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“Only the USSR Has . . . Clean Hands”: The Soviet Perspective on the Failure of Collective Security and the Collapse of Czechoslovakia, 1934–1938 (Part 1)

MICHAEL JABARA CARLEY

The first part of this two part essay is a re-examination of the Czechoslovak crisis (1934–1938) based on papers from the Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii in Moscow. The essay is also grounded in British, French, and Romanian archives and the standard published collections, including the American and German series. It is about the development and conduct of Soviet collective security policy in the key years leading to the “Munich crisis” in September 1938. Evidence from the Moscow archives demonstrates that the Soviet government was serious about collective security and that it was ready to participate in an anti-Nazi alliance. Its initiatives were repeatedly rebuffed in Europe, notably in Paris and London. Even in Prague, the Czechoslovak president, Eduard Beneš, was an undependable ally. These rebuffs led the Soviet government to be cautious during the Munich crisis. The Soviet Union would not act unilaterally, but what it actually did do was intended to defend Czechoslovak security within the constraints of Anglo–French abandonment in which Beneš himself was complicit.

As the Czechoslovak crisis reached its conclusion at the end of September 1938, Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, Maksim M. Litvinov, was in Geneva at the League of Nations. He was attempting to organise last minute support for Czechoslovakia which faced invasion by Nazi Germany and abandonment by its ally France. Europe seemed on the brink of war, and the British foreign secretary, Edward Lord Halifax, directed his representatives in Geneva to talk to Litvinov about what the Soviet Union would do if war broke out. The question must have irked Litvinov since he knew that the British government, especially its prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, would not go to war to protect Czechoslovak security. Nevertheless, the British delegation sought out Litvinov, who was quick to accuse Britain and

France of shilling for Adolf Hitler. "Only the USSR," Litvinov said, "has . . . clean hands" in regard to Czechoslovakia.¹

For many historians, Litvinov's claim may seem unpersuasive. We still live with Cold War biases which Russian archivists have not helped to dispel by severely restricting access to Soviet foreign policy files. There are to be sure many studies of the Munich crisis focusing on French and British policy. Opinion ranges from traditional condemnation of the "guilty men," who sold out Czechoslovakia, to sympathetic understanding of the so-called "realists," who recognized that France and Britain did not have the guns and gold to wage war in 1938. The "realists" were therefore wise to buy time to rearm even if the cost of the time thus obtained was borne by Czechoslovakia. While some historians assert that Anglo-French statesmen had no choice but to negotiate with Hitler, others hold that there were realistic options including resistance to Nazi aggression, which were not chosen.²

The Soviet Union was the other Great Power involved in the Czechoslovak crisis, although historians have often overlooked or underestimated its role. There are notable exceptions: Silvio Pons, an Italian historian and pioneer of research in Soviet archives, has written that Soviet policy in 1938 was characterised by "watchfulness" and "passivity," more than "involvement." This position was due to the Stalinist purges and also to "strategic choice." The Soviet dictator, Iosef V. Stalin, viewed foreign policy through a Marxist-Leninist prism: war between the imperialist states was inevitable and for the Soviet Union there was little to distinguish between the future "capitalist" belligerents. According to Pons, France and Britain "cannot be held entirely responsible for the withdrawal and inaction of the USSR in the face of an increasingly tense European atmosphere."³ Zara Steiner has also produced an interesting essay on the Munich crisis based on access to some important Russian archival files in which she demonstrates the cautiousness of Soviet foreign policy, though she tends to accept Pons' view that Stalin was a prisoner of his ideological world view.⁴

Hugh Ragsdale has written the most recent study in which he reverts to a traditional condemnation of Anglo-French appeasement quoting the *Manchester Guardian* (February 1939) to the effect that it was "a clever plan of selling off your friends in order to buy off your enemies." (p. xv). What is unique in Ragsdale's study is his curiosity to examine East European archives, notably Romanian, in assessing the Munich crisis. He believes that the Soviet government was more committed to support of Czechoslovakia than, say, Pons might allow, and that it mobilized large forces during the Munich crisis on its Polish and Romanian frontiers. Even more interesting, he found a certain disposition in Romania to cooperate with the USSR in the defence of Czechoslovakia, unlike Poland, which was openly hostile. The Red Army would have to cross Poland and/or Romania to reach Czechoslovakia, and the Romanian government appeared willing to consider this eventuality,

if France and the USSR were fully committed to defend Czechoslovak independence. Ragsdale's position essentially endorses that of the late Lev A. Bezymenskii, who asserted that Soviet support for Czechoslovakia was genuine.⁵

The defence of Czechoslovakia was organized around the mutual assistance pacts concluded between the Soviet Union, France and Czechoslovakia in 1935 and between France and Czechoslovakia in 1924–1925. Franco–Soviet relations had almost always been hostile, but Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933 caused both the French and Soviet governments to re-examine their relationship. In France it was the politicians Édouard Herriot, Joseph Paul-Boncour, and Louis Barthou who supervised the movement toward better relations. In Moscow, it was the foreign commissar, Maksim M. Litvinov, who became the principal spokesman for the Soviet policy of "collective security," which meant, in effect, the re-establishment of the First World War alliance against Germany.

From 1932 onward the Soviet government sought to improve relations not only with France, but with the United States, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and even the usually hostile Poland. It also sought to minimize strained relations with Italy, destabilized by the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in the autumn of 1935. Soviet policy was anti-Nazi, not anti-fascist, in spite of propaganda to the contrary. Litvinov was convinced of the aggressive aims of Nazi Germany, and warned both Stalin and his western interlocutors of the threat to European peace and security. He often taunted German diplomats, bringing up Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, his bestselling racist blueprint for German domination.

In October 1934 improving Franco–Soviet relations were dealt a blow by the assassination of Louis Barthou and his replacement by Pierre Laval, a determined anti-communist who was more interested in improving relations with Nazi Germany than with the Soviet Union. The discussion of a mutual assistance pact, started under Paul-Boncour and Litvinov in the autumn of 1933, was thus slowed down by Laval. The Soviet government was worried by Barthou's death and so were French advocates of Franco–Soviet rapprochement. They warned the Soviet ambassador in Paris, V. P. Potemkin, that Laval could reverse French policy.⁶ Negotiations continued in the early months of 1935 with Litvinov pressing for an alliance with teeth and Laval and the permanent officials of the Quai d'Orsay extracting them, one by one. One French official called it "blackballing" Litvinov's proposals.⁷ In fact, they were the Politburo's proposals including a French commitment to the security of the Baltic states, vulnerable to German aggression, and immediate, automatic delivery of mutual assistance in case of aggression against either contracting party. The Politburo, Stalin's cabinet, did not want treaty language tied up in the League of Nations where action could be blocked by a single dissenting vote.⁸ On all points Laval refused to give way: the council of ministers, he said, had gone as far as it would go. He told Litvinov that he

was "completely indifferent" to the fate of the pact, and he told his friends that he felt like "a hounded dog" in negotiations with Litvinov and Potemkin. Because Laval refused to support a Baltic guarantee, Litvinov withdrew a reciprocal commitment to the security of Belgium, Switzerland and the demilitarized Rhineland. "On this point however the French immediately agreed," Litvinov later explained.⁹ The Soviet Union meant business, if France did not. There was not much left to the pact, when Laval and the Quai d'Orsay had finished with it, tied up in League of Nations procedures without automatic, immediate delivery of mutual assistance and without military provisions.

