
‘A Situation of Delicacy and
Danger’: Anglo-Soviet
Relations, August
1939–March 1940

MICHAEL JABARA CARLEY

I

In August 1939 the world seemed suddenly to turn on its head. What appeared to be certainties and solid points of reference disappeared into the air like puffs of smoke in the breezes of a late summer's day. Europe was on the brink of a new war as Nazi Germany made ready to invade Poland. Since 1933 the Soviet Union had advocated the creation of a system of 'collective security' to counter the Nazi German threat to European peace and security. Maksim M. Litvinov, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, was the Soviet government's most visible and eloquent spokesman, warning of the Nazi menace privately in meetings with Western diplomats and publicly at the League of Nations in Geneva. In the ensuing years events all over Europe proved Litvinov to be right, and he won grudging respect in the West. But in Moscow the commissar was not rewarded for his foresight. In May 1939 Litvinov was sacked.¹ Soviet policy appeared to go on as before, and Viacheslav M. Molotov, the new Commissar for Foreign Affairs, continued Litvinov's negotiations with France and Great Britain for a tripartite alliance against Nazi Germany. Then, in the course of a fortnight in August, a stunning reversal occurred and the two-arch enemies, who for years had heaped opprobrium on one another, suddenly resolved their differences. On 23 August Molotov signed a non-aggression pact with the Nazi Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, who flew to Moscow for the occasion. The French and British governments had only just sent a military mission there to negotiate the terms of an anti-Nazi alliance. 'Yesterday it was there. Today it is gone', noted American journalist William Shirer from Berlin: 'There will be no long [German] front against Russia to hold this time.' In France

I wish to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its financial support of my work. This article will appear, *mutatis mutandis*, as part of my forthcoming book entitled *1939: The Alliance that Never Was and the Coming of World War II*, to be published by Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, in autumn 1999.

¹ E.g., M. J. Carley, 'Down a Blind-Alley: Anglo-Franco-Soviet Relations, 1920–1939,' *Canadian Journal of History*, 29, 1 (April 1994), 147–72.

and Great Britain there was shock, anger and humiliation, especially in the knowledge of Nazi *schadenfreude* over the sudden turn-about which cleared the way for the German invasion of Poland. With 'Russia in the bag', Nazis boasted, the British would not dare to fight.²

Anglo-French officials put on a brave face, but saw their strategic plans for a long grinding war and strangling blockade of Nazi Germany gravely compromised. On 1 September the German army invaded Poland, and within a few days the second front in the East collapsed before it had even been organised. The Anglo-French alliance scarcely raised a finger to help the Poles. The British and French governments dragged their feet in declaring war, and when the air raid sirens finally wailed, it was only a phoney war, the 'bore war' on the Western Front. While the Luftwaffe remorselessly bombed Poland, it was the *guerre de confettis* in the west. The British dropped ineffectual propaganda leaflets on the few German divisions manning the Siegfried line against France. German soldiers might symbolically have used the leaflets for toilet paper. Not the British intention, to be sure, but the alliance was reluctant to provoke the enemy.³

Pas de conneries, was a popular French attitude, or *we'll pay the price*.⁴ 'Some Funkstick in the Air Ministry,' later complained Winston S. Churchill, was afraid that retaliation against the enemy would provoke counter-retaliation. 'Don't irritate them dear!' replied a sarcastic Churchill, who had taken a seat in the British War Cabinet.⁵ The German army played on these anxieties: 'We won't shoot if you don't', was a message broadcast to French troops at the front. '*Pas méchants*', these Germans, thought many French soldiers.⁶ Meanwhile, the Poles were crushed. The Soviet ambassador in London, I. M. Maiskii, was astonished by the rapidity of the Polish collapse. Poland was *foutue*, reckoned the French Commander-in-Chief Maurice Gamelin: the French would have to dig in and hope for better luck. What happened to the Poles, however, could not happen to them. France was not Poland!⁷ The British attitude was similar, but also more creative.

Creativity and patience were much in need because on 17 September the Soviet army occupied eastern Poland. Poland was finished anyway, but in London and Paris it seemed like a stab in the back. The Anglo-French had no room to talk, and

² See Shirer's contemporary impressions in *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 180-3; and also M. J. Carley, 'End of the "Low, Dishonest Decade": Failure of the Anglo-Franco-Soviet Alliance in 1939', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 45, 2 (1993), 303-41.

³ Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle, France 1940* (London: Papermac, 1990), 138-42.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Camets de la drôle de guerre, septembre 1939-mars 1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 202; and Horne, *France 1940*, 142.

⁵ Martin Gilbert, *Finest Hour: Winston S. Churchill, 1939-41* (London: Minerva, 1989), 90-1.

⁶ Shirer, *Diary*, p. 302; and Horne, *France 1940*, p. 146.

⁷ Excerpt from Maiskii's journal, *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki*, 23 vols. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury [then Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia], 1958-) (hereafter DVP), vol. XXII, bk. 2, 44-5, secret, 7 Sept. 1939; Martin Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 317, 346-7; and Elisabeth du Réau, 'Édouard Daladier: la conduite de la guerre et les prémices de la défaite', *Historical Reflections*, 22, 1 (Winter 1996), 97.

the Soviet government, not unexpectedly, took a different view of the circumstances. The Soviet Union felt no debts of obligation to Poland. Soviet–Polish relations before the war had been cold or hostile, and when the Soviet government wanted to improve relations with France or to promote collective security, Poland was there, as an obstacle. Apart from preventing German invasion forces from driving up against Soviet frontiers, the Polish collapse offered the additional and satisfying advantage of recovering territories captured by the Poles during the Russo–Polish war of 1919–1920. At the end of September Ribbentrop went again to Moscow to sign further agreements with Molotov, coldly renegotiating their respective spheres of interest in Poland and the Baltic and developing trade relations. Molotov swapped ethnic Polish territory for Lithuania, as easily as American kids swapped baseball cards. The Soviet government imposed mutual assistance pacts on the Baltic states in September and October allowing, inter alia, for the stationing of Soviet troops in those countries. The Baltic governments had no choice but to agree to Soviet terms. No one could or would help them to resist.

The fate of Poland rankled in London and Paris, but there was nothing either the British or the French government could do. It was an uncomfortable moral position, though in war morality has little purchase on the minds of war-makers. In protesting against the Soviet occupation, the French were somewhat more aggressive than the British, though even they held to the position that they had ‘to swallow our feelings’ because of ‘the extreme importance of not getting on the wrong side of the Russians . . .’ Sir William Seeds, the British ambassador in Moscow, also advised caution in dealing with the ugly situation. ‘I beg respectfully to express my opinion’, he said, ‘that the attitude of H. M. Government . . . has been much better adapted [than the French] to a situation of delicacy and danger.’⁸

Danger concentrated the Foreign Office mind most effectively. The British government adopted a cautious policy towards the Soviet Union soon after the conclusion of the Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact.⁹ But the British government then went further than mere passive caution, it actually sought to encourage an Anglo–Soviet rapprochement. The British initiative broke a pattern of the previous twenty years: it had been the needy and isolated Soviet Union which had sought

⁸ Sir A. Cadogan, Gladwyn Jebb, 18 Sept. 1939, reporting a meeting with the French chargé d’affaires, Roger Cambon, C14998/13953/18, Public Record Office, London, Foreign Office (hereafter PRO/FO) 371 23102; and Seeds, no. 270, 29 Sept. 1939, C15399/13953/18, *ibid*.

⁹ For earlier works which touch upon Anglo–Soviet relations in the period covered by this article, see inter alia Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Stafford Cripps’ Mission to Moscow, 1940–42* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Martin Kitchen, *British Policy towards the Soviet Union during the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Steven Merritt Miner, *Between Churchill and Stalin: The Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the Origins of the Grand Alliance* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Geoffrey Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance: Stalin’s Pact with Hitler* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989); and Lloyd C. Gardner, *Spheres of Influence: The Great Powers Partition Europe from Munich to Yalta* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1993). See also Geoffrey Roberts, ‘Churchill and Stalin on the Eve of War: Episodes in Anglo–Soviet Relations, September 1939–June 1941’, unpublished manuscript, 14 pp.

better or at least businesslike political and economic relations, and the French and British who had often rejected Soviet overtures.¹⁰

Not everyone in France and Great Britain had opposed better relations with the Soviet Union. Realists, as the permanent under-secretary of the Foreign Office, Sir Robert Vansittart, would call them in the 1930s, argued that better relations would be economically and politically advantageous. Even in the 1920s French realists said that improved relations with Russia were essential to French security against Germany. In the 1930s security issues transcended those of economics and trade, but anti-communist ideologues saw a greater danger in the spread of revolution and Soviet-style communism in the event of war. An Anglo-French alliance with the Soviet Union would guarantee victory against Nazi Germany, but also the spread of social revolution behind the bayonets of the Red Army. The ideologues held the upper hand: they blocked an Anglo-Franco-Soviet rapprochement and embraced appeasement.¹¹ The conference at Munich in 1938 where Czechoslovakia was dismembered on Hitler's table was the appeasers' best day, though it quickly turned out to be just another Nazi 'swindle'.¹²

II

In September 1939 circumstances were different: the British became the suitor, while 'the Soviet' – this was common Foreign Office usage – stood off, relieved to have avoided being drawn into the war, and anxious to take advantage of the destabilisation of Europe without compromising its declared position as a neutral. The careful, 'slabfaced', Molotov may have thought that the about-turn was fair play. If he thought about it at all: Molotov was a ruthless, dog-loyal *oprichnik* who followed Stalin's orders without question. What may surprise is that those policy makers in the Foreign Office who only months before had rejected Soviet overtures – Sir Orme Sargent, Sir Alexander Cagogan, R. A. Butler, and Lord Halifax – now contemplated a more flexible policy.

