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# CHAPTER NINE

# CAUGHT IN A CLEFT STICK: SOVIET DIPLOMACY AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR*

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The late British historian John Erickson wrote that the Spanish Civil War put the Soviet government into a cleft stick; caught between helping the Spanish Republic against a military, fascist uprising and alienating a new found, but milquetoast French ally.[1] The mutiny in Spain was directed against the recently elected centre-left coalition, the Popular Front, which included Spanish communists. It should have been normal for the Soviet Union to want to help workers and communists fighting against a right-wing, fascist mutiny. France too had just elected a Popular Front government, but the French coalition was fragile. Its most conservative element, the Radical party, was unwilling to get involved in Spain for fear of inflaming domestic political tensions or risking civil war. The British Conservative government also took a dim view of active involvement in the civil war and of Soviet intervention to support the Spanish Republicans, even if they were the legitimately elected, legal government. Most British Conservatives had a special aversion for the Soviet Union, and saw its involvement in Spain as a threat to spread communism into Western Europe.

The Soviet government did not have the leisure to consider the Spanish problem outside the larger issue of its security in Europe. In January 1933 Adolf Hitler had taken power in Germany. The Soviet government immediately saw the danger even if the Soviet Union had maintained good or tolerable relations with the Weimar Republic during the 1920s. Hitler came to power attacking not only Jews but communists as well. In the

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1920s he had written a political blueprint for the resurgence of a powerful German state. In *Mein Kampf*, which sold widely in Germany, Hitler saw Jews and Slavs as *untermenchen*, sub-humans good only for death or slavery. The Soviet heartland was to become part of a greater German Reich. The Soviet Union would thus be disbanded and dismembered. A rump Russian state would begin at the Ural Mountains. Soviet diplomats and Stalin himself were aware of *Mein Kampf*. They were also well acquainted with Hitler's anti-communist diatribes—the Soviet embassy in Berlin kept Moscow well informed. Maksim M. Litvinov, the Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, and his first deputy Nikolai N. Krestinskii, naturally pressed German diplomats for explanations of Nazi public hostility toward the Soviet Union. Litvinov confronted Konstatin von Neurath, his German counterpart, in Berlin only a month after Hitler took power.

German policy remains unchanged, Neurath said to Litvinov, and is independent of the change in government. "Hitler knows how to distinguish between communism and [the Soviet] government." Litvinov was not convinced.

The Soviet interrogation continued with German officials in Moscow during the rest of 1933. What about *Mein Kampf*? Litvinov asked the German ambassador in Moscow, Rudolf Nadolny.

"Hitler's book belongs to the past," the ambassador replied.

Litvinov was not so sure: "We have sufficient information about German proposals of a similar kind. Hitler has not repudiated his book and it continues to circulate in Germany." We want to believe official statements that there has been no change in German policy, but we cannot disregard our own eyes and ears when we observe events in Germany. According to Litvinov, "Nadolny threw up his hands and stated that my words utterly depressed him for if he conveyed my statements to Berlin, an impression of completely hopeless relations would result." Nadolny favoured good German-Soviet relations, but he ran up against a wall in Berlin, though in Moscow he attempted to blame Litvinov. He made his best arguments, again dismissing *Mein Kampf* as a meaningless relic of the past, but he could not convince his Soviet interlocutors.

You don't "understand our policy," deputy foreign commissar L. M. Karakhan told Nadolny: "In the present international situation the basic question is the question of war. [You] cannot deny that this is the fundamental danger which exists in the world." It is "completely natural that we are ready to collaborate and ready to support any force, which is against… war… Once France or other countries state their opposition to war… we welcome them. About their reasons for this we do not care a

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pin. It is important to us that she does not want it and this explains our relations not only toward France but toward any other government." Nadolny hotly protested that Germany did not want war, but this was an idea that carried little weight in Moscow.[2] One German diplomat asked incredulously if the Soviet Union was moving into the anti-German camp based on *Mein Kampf* and the hostile speeches of Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg. Repudiation of *Mein Kampf* might help to dispel our misgivings, suggested the Soviet side. "Speaking unofficially," Nadolny admitted that it was "a big mistake" not to disavow *Mein Kampf*.[3] But not from Hitler's point of view, and Nadolny eventually resigned his post. Denial in spite of everything remained the German line. Neurath told Litvinov that Germany had no expansionist ambitions in the east, though "some blockheads might be thinking about it."

Litvinov was incredulous: "Not only 'some blockheads' were writing about eastward expansion, so was the 'boss' of the country." The German people were being brought up on *Mein Kampf*![4]

In the meantime Franco-Soviet relations were improving. In November 1932, the Soviet Union and France signed a non-aggression pact which since 1926 the French had refused to conclude. The French government too had taken fright, temporarily overcoming its habitual anti-communism.[5] In 1933 the two governments exchanged military attachés, and in January 1934 they signed a provisional trade agreement. French cabinets changed every few months. Could one be certain, Soviet diplomats asked, if French policy would remain committed to the opening to Moscow? The French ambassador in Moscow, Charles Alphand, reassured Litvinov, but the latter was sceptical. In December 1933 the Politburo, Stalin's cabinet, 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 Soviet entry into the League of Nations, an institution which it had heretofore refused to join.[6] In 1934 Louis Barthou, the foreign minister of the moment, held talks with Litvinov. While Soviet diplomats continued to be polite with their German counterparts and to regret the negative turn in Soviet-German relations, the Soviet government was developing quite a different policy which it called "collective security," a broadly based alliance against Nazi Germany. Litvinov told Stalin that Paris was their "most important" embassy. France had become the "pivot" of Soviet policy in the west, more important even than the United States.[7]

At the same time the Soviet view of Nazi Germany hardened: "The increasing rearmament of Germany….," Litvinov advised Stalin,

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> now leaves no doubt: foreign governments are only speculating on whether Germany will be ready for war in a year or a year-and-a-half, a longer period is not even mentioned. To be ready for war does not yet mean go to war. It is possible that with the strengthening of its military power Germany at first will use it for the diplomatic reinforcing of its international position, for attracting allies, and for guaranteeing at least the neutrality of those governments which do not become allies. Military power attracts and in this task it is succeeding.