Even after Laval agreed to a draft with Litvinov in Geneva on 17 April, officials at the Quai d'Orsay tried to weaken the language.¹⁰ Potemkin raised strenuous objections, advising Herriot, who intervened, and Laval backed off a little, apparently not so indifferent after all to the fate of the pact. In Moscow, the exasperated Politburo, or perhaps one should say Stalin, appeared on the verge of telling the French that the Soviet Union could also live without the pact. The Politburo advised Potemkin in Paris not to hurry negotiations since Moscow might not approve the draft treaty. We don't want to create "the illusion that we apparently need the pact more than the French. . . ." To demonstrate its exasperation, the Politburo recalled Litvinov from Geneva.¹¹ According to Laval, it was just a tiff over wording, but the French ambassador in Moscow, Charles Alphan, rightly begged to differ, noticing Soviet anger, and warning that Stalin could break off negotiations.¹²

The pact thus teetered in the balance. V. S. Dovgalevskii, Potemkin's predecessor in Paris, had once said that you could never trust the French when it came to an agreement, even in the presence of stenographers.¹³ His observation rang true in 1935. Litvinov returned to Moscow, meeting with Stalin and other members of the Politburo on 22 and 23 April to calm the exasperation. His reasoning was better the shell of a mutual assistance pact than none at all. The pact faced strong opposition inside and out of France. Conservative politician Georges Mandel had come to Litvinov's attention as a strong supporter of a pact with teeth, but few others were. Even Herriot, one of the earliest advocates of a Franco-Soviet rapprochement, was equivocal. Britain, Italy, Germany, and Poland all opposed the pact. So it was the shell or nothing, and the shell was still worth something in that it would, *inter alia*, hamper the formation of an anti-Soviet bloc and discourage France from composing with Germany. This latter observation was ironic: the French used the reverse reasoning to justify their adherence to the pact, that is, that it would discourage the Soviet Union from composing with Hitler. "Our security," Litvinov advised Stalin, "rests in the first place exclusively in the hands of the Red Army. For us, the pact has primarily political importance, lessening the chances of war not only from the side of Germany, but also from Poland and Japan." Potemkin thus concluded the agreement in Paris, with Laval, on 2 May 1935. After all, as Laval often said, "We have to sign something."¹⁴

On the following day, 3 May, having learned of the signature of the Franco–Soviet pact in Paris, Edvard Beneš, the Czechoslovak foreign minister and soon to be president, called in the Soviet minister in Prague, S. S. Aleksandrovskii, to discuss an agreement mirroring the Franco–Soviet pact.¹⁵ Beneš asked for two amendments to the text: 1) that Czechoslovakia did not have an obligation to come to Soviet assistance in the event of a Soviet–Polish war; and 2) that the operation of the pact be placed within the framework of the 1925 Locarno accords. Once again, Litvinov advised Stalin to agree: the French had approved and it would thus be hard to refuse to proceed. According to Litvinov, he had already informed Beneš that the two pacts could not be identical since Czechoslovakia was not a signatory of the Locarno accords. Beneš replied that “Czechoslovakia could offer help only in those cases where such help is also offered by France.” The Soviet Union had no common border with Germany, and in the case of war Czechoslovakia would quickly be defeated unless France entered the fighting against Germany. Beneš’s real motive, as he told the French in April, was that he did not wish to go further than France in his commitments to the Soviet Union, and inclusion of the reference to Locarno would have added a further limitation on Czechoslovak obligations. Like Laval, Beneš wanted the treaty to be directed uniquely against Germany and not against Poland. This might be dangerous, Litvinov observed, since Czechoslovakia could find itself without allies in the case of Polish aggression and thus be “crushed.” Beneš admitted that the Soviet observation had merit and he promised to think it over, but Litvinov did not believe that the Czechoslovak government would change its position. As Litvinov put it to Potemkin, the Czechoslovaks wanted the same “narrow” terms as the French, and these circumstances “compel us to be cautious.”¹⁶ On 4 May, the Politburo approved the text of the pact but with the inclusion of a stipulation that Soviet aid to the victim of aggression was conditional on France also rendering such aid.¹⁷ The French did not want a pact with teeth; the Czechoslovaks did not want one without France and under the circumstances neither did the Soviet Union. The position of France was therefore critical: if it did not render assistance, Czechoslovakia could face an aggressor alone. The pacts of 1935 were thus a poor foundation to withstand the crisis of 1938.

On 16 May Beneš and Aleksandrovskii signed the Czechoslovak–Soviet pact just after Laval travelled to Moscow to meet Stalin, Litvinov, and others. In view of his reticence to sign any pact at all, it is surprising that Laval himself raised the question of general staff talks, necessary to actualize mutual assistance in the event of German aggression. Since the Soviet Union did not have common frontiers with Germany, mutual assistance also raised the issue of passage of Red Army forces across Poland and Romania either to reinforce Czechoslovakia and/or to attack Germany. The Poles were opposed to passage under any circumstances, holding grudges against both the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, but the Romanians were more open to

cooperation. In fact, Nicolae Titulescu, the Romanian foreign minister, maintained good relations with Litvinov, and supported the conclusion of the Franco–Soviet mutual assistance pact. When the pact ran into trouble in Paris, he used his influence to obtain French agreement. If the pact were not concluded, he told Litvinov, Hitler would achieve total victory and German insolence would have no limit. Failure would inevitably lead governments in the Danube basin to gravitate toward Berlin.¹⁸

Titulescu went so far as to say that the minor Powers were going to have to choose camps, the fascist or that of "collective security." He appeared to incline toward the latter and discussed a pact of mutual security with Litvinov, advising that even the Romanian King Carol approved of the principle. But Titulescu had his own agenda to secure Romanian suzerainty over Bessarabia, a territory seized from Soviet Russia in 1918 at the moment of its greatest weakness. In the event of military cooperation and the movement of Soviet troops into Bessarabia, Litvinov assured Titulescu of Red Army withdrawal upon Romanian request, which amounted to *de facto* acknowledgment of Romanian sovereignty. However, Titulescu made *de jure* Soviet recognition of Romanian possession of Bessarabia the precondition for Red Army passage to aid Czechoslovakia. The Romanian pact would also follow Czechoslovak terms, not recognizing Poland as a potential aggressor.¹⁹

Like the French and the Czechoslovaks, Titulescu offered limited satisfaction of Soviet desiderata in exchange for complete satisfaction of his. As he put it,

Our geographical position in relation to the Soviets requires us to take seriously the Russian reality, in the same way that we also examine seriously the German reality. It does not matter how long there is an exchange of opinion between higher Soviet politicians and representatives of the foreign policy of Romania, our position remains that we can neither accept nor reject the idea of a pact of mutual assistance with the Soviets.

Titulescu also advised Moscow that he was under pressure from Poland. Warsaw would consider such a pact to be incompatible with the Romanian–Polish alliance signed during the 1920s and directed against the Soviet Union.²⁰ Titulescu thus had his own problems. Poland and Laval were more likely to "break his neck," he said, than his own boss, King Carol. When Soviet–Romanian discussions of possible Red Army passage rights risked becoming public, Litvinov agreed with Titulescu to issue a *démenti* to calm "prattling" in the Romanian press. Moreover, right wing political forces in Romania were influential and Titulescu, as Alphand pointed out to Soviet officials, was the only obstacle preventing a shift in Romanian policy.²¹

In the meantime, Laval promised quick ratification of the mutual assistance pact, but no sooner had he returned to Paris than he dragged his feet, and here, Litvinov suspected that Titulescu might be contributing to the

delay in order to obtain what he wanted.²² There were thus additional reasons for Stalin and his colleagues, to doubt their supposed “allies” without reference to Marxist-Leninist ideas about the inevitability of war and the absence of distinctions between capitalist states.