What choice did they have? In their political reflections immediately after the Soviet turn-about in August, the Foreign Office concluded that it was best to wait out the situation. According to Sargent, deputy permanent under-secretary, Russia was reverting to its 'historic national policy', and abandoning its 'international ideals'. The recovery of territories lost during the previous war and access to the ice-free sea were now its main objectives. Molotov had tried to obtain French and

¹⁰ Carley, 'Low, Dishonest Decade'; Carley, 'Five Kopecks for Five Kopecks: Franco-Soviet Trade Relations, 1928–1939', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 33, 1 (January–March 1992), 23–58; Carley, 'Generals, Diplomats, and International Politics in Europe, 1898–1945', *Canadian Journal of History*, 30, 2 (August 1995), 289–321; Carley, 'Fearful Concatenation of Circumstances: the Anglo-Soviet Rapprochement, 1934–1936', *Contemporary European History*, 5, 1 (March 1996), 29–69; Carley, 'Prelude to Defeat: Franco-Soviet Relations, 1919–1939', *Historical Reflections*, 22, 1 (winter 1996), 159–88; and M. J. Carley and R. K. Debo, 'Always in Need of Credit: the USSR and Franco-German Economic Co-operation, 1926–1929', *French Historical Studies*, 30, 3 (summer 1997), 315–56.

¹¹ Carley, 'Prelude to defeat'; idem, 'Fearful Concatenation'.

¹² Shirer, *Diary*, 192.

British acquiescence in the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states [as Sargent saw it], but, having encountered difficulties, turned to Herr Hitler for satisfaction. ‘It is a dangerous game’, noted Sargent, ‘for there is every prospect of the two thieves falling out sooner or later, and Hitler has on the whole better cards than Stalin.’¹³ The Poles, who were then doomed but did not know it, had a simpler explanation for all of what happened. ‘The man in the street’, observed Sir Howard Kennard, the British ambassador in Warsaw, ‘who knows little of possible military implications, has taken the news with a half-amused shrug, “Isn’t Vasily a swine!” they are saying.’¹⁴

A Foreign Office clerk later summed up the position in response to a letter of complaint about British policy from a private citizen, one Miss J. F. Tuke: ‘It would not be difficult to put up a debating case for our failure to treat Soviet aggression against Poland as we treated German aggression against that country . . . It is quite true that our attitude towards the Soviet Govt. is dictated by funk – fear of their combining with Germany if we annoy them . . . Our policy towards the Soviet Union being in fact an immoral one thrust upon us by necessity, the less we say about it the better.’¹⁵ So a brief letter of acknowledgement was sent to Miss Tuke, and the Foreign Office got on with the realist’s policy which Vansittart had promoted unsuccessfully since 1934.¹⁶

It was not just diplomats in London and Paris who had to get used to new European realities; some Soviet diplomats did also. I. M. Maiskii, the Soviet ambassador in London, had taken it for granted that an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance would be concluded in August.¹⁷ He was not quite sure what to make of his government’s volte-face, noting in his journal: ‘Our policy obviously represents a kind of sudden reversal, the reasoning behind which is for the present still not entirely clear to me.’ While he waited for information from Moscow, Maiskii observed confusion and anger in London. Labour politicians were furious: the Soviet government had betrayed its first principles and extended a hand to fascism. ‘This will pass’, observed Maiskii, and anyway the Tories were taking the Soviet reversal with more serenity. Indeed they were even trying to calm the Labour outcry.¹⁸ Maiskii did not mention the British communists, but they were equally dismayed by the Soviet turn-about. When the Comintern in Moscow ordered that a new line be followed in favour of peace and against the ‘imperialist’ war, many communists left the party.¹⁹

In the higher altitudes of diplomacy, these defections did not matter: Soviet officials laid responsibility for the new situation on the Anglo-French and the Poles for the failure of the talks in Moscow to achieve an anti-Nazi alliance. It was a

¹³ Sargent’s minute, 24 Aug. 1939, C12678/15/18, PRO FO 371 22980.

¹⁴ Kennard, no. 205 saving, 24 Aug. 1939, C11985/15/18, PRO FO 371 22977.

¹⁵ D. W. Lascelles’s minute, 22 Oct. 1939, N5544/92/38, PRO FO 371 23683.

¹⁶ Carley, ‘Fearful Concatenation’.

¹⁷ Excerpt from Maiskii’s journal, secret, 5 Aug. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 1, 582–83.

¹⁸ Excerpts from Maiskii’s journal, secret, 24, 26 Aug. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 1, 647, 659.

¹⁹ Pierre Broué, *Histoire de l’Internationale communiste, 1919–1943* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 734–42.

legitimate argument and effective with some French and British interlocutors because of their embarrassment over delays and hesitations in the negotiations. Molotov said that the Soviet government had acted to avert an Anglo-German agreement against the USSR, fears of which had been increased by secret talks during the summer, leaked in the press, between Robert Hudson, Parliamentary Secretary for the Department of Overseas Trade, and Helmut Wohltat, a senior official in the German Economics Ministry.²⁰ In September events moved quickly: Labour indignation dissipated, and Labour politicians were soon pressing for an improvement of relations with the Soviet Union.

The British government was willing to examine the possibilities. So was Maiskii. The Soviet ambassador, who had been at his post since 1932, had worked long, hard, and somewhat deviously to improve Anglo-Soviet relations. As a former Menshevik, he appreciated deviousness as an essential quality to survive in Bolshevik Russia. This was especially true during the Stalinist purges when no one knew who would be arrested next. Maiskii's task was never easy, but it was harder now because of the turn-about in Soviet policy. During his years in London the ambassador had cultivated a wide network of relationships with intellectuals, journalists, politicians, and ministers. David Lloyd George, the Liberal leader and former prime minister, and Churchill, the Tory gadfly and outcast during the 1930s, were among his most important contacts. The venues of the ambassador's meetings were often the dining table, the corridors of Parliament, and a secluded corner at diplomatic receptions.²¹

In the autumn of 1939 Maiskii used every opportunity to meet the principal representatives of his far-flung network. His purpose was to defuse British hostility over the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland. Maiskii met Lord Strabolgi in Parliament on 20 September, a few days after the Soviet advance into Poland. Strabolgi was an early trader in the Soviet Union and a well-known advocate of good Anglo-Soviet relations. Over tea in the House of Lords, Maiskii gave the usual Soviet line of overtures to the West repeatedly spurned since 1933. Strabolgi asked if he knew what 'double-crossing' meant, as that was how the British felt about the failed negotiations in Moscow.

Maiskii was quick to defend Soviet policy; he had been doing it for many years and knew the position well. 'It was only when his government was convinced that the British and French were not in earnest about the pact under negotiation that they decided to enter into a political arrangement with Germany.' After a long disquisition on this point, Maiskii insisted that the Soviet government did not want Nazi Germany to win the war and did not want to see it on the shores of the Black Sea. When Strabolgi then replied that the Soviet ought not to have signed the Non-Aggression Pact, Maiskii returned to his earlier points. Sending the Anglo-French military mission to the Soviet Union on a slow merchant ship, at thirteen knots, had made, to say the least, a poor impression in Moscow.

²⁰ Molotov to A. V. Terent'ev, Soviet ambassador in Ankara, very secret, 3 Sept. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 12.

²¹ Sidney Aster, 'Ivan Maisky and Parliamentary Anti-Appeasement, 1938-39', in A. J. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), 317-57.

Would it not be in Soviet interests, asked Strabolgi, to see ‘the capitalist imperialisms of France and Britain’ eliminated? No, answered Maiskii, ‘because [we] would then only have a greater and stronger Germany, another capitalist Empire, as [our] neighbour’. Strabolgi pressed on, asking if the Soviet government would co-operate in blocking German expansion into the Balkans. Maiskii replied that some form of co-operation might be possible.²²

Maiskii had a similar conversation with Ernest Remnant, a long time habitu e of the corridors of power when Anglo-Soviet relations were strained. This conversation, along with that with Strabolgi, was reported to the Foreign Office, and prompted Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, to invite Maiskii in for a talk.²³

What were Soviet intentions, asked Halifax, in view of the recent changes in Soviet policy? Halifax remarked dryly that ‘the Soviet government had been impressing upon us that the main principle of their policy was to assist European states to defend their independence against aggression’. He had listened, he said, to many of M. Litvinov’s speeches in Geneva along these same lines. ‘I should be greatly obliged if [you] could help to clear up our doubts’ concerning Soviet policy in general and in regard to the future of Poland in particular.

Maiskii said that the Soviet Union was neutral, but Halifax wondered aloud whether the Soviet government could clarify the apparent obscurities in its policy and in particular provide a ‘clearer definition of [its] neutral status’. For instance, would the Soviet Union be prepared to negotiate a war trade agreement? What was the Soviet position regarding Polish frontiers?

Halifax reported that Maiskii had ‘displayed evident embarrassment’ in response to his questions. Ironically, Maiskii indicated in his account of the meeting that the Foreign Secretary was also uncomfortable. ‘Halifax was very strained and ill-at-ease, he spoke slowly in a forced tone of voice, weighing his words carefully, he often stopped and gazed for a long time at the ceiling . . . I felt, that, looking at me, Halifax was silently putting the question: are you an enemy or not?’ Clearly this was just the question to which the British government sought an answer. Maiskii’s report of the meeting was similar to that of Halifax, leaving out the Foreign Secretary’s sarcastic references to previous Soviet policy and his own embarrassment, if he had any. He promised to refer these questions to his government, and he did so at once.²⁴

One might allow that both Halifax and Maiskii were embarrassed by the situation, though neither may have cared to admit it. It had been two months since Maiskii had seen Halifax, and the Soviet position was not now easy to defend. Nor was the British, in view of the bungled Anglo-Franco-Soviet negotiations during

²² Conversation between Lord Strabolgi [Joseph Montague Kenworthy] and Mr. Maisky . . . 20th September 1939, private and confidential, C14877/13953/18, PRO FO 371 23103.

²³ ‘Sir L. Oliphant’, Laurence Collier, head of the Northern Department, 21 Sept. 1939, C14296/13953/18, PRO FO 371 23103; and Frank Roberts’s minute, 27 September 1939, C14877/13953/18, *ibid.*

²⁴ Halifax to Seeds, no. 686, 23 Sept. 1939, N5736/1458/38, PRO 371 23697; and Maiskii to Molotov, highest priority, very secret, 23 Sept. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 124–5.

the spring and summer. On the other hand, there may have been some slight humour in Maiskii's many meetings with British officials. One can easily imagine the ambassador and the Foreign Secretary rushing off to their respective studies and secretaries to write down their recollections of this and subsequent meetings. Historians should be grateful for their industry.