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 it will fulfill the plan of Rosenberg and Hitler himself, the programme of which is outlined in the latter's book *Mein Kampf*." Litvinov proposed that the Soviet government pursue the organisation of an Eastern Pact which would head off any French inclination to compose with Germany, always a possibility in the minds of certain French politicians. On 2 November 1934 the Politburo approved Litvinov's recommendations, though if France was the "pivot" of Soviet policy, it was one that wobbled badly.[8]

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 hostility in the State Department and opposition to the loan.[9] Whatever Litvinov's disappointment over the failure of the "gentleman's agreement," the Soviet government continued its pursuit of better relations with the United States. As if to underscore the point, Litvinov emphasised to Stalin, the importance of sending the right kind of people abroad to represent Soviet interests, people who kept to business and avoided "propaganda" or inappropriate conduct.[10]

This was an old story. The Soviet government had sponsored the organisation of the Communist International, or Comintern in 1919 as a propaganda instrument and purveyor of revolution against the western powers who had intervened in Russia to overthrow the Soviets. After the

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end of the foreign intervention and civil war (1917-1921), the Comintern remained, but in a sense had lost its *raison d'être*. Instead of revolution the Soviet government had to focus on economic reconstruction, foreign trade, and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the very powers which had failed to overthrow it. Neither side however could forget the past, and both Soviet and western governments were divided between pragmatists ready to negotiate, and ideologues who thought only of undoing the other side. Ironically, the Soviet side had greater success in getting its ideologues under control than the western powers had in quieting theirs. The Soviet government did not however disband the Comintern, and it became a western bogeyman and a weapon of Soviet policy whenever relations in the west became strained. There was conflict throughout the interwar years between these competing forces, a conflict which came to the fore in the 1930s with the rising danger of Nazi Germany and which was greatly aggravated by the Spanish civil war. As the Soviet government sought to organise an anti-Nazi coalition, western anti-communism whether lodged in the US State Department or elsewhere obstructed better relations. In the west the key question was: Who is 'Enemy no. 1', Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union? All too often, one knows now, the answer came up wrong.

As 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, including the influential Vansittart. It remained to be seen whether the fear of Nazism would be sufficient to overcome the Tory fear of anti-communism.

In late 1934 the British Cabinet, encouraged by Vansittart, contemplated the despatch of a cabinet minister to Moscow to discuss better relations. He was up against Tories who were "shocked" by the very concept of getting on with the Soviet Union. Vansittart nonetheless made modest headway and was ably assisted by the enthusiastic Maiskii. We need to be more pro-active, he advised Moscow, in order to overcome anti-Soviet prejudices.[11] There was hesitation on both sides: the British wanted a formal invitation, the Soviet wanted to be certain an invitation would be accepted before issuing it. Vansittart feared Nazi Germany as much as Litvinov did, and his messages to his superiors were just as urgent. Maiskii and Vansittart worked hand in glove to bring off the visit which the latter wanted to exploit "to the maximum". It would be an important step to putting right Anglo-Soviet relations.

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Anthony Eden, Lord Privy Seal, visited Moscow at the end of March 1935 where he met Stalin, Litvinov, and other Soviet officials. 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 which 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. There are "serious and alarming impediments to the preservation of normal peaceful international order," he told Eden: "Never since the World War have there been such misgivings about the fate of peace as now." Litvinov did not mention Hitler, but it was clear about whom he was talking. His warning to Eden was the same as to Stalin and to the Americans. The "danger of war" hangs over Europe, Litvinov said, and "over the whole world". Only concerted action, "the collective efforts of all States", especially the great powers, could reduce the risk.[12] 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, their attempt to improve relations in London went wrong. Litvinov and Maiskii had high hopes for Eden, 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 obstacle.[13]

The high point or apparent high point of the Soviet effort to build an anti-Nazi alliance came after Eden's visit to Moscow. This was the conclusion of the Franco-Soviet mutual assistance pact in early May 1935, followed by a mirror agreement with Czechoslovakia two weeks later. As with the Soviet-American "gentleman's agreement", the mutual assistance pact was not all that it appeared to be. The French foreign minister Barthou had moved to consolidate Franco-Soviet relations, but he was assassinated in Marseilles in October 1934, along with the Yugoslav King Alexander. His successor Pierre Laval was not as committed to Franco-Soviet relations, illustrating the weakness of French policy making when governments changed every few months. Litvinov later remarked derisively that French cabinets changed so often that policy proposals from one to the next were quickly forgotten.[14] Laval's succession was a good example, he worked for the next 16 months—a record, or nearly so, for a French foreign minister—to distance France from the Soviet Union, all the time appearing to move forward with consolidating Franco-Soviet relations. The Soviet government was aware of Laval's duplicity, but tried to work with him or around him until he fell from power in January

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1936.[15] In the meantime Laval weakened the pact signed with the Soviet Union and then delayed ratification after promising speedy parliamentary approval. Laval damaged Soviet confidence in France. Litvinov summed up the situation at the time of the conclusion of the pact: "We should not rest any serious hopes on the pact in the sense of real military support in the case of war. Our security in the first instance remains exclusively in the hands of the Red Army. The pact for us has mainly political importance, in reducing the chances of war not only from the side of Germany but also from Poland and Japan. Moreover, the pact can act as an obstacle… to the formation of an anti-Soviet bloc including Poland, Germany, and France…." Stalin's reaction was more succinct: "I never trust these French fellows."[16]

Moscow was too heavily invested in an anti-Nazi alliance, however problematic, to let Laval force them off of it. Litvinov even sought to maintain tolerable Soviet-Italian relations, illustrating the point that Soviet policy was anti-German and not anti-fascist. After the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935 when the Soviet Union agreed to League of Nations economic sanctions, it sought to limit damage to its relations with Rome. "While we do not want to spoil our relations with Italy," Litvinov advised Stalin, "we cannot avoid speaking out against the breaking of the peace being instigated by an Italian imperialist war." And Litvinov had in the back of his mind to use the Abyssinian crisis to consolidate Anglo-Franco-Soviet relations, though he was sceptical of the possibilities. He also wanted to send a message to Germany and Japan. Italy was not the primary target.[17] Eventually, it should be brought back into the fold of collective security. As Litvinov explained to his ambassador in Rome, B. E. Shtein, the Soviet government sought to protect the legitimacy of the League of Nations.

> We are not interested in the fate of Abyssinia and we will not oppose any resolution of the conflict, in so far as it will originate outside the League and will do no harm to it. We would frankly like the soonest possible end to the conflict, we would like Italy to come out of it in a strong position, capable of fulfilling its role in guaranteeing peace in Europe. At the same time we are convinced that the slightest compromising of the League in this affair in the case of a rejection of sanctions, and more so a formal agreement on the partition of Abyssinia, would mean the end of the League of Nations and the end of the system of collective security. We will therefore in every case go to the defence of the authority and covenant of the League—not more and not less.

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Litvinov emphasised that if the Soviet Union were not interested in maintaining good relations with Italy, or if these relations were judged to have been "fatally compromised", the Soviet government would have taken a more aggressive role at the League. He instructed Shtein to make these points as strongly as he could to the Italians, as he did himself to the Italian ambassador in Moscow.[18] In hindsight, Litvinov noted "that sanctions against Italy interested us only in their capacity as a rehearsal of sanctions against an aggressive Germany…."[19] The Italians inevitably defeated the outgunned Abyssinians, the League sanctions were raised, and in June 1936 the Soviet government prepared to open trade negotiations with Italy.[20]

Meanwhile, Soviet-German relations continued to decline. Litvinov and his deputy Krestinskii appeared to play "good cop, bad cop" roles. This was perhaps a natural act, as Krestinskii had been Soviet ambassador in Berlin during the heydays of German-Soviet relations in the 1920s.