A political cartoon in a Norwegian newspaper summed up the French attitude toward the Soviet Union: a burly-looking Bolshevik, wearing a *budenovka*, a civil war campaign cap, had the fair, innocent Marianne on his arm with an apprehensive child carrying her wedding train.

“Are you content?” the Bolshevik spouse asked.

“Yes,” Marianne replied, “but I would be more so, if I did not detest you so.”²³

British reaction to the “marriage” was also unenthusiastic. Sir Orme Garton Sargent, an assistant permanent under secretary in the Foreign Office, thought the French had been had: “. . . in this particular mutual guarantee treaty it is Russia who obtains the benefits and France who assumes the practical obligations. If so, we must take off our hats to M. Litvinov for his very astute and successful diplomacy whereby he has been able to bluff and browbeat the French, in a moment of panic, into concluding this advantageous and one-sided bargain.”²⁴ The bargain was one-sided, but not in the way Sargent imagined. Litvinov was “furious” with Laval for weakening the pact and only declined to send him a “cordial” telegram about it, to avoid making matters worse. Officials in the Quai d’Orsay were thinking of only a temporary agreement so as to leave the door open to Berlin. The French general staff was against a deepening of the pact: France had a number of accords with its allies and there was “no particular reason” for another with the Soviet Union! A peculiar statement indeed for a country in desperate need of powerful allies, but the general staff did not want to give Germany a pretext for sending troops into the demilitarized Rhineland, or Poland a reason for allying with Hitler against “the Russian danger.”²⁵

Sargent’s disquiet about the Franco–Soviet pact was thus ill-founded, though not everyone in the Foreign Office shared his opinions. Sir Robert Vansittart, the permanent under secretary, took a different view, but even he noted that Litvinov was “obsessed” with the German danger, a complaint, ironically, often directed against Vansittart himself.²⁶ Moreover, the British government, under Vansittart’s urging, had sent the Lord Privy Seal, Anthony Eden, to Moscow in March 1935 as a sign of better relations, and the discussions with Stalin, Litvinov, and others had gone well, leading to Soviet hopes that relations would improve.

There were nevertheless other obstacles in the way of the Soviet conceived anti-Nazi alliance. Poland had grievances with Russia dating back centuries, irritated by the inconclusive Polish–Soviet war of 1919–1920. It was at this time that Poland had also developed a grudge against Czechoslovakia over a territorial dispute and for not aiding it when the Red Army threatened Warsaw in August 1920. Poland played the critical role in the French conceived *cordon sanitaire* (1919) to dam up Bolshevism and to replace

Russia as a counter-weight against Germany. Franco–Polish ties were shaken in January 1934 when the Polish government signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. Barthou, French foreign minister at the time, took a dim view of Polish policy and was ready to jettison the Polish alliance for the Soviet, if necessary.²⁷ This was not, however, to be Laval's position or that of the French general staff.

Whenever Litvinov sought to improve relations with France, he also sought to do so with Poland to remove a potential obstacle in his way. So it was that Litvinov met the Polish foreign minister, Józef Beck, in mid-February 1934, as he would often do during the 1930s to attempt to talk some sense to his counterpart, or to the Polish ambassador in Moscow. Litvinov took his usual approach: Nazi Germany was a threat to European security which would eventually turn against Poland. Better to believe *Mein Kampf* than Hitler's soothing political speeches intended to disarm his adversaries. Make no mistake, Litvinov said, Hitler was bent on war and territorial expansion, and Poland would eventually become a target. The Nazi–Polish non-aggression pact was only a tactical manoeuvre to give Hitler time to achieve other more immediate objectives. Beck responded with that usual Polish certainty which so exasperated Litvinov: Poland did not have some "small, seasonal government"; there was no threat to Poland or any immediate danger of war in Europe. Litvinov had similar conversations with the Polish ambassador, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, who allowed that he could not understand Soviet disquiet concerning Nazi Germany. Litvinov reacted incredulously, reminding the Polish ambassador of his country's vulnerability. "Whenever Poland takes any small step forward," Litvinov said of Polish policy, "it then immediately hurries again to step backward." The exchanges between Litvinov and Łukasiewicz were often pointed, as when in June 1935 the Pole brought up the Czechoslovak–Soviet mutual assistance pact. He wondered about Soviet–Czechoslovak "intentions" since given the "geographic circumstances"—meaning the absence of a common Soviet frontier with Czechoslovakia or Germany—the pact "hangs in the air." "The geography," replied Litvinov, "is obviously well known to both countries, and nevertheless they reckoned the pact to be in their mutual interests."²⁸

The Polish ambassador was not entirely wrong about the Czechoslovak pact "hanging in the air," Beneš used the same expression but for a different reason: the Czechoslovak and Soviet governments had ratified their pact which was dependent upon the French who had *not* ratified theirs. Beneš agreed therefore to press Laval, though the lobbying, if there was any, was ineffectual.²⁹ The Czechoslovaks were only beginning to pay the price of placing too much reliance on France.

Why did the hard-noised Stalin accept these dubious treaty arrangements? Litvinov convinced him that they were a necessary first step in the defence of Europe against Nazi Germany. His language to Stalin or to foreign diplomats was the same:

Hitler continues to resist any attempt at the organization of collective security because at the heart of his policy lies, consistent with the book "Mein Kampf," the concentration of force and the preparation of aggression in the first place toward the south-east and in an eastward direction. Under such conditions, there is no basis to believe in Hitler's promises about disarmament. We are therefore asking . . . that in negotiations with Germany everything be done to avoid letting Hitler interpret any agreement as consistent with his concept of dividing Europe into parts in which one can or cannot guarantee peace, which would encourage aggression against this or that part of Europe.³⁰

In other words, peace was "indivisible": if peace were disturbed in one part of Europe, it would be disturbed in all of Europe. Here was another problem for Czechoslovak security because the British and French governments were not prepared to accept this general principle. Sargent, for example, resented what he perceived to be Litvinov's attempts to narrow British options. "The real opponent with whom we have to deal . . . is Litvinov," he observed, "who will fight hard to preserve the principle of simultaneity in all its aspects. . . ." ³¹ In the Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsay there was a strong desire to compose with Nazi Germany and not to close off German expansion in the east.

It was Britain which cut the first side deal with Hitler, the Anglo-German naval agreement on 18 June 1935. Both the French and Soviet governments were taken aback by British action. "Great Britain had snatched at an apparent advantage," observed the sharp-tongued Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan M. Maiskii, "as a greedy boy will snatch at a cake on the table; the result is likely to be an attack of indigestion."³² Litvinov reckoned that the British had played into Hitler's hands. The French considered British action a betrayal. So it was to be each for himself, another step in the wrong direction if Czechoslovak security were to be protected.