The remorseless Molotov was terse and unhelpful in reply to Maiskii. 'England, if it really wishes, could enter into negotiations on trade with the USSR, but the USSR will remain and intends to remain neutral in the war in western Europe, assuming, of course, that England itself in its relations with the USSR does not force it on to the path of involvement in this war.' The fate of Poland, Molotov added, depended on many factors and contradictory forces and it was impossible at that moment to predict the outcome.²⁵

The next day, 27 September, Maiskii conveyed Molotov's brief message to the Foreign Office. Halifax could not resist another arid comment on the irreconcilability of current and previous Soviet policies. Once again the two accounts of the meeting are similar in content. Maiskii left out Halifax's slightly mocking observations, but he duly reported Halifax's bewilderment over Soviet policy. What sort of action by Britain, asked Halifax, might compel the Soviet Union to abandon its neutrality? The ambassador 'was unable to give any clear answer.'²⁶

Maiskii appears to have wanted to open up a narrow alley to the British, being little supported by Moscow, and to encourage the Foreign Office to make overtures to the Soviet government. The discussion in London on whether to do so was divided. Seeds, the British ambassador in Moscow, thought of 'driv[ing] a wedge between the two aggressors'.²⁷ The Foreign Office saw the situation in similar terms and contemplated sending a mission to Moscow. 'I shd. do everything in practice', Cadogan, the permanent under secretary, said, 'to try and induce the Soviet to be as inconvenient as possible to Germany and later, if possible, to assist us and our friends.' Another mission to Moscow, however, did not seem appropriate. The position was reinforced by Vansittart, then chief diplomatic adviser, but with little influence: '. . . I hope we shall not come so low. We have just received a most resounding kick in the pants. We may get something even worse and more damaging; but at least there are a few pickings of compensation in the opinion of other countries. Even those we shall sacrifice if we abase ourselves to go to Moscow. By all means let us refrain from hostility or hostilities, and wreath our wry smiles as we may. But not *that!*'²⁸

Mission to Moscow or not, the question of Anglo-Soviet relations continued to be discussed. The Soviet would do nothing for the *beaux yeux* of Great Britain, but

²⁵ Molotov to Maiskii, very secret, 26 Sept. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 130.

²⁶ Halifax to Seeds, no. 710, 27 Sept. 1939, N4803/1459/38, PRO FO 371 23697; and Maiskii to Molotov, highest priority, very secret, 27 Sept. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 131–2.

²⁷ Seeds, no. 349, immediate, confidential, 30 Sept. 1939, C15320/13953/18, PRO FO 371 23103.

²⁸ 'S of S', Cadogan, 23 Sept. 1939, N4571/57/38, PRO FO 371 23678; and 'Secretary of State', Vansittart, 26 Sept. 1939, *ibid.*

its actions in eastern Europe were not entirely inconsistent with British interests.²⁹ Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, recognised it in a well-known, often cited, speech on 1 October: while Britain might have hoped for different circumstances, with Poland and the Soviet Union as allies, Russian armies stood in Poland to block any further Nazi advance in the east. It was hard to understand the contradictions in Soviet policy. 'Russia is a riddle . . .,' said Churchill in his famous epigram, 'but perhaps there is a key.' That key was 'a cold policy' of 'Russian national interest'. 'It cannot be in accordance with the interest or the safety of Russia that Germany should plant herself upon the shores of the Black Sea, or that she should overrun the Balkan States.'³⁰ Here was Maiskii's line repeated, *mutatis mutandis*, by a minister in the British war cabinet. The ambassador hoped the line would play well, and there were signs that it would. After a row at the outset of war over the British blocking of deliveries of machine tools contracted by the Soviet Union, the British and Soviet governments concluded a barter arrangement in early October: Soviet timber for British rubber and tin.³¹ Trade was often a good way to improve political relations.

On 6 October Churchill invited Maiskii over to the Admiralty for one of his habitual nocturnal discussions. Churchill pursued his line on Anglo-Soviet relations: they were strained and were driven by mutual suspicions. The British government suspected that the Soviet Union had concluded a military alliance with Nazi Germany. 'I do not believe it,' said Churchill, 'but suspicions are widespread in political and even in government circles. On the other hand, I recognise that the Soviet Union suspects all sorts of British machinations in the Baltic and the Balkans, and that this suspicion affects your relations with us.' Churchill freely admitted that negotiations for a tripartite pact had been badly handled. 'But the past is the past', he said: he was 'more interested in the present and the future'. Then Churchill brought out a familiar refrain not heard much since the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement of the mid-1930s. The basic interests of the Soviet Union and Great Britain, he said, were nowhere in conflict and were rapidly coming to coincide. While some 'sentimentalists' in the Liberal and Labour parties had 'shed tears' about a Soviet protectorate over the Baltic states, he would rather see them under Soviet than under German control. 'Stalin is playing a big game, and playing it with good luck. He must be pleased. But I do not see why we should be displeased.' Churchill went on at some length, asking for Maiskii's suggestions. The ambassador avoided giving an answer, or so he said, but asked if Churchill spoke for the government. Churchill affirmed that in general he did.³²

The Minister for Health, Walter Elliot, took up Churchill's line two days later. Like Churchill, Elliot indicated that the British government sought better relations,

²⁹ 'Sir A. Cadogan', Sir L. Oliphant, 25 Sept. 1939, *ibid.*

³⁰ Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), 449.

³¹ War Cabinet Conclusions, no. 38 (39), 5 Oct. 1939, N5057/92/38, PRO FO 371 23682; and War Cabinet Conclusions, no. 43 (39), 10 Oct. 1939, N5169G/92/38, *ibid.*

³² Maiskii to Narkomindel (commissariat for foreign affairs), highest priority, very secret, 7 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 167–9.

and asked Maiskii if he could suggest some ideas as to how the British might approach the Soviet government. Maiskii said that he had avoided such questions, but asked for immediate instructions. In the present circumstances, advised Maiskii, his responses to these queries 'could have great practical significance'.³³

Anthony Eden, the Dominions Secretary, then met Maiskii a few days later (13 October) over breakfast. British and Soviet interests were not in conflict, Eden said, following Churchill's line: all members of the government agreed on the need to improve relations and eliminate suspicions. Eden suggested the despatch of a high-profile mission to Moscow to resume trade negotiations, and the replacement of Ambassador Seeds by a representative of greater authority who would enjoy Soviet confidence and who could establish better Anglo-Soviet relations. Maiskii was impressed by these British initiatives: 'While by no means exaggerating my recent conversations . . . I nevertheless must note that if three ministers in the course of one week ask my advice about measures for a possible improvement of Anglo-Soviet relations, the given question, obviously, is being . . . discussed in government circles.' Maiskii again requested instructions. 'I am in a difficult position', he said, 'and I might unintentionally make some mistake . . . [which] could have one or another practical consequences.' In particular, Maiskii asked if the time was appropriate for an improvement in Anglo-Soviet relations and if it would be expedient for the British government to send a high-profile delegation to Moscow.³⁴

Eden's account of his conversation with Maiskii offered different emphases from those of the ambassador. Like Halifax, Eden referred to previous Soviet policy. 'Peace is indivisible', Litvinov had said, but now Maiskii replied ' . . . the situation is somewhat different'. Once again Maiskii blamed the change in Soviet policy on five years of failed collaboration with the French and British governments. You will know 'how deep at all times were the suspicions in the minds of our respective Governments of each other'. Eden professed still to be confused by present Soviet policy. 'In a world such as this where wild beasts [are] loose,' replied Maiskii, 'every country ha[s] to take certain precautions for its own safety.' Eden again rejoined, and eventually Maiskii's wife, who was present, 'interjected that her husband had always been anxious for improved Anglo-Russian relations and that recent events had been a disappointment to him'. Maiskii insisted that Soviet professions of a desire for neutrality were genuine; this would not change unless the British took some unfriendly action. Eden noted that 'Maisky implied several times during the conversation that if we would make some further advance now we should not be rebuffed, though he was always vague as to the form which any such action might take'.³⁵ And here is the dissonance in the two accounts of this meeting. Eden said that Maiskii had implicitly encouraged a British approach which would not be rebuffed. But Maiskii advised Molotov that he had offered no advice, while asking if

³³ Maiskii to Narkomindel, immediate, very secret, 8 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 170-1.

³⁴ Maiskii to Narkomindel, highest priority, very secret, 13 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 183-4.

³⁵ Eden to Halifax, personal and confidential, 13 Oct. 1939, N5426/92/38, PRO FO 371 23682.

the moment was right for an improvement of relations. Eden himself reckoned that Maiskii wanted better relations, but he did not think the ambassador was ‘very well informed on all details of Soviet policy’. This was not quite it: Maiskii was ahead of his government, whose policy he was trying to finesse into an opening to the British.

In mid-October Maiskii’s efforts produced positive results in London, but not in Moscow. While Molotov was slow to reply to Maiskii’s urgent requests for instructions, Halifax was prepared to move forward: ‘During the last few days I have been thinking a good deal about what possible means there may be by which we could improve our political contacts with Russia.’ The opportunities seem almost ‘non-existent’, Halifax told Oliver Stanley, President of the Board of Trade: but ‘. . . if it was possible to find means through which the present position of almost complete political deadlock and absence of political touch could be remedied, it might be of great usefulness’.

I find it difficult to believe that the Soviet Government have thrown in their lot with Herr Hitler, to such an extent as would make it difficult or uncongenial for them to double-cross him, and obviously if we could persuade them in any way to double-cross him, or to have the appearance of doing so, it would be of great potential significance.

And Halifax went on: ‘It so happened that Sir Stafford Cripps came to see me last night upon other matters.’ During the conversation Cripps, a maverick Labour man, turned to the subject of the Soviet Union and pressed hard for a trade mission to Moscow. ‘I told him’, said Halifax, ‘that with the general purpose of encouraging the Russians to double-cross the Germans, I was in warm sympathy . . .’ But he would like some assurances that Britain could ‘pull off a pretty good agreement’, which was another way of saying that he did not care to be ‘exposed to humiliation and merely serve the purpose of giving Stalin another scalp’. ‘I [am] naturally suspicious after my Russian experiences of the last few months.’ Cripps thought some dangers could be avoided by exploring the ground first with Maiskii. The ambassador was ‘very keen on it’, said Cripps, and so Halifax again saw Maiskii.³⁶

‘Today [16 October] Halifax invited me in to see him’, reported Maiskii: ‘he said that the British government would like to improve Anglo-Soviet relations and he is ready to discuss different means of achieving these ends . . .’ Halifax thought that trade negotiations would be the best way to proceed and he suggested that they take place in London. Although saying nothing definite, the Foreign Secretary implied that if the basis of an agreement could be agreed upon, a British delegation would go to Moscow to conclude negotiations.³⁷ Halifax’s account of the meeting does not entirely square with Maiskii’s, for in the British account it is the ambassador who states that the Soviet government was ‘prepared to do more in the direction of improving trade, if we [the British government] so desired’, and it is Halifax who says that ‘we are considering these possibilities and that [he] hoped, if any such opportunities did, in fact, exist, that we might be able to take advantage of them’.