You are well aware, Krestinskii told the German ambassador, then Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg, that the Soviet Union wished to have "normal friendly relations" with all governments. We even proposed German entry into an Eastern Pact of Mutual Security, but of course the German government declined our offer.[21]

Litvinov was tougher, and *Mein Kampf* was never far from his mind, raising the subject even with the *French* ambassador in Moscow and wondering mischievously if anyone in Paris had bothered to query the Germans about "Hitler's book", since France too was an obstacle to German hegemony in Europe.[22] In 1935 the Soviet government continued to maintain trade relations with Germany, but only enough, according to Litvinov, to avoid a diplomatic rupture with Berlin. Even so, Litvinov thought that the Soviet government could be more aggressive at least in the press in response to increasingly virulent German public attacks. "Our present Tolstoyian position, I consider harmful, encouraging further waves of anti-Soviet demonstrations [in Germany]."[23] Litvinov was scarcely less blunt in dealing with Schulenburg. *Mein Kampf* was again the subject of conversation. Litvinov remarked somewhat allegorically: "If one or another fellow says to us today, that he intends to attack us, but then tomorrow says that he does not intend to attack us, we would be more prudent to base our reaction on his first statement and take precautionary measures. If we were mistaken concerning the intentions of the adversary, then we risk nothing, whereas if we base our reaction on the second statement and take no counter measures then we risk our very existence…"[24] Allegory aside, the Red Army was arming to the teeth in

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the event that Germany wanted to test its strength against the Soviet Union.

Litvinov was polite with his German counterparts, but brutally frank with potential allies. In October 1934 he advised the American ambassador in Moscow, William Bullitt, that for so long as Germany was controlled by the Nazis, so long would Germany be a "mad dog that can't be trusted, with whom no agreements can be made, and whose ambition can only be checked by a ring of determined neighbors." War was inevitable if Nazi Germany could not be reined in. Litvinov "displayed almost violent rage in his comments on Hitler," Bullitt reported in March 1936. The Soviet theme was the same: "… the promise of a dog, liar, and blackguard like Hitler was worthless…"[25] There was a subtext in these statements to foreign diplomats: *we* can see the obvious danger, so why can't *you* see it? Litvinov's message was the same to Stalin or to Bullitt, or to any other potential ally. This conviction about the Nazi danger is what held the Soviet Union to the course of "collective security" even when potential allies were unenthusiastic about signing on. "I must say," Litvinov wrote to Surits in April 1936, "that never has the international situation been as clear as it is now."[26] Yet, on the eve of the outbreak of the Spanish civil war, Soviet initiatives had produced few results.

Anti-communism everywhere hampered Litvinov's initiatives. The Americans and British hide hostility in polite reserve, though Maiskii and Litvinov thought erroneously that they had an ally in Eden. The French were two-faced and conniving, even after the departure of Laval. In the spring of 1936 the centre-left Popular Front which included the French communists won elections and formed a government under Socialist Léon Blum. One might think that Litvinov would have been overjoyed, but he was in fact discouraged, fearing a backlash of the French right and a swing toward fascism.[27] At the same time Mussolini was moving closer to Hitler and resented Soviet participation in League sanctions. And yet in early July 1936, on the eve of the outbreak of civil war in Spain, the Soviet government was preparing to open trade negotiations with Italy and remained committed to deepening its relations with France. The wobbly French "pivot" still spun on its axis.

Given that Spain was not at the centre of Soviet attention in Europe, Moscow reacted quickly to the uprising. On 24 July Georgi Dimitrov, the head of the Comintern, sent directives, with Stalin's approval, to the leaders of the Spanish communist party advising them to concentrate on defeating the mutiny. The Communist party should support the Republican government and keep a low profile. At the same time the Narkomindel, the Commissariat for foreign affairs, seemed more

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preoccupied with new outbursts of anti-Soviet propaganda in Germany and about replies in the Soviet press. The German and Italian governments were quicker off the mark, sending war matériel to Franco which began to reach him at the end of July.[28]

This is when the cleft stick really began to bind. Neither Britain nor even France with its own Popular Front was prepared to intervene on behalf of the Spanish Republic. Many Tories and French conservatives hoped for Franco's triumph to create a bulwark against the spread of communism. Events moved quickly on all sides. On 3 August popular demonstrations took place in the Soviet Union and collections were made amongst workers to help the Republican cause. On 4 August Krestinskii noted that the Germans had launched a furious press campaign against the Soviet Union in connection "with events in Spain". On 5 August the French Chargé d'Affaires, Jean Payart, delivered a note to the Narkomindel proposing a non-intervention agreement between the major powers. The Soviet government quickly agreed to the proposal, according to Krestinskii, because it would be difficult to supply the Republic, on account of the distances involved, and because Italy and Germany would continue to support the "mutineers" and justify their action based on Soviet intervention. "We cannot avoid giving a positive reply or give an evasive answer," Krestinskii advised Stalin, "because this will be used by the Germans and Italians who will justify their further help to the mutineers by referring to our response." Italy was already supplying military aircraft to Franco. The sharpening international situation had begun to define the two sides in what Krestinskii termed "the future world war". Mussolini has lost his flexibility in maintaining even the appearance of correct relations with the Soviet Union, and the Italian press is "more and more" adopting "Hitlerite methods towards us". The weakest member of Litvinov's grand alliance thus faded rapidly away. There was more bad news. France had approached the Soviet Union about its non-intervention proposals, according to Krestinskii, only after consulting Britain and Italy; while the British in their reply did not even mention the USSR. Ignoring Moscow became a frequent characteristic of Anglo-French diplomacy prior to 1939. These gestures did not go unnoticed. Krestinskii sent instructions to Maiskii in London to take a strong line should the British government object to the popular rallies and collection of money for Spain in the Soviet Union.[29]

In August Soviet policy zig-zagged. On 17 August the Politburo approved the sale of oil to the Republican government on favourable terms. On 29 August the Politburo issued an order prohibiting the export of arms to Spain and approving Soviet participation in a non-intervention

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committee being organised in London. On 2 September Litvinov advised the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires in London that the Soviet government intended to do whatever it could to impede the supply of arms to "Spanish mutineers" by imposing "strict controls" on such countries as Germany, Italy, and Portugal.[30] That meant that the Soviet Union was going to support the Republic without challenging the Anglo-French position on non-intervention.