Meanwhile, Laval sent the mutual assistance pact to the National Assembly, where it sat for months, in spite of having a legal opinion from his officials that he need not do so. According to Potemkin, Laval's delaying tactics were due to second thoughts and German protests.³³ Litvinov speculated that Laval would use ratification as a "trump for negotiations with Germany," and his impatience was quick to surface. When the French ambassador, Alphanand, met Litvinov in July to complain about a lack of cultural exchanges, mentioning the *Comédie française*, Litvinov said he would be happy to proceed in that domain, *after* ratification of the mutual assistance pact. He chose not to make a point about the *comédie* of Franco-Soviet relations. A few weeks later in Geneva, Litvinov complained to Laval who retaliated by reading from a folder of documents about communist activities in French colonies. This was a procedure Laval had used before when he wanted to divert attention from Soviet complaints about bad relations with Paris. Litvinov

thought he recognized a scene played out "during the time of Curzon," the die-hard British foreign secretary of the early 1920s. "I suggested," recorded Litvinov, "that the time had passed when any Curzons and their like, were able to allege that if only the Soviet government did not exist, then there would be no discontent and no anti-government movements in India and other colonies."³⁴

Sometimes, even Foreign Office clerks acknowledged that criticism of Soviet "propaganda" was a sure sign of impending troubles. "To attach so much importance to Moscow's articles, manifestos, declarations and prophecies and so forth," noted one clerk, "would mean running the risk of appearing as ridiculous as those who were responsible for this propaganda."³⁵

Soviet "propaganda" was an issue not only for Laval, but for Litvinov too. It had its roots in the creation of the Communist International in 1919, organised to spread world revolution, but also to defend Soviet Russia against western military intervention. After the end of the foreign intervention and Russian civil war in 1921, the Comintern gradually lost its *raison d'être* except as an instrument of Soviet foreign policy, though it riled western politicians or was useful to them as a pretext for poor relations with Moscow. "Propaganda," as viewed in the west, could mean almost anything: genuine propaganda in French or British colonies or in China, editorials in Soviet newspapers, even placards in Russian celebrating the 1917 revolution. Propaganda could also mean the public rhetoric of Soviet politicians in domestic debates. There was however another, *secret* language used inside the Commissariat for foreign affairs (NKID), couched in terms of *realpolitik*, and political, military, or economic calculation. The public language of the Soviet government and its politicians, framed in Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, clashed with the secret language of the NKID. Even Litvinov spoke "Bolshevik" in public—it was expected—but not in secret. During the 1920s, Litvinov often criticized Comintern agents and Soviet "orators," as he called them, for meddling abroad or making inappropriate public comments, harmful to Soviet foreign policy interests. In 1935 he warned against foreign language radio broadcasts which could easily slip from "information" into propaganda. Party militants, Litvinov implied, needed to be kept on a short leash. Foreign diplomats occasionally recorded Litvinov's scorn for the Comintern. "Useless," Litvinov said, who would certainly have been sympathetic to the popular Soviet epigram that ten foreign communists were not worth a single Soviet tractor. Even Stalin noted Litvinov's indifference toward "revolutionary" considerations.³⁶

In the mid-1930s the Comintern was enlisted in the fight for "collective security" and it supported centre-left political coalitions or Popular Fronts such as those in France and Spain. Instead of the intended improvement in Soviet-western relations, the opposite occurred because, as Laval himself pointed out, the Popular Front included the French communist party, thus legitimising it.³⁷ In Laval's view these political coalitions made the communists formidable

political rivals, and so attacks on Soviet “propaganda” intensified because of the electoral successes of the French left for which the Soviet Union was not responsible. The criticism of “propaganda” intensified to the point where western diplomats in effect asked the Soviet Union to renounce its revolutionary origins, something which Stalin would and could not do.

By the autumn of 1935 relations between the delicate Marianne and the burly Bolshevik were deteriorating rapidly. “The anti-Soviet role of Laval,” Litvinov advised, “is coming to light more and more.” Ratification of the mutual assistance pact was in doubt in November, though Laval had said to Titulescu that it would be ratified, all the while unleashing the right wing press against it. Later on that month, Litvinov heard that Laval had told the Yugoslav prime minister that the Franco–Soviet pact was “dead.” “He does not hide from us or from others,” Litvinov noted, “that he is sounding out the Germans about a guarantee of Czechoslovakia. Such a guarantee would mean freedom of action for Germany in the East.”³⁸ Laval did want to sound out the Germans, and directed the French ambassador in Berlin, André François-Poncet, to ask for a meeting with Hitler. Litvinov told the French ambassador in Moscow that he did not think much would come of it, except to increase mistrust of Laval. Alphand replied that unfortunately Franco–Soviet relations had become tied up—again, he suggested—with domestic French politics. Stories about Soviet propaganda in the colonies had excited recent senatorial elections. According to the right, a government of the left could not hold power in France without the danger of disorder, an obvious reference to the formation of the Popular Front, organised to fight Parliamentary elections in the spring of 1936.³⁹ Vansittart, the Foreign Office permanent under secretary, told Maiskii that “Laval’s flirt with Germany” was going nowhere, and François-Poncet criticised Laval for alienating France’s potential allies.⁴⁰

Laval’s own statements to Potemkin in Paris were enough to undermine assurances reaching Moscow from other sources. Laval informed Potemkin of François-Poncet’s discussions with Hitler. Both France and Germany wanted to establish good relations, according to Laval, but unfortunately the greatest obstacle to a Franco–German rapprochement was the Franco–Soviet pact. This sounded like Laval “trying to prepare us for the rejection of the pact. . . .” According to Potemkin, Laval was not above blackmailing the Soviet government: either Moscow discouraged a Popular Front campaign against him—Laval thinking that Stalin had only to say the word—or the pact would not be ratified. For the reader who may doubt Potemkin’s report, Laval and François-Poncet had been saying much the same thing to their German interlocutors. “You do mean to play the Bolsheviks a trick or two one of these days,” Laval joked with the German ambassador in Paris.⁴¹ Was Laval’s idea of a “trick or two” some future invasion? Litvinov drew the correct conclusion: “Laval has already shown us how easy it is to transform even a mutual assistance pact into a scrap of paper.” As Litvinov had said

earlier to a French journalist, "Stalin . . . was disappointed by the policy of moral weakness of France."⁴² The French might have retorted that Stalin was in no position to lecture about "morality," but, like many others, he had a perception of the French as weak and untrustworthy. This suspicion was not based on Stalin's ideological biases, but on his experience in dealing with the French.

Still, the Soviet government did not abandon the anti-German alliance, though its supposed partners did, one by one. Litvinov had tried to improve relations with the United States, travelling to Washington in November 1933 to conclude a "gentlemen's agreement" with the new President Franklin Roosevelt, settling old grievances and mapping out future cooperation. Litvinov viewed the United States as a key member of an anti-German coalition. Unfortunately, the State Department treated the "gentlemen's agreement" like an unwanted newborn, and the rapprochement soon died.⁴³ Litvinov even sought to include Italy in his coalition, but Benito Mussolini's ambitions for empire in Abyssinia put obstacles in the way. The League of Nations also figured in Litvinov's plans, to frame and reinforce anti-German resistance.⁴⁴ Hence, in December 1935 Litvinov was furious when Laval negotiated a secret deal with the British foreign secretary to cede a large part of Abyssinia to Mussolini. Laval is "a determined enemy of the collective system of security including the League of Nations . . ." Litvinov reckoned: "if he remained in power, nothing would be left of the previous foreign policy of France."⁴⁵