³⁶ Halifax to Stanley, 14 Oct. 1939, N5296/92/38, PRO FO 371 23682.

³⁷ Maiskii to Narkomindel, highest priority, very secret, 16 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 190–1.

Halifax also raised the issue of the difficulty in the event of a trade agreement of British goods sent to the Soviet Union finding their way to Germany.³⁸ On this important point Maiskii was silent. Interesting silences and transposed voices often characterised the British and Soviet accounts of these important meetings. Thus, the initiative for an improvement of relations appears to shift from one side to the other, according to the British or Soviet account; it was safer for both sides. Maiskii had to fear for his life if he erred, while Western politicians had merely to fear right-wing displeasure or ridicule if they went too far in courting the Soviet Union. Anglo-Soviet and indeed Western–Soviet relations had often been like this before the war. ‘After you Alphonse; but no sir, after you’, was the well-worn refrain of Western–Soviet dialogue.

III

There was more to this meeting. While Halifax’s report is short and limited to trade matters, Maiskii’s indicates that other issues were discussed, including Soviet–Turkish negotiations and affairs in the Baltic area. Then,

Halifax briefly touched upon the prime minister Neville Chamberlain’s last statement in Parliament [on 12 October, rejecting Nazi offers for a peace settlement made by Hitler on 6 October], and, underlining British determination to wage ‘war to the finish’; at the same time he gave me to understand that if Hitler put forward some new, more acceptable proposals, the British government would be ready to examine them.³⁹

The same subject came up in a conversation on the following day between Maiskii and Butler, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign Office, who became the principal Foreign Office go-between with Maiskii. Maiskii reported:

The general orientation of the British government, in Butler’s words, comes to this, that it would be ready to conclude peace even tomorrow, would it be assured that the arrived at agreement has a stable character (‘would assure peace and tranquillity for 20–25 years’ as Butler put it). Such confidence, in the opinion of the British government, could be created through guarantees of the peace treaty by all the great powers and in particular the USA and the USSR. For the sake of achieving a solid peace of this kind the British government would be ready to make significant concessions to Germany even in the colonial area.

Butler then qualified the position by noting that inasmuch as such a peace was not at present possible, ‘Great Britain will continue the war’. But he reckoned that in the next phase of the war new offers might be made, ‘possibly with greater chances of success’.⁴⁰ In Butler’s account of the meeting there is not a word about the prospects of peace with Nazi Germany, not surprising since such discussions were unpopular in the autumn of 1939. Before the war Butler had been a loyal executor of Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement. His conversation with Maiskii, therefore, was not inconsistent with the British government’s pre-war position. Moreover, these

³⁸ Halifax to Seeds, no. 736, 16 Oct. 1939, N5342/92/38, PRO FO 371 23682.

³⁹ Maiskii to Narkomindel, 16 Oct. 1939, cited above.

⁴⁰ Maiskii to Narkomindel, highest priority, very secret, 17 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 196–7.

private talks took place in the context of public discussions in Great Britain about the prospects for an early peace. Lloyd George made a speech in the House of Commons on 3 October suggesting that the government keep the door open to a peace initiative, especially if it came from a neutral power, and he mentioned the Soviet Union, among others. Although Lloyd George was roundly condemned in the press, it looks as though the Foreign Office may have taken his advice under cover of Chamberlain's statement in Parliament on 12 October.⁴¹

Molotov, who had not yet responded to Maiskii's urgent requests for instructions on Anglo-Soviet relations, promptly queried Maiskii about Butler's statements. At the same time he informed the German ambassador in Moscow, Friedrich Werner von der Schulenberg, of the conversation in London. In a two-sentence cable Molotov asked Maiskii if Butler 'had hinted to you about the desirability of our mediation in the spirit of the conclusion of peace with Germany in certain conditions. I await an answer'.⁴² Molotov's question was serious and consistent with the new Soviet position calling for an end to the war. Since issues arising from the disintegration of Poland had been resolved, said a joint Nazi-Soviet communiqué published at the end of September, there was no need for a continuation of the war.⁴³

Maiskii hastened to answer Molotov's inquiry: 'Characterising the orientation of the British government on war and peace, Butler clearly stated the point of view of Chamberlain and Halifax. At one point he even referred to his conversation with them. I do not have the impression that Butler is directly hinting at the desirability of our mediation. He spoke rather along the lines of an explanation . . . of British government policy . . .' But Maiskii thought that from all that Butler had said, the British government would not oppose Soviet mediation and guarantees of a peace treaty. The ambassador went on along these lines, referring to a recent conversation with Lloyd George, who nevertheless noted that the German sinking of the British battleship *Royal Oak* inside the main British base at Scapa Flow (on 14 October) among other German raids had aroused instinctive British defiance.⁴⁴ When Schulenberg later asked for more information on British interest in a peace settlement, Molotov replied that according to Maiskii there was nothing definite.⁴⁵

Maiskii's accounts of wistful but impossible thoughts of peace by British ministers could scarcely have impressed the suspicious Molotov with the British government's determination to fight to the finish. And Maiskii's reports sometimes captured

⁴¹ 'Sir A. Cadogan . . .', Butler, 17 Oct. 1939, N5493/93/38, PRO FO 23682; and Antony Lentin, "'A Conference Now': Lloyd George and Peacemaking: Sidelights from the Unpublished Letters of A. J. Sylvester', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 7, 3 (November 1996), 563–88.

⁴² 'Notes of a conversation of the people's commissar for foreign affairs of the USSR V. M. Molotov with the ambassador of Germany . . . Schulenberg,' secret, 19 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 200–1; and Molotov to Maiskii, very secret, 19 Oct. 1939, *ibid.*, 201–2.

⁴³ 'Declaration of the Soviet and Germany governments,' signed by Molotov and Ribbentrop, published in *Izvestiia*, 20 Sept. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 136–7.

⁴⁴ Maiskii to Molotov, highest priority, very secret, 20 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 204–5.

⁴⁵ 'Notes of a conversation of the people's commissar for foreign affairs of the USSR V. M. Molotov with the ambassador of Germany . . . Schulenberg,' secret, 13 Nov. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 287–7.

indiscretions: British ministers should have kept to themselves their anxieties and lack of confidence in victory.⁴⁶ Maiskii, for one, did not have a high regard for the composition of the British Cabinet. With the exception of Churchill and Eden, ‘Munichites’ remained in the most important posts – Chamberlain, Halifax, Sir John Simon and Sir Samuel Hoare among others. It was the same old government of Tory ‘. . . “appeasers”’ observed Maiskii, ‘ever so faintly touched up in anti-Hitlerite colours . . .’⁴⁷ Soviet attitudes were contradictory: on the one hand, Molotov now appeared to favour a peace settlement; on the other, Maiskii was disdainful of the appeasers and seemed to be looking for signs of British determination to fight. The Soviet Union would not risk the Non-Aggression Pact for any important agreement with the British, unless it could be persuaded that the British were a partner and possibly even an ally worth having. The phoney war, however, did not inspire confidence, and it did not go unnoticed by Maiskii or in Moscow.

‘It is a strange war!’ Maiskii wrote in his journal on 24 October. ‘There’s no action at the front. The French military communiqués repeat stock phrases like “The night passed quietly” or “The day was marked by routine patrols”.’ ‘The Anglo-French hoped for success in a long war of attrition’, wrote Maiskii, while Hitler hoped for the ‘rotteness of democracy’. ‘I hear continually here at each step: “Ultimately only Russia will profit from the war” or “When the western capitalist countries will have clawed at one another’s throats, communism will triumph” . . .’ Maiskii considered the spread of revolution to be more likely now than at any time since Karl Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. The belligerents were hesitating to come to death blows, thought Maiskii, but unless a miracle occurred, all-out war was not far off.⁴⁸

The British held to similar opinions about war as a generator of communist revolution, it was a spoken and unspoken assumption of the inter-war years. A Foreign Office paper written a week earlier than Maiskii’s journal entry noted that the Soviet objective ‘. . . is to hold the balance between the belligerents with a view to bolshevising Europe at little cost to herself when both sides become exhausted’. One senior Foreign Office official, R. A. Leeper, blamed it all on Hitler: ‘He has . . . enabled Stalin to get into a stronger position for introducing the Bolshevik virus into Europe at the beginning of the war instead of having to wait until the end when the European nations had weakened themselves in a life and death struggle’.⁴⁹ ‘After all,’ said Sargent, ‘the fundamental principle of Bolshevism is the extension of communism.’ ‘I agree generally,’ rejoined Halifax.⁵⁰ Sir Arthur Rucker, Chamberlain’s principal privy secretary, put it this way in mid-October: ‘Communism is now the

⁴⁶ Maiskii to Narkomindel, immediate, very secret, 27 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 237–5 (concerning a breakfast meeting with Horace Wilson, Neville Chamberlain’s main advisor); and the excerpt from Maiskii’s journal, secret, 30 Oct. 1939, *ibid.*, 247–8 (concerning a dinner meeting with Elliot).

⁴⁷ I. M. Maiskii, *Memoirs of a Soviet Ambassador: The War, 1939–43* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 14–15.

⁴⁸ Excerpt from Maiskii’s journal, secret, 24 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 213–15.