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 Blum; indicating to Prague our readiness to proceed; and asking the Commissariat for defence to prepare for talks.

> The aggressiveness of German foreign policy and the colossal growth of its rearmament are intimidating many governments from concluding defensive unions or pacts of mutual assistance, raising doubts in the effectiveness of such pacts in particular, and their usefulness in discouraging Germany from military action. Has not the time come 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 pointed to 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. "On the other hand, there is not the slightest doubt that Hitler's efforts were leading to the creation of an opposing coalition to resist the USSR or at least to isolate it. *The chances of realizing such a bloc have significantly increased of late* [author's emphasis]…" This last observation could only refer to Spain, and Litvinov asked for directives from Stalin. The Politburo secretary, L. M. Kaganovich, was casual about Litvinov's mail, though he sent it on to Stalin who was on holiday in Sochi. The Politburo approved the proposed initiative on 20 September, though the formulation of approval was unenthusiastic. There was, the protocol read, an "absence of opposition to his [Litvinov's] proposals".[31]

If the Politburo coolly approved Litvinov's recommendations, Stalin intervened more aggressively in the Spanish question, according to Kaganovich, taking stronger action on behalf of Republican Spain. "Stalin

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does not want to facilitate the dirty business of strangling the Spanish Republic, on the contrary, he wants to help the Spanish Republic strangle the fascists." Was this a veiled reference to Litvinov's policies? Perhaps not, but there was speculation that he had run into trouble in the Politburo during Stalin's absence in Sochi. Rumours circulated in Moscow that Litvinov would be sacked.[32] The German ambassador, Schulenburg, reported that the Soviet government "felt impelled 'to do something' on account of pressure from foreign communists shocked to think that Moscow would leave 'the Spanish proletariat in the lurch".[33]

In September, the Soviet government approved the despatch of war *matériel* to the Spanish Republic. The Comintern also began to recruit international brigades to join the fight against the fascists. On 4 October the first Soviet shipments of arms reached Spain, tanks, warplanes, guns, along with military advisors and pilots. On the same day Krestinskii sent instructions to London to toughen the Soviet position in the non-intervention committee. The French and British governments do not want to help the Spanish republic, said Krestinskii, and are using the non-intervention committee as a legal pretext for doing nothing. Madrid needs guns and is asking for them. To accept further "non-intervention obligations" would therefore hurt Republican interests. On 7 October S. B. Kagan, the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires in London, advised the non-intervention committee that in view of the violations of the non-intervention agreement by Germany, Italy, and Portugal, the Soviet Union would consider itself free from any obligations unless the violations ceased. On 15 October Stalin sent a telegram to the Spanish communist party published in *Izvestiia* encouraging Spanish resistance against "the fascist reactionaries". The cause of Spain, he said, is also the cause of "all forward and progressive humankind." The next day Litvinov instructed Potemkin to take up with Blum what he called the London committee's "conniving" with the Spanish "rebels". The non-intervention committee thus became the scene of Soviet efforts to impede fascist support for Franco. It would all have been a farce, as Maiskii commented later, if the stakes had not been so high. In the meantime, Soviet arms and advisors backed up Stalin's words, and not a minute too soon for Franco launched an offensive in early October to take Madrid. His troops advanced rapidly and it looked like the Republic would collapse.[34]

In Paris too it looked liked Madrid would fall, and this eventuality was welcomed inside the French foreign ministry by its secretary general, Alexis Léger, among others. Léger was troubled by the "psychological disadvantages of the rapprochement with Russian communism; [and] at the conspiracy which extends at the present time to all countries." "In the

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next fifteen days," Léger told a deputy chief of staff, referring to the pending battle of Madrid:

> There will be a decisive confrontation. If the Soviet ambassador who has settled into the Palace Hotel in Madrid is obliged to evacuate the premises, it will be the beginning of the ebb of the Bolshevik tide. The Soviets will do anything to avoid this end. They have already dropped a bomb in proposing to break the pact of non-intervention which French diplomacy is going to try to avoid.[35]

Obviously, the Soviet démarche on 7 October had got the attention of the French government. A fortnight later, as the end looked near for Madrid, Léger called in the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires to warn him that if the Soviet Union continued its present policy, "this disagreement on a major issue of policy might well affect the whole future of relations between France and Russia and of the working of the Franco-Soviet Pact." Some French ally, some "pivot", Stalin must have thought.

Léger could not understand what the Soviet government was doing, risking war with Germany because of Spain.

> Stalin had no ideals; he was a realist and an opportunist and he had been prepared to cooperate for a few years with the bourgeois Governments of Europe with a view to avoiding war on this continent until Russia was armed once more and free from the menace of war in the Far East. France had been anxious to deny Russia to Germany, and the Soviet Pact had consequently been concluded with no illusions on either side.

Léger speculated that Stalin was feeling pressure from "the ideologists of the Russian Revolution", and that he had given into it, but if Kaganovich's account is to believed, Stalin himself took the initiative, contemptuous of Anglo-French hypocrisy, in order "to help the Spanish republic strangle the fascists".[36] Did Stalin act to counter criticism on his left, or did he intervene for the reasons given by Kaganovich? In retrospect, the French ambassador in Moscow, Robert Coulondre, reckoned that Stalin was trying to steer a middle course, giving some satisfaction to both interventionists and to "friendly powers". It was not so easy to know what was in Stalin's mind, as his right arm V. M. Molotov remarked long afterward.[37] One point is certain: Stalin had long recognised that Litvinov was "not interested" in supporting foreign revolutions, but Stalin kept him on the job, and in good standing, according to Coulondre, contrary to the rumours in Moscow.[38]

The policy discussion in Moscow continued about how far to go in supporting the Republic. In early November, while the fate of Madrid was still in question, Litvinov advised Maiskii that arms supplies to the Republic might be halted because of the dangers and difficulties involved. "The

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Spanish question had undoubtedly significantly worsened our international position," Litvinov explained: "It has spoiled our relations with England and France and sown doubt in Bucharest and even in Prague." Maiskii challenged Litvinov stating that the Republic could not survive without Soviet guns. If the Republic wins, Maiskii added, it would be a blow to Hitler and Mussolini. Soviet prestige would grow immeasurably and France and England would be drawn to Moscow by its successful demonstration of strength. This was just the issue, for Litvinov was less certain of the Republic's eventual victory. But if we lose, Maiskii thought, Soviet prestige would be damaged, and our ability to form an alliance with Britain and France, greatly impeded.[39] "In essence, I agree with you about the importance of the outcome of the struggle in Spain," Litvinov wrote to Maiskii: "For us here, it is also very clear." The difficulty was that while there was a certain stability at the front, this equilibrium could easily be disturbed by additional reinforcements which Franco could obtain more easily than Republican forces. A further Soviet attempt to stabilise the front would only provoke stronger countermeasures by the other side. The Soviet Union could never keep up. We do not have a fleet in the Mediterranean and we are far away. Without a change in Anglo-French policy, "we cannot change this situation."[40]