In 1936 Litvinov received good news when Laval was compelled to resign in January, discredited in the scandal created by the leaked Abyssinian negotiations. Ironically, Litvinov might have accepted Abyssinian partition if it been accomplished in a manner which did not weaken the League or the coalition he was attempting to build. Absent Laval, Litvinov hoped that Franco-Soviet relations would improve; and in fact, the National Assembly finally ratified the Franco-Soviet pact ratified in February-March, in spite of strong negative votes in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The debates were nasty, and Litvinov thought the Soviet press should sensitise the French to their own danger, noting for example that *Mein Kampf* had identified France as "a hereditary enemy of Germany" and that Hitlerite Germany represented a menace to all its neighbours, not only France, but "especially" Czechoslovakia. Litvinov sought Stalin's authorisation to warn the French premier of Soviet displeasure over "baseless attacks" in the Chamber—which he obtained—and at the same time asked for increased secret funds to influence the French press. Here was a reliable indicator of Soviet intentions for Moscow did not expend its gold carelessly. While trying to sensitise the French, Litvinov remained acutely aware of the Soviet Union's own danger, for as he put it, Hitler never passed up an opportunity to attack us.⁴⁶

The good news about Laval's resignation thus proved to be an orphan. While the Soviet government remained committed to an anti-German alliance,

no one else did. Great Britain soon backed away from Litvinov's anti-German coalition. In December 1935 Anthony Eden had become foreign secretary. In Moscow his appointment sounded like good news; Litvinov thought he was a partisan of better relations with the Soviet Union. As it turned out, Eden was no friend. In February 1936 he put the brakes on improving Anglo-Soviet relations. The Moscow press ran a story, unwisely as it turned out, on the dire living conditions of the British working class. Eden was incensed: "This article convinces me that we should hold M. Maisky & his Govt. severely at arm's length. We wish for correct relations, but any cordiality towards a Govt. that behaves like this is strongly to be deprecated."⁴⁷ It says a great deal about the strength of anti-communism inside the British elite and the weakness of the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement that a trifling article in the Soviet press in Russian could have such an effect on Eden who had met with Stalin only eleven months earlier.

This change of policy was not immediately evident in Moscow, but the Soviet government soon had other bad news to contemplate. On 7 March Hitler ordered his troops into the Rhineland, and the French and British governments reacted only with protests. Did anyone at the Quai d'Orsay then remember or know about Litvinov's earlier willingness to offer a Soviet guarantee of the security of demilitarised Rhineland? Mandel, who became a regular informant of the Soviet embassy, indicated that in the upcoming legislative elections no one could stand on a policy of firmness toward Germany. Herriot thought that the communists and socialists would make electoral gains, possibly the right also. He speculated that Édouard Daladier, Herriot's rival in the Radical party, might form the new government. He warned Potemkin against Daladier who, he said, had a deep but hidden dislike of the communists and shared Laval's "Germanophilia." For Herriot, a German orientation was pointless: European security could only be guaranteed by a Paris-London-Moscow alignment. Outside of it, there could be no security. The problem, as Litvinov observed, was Herriot's "flabbiness," he could not hold to a firm line in a fight. When the Popular Front did win spring elections, as Herriot foresaw, Litvinov worried that big gains on the left, especially by the French communist party, could provoke a movement toward fascism.⁴⁸ None of this boded well for collective security or the security of Czechoslovakia.

Worse was yet to come. On 17 July a military revolt, soon led by General Francisco Franco, erupted against the Spanish Popular Front government. It was the beginning of a bloody civil war which continued until March 1939. It became a struggle of ideologies, right vs. left, fascist vs. communist. The British government, already worried about the French Popular Front, feared the spread of communism first in Spain and then in France. The newly elected French Popular Front government, headed by the Socialist Léon Blum, might have been expected to aid the Spanish "Republicans," and his first instinct was to do so. But Blum feared civil war if he did. Britain and

France therefore opted for "non-intervention" while fascist Italy and Nazi Germany intervened aggressively to support Franco.

The only remaining question was what would the Soviet Union do? As with the Popular Front victory in France, Litvinov saw the Spanish civil war as a threat to "collective security." It ended his faint hopes in Italy as a potential ally, and threatened Soviet relations, such as they were, with France and Britain. Litvinov therefore attempted to pursue a cautious line accepting Anglo-French non-intervention and agreeing to join a non-intervention committee to prevent foreign guns and soldiers from fuelling the Spanish conflict. Non-intervention was a "farce" of course, as Litvinov soon recognized, because the Italians and Germans were determined to support the Spanish "nationalists."

Stalin was incensed by Anglo-French policy and ordered guns, ammunition, and advisors to Madrid to help it resist the "fascist mutineers." The French and British governments reacted angrily to Soviet intervention—they did not want Moscow spreading Bolshevik revolution in Spain—and the Secretary-General of the Quai d'Orsay, Alexis Léger, threatened the Soviet *chargé d'affaires* with abrogation of the only recently ratified mutual assistance pact, if Moscow did not take a more passive role. Whether Léger was bluffing or not, Litvinov was alarmed by Spanish developments and in September obtained Stalin's consent for new *démarches* to strengthen collective security. During the autumn he attempted to pull back Soviet policy to a less aggressive position in Spain. He faced opposition both in Moscow and from Maiskii in London. Meeting Stalin six times in late October and in November, Litvinov argued that while Soviet arms shipments had successfully established a precarious military equilibrium in Spain, this could easily be broken by Germany and Italy, who were in a much better position to reinforce Franco than the Soviet Union could the Republicans. A further Soviet attempt to maintain the military equilibrium 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, reasoned Litvinov: without a change in Anglo-French policy, "we cannot change this situation."⁴⁹ The Spanish civil war had nothing directly to do with Czechoslovak security, but indirectly it did. If Franco-Soviet relations were further damaged by Soviet intervention in Spain, the consequences for Prague would be dire.

There was one other piece of bad news that went almost unnoticed in the early months of the Spanish civil war. The Romanian foreign minister Titulescu resigned at the end of August 1936 because of political intrigues against him and criticism that he had ventured too close to Moscow. During the early months of 1936 he had continued to discuss a Soviet-Romanian mutual assistance pact with Litvinov and the Soviet minister in Bucharest, M. S. Ostrovskii, but he could not conclude with Moscow if Britain and France failed to commit to collective security. The resignation of Titulescu

was another blow to Litvinov's policies and to the security of Czechoslovakia and it aroused concern in Moscow.⁵⁰

The French were also worried. In September Yvon Delbos, the French foreign minister, met Tutulescu's successor, Victor Antonescu, in Geneva to obtain assurances about future Romanian policy. Delbos said he had the impression that Litvinov would agree to *de jure* Romania sovereignty over Bessarabia in exchange for the conclusion of a pact within which would be provision for Red Army passage rights in the event of German aggression against Czechoslovakia. Antonescu responded evasively: the matter was "very delicate" and would have to be put to the King and prime minister. Paul-Boncour, who was present at the meeting, reproached Antonescu: "Romania wants to obtain everything but it does not want to give anything in return." Delbos explained that he had persuaded Litvinov to relent on Bessarabia, but only in return for passage rights, for otherwise the mutual assistance pact with Czechoslovakia would be inoperable. In Bucharest, Antonescu explained to the French minister that Romania would not accept further treaty commitments "without first being certain of effective [French] support." As for relations with the Soviet Union, "public opinion" was "more and more anti-communist and hostile to an alliance with the Soviets." Ostrovskii expressed his disquiet to his French counterpart about the growth of anti-Soviet opinion. The Spanish civil war and the French popular front, said the Romanian minister in Moscow, aroused fears of communism even in Bucharest. Closer relations with the Soviet Union always stirred up trouble on the right, and in Romania the right and fascist right were growing stronger.⁵¹