⁴⁹ Untitled Foreign Office memorandum, secret, not signed, 19 Oct. 1939, C16324G/15/18, PRO FO 371 22985; and ‘First Month of the War,’ Leeper, 4 Oct. 1939, C16151/15/18, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Sargent’s minute, 11 Oct. 1930, C16404/15/18, PRO FO 371 22985; and Halifax’s minute, 11

great danger, greater even than Nazi Germany . . . [It] is a plague that does not stop at national boundaries, and with the advance of the Soviet into Poland the states of Eastern Europe will find their powers of resistance to Communism very much weakened. It is thus vital that we should play our hand very carefully with Russia, and not destroy the possibility of uniting, if necessary, with a new German government against the common danger.⁵¹

IV

These widely held views did not stop either Maiskii or Halifax from attempting to improve Anglo-Soviet relations. In fact, Maiskii was a busy man in October 1939, seeing British ministers, officials, and politicians almost every day. There appears to have been no more talk of Soviet mediation of a peace conference, but a great deal of discussion continued about possible trade negotiations. Maiskii privately made fun of the obvious British interest in a rapprochement with the Soviet Union, but in his meetings with British officials he advised them to get on quickly with trade negotiations, but to move delicately over the difficulties of re-exporting goods to Nazi Germany. To Moscow, Maiskii reported the further statements by British officials indicating their desire to improve Anglo-Soviet relations.⁵²

And still Molotov did not reply to Maiskii's requests for instructions even after another meeting with Halifax on 25 October.⁵³ Halifax advised that the Cabinet had approved the opening of negotiations with the Soviet Union to reach a trade agreement and that Stanley, President of the Board of Trade, would lead the British side. As Halifax put it, 'I said that my interest in the matter was primarily political, in that I was concerned, if possible, to effect some improvement in the relations between this country and the Soviet Government, or at least to prevent any further deterioration in them.' This is the first time that Halifax records his interest in an improvement in political relations, confirmed again by Maiskii's account. There are some notable differences: Halifax reported on Maiskii's enthusiasm at the prospect of negotiations, an enthusiasm the ambassador understandably failed to mention in his cable to Moscow.⁵⁴ Maiskii then met Stanley, both of whom prepared records of their conversation. The accounts largely concur, though once again Maiskii did not report to Moscow the pleasure he expressed at the prospect of a beginning of negotiations. According to Stanley's account, the ambassador 'claimed that he had

Oct. 1939, *ibid.* Sargent's minute, 11 Oct. 1939, C16404/15/18, PRO FO 371 22985; and Halifax's minute, 11 Oct. 1939, *ibid.*

⁵¹ Sargent's minute, 11 Oct. 1939, C16404/15/18, PRO FO 371 22985; and Halifax's minute, 11 Oct. 1939, *ibid.*, and John Colville, *Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries, 1939–1955* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 40, entry of 13 Oct. 1939.

⁵² Excerpt from Maiskii's journal, 30 Oct. 1939, cited above; excerpt from Maiskii's journal reporting on discussions over lunch on the previous day with Leslie Burgin, minister of supply, and Sir F. Leith Ross, Ministry of Economic Warfare, secret, 21 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 208; and 'Russia', ns [but probably by Leith Ross], 20 Oct. 1939, N5647/92/38; PRO FO 371 23683.

⁵³ Maiskii to Narkomindel, very secret, 25 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 219

⁵⁴ Halifax to Seeds, no. 762, 25 Oct. 1939, N5634/92/38, PRO FO 371 23683.

the authority of his Government to state that they were willing to discuss a trade agreement with us . . .’

Maiskii’s declaration was technically true, based on Molotov’s cable to Maiskii of 26 September, but it was really making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear because of Molotov’s continued silence in response to Maiskii’s requests for instructions. The ambassador’s attempted finesse did not entirely escape the notice of British ministers. ‘M. Maisky . . . left upon me an impression of personal goodwill’, observed Stanley, ‘but of complete dependence upon Moscow and lack of any personal authority.’ As Stanley reported to the cabinet. ‘The next move [is] with M. Maisky . . .’⁵⁵ Could he persuade Molotov to go along?

On 11 November Molotov finally replied to Maiskii. During Litvinov’s years as Foreign Commissar, the Soviet government would have jumped at the lavish British expressions of interest in better relations, but not now. ‘When an opportunity arises, you can say that the Soviet government is sympathetic with their wishes [of Churchill, Eden, etc.], but inasmuch as actual British policy is not defined by these gentlemen, the Soviet government does not see at the present time encouraging possibilities in this regard. The facts indicate that in reality British power is hostile to the Soviet Union. We feel [this hostility] in all corners of Europe . . . not to mention in the far east. An improvement in Anglo-Soviet relations requires that British policy move towards a more favourable disposition [to the Soviet Union].’⁵⁶ Molotov’s cable left Maiskii overextended, and he had to backtrack with his many interlocutors, but he did not request, as he normally should have done, a meeting with Halifax to explain the new position. He went instead to go-betweeners.

On the following day Cripps went to see Maiskii to ask unofficially why there was a delay in the Soviet response to British proposals to begin trade negotiations. Maiskii repeated Molotov’s line that Stanley, Eden, and the others did not have any great practical influence, which was a somewhat obtuse statement, since Halifax had said that he spoke on behalf of the Cabinet. According to Maiskii’s account, he said that the Soviet government was regrettably too preoccupied with other international business to examine British offers.⁵⁷ Two days later Maiskii talked to Churchill in the spirit, so he said, of Molotov’s cable, but one wonders just how accurate was the ambassador’s representation of his instructions. Churchill put a favourable gloss on the Soviet desire for better relations, when in fact Molotov had said only that the British would have to take the initiative in improving unsatisfactory relations. Maiskii put the blame for the present state of affairs on hostile British policies, diverting attention from Soviet indifference to British overtures.⁵⁸ In any event,

⁵⁵ Untitled memorandum, secret, Stanley, 25 Oct. 1939, N5678/92/38; PRO FO 371 23683; War Cabinet conclusions, no. 62 (39), 27 Oct. 1939, N5783G/92/38; PRO FO 371 23683; and Maiskii to Narkomindel and Narkomvneshtorg (commissariat for foreign trade), highest priority, very secret, 26 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 223–4.

⁵⁶ Molotov to Maiskii, very secret, 11 Nov. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 278.

⁵⁷ Maiskii to Narkomindel, immediate, very secret, 12 Nov. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 280–1.

⁵⁸ Maiskii to Narkomindel, highest priority, very secret, 13 Nov. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 289–91.

there is no report of Churchill's conversation in the Foreign Office files, which perhaps explains why the Foreign Office continued to wonder when it might have a Soviet response to its proposals.

The Cabinet discussed the Soviet silence in mid-November, and could only speculate on the reasons for it on the basis of erroneous assumptions advanced to Halifax by Cripps. The Foreign Office did not want to give the impression of being in too much haste to start negotiations for fear that the Soviet Union would play even harder to get, but British patience nevertheless began to run out.⁵⁹ Meanwhile Maiskii continued his line of approach with Elliot, saying, according to Elliot, 'that he had been in close communication with his own Government who were anxious for better relations with Great Britain'. In Maiskii's account of the same meeting, he reported that he had spoken with the minister along the lines of Molotov's cable of 11 November. 'Elliot was very glad [to hear] of our positive attitude to an improvement in Anglo-Soviet relations.' These were the same refrain and the same sharp practices which Maiskii had employed in his earlier meeting with Churchill. In Maiskii's account, Elliot talked about mutual suspicions, but Maiskii was not allaying them in London, whatever his desire to improve Anglo-Soviet relations.⁶⁰ Indeed, his over-extended position had forced him into a disingenuousness which Foreign Office officials assumed was also that of the Soviet government. Such was not the case if one is to judge by Molotov's terse and direct instructions.

On 23 November the Cabinet finally lost patience and authorised Halifax to call in Maiskii to discover if there was any news from Moscow. Butler seemed to want to prepare the ground, seeing Maiskii a few days before his discussion with the Foreign Secretary (on 27 November) and repeating many of the lines of Churchill and other ministers.⁶¹ According to Maiskii's account, Halifax was more blunt: 'Do you want trade negotiations, or not? The British government has been perfectly clear that it wants an improvement in Anglo-Soviet relations, but the long silence from Moscow raises doubts as to whether the Soviet government is serious about negotiations.' Maiskii replied that such doubts were unfounded, which was not an accurate representation of Molotov's position, but was necessary to save Maiskii's policy – and perhaps also his head – since he had to keep the British interested in negotiations. But he neatly threw back at Halifax the reproach over delays, noting that the British government had been in no particular hurry to negotiate, a point which the Foreign Secretary had to admit was true. According to Halifax, Maiskii replied 'vaguely and with some embarrassment', as well he might have done. Halifax assumed that the ambassador was 'merely voicing the party line', but it appears to be more the case of Maiskii trying to escape batting on a very sticky

⁵⁹ Extract from War Cabinet conclusions, no. 85 (39), 16 Nov. 1939, N6384G/92/38; PRO FO 371 23683; and War Cabinet conclusions, no. 67, 1 Nov. 1939, N5909G/92/38, *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Maiskii to Molotov, very secret, 20 Nov. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 320–1; and untitled memorandum, Elliot, 20 Nov. 1939, N6574/57/38, PRO FO 371 23678.

⁶¹ War Cabinet conclusions, no. 91 (39), 23 Nov. 1939, PRO FO 371 23683, and Maiskii to Narkomindel, very secret, 24 Nov. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 335–6.

wicket. Maiskii portrays himself as direct and challenging in the interview, though Halifax saw a slippery, vague and slightly embarrassed interlocutor.

Halifax complained about the recent harshness of the Soviet press which suggested an unfriendly or even hostile position towards Great Britain. This situation was much to be regretted, said Halifax, since it made more difficult an improvement in Anglo-Soviet relations. Maiskii replied that it was paying off the British press in its own coin and that it reflected the general Soviet impression that the British government was everywhere working against Soviet interests. 'I told M. Maisky', said Halifax, 'that . . . HMG looked after their own interests and nothing more.' According to Maiskii, Halifax 'suddenly reddened (which with him never happens), he became very agitated and all but vehemently began to argue that Soviet government's suspicion . . . had no basis whatever.'⁶² Halifax's account implicitly supports Maiskii's version, but this exchange was one that had occurred many times over the previous twenty years. It was pot calling kettle black. 'Hard words break no bones', said Soviet representatives, but they were just as sensitive about the harshness of the British press.⁶³

V

Halifax also raised the question of Finland with Maiskii. The Soviet government had been trying since the beginning of 1939 to conclude an agreement with Finland providing for better security around Leningrad and in the Baltic Sea. The Finnish frontier was only 32 kilometres from Leningrad, within the reach of hostile guns. The Finnish government feared and disliked its Soviet neighbour, and had proved unwilling to buckle under to Soviet demands for a cession of territory near Leningrad in exchange for other less desirable territory on its eastern borders. Negotiations were conducted under increasing tensions as the Finns mobilised their army in October 1939 and spat defiance at Moscow. The Soviet interpreted these acts as provocative, and even in the Foreign Office some clerks found the Finns to be 'most tiresome', just as they had been during British negotiations with the Soviet Union in the summer. The Soviet government made its own preparations for war. In view of a shooting incident on the Russo-Finnish frontier on 26 November, Halifax warned Maiskii that if hostilities broke out an improvement of Anglo-Soviet relations would be 'very difficult', a warning only implied in Maiskii's account.⁶⁴

It was not the first time that the Finnish question had arisen or the first time that

⁶² Maiskii to Molotov, highest priority, very secret, 27 Nov. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 340–2; and Halifax to Seeds, no. 836, 27 Nov. 1939, N6717/991/38, PRO FO 371 23693.