For the Soviet side, intervention in Spain and collective security were linked. Litvinov reassured Ambassador Coulondre, that he had instructed his officials to keep out of Spanish politics. Coulondre took this to mean that the Soviet government was backing off the hard line it had taken in October.[41] Litvinov held to a narrow view of who represented the Soviet government, excluding of course the Comintern. It was the only way he could deliver his usual lines about not meddling abroad with a straight face. While Litvinov ordered his ambassador in Spain to be careful, the Soviet government sent soldier-advisors to Spain to fight Franco. Since the Russians often knew what they were doing better than did their Spanish counterparts, they were drawn into running the war, in spite of orders to the contrary.[42] This situation worried the French and British more than did German and Italian intervention. A red government in Madrid would be a nest for revolutionaries; a Franco government would not overly worry London or Paris. Litvinov played along with non-intervention—though no one in Moscow liked it—to protect the prospects for collective security.

The Spanish Republic halted Franco's offensive on Madrid and the front there stabilised at the end of November. This Republican success did not help in strengthening Soviet relations with London, as Maiskii hoped it would. Sir Orme Sargent, an influential assistant permanent under secretary in the Foreign Office, saw only Reds conniving at revolution: they had saved

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Madrid "when everyone expected it to collapse…." What is more, he wrote, "It is… the consistent and natural policy of the Soviet Government to foster disagreement and discord between the capitalist Powers of Europe and especially between Germany and Great Britain… In the affairs of Spain they see a promising opportunity of applying this policy." For Sargent, such comments were mild compared to others he left in Foreign Office files. Even Winston Churchill, a backbench MP, who had become an advocate of Anglo-Franco-Soviet cooperation, was frightened by the spread of revolution in Spain. He warned Maiskii that Soviet intervention made an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement more difficult.[43] Not to be left out of the general western fright over Spain, the American ambassador in Berlin, William Dodd, warned Washington that the danger of revolution was rising. France would be "the next victim through Spain". Stalin was "coming out into the open and aggressively combining Russian military imperialism with Russian communism."[44] Dodd wrote these lines four days before Litvinov addressed his note to Stalin calling for renewed efforts to consolidate an anti-Nazi coalition. Dodd's analysis could not have been more wrong, but he was not the only American ambassador sending rants to Washington. Bullitt dismissed Litvinov's warnings of danger as mere "propaganda trumpetings". You can't trust a Bolo, Bullitt said: Soviet support for "democratic" governments was a mere sham "in order the better eventually to lead those democrats to the firing squad… To such men the most traitorous betrayals are the highest virtues."[45]

There were more sophisticated observers of the Soviet Union. Payart, the French Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow, explained that Soviet policy was *not* dominated by the objective of spreading world revolution. Stalin was a realist—even Léger conceded that—who was not above using revolutionary slogans or the Comintern for purposes of state. "Diplomacy founded uniquely on the principle of *raison d'état* having failed to produce the results desired by the Soviets, the USSR, relying on the Comintern, appeared to be reinforcing its diplomacy by an action of the foreign labouring masses, mobilised to put pressure on their governments...." These actions however would hamper Soviet policy, according to Payart, and would not last.[46] The wisdom of a mere Chargé d'Affaires had no chance in Paris where Spain had stirred up the flames of anti-communism and fear of war.

While the fate of Madrid remained uncertain and western diplomats speculated about Soviet policy, Litvinov took advantage of his Politburo remit to explore the possibility of strengthening of an anti-Nazi coalition. The first point on his agenda was to sound out the French, and this he did on 5 October in Geneva when he met the French premier Léon Blum. He encountered a man who was not certain of his future. "He gave me the

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impression of weariness, fatalism, and doom…," Litvinov advised, "He had little hope of overcoming domestic difficulties." On Spain, Blum explained his conduct as a result of "the danger of internal crisis." When Litvinov raised his idea of a broader anti-German coalition, Blum did not reject it out of hand, but said he would not take any initiative before a possible Locarno conference on western security. As for Franco-Soviet staff talks, which had been discussed off and on since May 1935, Blum indicated they were being "sabotaged" not only by his generals but also by Édouard Daladier, his powerful minister of defence. One can only imagine Stalin's cynical reaction upon reading Litvinov's cable. What is remarkable is that Soviet officials in Paris lobbied persistently for staff talks with their French counterparts until the spring of 1937 in spite of the reticence of "certain leading comrades" in Moscow. It was the French who put off Soviet approaches.[47] The new Locarno conference never got off the ground, but neither did Litvinov's grand European alliance against Nazi Germany. With potential "friends" like the French and the British, Litvinov's ideas must have looked increasingly quixotic in Moscow. Litvinov, the hardcore realist, looked like an ineffectual Don Quixote, ridiculed in the west.

At the same Soviet-German relations remained tense. Surits reported in October that the Germany was intensifying its support to Franco in hopes of seizing Madrid. This situation, with the Soviet government supporting the Republic, could produce "an open clash between the Germans and us." Berlin was working "hand in glove" with the Rome. Their successes were due entirely to Anglo-French non-intervention. Surits connected the Spanish struggle with collective security and cooperation in the face of the "German military danger". German strength, Surits wrote, is a direct reflection of the "weakness of the peace front". In November Soviet authorities arrested a number of German citizens in Leningrad and Krestinskii warned Surits in Berlin to be ready for trouble. "Any sort of complication is possible. We need to put our embassy… in full war readiness." Litvinov did not think Germany would go so far as a rupture of diplomatic relations, but he thought they might arrest Soviet citizens to take as hostages against Germans held in the Soviet Union. Surits was instructed to tighten up control of embassy personnel to avoid giving the Germans a pretext for reciprocal arrests.[48] To keep the lid on or to keep options open, informal Soviet-German economic discussions went on in Berlin, but petered out in the new year. The Soviet side may have leaked them to encourage the French to be more forthcoming in staff talks.[49]

As 1936 drew to a close, Maiskii sought to keep Anglo-Soviet relations from boiling over. Eden did not think a Franco victory would have adverse effects on British interests. Maiskii tried "to dispel this illusion". We should

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keep differences over Spain in a box, Eden replied, so that it did not prevent cooperation in other areas. Litvinov was conciliatory: the Soviet Union would remain on the non-intervention committee in order to play to the French wish "to maintain the fiction of non-intervention".[50] What he said in public however was a little different. In a speech before the extraordinary eighth congress of Soviets on 28 November he took a harder line. He mocked the London committee and got a laugh from the audience when he said that the committee's understanding of non-intervention "was not to intervene in the intervention in Spanish events." Litvinov followed Stalin's line, as he would be expected to do.[51]