Litvinov tried to calm fears, assuring Léger and other officials at the Quai d'Orsay, and London too, that the Soviet Union had no interest in spreading Bolshevism to Spain where in fact it was attempting to discourage radicalism. There were also meetings in Paris in November between Potemkin and French officials to discuss general staff talks. Potemkin advised Delbos of information from the Soviet military attaché in Berlin on weaknesses in French defences around Strasbourg. Potemkin observed that Czechoslovakia and France were vulnerable to German aggression and that "France itself could by no means feel itself in security." When Delbos replied that he would pass on the information about the defensive weaknesses along French border areas, Potemkin replied that France should be thinking not only about its own defences, but also about "a more active plan" to counter potential German aggression against Czechoslovakia. Germany was preparing for war, said Potemkin, and it was also trying to spread fear amongst French allies, so as to demoralise them and to pick them off one by one. This had also been Tutulescu's message. Potemkin stressed the obvious absence of a Franco-Soviet frontier and the need for Franco-Soviet staff talks to work out the "serious technical problems" of Franco-Soviet military cooperation.⁵²

It is true that there were "serious technical problems," but the serious political difficulties were far greater. These amounted to continuing resistance

inside the French government and the French general staff to closer cooperation with the Soviet Union. Blum favoured the talks, as did his air minister, Pierre Cot, but Daladier, General Maurice Gamelin, the chief of staff, and others were opposed. More than that, the political environment in France was vitriolic, worked up on the right by the fear of war and revolution, and exacerbated by French communist support of the Spanish Republican government.

Daladier and Gamelin were not the only problem. Litvinov cautioned Potemkin not to move too quickly on staff talks. "Authoritative comrades here"—meaning Stalin and his closest colleagues—were also interested in putting off direct talks and would not mind if the French took the initiative. "We have absolutely reliable information," Litvinov continued, "that the French high command is completely opposed to the Franco-Soviet pact and openly talking about it."⁵³ Litvinov mentioned General Henri Giraud as one of the loudest critics, but he might also have named Generals Gamelin, Gérodius, Georges, Debeney, and Schweisguth, among others. They feared communist propaganda in the army, general strikes, mutinies, urban uprisings, and other nightmarish scenarios. Litvinov was well-briefed, apparently having read an intercepted secret report by the British military attaché in Paris, Colonel Frederick Beaumont-Nesbitt, who referred to Giraud's open opposition to the Franco-Soviet pact.⁵⁴

Inside the French government there were still attempts to move forward. Blum informed Potemkin in December 1936 that there had been another meeting of the responsible ministers and Gamelin to discuss the "necessary measures to undertake in view of the approaching armed conflict." "The most threatened place in Europe is Czechoslovakia," said Blum: "It was decided that we should, without wasting any time, develop a concrete plan for its defence." France would mobilize its forces and send help to strengthen Czechoslovak air defences. In this context it was important to know what the Soviet Union would do to fulfill its treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia. For that, Blum's ministers concluded, the coordination of French, Czechoslovak, and Soviet military action was essential. This information sounded good, but would staff talks go ahead? "Regarding Daladier himself," Potemkin reported, "Blum himself told me that this individual is deeply hostile to us and that we should not count on him."⁵⁵

Caution remained the rule in Moscow, though there were exchanges in early 1937 between the Soviet military attaché in Paris and senior officers of the French general staff. For Daladier and his generals the strategy was to stall without offending Moscow.⁵⁶ Blum and the air minister Cot still sought to overcome resistance in May but they ran into additional opposition from London where Eden intervened with Delbos and Léger to block the talks. The French defended themselves by describing their policy as "a half-way house" to avoid offending the Soviet Union and pushing it into a rapprochement with Germany without going too far in the other direction. Eden was

unsympathetic: "To many who disliked and feared the diplomatic influence of the Soviet Government in Europe this extension of Franco–Russian collaboration would be interpreted as restricting in a new and dangerous way the liberty of action of the French Government in European politics." Eden's comment was ironic since the British government was itself attempting to narrow France's "liberty of action," a point which Potemkin had already drawn to French attention. Eden also wanted to keep open options to Berlin and a new settlement in the west, a "western Locarno," just what Litvinov feared. In the end, the issue came down to the defence of Czechoslovakia, "essential to French interests," Delbos said: "We will not abandon Czechoslovakia. We cannot do so without disappearing from the map of Europe as a power of the first order." This prediction proved true, but Eden's intervention had an effect: the French ambassador in London advised at the end of May that "the French Government were going to reduce to the smallest possible compass any further developments of the Franco–Soviet Pact. . . ." ⁵⁷

British intervention in Franco–Soviet relations was another blow to Czechoslovak security, but Stalin contributed one of his own. In June he turned on his high command and after drumhead trials a number of senior officers were executed. While the British and French governments did not care about the disappearance of most of the "old Bolsheviks" which had started in the previous year, the execution of senior commanders was viewed as a matter of concern. This reaction was also ironic since the British and French governments had not wanted close relations with the Red Army before the purges, though the purges provided an effective *ex post facto* justification for refusing staff talks. Profiting thus from the clarity of hindsight, Étienne de Crouy-Chanel, Léger's private secretary, referring to the mutual assistance pact, said that "even before the execution of the Soviet generals . . . the French Government had never had the intention of agreeing to anything in the slightest degree binding. . . ." The pact's only value to France would be in the event that the Red Army could "take the offensive beyond its own frontiers and in particular of coming to the help of Czechoslovakia in the event of an attack by Germany." ⁵⁸ These comments too are ironic since the French army, not to speak of the British—who did not have an army fit to fight in Europe—had no plans to take the offensive "beyond its frontiers" to aid the Czechoslovaks or the Soviets. Crouy was projecting France's own weaknesses onto the Soviet Union, but what then would be the French *quid pro quo* for a Soviet offensive? These were questions which the Soviets always asked, and the French always avoided. Franco–Soviet relations were, to amend a well-known epigram, a comedy wrapped in irony inside a tragedy.

Litvinov and Potemkin knew that the Soviet Union's reputation had been badly damaged by the purges. However, they did not like to hear of French gloating about having successfully fended off staff talks, since it was Daladier in early 1937 who had passed information to Potemkin to the

effect that Germany had contacts in the Red Army high command who were planning a *coup d'état* against the Soviet government and a new alliance with Berlin against France.⁵⁹ Daladier's intervention is puzzling in view of his known but still hidden hatred of the French communists and by extension of the Soviet Union. What did he think would be accomplished in handing over his "intelligence" to Potemkin? Did he want to prevent a reversal of Soviet policy, or was Stalin's reaction the one he had hoped for? The existing evidence does not allow a response, but what is certain is that Litvinov's policy was in ruins. All the partners to his would-be coalition against Germany had fallen away one by one. He had taken a big risk for a big prize in promoting an anti-Nazi alliance. In the summer of 1937 Litvinov had nothing to show for his efforts, a failure all too obvious to Stalin, who would not have needed a Marxist-Leninist explanation to understand that the Soviet Union had no allies and was exposed to grave danger.

In the spring of 1937 the news continued to be bad. In London Neville Chamberlain had taken over as British prime minister and in Paris Blum's government had fallen after little more than a year in power. Czechoslovakia, recognizing the worsening situation, faced the necessity of seeking agreement with Germany, as Titulescu had foreseen, if France and Britain did not take a stronger stand. "There was no doubt that Czechoslovakia was on the first line of fire," observed Litvinov, facing danger from all sides. Britain was putting pressure on Beneš to settle the Sudeten question, that of the German population in the so-called Sudeten territories, so as not to provoke Hitler. The Czechoslovak government was however still holding out against surrendering its pacts with the Soviet Union and France or its territory to Berlin.⁶⁰

If the Soviet government had trouble controlling its inclination to resort to Marxist framed public criticism of Britain and France, the British and French in turn had trouble controlling their anti-Marxist framed outbursts against Moscow. These were often found in the French press, as Litvinov pointed out, but he also complained about more official criticism coming from French ambassadors and other representatives abroad which made its way to Moscow. The French ambassador in Tokyo, for example, enjoyed a good rant against the Soviets, and Gamelin was heard to criticise the Popular Front and to praise Japan, "which was leading the struggle against Bolshevism."⁶¹ Tensions between Japan and the Soviet Union were on the rise, and Litvinov did not appreciate French generals taking the side of Tokyo.