⁶³ Minute by W. Ridsdale, News department, quoting Tass correspondent, Andrei Rothstein, 18 Nov. 1939, N6423/57/38, PRO FO 371 23678

⁶⁴ Thomas Snow, British minister in Helsinki, no. 163, 24 Oct. 1939, N5595/991/38, PRO FO 371 23692; and Ivone Kirkpatrick's minute, 17 Oct. 1939, N5263/991/38, *ibid.* See also Geoffrey Roberts, *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War: Russo-German Relations and the Road to War, 1933–1941* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 112–13; John C. Cairns, 'Reflections on the Winter War, Prologue, 1939–40', *Historical Reflections*, 22, 1 (Winter 1996), 211–34; and O. A. Rzheshesvkii and O. Vekhviliainen (eds.) *Zimniaia voina, 1939–1940*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1998).

the Foreign Office had issued a warning about worsening Soviet–Finnish relations. In late September Laurence Collier, head of the Northern Department, had drawn attention to the likelihood of increased Soviet pressure on Finland. He recommended encouraging Finnish resistance ‘because anything which increases Russian preoccupation in any part of the world improves our position in bargaining with the Soviet Government . . .’ Collier suggested enquiring if the Finnish government ‘would welcome assistance in the . . . [inter alia] supply of British war material to . . . Finnish forces . . .’ Collier’s proposal was approved and the service departments so notified. This was all music to the ears of the British ambassador in Helsinki, Thomas Snow, who was an anti-Red incendiary and against any Finnish concessions.⁶⁵ The Soviet government was aware of Snow’s encouragement of Finnish defiance, and the Soviet embassy in Helsinki reported the Finnish military build-up and the highly visible and suspicious presence of numerous British nationals in the Finnish capital.⁶⁶

Halifax warned Maiskii even in October that Finnish–Soviet hostilities would make impossible an improvement in relations, while Maiskii’s account said only that Halifax had expressed the hope that the Soviet–Finnish negotiations would have a successful outcome ‘without any shocks’. Although the ambassador replied that he saw no reason to fear the outbreak of hostilities with Finland, he does not appear to have reported Halifax’s apparent direct warning, perhaps because he preferred to avoid irritating Molotov with unpleasant facts which might dash his hopes of improved relations.⁶⁷ But Molotov had other sources of information, and was aware of British activities perceived to be hostile to Soviet interests. Molotov’s reference to these activities was not without foundation, while Halifax’s denial of them was not entirely true.

Churchill saw the problem, having even discussed it with Maiskii in November. It was only clerks and lower government bureaux, said Churchill, who had been guilty of indiscretions. What did the Soviet expect, he asked, after the Nazi–Soviet pact and the suspicions it had engendered?⁶⁸ Shortly afterwards, Churchill raised the issue in the War Cabinet, reiterating his view that it was in British interests to see the Soviet Union hold a strong position in the Baltic and that it would be a mistake ‘to stiffen the Finns against making concessions to the USSR’. Halifax replied that Finland should not be encouraged to yield to demands contrary to its interests. Collier picked up on this exchange, did not agree with Churchill’s estimate of the situation, and persuaded Halifax to take a harder line.⁶⁹

Finland was not the only source of Soviet suspicions against Great Britain;

⁶⁵ ‘Sir L. Oliphant’, Collier, 21 Sept. 1939, N4712/194/38; and Collier to War Office, 25 Sept. 1939, *ibid.*, PRO FO 371 23643.

⁶⁶ V. K. Derevianskii, Soviet ambassador in Helsinki, to Narkomindel, very secret, 9 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 171–2; and M. G. Iudanov, Soviet chargé d’affaires in Helsinki, to Narkomindel, very secret, 13 Oct. & 4 Nov. 1939, *ibid.*, 184, 257–8.

⁶⁷ Halifax to Seeds, no. 762, 25 Oct. 1939; and Maiskii to Narkomindel, very secret, 25 Oct. 1939, cited above.

⁶⁸ Maiskii to Narkomindel, highest priority, very secret, 13 Nov. 1939, cited above.

⁶⁹ Extract from War Cabinet conclusions, no. 85 (39), 16 Nov. 1939, cited above.; ‘Sir O.

Turkey and the Caucasus were others. Even before the outbreak of war in Finland on 30 November, the British government had begun to contemplate subversive activities in the Caucasus with the connivance of Turkish military and intelligence authorities.⁷⁰ Bombing the Soviet oil fields around Baku was mooted at the end of October, though the Foreign Office did not think it was a ‘practicable’ idea. The papers on these topics were all in Green – top-secret – jackets for good reason; in fact, some papers are withheld from the files until 2016. The idea of raiding Baku nevertheless continued to be studied by the joint intelligence sub-committee of the Chiefs of Staff.⁷¹ The Soviet government also picked up information on British activities in Turkey and Rumania perceived to be directed against the Soviet Union.⁷²

Butler saw Maiskii on 29 November to reinforce Churchill’s earlier statements that the British government was not pursuing a ‘Machiavellian’ policy towards the Soviet Union, but in Moscow these declarations had no credibility.⁷³ In hindsight Maiskii asserted that British policy was to extend the right hand of friendship and at the same time with the left to ‘sow the seeds of anti-Soviet intrigue in all the corners of the world’.⁷⁴ Undoubtedly this view was partially correct, and entirely persuasive in Moscow. It hardly mattered since later that day, after Maiskii met Butler, the Narkomindel, the Soviet Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, summoned the Finnish minister in Moscow to inform him that the Soviet government was breaking off diplomatic relations. While the phoney war continued in the west, a real war broke out between Finland and the Soviet Union on the following day. It was a surprise to Maiskii.⁷⁵

VI

The Russo-Finnish war got Maiskii off one hook only to have him hoist upon another. The British government immediately abandoned any interest in pursuing negotiations with the Soviet Union and the ambassador no longer had to worry about reconciling Moscow’s lack of interest in better relations with his own encouragement of them. But the war also threatened any Anglo-Soviet relations at

Sargent’, Collier, 20 Nov. 1939, N6384/92/38; PRO FO 371 23683; and Halifax to Churchill, 25 Nov. 1939, *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Collier to H. Knatchbull-Hugessen, British ambassador in Turkey, most secret, 10 Nov. 1939, N6125G/57/38, PRO FO 371 23678; Knatchbull-Hugessen to Collier, most secret, 18 Nov. 1939, N6585G/57/38, PRO FO 371 23678; and Collier to Knatchbull-Hugessen, secret, 1 Dec. 1939, *ibid.*

⁷¹ Burgin, ministry of supply, to Halifax, most secret, 31 Oct. 1939, N5894G/1290/38; PRO FO 371 23697; Halifax to Burgin, secret, 8 Nov. 1939, *ibid.*; Burgin to Halifax, secret, 4 Nov. 1939, N6037G/1290/38, *ibid.*; Halifax to Burgin, secret, 16 Nov. *ibid.*; and ‘Russia: Vulnerability of Oil Supplies’, Chiefs of Staff Committee, no. (39) 142, 2 Dec. 1939, N7104G/1290/38; *ibid.*

⁷² Terent’ev to Narkomindel, highest priority, very secret, 27 Oct. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 235–8; and Terent’ev to Stalin, Molotov, and K. E. Voroshilov, commissar for defence, very secret, 7 Dec. 1939, *ibid.*, 373–80.

⁷³ Maiskii to Narkomindel, immediate, very secret, 29 Nov. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 347–9.

⁷⁴ Maiskii to Molotov, secret, 11 Dec. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 391–6.

⁷⁵ Excerpt from Maiskii’s journal, secret, 29 Nov. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 350.

all. Seeds in Moscow thought they should be broken off and a blockade thrown up around the Soviet Union. This was nothing compared with Snow's imprudent recommendation in early November, even before war broke out, that Japan should be encouraged to attack the Soviet Union! The Foreign Office thought Snow's proposal to be risible and tried to take a more restrained approach.⁷⁶ Public opinion risked forcing Britain out of a position of restraint. France did also: the Paris press commenced a vicious campaign against the Soviet invasion, and the French government gave the distinct impression of preferring to down the Bolshevik rather than to fight the Wehrmacht.⁷⁷

The Foreign Office themselves reckoned the Soviet Union to be not quite an enemy but nearly so. The British press almost unanimously condemned the Soviet attack on Finland. The communist *Daily Worker* was the only cuckoo. Maiskii was taken aback by the violence of public reaction. The question here, Maiskii noted in his journal, is 'who is enemy no. 1. – Germany or the USSR?' There are all sorts of rumours going round London about new peace feelers to Hitler. But in spite of the anti-Soviet fury, there's no talk of a diplomatic rupture, unlike in France.' Maiskii thought the British cleverer than the French, and did not think it would come to a break. But 'beyond the near future, I could not guarantee'. Relations were outwardly correct, observed Maiskii, but around the embassy and trade mission, there was a 'cold emptiness'. With a few exceptions, all their 'friends' had run for cover. 'But it's not the first time. They'll be back.' 'I am an old hand', he wrote, 'facing the storm is nothing new for me.' One thing was for sure. 'The sooner the business in Finland is finished, the sooner things will settle down.' The British were great lovers of faits accomplis.⁷⁸ Maiskii was not too far wrong: Cadogan likened the Foreign Office position to that of a posse of police who could not deal with a whole mob all at once. 'They have to crack the nearest heads . . .' By this, Cadogan meant Nazi Germany. For the moment the Foreign Office knew who was 'enemy no. 1'.⁷⁹ On the other hand, 'anti-Bolshevik feelings' had to be satisfied, and the Foreign Office did this through inspired articles in the press. There was 'the clear understanding' however that 'anti-Bolshevik propaganda [should not] get out of control . . . or degenerate into a clamour for war against the Soviet Government.'⁸⁰

In France the atmosphere was more tense. The Soviet ambassador in Paris, Ia. Z. Surits, reported that the French were completely out of control, Finland had become a member of the Allied coalition, and 'aid for Finland' was being openly discussed. 'Rumours are circulating of imminent British naval operations against us. Nearly the entire French press is shouting that we are easy pickings and riven with internal dissent . . . Our embassy has become a plague zone and is surrounded by a

⁷⁶ Seeds, no. 503, 6 Dec. 1939, and various minutes by Foreign Office officials, 8 Dec. 1939, N7134/57/38, PRO FO 371 23678, and Snow to FO, 6 Nov. 1939 & FO to Snow, 24 Nov. 1939, N6667/991/38, PRO FO 371 23693

⁷⁷ Cairns, 'Winter War', 212; and Horne, *France 1940*, 179–80.

