President Franklin Roosevelt quietly encouraged the Soviet government to come to terms with France and Britain.²⁴ If Britain feared American disapproval of closer Anglo-Soviet relations, as Neilson says, the fears were groundless.

And, asks Neilson, what about the purges? They came *after* the critical French and British decisions in 1934–36 to halt the

improvement of relations with the Soviet Union. The critical factor in these decisions was anticommunism. The purges merely reinforced decisions previously taken. Incidentally, there is no underlying assumption in 1939, *pace* Neilson, that the successful conclusion of a tripartite alliance would have deterred Nazi Germany. Maybe it would have, maybe not. As Litvinov sometimes noted, a policy of deterrence necessarily risked war if it failed. If war came, it would have to be waged with determination and brave hearts.²⁵ Neilson says the Red Army of 1939 was not the army of 1944, but neither was the Wehrmacht, the army of 1941.

Neilson does not see anticommunism as the main impediment to successful British negotiations with the Soviet Union: 'Chamberlain is an easy and convenient strawman, with his obvious anti-Soviet bias, [but] the general position is not so clear ... Within the Foreign Office there were divided opinions.' Again *pace* Neilson, I do not contend that the British government was undivided. I *emphasize* the divisions, but the prime minister held immense power and influence even when he did not have majority support in Cabinet or elsewhere in the government. He could and did put forward obstacles to the success of negotiations in that summer of 1939. Chamberlain was not a strawman; he was *prime minister*. Chamberlain held a large responsibility for the alliance that never was and for the unfavourable Anglo-French strategic position in September 1939. And anticommunism was not unique to Chamberlain, nor limited in time to 1939. Chamberlain's views were shared by Bonnet and Daladier among many others at the highest levels of government and society in France and Britain. The divisions of 1939 between ideologue and pragmatist were characteristic of Western-Soviet relations throughout the interwar years. What happened in 1939 had occurred many times before, but then the stakes were not so immediate or so critical. Neilson contends that one has to look at the whole picture of British foreign policy to understand 1939; I would counter that one has to look at the whole picture of Western-Soviet relations during the interwar years. The pattern of conflict between pragmatists and ideologues is clear whether in Britain, France or the United States.

Stalin may have been pursuing a cynical double game, Neilson proposes, but he admits there is no evidence to support this hypothesis. T.J. Uldricks responds best to Neilson's conjecture: this position 'makes 98 percent of all Soviet diplomatic activity a brittle

cover for the remaining covert 2 percent'.²⁶ Backchannel Soviet activity would have been identified by German sources, but these have not surfaced.

Consistent with his position on 1939 Neilson rejects Gorodetsky's assessment in *Grand Illusion* that Stalin's foreign policy was based on *realpolitik* and Russian national interest. 'Stalin always exploited opportunities as they appeared at a given moment', writes Gorodetsky: 'Throughout most of the 1930s he adhered to collective security, in an attempt to protect Russia from a disastrous war, until he despaired of its success at the end of the decade' (p.7). Gorodetsky's view is consistent with my own findings for the interwar years as a whole. Neilson says Stalin was more influenced by his communist view of a capitalist world, which 'had as [its] primary motivation the destruction of the worker's paradise'. The foreign intervention (1917–21) Neilson mentions was taken as proof of Western hostility. But there was a lot of other proof as well during the interwar years, and in 1940–41, as Patrick Osborn shows in his *Operation Pike*. Practical experience, as much as ideology, would have taught Stalin and his colleagues who survived the purges to be careful in dealing with Britain and France. And yet from 1933 to 1939 the Soviet government went a long way to promote an anti-Nazi grand alliance. Whatever was behind Stalin's moustache, Lenin's early policy of peaceful coexistence was largely followed by the Soviet Union throughout the interwar years and was left largely unreciprocated in the West. Of course, one could ask what came first, the chicken or the egg, but when the Soviet government made offers the West more often than not slapped them away.

This does not make a difference to the cold war historians of Soviet foreign policy, who produce 'more heat than light' says Neilson, attacking the pragmatism and legitimacy of Soviet foreign positions. 'It wasn't so', they say. But the constant repetition of their arguments will not make them true. And yet you have to hand it the old guard of cold war and émigré historians – Ulam, R.C. Raack, Igor Lukes and others – evidence has had no impact on them. Really you have to respect them for that: they know what they believe and what they are going to say – 'and don't bother me with the evidence!'