While French ambassadors in Moscow complained about nastiness in the Soviet press; Litvinov complained about the French. *Le Temps*, the semi-official Paris daily, often aroused Soviet ire, and for two reasons. First, because it was fed by Quai d'Orsay and, second, because it was fed by the Soviet embassy in Paris, about 500,000 francs a year beginning in the early 1920s, to mute its anti-Soviet vitriol. Sometimes, *Le Temps* did mute the vitriol, but not often and not for long, and this was an endless source of irritation

to the normally thrifty Litvinov who had to throw good money after bad. Litvinov raised the subject with Delbos, for example, in early 1937 when the Soviet government was still trying to move ahead on staff talks. Delbos denied that *Le Temps* was a semi-official organ of the Quai d'Orsay—which was untrue, everyone knew that it was. Of course, Litvinov could scarcely say that the Soviet Union was not getting its money's worth from *Le Temps*, or that the Soviet embassy was providing “allowances” to other papers and journalists, all to quiet anti-Soviet attacks and promote the Franco–Soviet pact, and all to no avail. To be sure, the Soviet embassy was not alone in this practice, or even the biggest spender. Germany and Italy were rumoured to pay out much more.⁶²

Robert Coulondre, who succeeded Alphand as French ambassador in Moscow, complained often to Litvinov about Soviet “propaganda.” In November 1937 he objected to an article by Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian head of the Comintern, published in *L'Humanité*, the French communist daily, to mark the anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Moreover, the French communist party had abandoned its anti-war politics to support French national defence and Dimitrov was a strong partisan of the popular front strategy.⁶³ For the French right, however, the Popular Front was an abomination which had given legitimacy to the hated French communists. Dimitrov's other transgression was to praise the Comintern, especially active in Spain, another focus of the right's anger. Litvinov considered the complaint a trifle compared to the open hostility of the French government and press toward Moscow, and he drew attention to the “long list of disappointments which the policy of collective security had brought to the Soviet Union.”⁶⁴ Ironically, the Soviet embassy was paying large subsidies to promote collective security, *not* world revolution. Litvinov wondered what the British and French governments would think of the impressive sums which the Italians were investing in anti-British and anti-French propaganda. Soviet intelligence had intercepted “authentic documents” which gave the figures, 12.5 million lire, for propaganda distributed by Italian consulates in Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Alexandria, and across North Africa.⁶⁵ Litvinov's implication was that the French and British were applying double standards about “propaganda,” and they were.

This was the state to which Franco–Soviet relations had fallen at the end of 1937. Delbos made a tour of Eastern European capitals in December, skipping Moscow. His private comments while on tour quickly reached an offended Litvinov. The French foreign minister complained about what Litvinov called “imaginary” Comintern interference in French domestic affairs, while denigrating the value of the Franco–Soviet mutual assistance pact. Delbos had coddled Beck in Warsaw, instead of trying to obtain a change in hostile Polish policies. Litvinov nevertheless heard that the Romanian foreign minister Antonescu had complained about the “passivity” of French and British policy. “He apparently told Delbos,” Litvinov continued,

that the uninterrupted, unending concessions to Germany by Italy, England, and France were increasing the danger of war, and what is more, apparently, he demanded from Delbos that the Great Powers oppose at least once and at long last a determined *niet* in response to Italo-German pretensions. If London, Paris, and Moscow, forming a bloc, held to stern language in Geneva, then, in the opinion of Antonescu, all the small and middle powers would line up behind them and this would lessen significantly the danger of war.

Unfortunately, the French were paralysed: "Delbos said everywhere that Germany firstly threatens Austria, not Czechoslovakia." Once Austria was absorbed by Germany, Litvinov knew, Czechoslovakia's northern defences would be turned, and it would become the next target of German aggression. He guessed, not without sarcasm, that Delbos had got his orders from London to encourage the Czechoslovaks to make concessions to the Sudeten Germans, though the advice had not been well received in Prague. Litvinov was aware of British pressure on Beneš. The French knew also: in December Léger advised the Czechoslovak minister in Paris that British statements of concern about Eastern Europe were rhetorical and that Britain would not "lift a finger" in the East. Maiskii used this same expression in his diary. Stalin was not the only one to sense French weakness. The French *cote d'amour*, cracked one Romanian diplomat, is not what it used to be.⁶⁶

Antonescu's language may have come as a surprise in Moscow, though Litvinov did not give him much credit for tenacity. Titulescu would have retorted that tenacity was a luxury for the small East European states which were surrounded by dangerous neighbours. In London the retired Titulescu told the Soviet ambassador Maiskii that peace in Europe depended on the building of a "peace front" led by Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Obviously, he could speak more freely without King Carol and the Romanian right looking over his shoulder. If the "peace front" is established, said Titulescu, all will be well. If not, there will be "a tragedy in two acts: first act, creation of a German *Mittel Europa*; second act, the ruin of the British Empire. So the British have a choice to make and that in short order."⁶⁷ In talking to Maiskii, Titulescu was preaching to the converted.

Litvinov's comments on French policy were mild compared to those of Ia. Z. Surits, now ambassador in Paris, and of Potemkin who had returned to Moscow as deputy commissar for foreign affairs. Surits was getting information from Mandel, Cot, Paul Reynaud, and other French politicians and journalists. It is surprising that they would speak so openly about French domestic and foreign policy, but it meant that Moscow was well informed and not just pursuing a Marxist critique of capitalism. Mandel and Reynaud urged the Soviet government to take a hard line with Daladier, still defence minister, but Surits did not think it would do any good. The malaise and divisions in French government and society ran too deep. Both Potemkin

and Surits concluded that France was headed toward fascist domination and the loss of its independence.⁶⁸

Still, in January 1938 Litvinov held the door open, in offering a “general directive” on Soviet policy to Surits: “do not be the first to go forward, do not make ourselves out to be the only defenders of the League of Nations, attempting to push other governments, and maintain a calm, waiting position, supporting those proposals which go in the direction of our general policies.”⁶⁹ We will wait and see what happens, was Litvinov’s line, but the auguries were grim.

NOTES

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3. S. Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War, 1936–1941* (London, 2002), 126, and passim.

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

8. Litvinov to Stalin, no. 122/L, secret, 2 Apr. 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 113, d. 122, ll. 150–51; Politburo protocol no. 24, 9 Apr. 1935, G. Adibekov, et al., eds., *Politburo TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i Evropa, Resbeniia “osoboi papki,” 1923–1939* (Moscow, 2001), 322.

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

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11. Potemkin to NKID, highest priority, 20 Apr. 1935, *DVP*, XVIII, 296–97; Politburo protocol, no. 24, 20 Apr. 1935, *Politburo TsK RKP(b)*, 325 & Politburo decision, 21 Apr. 1935, *ibid.*, 326.

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13. Dovgalevskii to Litvinov, 3 May 1931, *DVP*, XIV, 306–09.