⁷⁸ Excerpt from Maiskii's journal, 12 Dec. 1939, *DIP*, XXII, bk. 2, 400–1.

⁷⁹ Cadogan's minute, 1 Dec. 1939, N7143/57/38; PRO FO 371 23678.

⁸⁰ Minutes by Sargent and Halifax, 2 Dec. 1939, C19731/3356/18, PRO FO 371 23074.

swarm of plainclothes cops.’⁸¹ Actually, Surits understated the situation in France. ‘*Il faut casser les reins à l’URSS*’ was heard at the highest levels of the French government. ‘We’ll sweep them away . . . drive them from the field,’ said some cocky French generals and politicians. According to Alexis Léger, the French Vansittart without the courage or the vision, the French government did not intend to break diplomatic relations or declare war, ‘. . . but will if possible destroy the Soviet Union – using cannon if necessary’. Not everyone in Paris was as keen, but such attitudes were reminiscent of October 1918 when the French general staff confidently planned to invade southern Russia to drive off the Bolsheviks.⁸² Finland was a fever: the French had got it and London was catching it also.

On 14 December the Soviet Union was thrown out of the League of Nations. Molotov, a cold, hardened Bolshevik, took it amiss.⁸³ Maiskii reported that the French were agitating for breaking off relations and that the idea was receiving a far more favourable hearing in British governing circles. Events seemed to demonstrate to the British that the Soviet Union had a closer relationship with Nazi Germany than had previously been supposed. According to this thinking, it might be a lesser evil to see open Soviet involvement in the war on the side of Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union would then not be able to stand aside in the war to pick up the pieces after the exhaustion of the capitalist powers. According to the same scenario, the United States would almost certainly come into the war on the Anglo-French side. In this regard, the United States public support for Finland was particularly encouraging to the British. Breaking off relations would be the first step towards driving the Soviet Union into the war, ‘in the worse case scenario on the side of Germany, in the best case (you can never tell) one-on-one against all the bourgeois world, including Germany, for the hope of some kind of deal with Germany until now has not been given up here’. This was a minority position, said Maiskii, the majority position still favoured a ‘neutral’ Soviet Union. ‘How long, however, the majority will hold its . . . position depends on many circumstances which now are difficult to foresee.’⁸⁴

At the end of December the Soviet Union was almost completely isolated. Its relations with France, Great Britain, and the United States were severely strained. A few months previously it had been involved in serious fighting with Japan on the Manchurian frontier. The Red Army had thrashed the Japanese, but the situation was still uncertain. Relations with Italy, Turkey and even its ally China were under

⁸¹ Surits to Narkomindel, very secret, 23 Dec. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 439–40.

⁸² Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Politique étrangère de la France: l’abîme, 1939–1944* (Paris: Seuil [Points], 1986), 111–14; William Bullitt, US ambassador in Paris to Cordell Hull, Secretary of State, strictly confidential, 15 Jan. 1940, Orville H. Bullitt (ed.), *For the President, Personal and Secret: Correspondence between Franklin D. Roosevelt and William C. Bullitt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 400–402; Paul de Villelume, *Journal d’une défaite, août 1939–juin 1940* (Paris: Fayard, 1976), passim; and M. J. Carley, *Revolution and Intervention: the French Government and the Russian Civil War, 1917–1919* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1983), 105–15.

⁸³ E.g. ‘Record of conversation of the people’s commissar for foreign affairs V. M. Molotov with the ambassador of Turkey in the USSR A. Kh. Aktay’, secret, 28 Dec. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 452–4.

⁸⁴ Maiskii to Narkomindel, very secret, 23 Dec. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 441–2.

stress. It had been expelled from the League of Nations. And what can one say of Soviet relations with Nazi Germany? Two scorpions in the night had warily agreed to share a prey, keeping one eye on the prey and one eye on each other with tails raised high to strike.

Maiskii was worried, but Molotov, in a chilling reply to him, was angry and defiant. First, he said, Soviet action against Finland 'is to be explained by the fact that we can no longer tolerate the existence of a hostile Finnish government at the very gates of Leningrad, threatening the security of the Soviet Union'.

We have decided to put an end to this situation and we will liquidate it by any means in spite of everything. Secondly, rumours about some political, or even military, agreement of the Soviet Union with Germany against the Anglo-French do not correspond to reality. We have no such agreement with Germany, and talk of it is either the product of panic or provocation. Third, if they calculate on weakening the Soviet Union by supporting Finnish resistance, nothing will come of it. We will liquidate the Mannerheim–Tanner gang, and we will not be stopped by it in spite of its accomplices and well-wishers. If they attempt to drag the Soviet Union into a larger war, then they should be aware that our country is thoroughly prepared for it. Being roused to war, the Soviet Union will wage it until the end with all its might.⁸⁵

Maiskii must have anticipated Molotov's cable which appears to have crossed with one of his relating a Christmas eve conversation with Lloyd George. 'Anglo-Soviet relations,' said the former prime minister, 'have entered a very dangerous period.' The British government was taking a line now which would logically lead to a rupture of relations. Lloyd George's message was simple: don't play into the hands of those who want a rupture. Not everyone stood for this position; some people such as Churchill, were against it. 'The position can still be set right.' On the Finnish issue, the Soviet Union was justified, said Lloyd George, in asking for dispositions to assure its security. But the question had gone outside these narrow bounds: it was becoming one of opposing systems: capitalism vs. socialism. Finland was now a magnet for all the 'reactionary powers'. 'If I was in your place,' said Lloyd George, 'I would end the Finnish war as soon as possible, for each week will bring new dangers of complications [and] . . . new efforts to create an anti-Soviet bloc. And I would end the Finnish war without using the "German methods" applied in Poland, for this will only give ammunition to anti-Soviet "provocateurs".' Maiskii protested this last point, but Lloyd George only laughed: 'Excuse me, an old man, understanding a thing or two about international political and military affairs. I don't want to offend you. But from my personal experience, I know that war is war. And especially in this war, which, in my view is the last great struggle of capitalism for its right to existence.'⁸⁶ On the same day, Oliver Harvey, private secretary to Halifax, wrote in his diary about the dangers of an anti-

⁸⁵ Molotov to Maiskii, very secret, 25 Dec. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 446 (Karl Gustav Mannerheim was a former tsarist officer and commander in chief of Finnish armed forces; Väianö Tanner was Foreign Minister in the Finnish government).

⁸⁶ Maiskii to Narkomindel, immediate, very secret, 25 Dec. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 448–9.

Bolshevik 'crusade' allied with Germany *sans* Hitler. 'Many here would be foolish enough to fall into such a trap, the PM and Horace Wilson first of all . . .'⁸⁷

Maiskii's reports captured the mood in London and in the Foreign Office. The French and British governments carried on with the dangerous contemplation of plans to bomb the Soviet oil fields around Baku. The idea was to tighten the blockade against Nazi Germany by denying it Soviet oil. It scarcely seemed to matter that the French and British air forces did not have the means to destroy or disrupt Soviet oil production, or that Germany received relatively little oil from Soviet sources at this time. In any event, Sargent preferred to keep the way open to Moscow: developments in Finland might cause a Nazi-Soviet quarrel.⁸⁸ But could the Foreign Office maintain control of the agenda? The Foreign Office had lost it once before in 1927, when the government broke off diplomatic relations with Moscow. And the Foreign Office itself was divided.

Vansittart, who for years had advocated a realist's policy towards the Soviet Union, seemed to lose a wheel in the heat and after-heat of the Russo-Finnish war. There was plenty of 'common ground', he said, between the Nazis and the Soviet: Baku was their Achilles heel. Vansittart was bitter over past failures, his failure also since he had been a significant advocate of better relations with the Soviet Union. The British really 'ran after Russia', but were had by 'Soviet duplicity'. 'Let us never again forget it or haunt any more garden paths . . . if one plays cards once with a sharper it is one's misfortune; if one plays twice it is one's fault.' Vansittart had caught the Finnish fever: 'We should strike at Russo-Germany or Teutoslavia – call the combination what we will or they will – before its gets too strong.'⁸⁹ Cadogan viewed war with the Soviet Union with near equanimity and thought the bombing of Baku not a bad idea: 'I shd. say that, if there were a reasonable chance of success, it ought to be tried . . . We should have to pick a quick quarrel with the Soviet I suppose, before we launched our bombers . . .'⁹⁰ Edouard Daladier, the French premier, talked about the Baku raids as partly a matter of 'internal politics': '. . . those elements among the upper classes . . . owing to their fear of bolshevism, would be glad to make peace with Germany before she is thoroughly beaten.' Foreign Office official Harvey, then in Paris, recorded in his diary that Chamberlain did not want to see Germany beaten up too badly for fear it would 'open the door to Bolshevism'.⁹¹ Such statements were not far off Maiskii's reports of them to Moscow. To bomb Baku seemed like a wonderful idea – clean, useful and easy to carry out against the hated Reds. It would be cathartic revenge for the Non-

⁸⁷ John Harvey (ed.), *The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937–1940* (London: Collins, 1970), entry of 24 Dec. 1939, 332.

⁸⁸ Brock Millman, *The Ill-Made Alliance: Anglo-Turkish Relations, 1934–1940* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 351–6; and Sargent's minute, 19 Jan. 1940, N1147/283/38, PRO FO 371 24851.