In early 1937 Soviet preoccupations focused on Paris and on moving ahead with staff talks. The French still stalled. Litvinov complained about French diplomats "in various countries" talking against the Soviet Union. So Litvinov gave assurances that the Soviet Union had not the slightest intention of promoting communism in Spain. Coulondre heard "from semi-official sources" that Stalin intended "to finish with this ["ideological"] agitation [in Spain]… We should not count on a scandal which was not his way; his intentions will be evident from his acts." Spanish anarcho-syndicalists and ultra-leftists did not sit well with Stalin. They were "Trotskyists", named after Stalin's arch-nemesis, the exiled Bolshevik L. D. Trotskii. Soviet messages reassured the French: Léger thought smugly that the Soviet government "had resigned itself to liquidating the Spanish *affaire*."[52]

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 hoped to build. The Franco-Soviet and Czech-Soviet pacts were a *pis-aller* after the failure of the Eastern Pact which Litvinov had originally envisaged.[53] For Litvinov, Abyssinia and Spain were expendable for his greater objective.

Well, perhaps not Spain. Maiskii, the Soviet delegate on the non-intervention committee, still sought to obstruct German-Italian intervention, and he continued to talk to Eden, though without much success.

A firm line is essential against Hitler, Maiskii insisted.

We should act like "louts" then, Eden replied, like Hitler?

"With firmness," repeated Maiskii. Soviet activity in Spain, he wrote in his diary, demonstrated "that we can be a serious factor in Western Europe and that therefore the great powers in this part of the world can reckon on the Soviet Union to their benefit."[54] Of course, this was just what frightened the French, British, and Americans. Maiskii tried to make Eden see that the war

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in Spain was part of the larger struggle in Europe between fascist aggressors and western democracies. The former advanced before the weakness of the latter. "Let there be no doubt: the Soviet government remains committed to its old policy of collective security… But in well-known circles of Soviet public opinion there is some change…." Maiskii thought that the British position might be firming up, but he was wrong. Eden said that the British government remained indifferent to who won in Spain; Mussolini was looking for a way out. Maiskii doubted it.

"You Soviet people are always pessimistic," Eden replied.

"You don't think that in nine cases out of ten we are right?" Maiskii asked. Eden laughed, but Maiskii was not joking.[55]

In June 1937 Stalin turned on his high command, and a number of senior commanders were summarily executed after drumhead trials. The French embassy reported that former deputy commissars Krestinskii and Karakhan as well as former Ambassador Rozenberg had also been arrested.[56] Although the French and British had moved away from closer relations with the Soviet Union, the Stalinist purges were a splendid *post facto* pretext to justify their actions. Potemkin advised Surits that the foreign press was exploiting the situation "to discredit the solidity of our regime and of the Red Army". The French high command had congratulated itself for staying out of staff talks. When the Soviet minister in Prague urged Moscow to publish more information on the "liquidation of traitors and spies", Potemkin replied that enough had already been published, anything more would be "superfluous" and perhaps "even harmful". He told Coulondre that Daladier had informed him some months ago that German officers were bragging about the fact that they had "ties with representatives of the high command of the Red Army". According to Daladier, Potemkin said, "German generals were counting on the carrying out of a fascist *coup d'état*, with the help of their informants amongst general staff officers of the Red Army, after which they hoped to conclude with the new Russian government a military alliance against France." Litvinov passed on the information to Surits in Paris, thinking it might quiet French gloating. In fact, Daladier's intelligence was disinformation, probably of Nazi origin, which succeeded beyond what must have been the wildest dreams of its creators.[57] Given Daladier's hostility to the Franco-Soviet pact, one wonders whether he could have been pursuing his own sinister intrigue.

The Soviet Union continued to send supplies to the Spanish republic, which was losing ground against Franco. The Republican resistance was never more than a long, unsuccessful holding action against stronger fascist forces. Resistance was impeded by incompetence and internal disunity, exacerbated by the importation of Stalin's bloody purges of "Trotskyist"

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renegades and anarchists. Were they also fulfilment of the promise to Coulondre that "agitation" in Spain would be quieted down without "scandal"? The agitation was quieted down, but not without scandal.

In the summer of 1937 the prospect of re-forging the First World War alliance against Germany had dimmed. The civil war killed Soviet-Italian trade talks. In September 1937 the Soviet government took steps to halt or slow down trade with Italy. Potemkin, who had returned to Moscow to replace the doomed Krestinskii, reckoned that Italy was being drawn into the "ruinous embrace of Hitlerite Germany". Even though Litvinov wanted to stall on breaking off with Rome, he had to recognise that Italy was not going to be a member of an anti-Nazi coalition.[58]

France and Britain remained in play in Soviet calculations, but only barely. The Stalinist purges, especially against the high command, had done their work—perhaps unintended by Stalin—in further damaging Soviet-western relations. Franco-Soviet relations were distant. The Comintern preoccupied the French more than collective security. It was no help that French communists were demanding aid for the Spanish Republic. The French ambassador complained frequently to Litvinov, who wearied of it. According to Coulondre, "Litvinoff's attitude was that while he could not suppress the French Communist Party, any more than the Pope could suppress the Society of Jesus, he did not care in the least what the French Government did to them. All that interested Russia was a military alliance with France."[59] In his *dnevnik* Litvinov took a different line: one could not celebrate the anniversary of the Russian revolution in Moscow without arousing French suspicions. In reading the French press, he wrote: "one might conclude that France has a mutual assistance pact, not with the Soviet Union, but with Germany or Italy."[60]

Relations were a little better with London, though Litvinov was not sure what was going on there. Maiskii said the non-intervention committee "had one foot in the grave". Perhaps, but it dragged on as a "comedy", according to Litvinov: he played along to avoid exacerbating relations with would-be allies. Maiskii kept up his conversations with Eden, Neville Chamberlain, the new prime minister, and with other important British politicians. His basic line was that Franco's victory in Spain would damage British maritime interests in transforming the Mediterranean into an "Italian sea". While Maiskii was willing to admit that Hitler was not yet ready for "a big war", he could certainly manage a "small war" against, say, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, among others. In a conversation with Chamberlain in July 1937, Maiskii said the Soviet Union had no wish to impose "a communist or any other system" on Spain. This point would have caught Chamberlain's ear, but could one trust a Bolshie? He feared that "the Russians [were]

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stealthily and cunningly pulling all the strings behind the scenes to get us involved in war with Germany." War, according to many Tories, meant the danger of the spread of revolution. Chamberlain was polite with Maiskii and did not mention his suspicions, even though they remained intense. As one maverick MP put it, "Tory opinion is almost entirely on the run and would willingly let Germany take Russia… so long as she leaves us alone". Chamberlain's a "surrenderer," said one Foreign Office official, the Cabinet is full of them. They're "terrified of Bolshevism."[61]