The fact is that when the French or British rejected Soviet overtures in the mid-1930s, it was not because of the Stalinist purges,

which had not occurred yet. In 1934–36 Anglo-French rejection of Soviet collective security was not because the Red Army was weak and useless, because Anglo-French generals observed the growing strength of Soviet military power. The evidence shows that the main motivation for Anglo-French rejection of Soviet pragmatism was anticommunism and fear that war would lead to the spread of socialist revolution. In the 1920s the British and French governments wanted to teach the Bolsheviks a lesson – that they would have to play by Western rules if they wanted trade, credit and tolerable relations. Western rules meant recognition of debts, compensation to property owners, and in effect renunciation of the October Revolution. What I am proposing is that the popular and orthodox image of the Soviet ideologue threatening murder and revolution, and the moderate, reasonable West defending itself against communist aggression does not hold up in the story of Western–Soviet diplomacy during the interwar years. As I see it, the reality was more complicated and rather different than the West's cold war stereotypes.

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NOTES

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2. Robert Buzzanco, 'What Happened to the New Left?: Toward a Radical Reading of American Foreign Relations', Stuart L. Bernath Memorial Lecture, delivered at the annual meetings of the Organization of American Historians, April 1999, Toronto, Canada.
3. Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917–67* (New York: Praeger, 1968).
4. E.g., S. Dullin, 'Litvinov and the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs: The Fate of an Administration under Stalin, 1930–1939', in S. Pons and A. Romano (eds.), *Russia in the Age of Wars, 1914–1945* (Milan: Fondazione G. Feltrinelli, 2000), pp.121–46; G. Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1999); J. Jacobson, *When the Soviet Union Entered World Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); T.E. O'Connor, *The Engineer of Revolution: L.B. Krasin and the Bolsheviks, 1870–1926* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); G. Roberts, *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War: Russo-*

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5. M.J. Carley, *Revolution and Intervention: The French Government and the Russian Civil War, 1917–1919* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), passim.
 6. 'Report of the Director of the Department for Anglo-Saxon and Romance Countries to Comrade Veinshtein', J. Bronskii, 22 Sept. 1922, Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Moscow (AVPRF), *fond 04, opis' 42, delo 53619, papka 259, listy 23–25* (hereafter f, o, d, p, l); and Chicherin to L.D. Trotskii, commissar for war, 9 Oct. 1922, *ibid.*, l. 45.
 7. M.J. Carley, 'Episodes from the Early Cold War: Franco-Soviet Relations, 1917–1927', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 52/7 (Nov. 2000), pp.1275–1305.
 8. Arthur Steel-Mailand, minister of labour, to Austen Chamberlain, 27 Dec. 1927, Public Record Office, London (PRO), Foreign Office (FO) 800/261, fol. 716.
 9. Felix Cole to D.L. Poole (both State Department officials), 6 Dec. 1919, National Archives, Washington, DC Record Group (NA RG) 59, 661.01P81/200, carton no. 6152.
 10. Litvinov, deputy commissar for foreign affairs, to Rakovskii, Soviet representative in London, no. 266, immediate, 26 Oct. 1924, Rossiiskii Tsentr Khraneniia i Izucheniia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii, Moscow (RTsKhIDNI), f. 353, o. 1, d. 5, l. 142.
 11. Kellogg to A.B. Houghton, US ambassador in London, no. 212, strictly personal and confidential for the ambassador, 4 Nov. 1926, 861.01/1175, NA, M[microfilm]-316, reel 75.
 12. See various papers in PRO, FO 371/12433; and Chamberlain's minute, 22 April 1927, PRO, FO 371/12404/F3876/2/10.
 13. Crawford Greene, MP, to G.L.T. Locker-Lampson, parliamentary under-secretary in the Foreign Office, 10 and 14 Feb. 1927, PRO, Treasury (T) 160/258/F10045/1.
 14. Carley, 'Episodes', passim.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. Minute by C.H. Bateman, Foreign Office official, Northern Department, 28 Jan. 1930, PRO, FO 371/14866/N499/77/38.
 17. 'Notes on Anglo-Soviet Relations (1929–1931)', Bateman, 25 Nov. 1931, PRO, FO 371/15609/N7818/225/38.
 18. M.J. Carley, 'Fearful Concatenation of Circumstances: The Anglo-Soviet Rapprochement, 1934–1936', *Contemporary European History*, 5/1 (March 1996), pp.29–69.
 19. Carley, 'Fearful Concatenation', passim; and M.J. Carley, 'Five Kopecks for Five Kopecks: Franco-Soviet Trade Relations, 1928–1939', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 33/1 (Jan.–March 1992), pp.23–58.
 20. Keith Neilson, 'Pursued by a Bear: British Estimates of Soviet Military Strength and Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1922–1939', *Canadian Journal of History*, 18/2 (Aug. 1993), pp.189–221.
 21. E.g., D. Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938–1939* (London: Mandarin, 1990).
 22. E.g., consult the debate on the listserv *H-Diplo* in Feb–March 2000.
 23. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*, p.144.
 24. K.A. Umanskii, Soviet ambassador in Washington, DC, to Molotov, secret, 6 June 1939, *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki, 1939*, vol. 22, book 1. Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1992, pp.422–26.
 25. E.g., in July 1938, see 1939, p.52.
 26. Uldricks, 'Role of Russia', p.141.