14. “On Negotiations with France,” not signed, but by Litvinov, nd, but sent to the Politburo on 22 Apr. 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 113, d. 122, ll. 179–82; Litvinov to Maiskii, no. 146/L, secret, 3 May

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

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

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20. Titulescu (Cap Martin) to ministry of foreign affairs, Bucharest, 21 June 1935, *SRO*, II, 24–25; and Litvinov to Surits, no. 207/L, secret, 27 June 1935, AVPRF, f. 082, o. 18, p. 80, d. 1, ll. 71–69.

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23. François Amé-Leroy, French minister in Oslo, no. 101, 21 May 1935, MAÉ URSS/977, ff. 175–76.

24. Sargent's minute, 4 May 1935, C3613/55/18, FO [National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Foreign Office] 371 18838.

25. Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 148/L, secret, 4 May 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, p. 164, d. 814, l. 106; Note, *Directeur politique*, Paul Bargeton, 19 March 1935, MAÉ URSS/973, ff. 107–110; Note, *Directeur politique*, 24 June 1935, MAÉ URSS/1004, ff. 172–74.

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27. Geneviève Tabouis, *They Called Me Cassandra* (New York, 1942), 207.

28. “Record of conversations with the Polish minister of foreign affaires Beck on 13, 14 & 15 February 1934,” Litvinov's *dnevnik* (journal), secret, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, p. 95, d. 4, ll. 53–63; “Meeting with Łukasiewicz, 10.II.1935,” Litvinov's *dnevnik*, secret, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 103, d. 1, ll. 3–8; and “Meeting with Łukasiewicz,” Litvinov's *dnevnik*, secret, 4 June 1935, *ibid.*, ll. 65–67. On Polish–Czechoslovak relations, see S. V. Morozov, *Pol'sko-čehkoslovatskie odnosbeniia, 1933–1939* (Moscow, 2004).

29. “On a conversation with Beneš,” Litvinov's *dnevnik*, secret, 20 June 1935, AVPRF, f. 082, o. 15, p. 80, d. 1, ll. 68–67.

30. Litvinov to Surits, no. 176/L, secret, 3 June 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 106, d. 30, ll. 15–16; and “Note communicated by Soviet ambassador, June 5, 1935,” C4564/55/18, FO 371 18845.

31. Sargent's minute, 19 Feb. 1935, C1339/55/18, FO 371 18826; and untitled note by Sargent, 3 June 1935, C4694/55/18, FO 371 18846.

32. Report of meeting between Maiskii and Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, 3 July 1935, N3423/135/38, FO 371 19460; and Chilston, no. 533, 6 Dec. 1935, N6304/135/38, *ibid.*

33. “*Ratification du traité franco-soviétique du 2 mai 1935*,” *Sous-direction d'Europe*, 12 June 1935, MAÉ URSS/978, ff. 195–97; and Potemkin to Litvinov, no. 355, secret, 26 June 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, p. 164, d. 814, ll. 133–41.

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36. Litvinov to G. V. Chicherin, commissar for foreign affairs, no. 3044, secret, 15 Jan. 1927, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 89, p. 21, ll. 7–9; Litvinov to Chicherin, no. 3076, secret, 26 Jan. 1927, *ibid.*, ll. 10–11; Litvinov to Chicherin, no. 3090, secret, 29 Jan. 1927, *ibid.*, l. 12; Litvinov to G. E. Zinoviev, head of the

Comintern, no. 597, secret, 5 June 1923, RGASPI [Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, Moscow], f. 359, o. 1 d. 7, l. 95; Litvinov to TsK VKP(b), not numbered, 15 March 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 113, d. 122, l. 110; Edmond Ovey, British ambassador in Moscow, no. 138, 25 Feb. 1930, N1404/75/38, FO 371 14860; untitled note by E. Rowe-Dutton, British embassy, Paris, 17 June 1937, C4517/18/17, FO 371 20686; and Stalin to V. M. Molotov, 29 Aug. 1929, L.T. Lih, et al. (eds.), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov, 1925–1936* (New Haven, 1995), 174–75.

37. “Conversation of the ambassador with Alphand,” no. 22, secret, Potemkin, 10 Jan. 1936, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 20, p. 167, d. 828, ll. 18–11; and “Conversation with Laval,” Potemkin’s *dnevnik*, no. 48, secret, 25 Jan. 1936, *ibid.*, ll. 27–19.

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39. “Meeting with Alphand,” Litvinov’s *dnevnik*, secret, 29 Nov. 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, p. 164, d. 814, ll. 2–3; and “Meeting with Alphand,” Krestinskii’s *dnevnik*, secret, 22 Oct. 1935, *ibid.*, ll. 4–6.

40. Litvinov to Surits, no. 306/L, secret, 19 Nov. 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, p. 106, d. 30, l. 33; and Litvinov to Surits, no. 315/L, secret, 25 Nov. 1935, AVPRF f. 082, o. 18, p. 80, d. 1, ll. 101–100.

41. Potemkin to Krestinskii, no. 5346, secret, 26 Nov. 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, d. 814, p. 164, ll. 119–22; memorandum by Konstantin von Neurath, German foreign minister, 25 June 1935, *Documents on German Foreign Policy* [hereinafter *DGFP*], series C, 6 vols. (Washington, 1959–1983), IV, 255–56; Roland Köster, German ambassador in Paris, to German foreign ministry, no. 827, 27 July 1935, *ibid.*, 493–96; Köster to German foreign ministry, no. 1188, 27 Nov. 1935, *ibid.*, 859–62; and Köster to German foreign ministry, no. 1223, 18 Dec. 1935, *ibid.*, 925–26.

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46. Litvinov to Stalin, no. 3533/L, secret, 13 Feb. 1936, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 16, p. 114, d. 1, ll. 31–32; Litvinov to Stalin, no. 3547/L, secret, 22 Feb. 1936, *ibid.*, l. 43; Litvinov to Stalin, no. 3556/L, very secret, 22 Feb. 1936, *ibid.*, ll. 56–60; Litvinov to Potemkin, 23 Feb. 1936, *DVP*, XIX, 98–99; and Litvinov to Surits, no. 3597/L, secret, 19 April 1936, AVPRF, f. 05, o.16, p. 118, d. 44, ll. 19–21.

47. Eden’s minute, 29 Feb. 1936, N880/20/38, FO 371 20339. For Anglo–Soviet relations, see M. J. Carley, “‘A Fearful Concatenation of Circumstances’: The Anglo–Soviet Rapprochement, 1934–1936,” *Contemporary European History*, 5, 1 (1996): 29–69.

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

49. Litvinov to Maiskii, no. 3799/L, secret, 19 Dec. 1936, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 16, p. 116, d. 22, ll. 38–39; *Na prieme y Stalina*, pp. 191–93; and M. J. Carley, “Caught in a Cleft-Stick: Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War,” in G. Johnson (ed.), *The International Context of the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 2009), 151–180.

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

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54. “Notes on the Attitude of the French General Staff towards the Franco–Soviet Pact,” F. G. Beaumont Nesbitt, nd (but October 1936), C7262/92/62, FO 371 19880.
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56. Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 33/L, secret, 4 Feb. 1937 (mistakenly dated 1936), AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 21, p. 169, d. 837, ll. 14–13; and Deputy Chief of Staff General Victor-Henri Schweisguth’s journal, entries of 8 Feb. & 19 March 1937, AN [Archives Nationales, Paris], *Papiers Schweisguth*, 351AP/3.
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