Churchill, still the Tory outcast, took a different view. No longer afraid of Spain, and not caring apparently what others thought about his views on an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement, he continued his contacts with Maiskii. At a banquet put on by King George VI in November 1937, Churchill made a point of speaking openly with the Soviet ambassador. The king tried to save Winston from the "Moscow devil", according to Maiskii's account, but Churchill refused to be saved. "Germany is the main enemy," Churchill said: "The basic task for us all, standing on guard for peace, is to hold together. Otherwise, we are finished. A weak Russia is the greatest danger for the cause of peace and indirectly," Churchill added, "for our Empire. We need a strong, very strong Russia." If only Churchill were prime minister, Litvinov might have thought. Churchill's conversations with Maiskii may have helped to keep hope alive in Moscow, and Litvinov in his job. If so, it was because the Soviet government had no other options. Vansittart, the driving force behind Eden's visit to Moscow, was "very pessimistic". The situation, he told Maiskii, is becoming "all the worse." Danger was approaching fast, but little was being done to counter it. Maiskii reckoned that Chamberlain would sacrifice not only Spain, but would also tolerate "German hegemony" in central and southeast Europe, if only this could be accomplished in some "not too odious form". Chamberlain, Maiskii noted in his journal, "would not raise a finger to help the USSR in case of an attack… by the fascist powers."[62]

With Italy out of the running, two of three of Litvinov's remaining partners, Britain and France, declined to join him. The third and last, the United States, did not want to join either, though in the latter case, the Japanese threat, might yet draw the two sides closer, or so Litvinov hoped. In July 1937 the Japanese army invaded China. This event should have increased mutual interest in better relations, but in the United States too the purges of the Red Army high command had made a bad impression. Joseph E. Davies, the American ambassador in Moscow, suggested to Litvinov that Stalin talk to a well-chosen journalist in order to counteract the bad publicity. The perceived weakness of the Red Army because of the purges would only encourage potential enemies. Ambassador Troianovskii reckoned that State

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Department officials, with a few exceptions, were "sabotaging" efforts at involving the United States in collective security. Even trifles caused trouble for the Soviet embassy. Instead of seeing the Soviet Union as an asset against potential aggressors, the American press viewed collective security as a danger because of Soviet association with it.[63]

On Litvinov's list of potential allies, there was not one reliable partner. The cleft stick was broken, but without any relief to the Soviet government for having gotten free. Bitterness and pessimism afflicted officials in the Narkomindel, who still survived Stalin's purges. Litvinov, Potemkin, Maiskii, and Surits continued in their jobs. Krestinskii, Karakhan, Rozenberg, and other diplomats were executed in 1938. One can only imagine what survivors and victims thought as the purges unfolded around them. It was an incredible situation: in March 1937 Krestinskii was writing advice to Stalin. Three months later he was arrested—"for what?" he might well have asked—and nine months later he was shot. Litvinov's pursuit of collective security must have looked to Stalin more and more like a fool's errand. This is the impression one gains now in reading Soviet papers. The British ambassador in Moscow remarked that Litvinov's credibility might indeed be suffering though there was no sign of a change of Soviet policy. It was still collective security.[64]

Contempt for Anglo-French weakness would have been a natural reaction, the more so since surviving Soviet officials would not have wanted to appear foolish for continuing naively to pursue better relations with the west. The "incorrigible conciliators" in London and Paris were undermining the League and collective security. Potemkin reserved special scorn for "our French friends… slavishly following London's orders" and for Ambassador Coulondre, who was collecting anti-Soviet "gossip" and stirring up trouble in the Moscow diplomatic community. "The French international position is going to pieces," Potemkin concluded in December 1937: France is being led "to the complete loss of its independence."[65]

Camille Chautemps, who had succeeded Blum as premier, reassured Surits in February 1938 that the Spanish frontier was in fact open. Supplies were passing into Republican Spain. He was exasperated by French communist criticism of his Spanish policy because the government, wanting to maintain secrecy, could not defend itself. Chautemps assured Surits that he would not spring any surprises on the USSR, as long as he was premier, nor weaken "Franco-Soviet friendship". These assurances were good news, but could they be taken at face value? Two months earlier Chautemps had told Bullitt, then U.S. ambassador in Paris, that to obtain a German rapprochement, he "would be quite ready to give the Germans all the assurances possible that France would never make a military alliance with the

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Soviet Union directed against Germany or indulge in military conversations…." He would not hesitate to share with the German government his utter disdain for the Bolsheviks, but conceded that France could not "formally abandon the treaty of mutual assistance" with Moscow. A week before his meeting with Surits, Chautemps reiterated to Bullitt that he would "leave no stone unturned in an effort to come to a settlement with the Germans…." This sounded just like Pierre Laval. No wonder Stalin did not trust the French.[66]

"All the world recognises", Litvinov told Coulondre in early March 1938, "that we are likely on the eve of war." Litvinov's comment came days before the German annexation of Austria. He reminded Coulondre—whatever Potemkin may have thought about him—that the Soviet Union was not "rejecting cooperation with other countries… these countries are becoming more and more hostile to us, and rejecting cooperation [with us]". There has been no change in our foreign policy, Litvinov continued: "Unfortunately, we have to recognise that other countries, one after the other, are turning their backs on the League of Nations and its principles." Influential people in France and Britain were talking publicly against the Soviet Union. We cannot ignore these facts, Litvinov said: would Britain for example fail to seek a rapprochement with the Soviet Union, if not for the hostility of its governing classes?[67] Coulondre's and Litvinov's records of this meeting did not correspond: one of them was soft-soaping the message. Either way, communications between Moscow and western capitals became a dialogue of the deaf, so oblique in official forms that only a sharp-eyed interpreter could decode them. In the west there were precious few of these, and even fewer politicians who would or could listen to them.

Soviet bitterness intensified as the Anglo-French ignored what seemed the obvious danger, or refused to see it in order to conciliate the fascist states and let the Soviet Union take care of itself. Nevertheless, the French policy showed some modest signs of change. In February 1938 the Soviet embassy reported on clandestine shipments of war matériel to Spain. These shipments were being brokered by a French civil servant Gaston Cusin and the French ambassador in Spain, Eirik Labonne, acting in a personal capacity! Jokers in Paris called this clandestine activity "*non-intervention relâchée*" which should have encouraged some hope in the Narkomindel.[68] And there was more. Blum returned to power in March 1938, giving some indication of a stronger line against Germany and in Spain. But meeting Blum in mid-March, Surits found him to be "literally in a state of panic". According to Labonne, the Republic's days were numbered without massive French assistance. When Surits asked if Labonne's reports would provoke a change French policy, Blum "only threw up his hands in frustration". Blum was

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premier, but Daladier was pulling the strings, and he was an uncertain friend of the Republicans. As Litvinov saw it, the French could help the Spanish Republic, or watch it be crushed. They were only just catching on to the danger of a fascist victory. He doubted clandestine aid would be enough—though 18,000 tons passed over French borders that spring. Litvinov remained intensely sceptical. Austria had just disappeared, and Litvinov issued a call for an international conference to discuss how to confront the German threat. He made his proposal without "any illusions". "My objective was to shake up a little pacifist public opinion, absolve us of responsibility for the final collapse of collective security, neutralise a little the campaign about our weakness, caused by the [purge] trials." Of course, if, "contrary to expectations", I am being too sceptical, then "so much the better". Sceptical or not, Litvinov asked Surits to intervene "unofficially" to obtain French support. It might help, he thought, with the British.[69] Nothing worked: the French and British governments rejected his proposal out of hand.

The Blum cabinet lasted less than a month, but even before it fell, there was little Soviet confidence in French prospects. Potemkin summed up the position in April 1938:

> In spite of the extremely tense international situation, the French government does not change 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 security. Now as before, they repeat over and over again the formula of "non-intervention" as though it were some kind of incantation. 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 encourage all the healthy forces of democratic Europe in the struggle for peace.

Potemkin seemed to write these lines with regret, as though he could not quite bring himself to abandon collective security. For Potemkin Spain had faded into the background; the crisis points were elsewhere in central and eastern Europe, especially in Czechoslovakia, where Poland was "clearly helping Hitler". As for the French, even under the new Blum government, they "were doing nothing" and preferred to let others take action for them.

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Potemkin concluded again that France was "inevitably heading for catastrophe" along with Poland, which was "preparing its fourth partition and the loss of its national independence".[70] Potemkin's prophecies could scarcely have been more accurate. If only the British and French would open their eyes, he must have thought. In the meantime the French "pivot" had wobbled crazily off its axis.

Litvinov still grappled with the diplomacy of Spain not wanting to abandon the non-intervention committee on Soviet initiative, when this question arose in March 1938, but not rejecting that possibility, if forced to it. "In general," Litvinov advised Maiskii: "…we are now in a holding position on all issues, and we are not going to force our collaboration on anyone." Yet even in April 1938, as the military situation in Spain worsened, Litvinov seemed open to accommodation with Italy. "We were always ready to recognise the expediency of an agreement with Italy, on condition, however, that it will weaken, and not strengthen the 'Berlin-Rome axis'". Litvinov never lost sight of his main objective, though he often concealed it in cynicism. "We will all be in it together on the same side…," he told the Romanian foreign minister prior to the Munich crisis, and so things would come out alright.[71]

Daladier, who replaced Blum as premier in April, acted according to Soviet expectations, and "entirely capitulated" on yet another "compromise" in the non-intervention committee. In May Daladier boasted about letting supplies pass to the Republicans; in June his government closed French borders with Spain. First Laval, then Chautemps, now Daladier: how could anyone trust the French? "Non-intervention was always a farce," according to Maiskii. Litvinov agreed, sick and tired of the French and British asking for his assent to arrangements which they had already made.[72] The Soviet Union played out its part because there was no other option, and because Soviet obstruction of the fascist states in the non-intervention committee would help the Spanish Republic at least a little.

The Soviet commitment to the Spanish Republic declined with Franco's victories and the increasing danger in central and eastern Europe—although supplies continued to be sent to Spain up to the end of resistance in March 1939.[73] Soviet eyes turned to Czechoslovakia until the Munich settlement at the end of September 1938. This was a decisive moment in Soviet calculations about Anglo-French intentions. The Soviet Chargé d'Affaires in Berlin opined indiscreetly that the Franco-Soviet pact was for "all intents and purposes… dead".[74] One did not need to be a Marxist ideologue to see that collective security was moribund, or that war was imminent. Common sense would have been sufficient. Litvinov sought relief from his humiliation at Anglo-French hands, in ample expressions of scorn for his would-be

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partners.[75] Stalin would have known that Litvinov's shame was also that of the Soviet Union and that this was a dangerous state of affairs. Litvinov hung onto his job until early May 1939, but continuing Anglo-French reticence to accept a last chance alliance against Hitler appears to have brought him down. This has gone on too long, Stalin must have thought, we have to try something else.

The Spanish Republic collapsed in February-March 1939. "There are times," Stalin noted a little later, "when you suffer defeat."[76] In Moscow it was easier to take a dispassionate view than on the French frontier where Republican refugees crossed into French internment camps. Had the Spanish Republicans held out until the autumn of 1939, they could have asked to be treated as allies with a call on Allied loyalty to overthrow Franco during or at the end of the war. They came up a little short.

The Anglo-French learned nothing from the experience of Spain, or so it appeared in Moscow, and they continued to pursue policies which soon legitimised Potemkin's April 1938 prophecies. The Spanish civil war did great harm to Litvinov's plans for a grand alliance, rubbing in how naïve he appeared to be in attempting to organise anti-Nazi resistance. It is ironic that France and Britain contributed so much to Litvinov's fall. He was their best hope in Moscow for an anti-Nazi alliance, which, incredibly, the French and British governments hesitated to conclude. That point became all too evident in Moscow during the long, painful episode of the Spanish civil war.

## Notes

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* I should like to thank my research assistant, Ovidiu-Cristian Ionita, for his conscientious work in locating published sources for the preparation of this essay.

[1] J. Erikson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941* (London, 1962), p. 428.

[2] 'Conversations with von Neurath,' Litvinov, 1 Mar. 1933, *Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, Moscow (hereafter AVPRF), *fond* 082, *opis'* 16, *delo* 1, *papka* 71, *listy* 57-53 (hereafter f., o., d., p. l(l).); 'Reception of Nadolny, 11.XII and 13.XII.33', Litvinov's *dnevnik*, AVPRF, f. 082, o. 17, d. 1, p. 77, ll. 6-2; and 'Conversation with the German ambassador Nadoly, 5 January1934,' Karakhan's *dnevnik*, *ibid*., ll. 22-19.

[3] 'Record of conversation with [Frits von] Tvardovskii,', D. G. Shtern, 30 Jan. 1934, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, d. 30, p. 97, ll. 13-20; and 'Meeting with Nadolny, 21.VI.1934,' Litvinov's *dnevnik*, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, d. 4, p. 95. ll. 122-23.

[4] 'Record of a conversation with Neurath, 13.VI.1934,' Berlin, Litvinov's *dnevnik*, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, d. 4, p. 95. ll. 159-63.

[5] M. J. Carley, 'Episodes from the Early Cold War: Franco-Soviet Relations, 1917-1927,' *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 52, no. 7 (Nov. 2000), pp. 1275-1305.

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