⁸⁹ Vansittart's untitled memorandum, 29 Mar. 1940, N3210G/49/38, PRO FO 371 24846.

⁹⁰ Cadogan's minutes, 19 Jan. 1940, N1147/283/38; PRO FO 371 24851; and 25 Mar. 1940, N3698G/40/38, PRO FO 371 24846.

⁹¹ R. Campbell, British ambassador in Paris, no. 36 saving, 12 Jan. 1940, N546/341/38, PRO FO 371 24853; and Harvey, *Diary*, entry of 29 Feb. 1940, 338.

Aggression Pact, a double-cross which had ruined the Allied blockade, and for the occupation of eastern Poland which had underlined Allied weakness. ‘It’s jolly good to look at the map. And finish the foe in a day’, noted one British wag. And this was just the problem. Even Cadogan, who could so easily contemplate action against Baku, doubted whether the three available squadrons would be capable of destroying the Soviet oil fields.⁹² ‘[T]he only charitable conclusion’, A. J. P. Taylor observed, ‘is to assume that the British and French governments had taken leave of their senses.’⁹³

‘Teutoslavia’ was an emotional and dangerous assessment of the Soviet–German relationship. It was also not accurate. Molotov met the German ambassador many times in the autumn and winter of 1939–40, but not to run after Nazi Germany or to agree to every German demand, though he agreed to some. Discussions concerned, inter alia, border incidents between Soviet and German ground and naval forces, the settlement of frontier disputes, the evacuation of citizens of German descent from the Baltic states, or the transshipping across Germany of war matériel for Finland. When Schulenberg invited Molotov to visit Berlin, the commissar was in no hurry. I am too busy, he said. When Schulenberg asked Molotov to send a Soviet ship west of the British Isles to obtain weather information to facilitate German air attacks on Great Britain, Molotov first delayed and then declined the German request. He also declined to provide safe harbour to German ships on the Kamchatka peninsula in the Pacific. The Soviet concluded an important trade agreement with Germany in February 1940, but the bargaining was hard. ‘Don’t take us for fools’, warned Soviet negotiators.⁹⁴ The Soviet government was attempting to pursue its own interests, taking advantage of the war, without being pulled into the Axis or involved in the fighting any more than it already had been in Finland. It was a dangerous, shortsighted policy, which failed, similar to the shortsighted Anglo-French policy of appeasement which had failed earlier on.⁹⁵ One wonders, however, why the deeply suspicious Molotov did not doubt a government so unaccustomed to keeping international agreements. The Foreign Office also wondered, and concluded that it was funk, cold fear of Nazi Germany. Molotov claimed in his old age that they knew war was coming, but thought they

⁹² Horne, *France 1940*, 183; and Cadogan’s minutes, 25 Mar. 1940, cited above.

⁹³ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–1945* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 469, n. 1.

⁹⁴ For example, see ‘Record[s] of conversation of the people’s commissar for foreign affairs V. M. Molotov with the ambassador of Germany in the USSR von der Schulenberg’, secret, 17 Oct., 26 Oct., 2 Nov., 4 Dec., 9 Dec., 17 Dec., 22 Dec. 1939, *DVP*, XXII, bk. 2, 193–4, 252–3, 365–7, 386–7, 418–20, 436–7; ‘From notes of a conversation of the deputy commissar for foreign affairs V. P. Potemkin with the ambassador in Germany in the USSR von der Schulenberg’, secret, 11 Oct. 1939, *ibid.* 176–7; ‘Record[s] of conversation of the people’s commissar for foreign affairs V. M. Molotov with the ambassador of Germany in the USSR von der Schulenberg’, secret, 7 Jan., 25 Jan., 5 March, 26 March 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 23–6, 49–53, 128–9, 184–7; and ‘Conversation in the Kremlin of the general secretary TsK VKP(b) I. V. Stalin with the special representative . . . of Germany K. Ritter’, special file, 29 Jan. 1940, *ibid.*, 57–61.

⁹⁵ Cf. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1964), 318.

could put it off for just a little longer. 'We weren't fools. No one . . . considered us fools.'⁹⁶

At the same time Maiskii seemed to recover his wits, once he had escaped his over-extended position with Molotov. He did what he did best: he attempted to rebuild the broken bridges. He warned Molotov of the dangerous strain in relations with the British government and he worked to calm British emotions overwrought by the Finnish war. Anglo-Soviet relations had worsened since December, he warned Molotov: they were like a taut string, and if further tension were put on the string, it would certainly break. The most immediate danger was the situation in Finland, 'and the sooner this situation is brought to a satisfactory conclusion, the better the chances that Anglo-Soviet relations can survive the present crisis.'⁹⁷ Maiskii also worked on Butler: it was necessary to isolate the Finnish question. It['s] essential', Maiskii said (according to Butler's account), 'that those who [are] responsible for big decisions . . . keep cool heads.'⁹⁸ And once again there is a shade of difference between Maiskii's report and Butler's, for, according to the ambassador, the advice about keeping cool heads came from Butler's mouth, not his. No doubt the ambassador preferred that Butler should tell Molotov to maintain his sangfroid. Whatever the provenance, the advice was also appropriate for London, because some clerks in the Foreign Office were having their own difficulties in keeping cool heads. They preferred hostile relations with the Soviet Union; the 'possibility of eventual Anglo-Soviet co-operation against Germany' seemed to them to be 'illusory'.⁹⁹

The Foreign Office disliked the ambassador's methods, but Butler listened to his arguments. And the two kept talking. In mid-February Butler brought up the Finnish question. The British government wanted 'to save Finland', but not to the extent of a break with the Soviet Union. The best way out would be a peaceful solution. Maiskii talked again about 'localising' the Finnish conflict, but commented that Butler's concept of it – the despatch of warplanes, supplies and volunteers – was not what he had in mind. Butler said that the government was under heavy public pressure to act, but that it might curtail its support for Finland if it could be assured that Norway and Sweden were not in any way threatened. Maiskii dismissed this concern with a laugh, but Butler was not entirely persuaded, asking if the latest Nazi-Soviet economic agreement signalled the formation of an alliance. It was only a trade agreement, replied Maiskii, but Butler again was not persuaded.¹⁰⁰

This conversation drew a reply from Molotov, and if Butler had offered a

⁹⁶ Albert Resis (ed.), *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics, Conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 11, 21–32.

⁹⁷ Maiskii to Molotov, 26 Jan. 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 53–6.

⁹⁸ Halifax to J. H. Le Rougetel, British chargé d'affaires in Moscow, no. 52, confidential, 8 Feb. 1940, N1390/30/38, PRO FO 371 24843.

⁹⁹ 'Conversation of the plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in Great Britain I. M. Maiskii with the Parliamentary under-secretary . . . Butler', Maiskii, 30 Jan. 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 61–3; and Fitzroy Maclean's minute, 7 Feb. 1940, N1390/30/38, PRO FO 371 24843.

¹⁰⁰ Conversation of the plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in Great Britain I. M. Maiskii with the Parliamentary under-secretary . . . , Maiskii, 16 Feb. 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 88–90.

slackening of support for Finland as a lure in exchange for Soviet guarantees of Sweden and Norway, the commissar took the bait. He informed Maiskii that the Soviet government had no intention of touching Norway or Sweden if they did not enter the war, nor was it opposed to a negotiated settlement with Finland. Molotov even suggested British mediation to settle the conflict. But Molotov did not like Butler's insinuation that the Soviet Union had become a Nazi ally:

You can communicate the following to Butler about our relations with Germany: first, we consider ridiculous and slanderous not only the assertion, but even the simple suggestion that the USSR had allegedly entered into a military alliance with Germany. Even simpletons in politics do not enter so clumsily into a military alliance with a belligerent power, understanding all the complexity and all the risk of such an alliance. On what basis does Butler think that the Soviet Union is governed by people not possessing even that understanding, which is accessible to any simpleton in politics?

Second, the trade agreement with Germany is only an agreement for a commercial transaction by which exports from the USSR to Germany amount to 500 million marks; the said treaty is economically profitable for the USSR since the USSR will receive from Germany a large quantity of armaments, machine tools and equipment, the sale of which was invariably refused to us by both England and France.

Third, as the USSR has been neutral, so it will remain neutral, unless of course England and France attack the USSR and compel it to take up arms. The widely circulated rumours about a military alliance of the USSR with Germany are being warmed up not only by various elements in Germany itself, in order to confuse England and France, but also by various agents of England and France themselves, wishing to use the supposed 'passage of the USSR into the German camp' for their special purposes in the realm of internal politics.¹⁰¹

Maiskii duly repeated the message to Butler on the following day, without Molotov's acerbity.¹⁰²

A few days earlier Molotov had welcomed a visit from Cripps on a world tour, who flew a long way from China to meet the Foreign Commissar in Moscow on 16 February. As happened more often than not, there were differences in the Soviet and British records of the meeting. According to the Soviet account, Molotov indicated that if the British government really wanted to improve relations, the Soviet Union would meet it halfway. And Molotov vented the usual Soviet grievances against the British which he and Maiskii had many times raised in the past. The Cripps version confirmed this position, but then added the menace that if an improvement of relations did not take place '... Russia would have to proceed in other directions with trade and political agreements'. There is no such threat recorded in the Soviet record of the meeting. Was Cripps here playing the role of a British Maiskii? The evidence does not provide an answer, but Cripps pressed Halifax to consider resuming negotiations: 'I have no doubt whatever that there is at the moment [the] opportunity of doing something to draw Russia away from Germany and that this opportunity may not still exist in a few months' or weeks' time.'¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Molotov to Maiskii, 21–22 Feb. 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 101–2.

¹⁰² 'Conversation of the plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in Great Britain I. M. Maiskii with the Parliamentary under-secretary . . .', Maiskii, 22 Feb. 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 102–5.

¹⁰³ 'Conversation of the *Narkom* for foreign affairs of the USSR V. M. Molotov with the member of the House of Commons of Great Britain Sir Stafford Cripps', 16 Feb. 1940 (this record of

Foreign Office reaction was at first largely derisive and negative. The British government was not interested in conveying unfavourable terms to the Finns and therefore refused to mediate. It was all a ruse, thought the Foreign Office clerks, Stalin was afraid of a raid on Baku. Let him continue to worry. 'For most purposes the Soviet Govt. are already our enemy.'¹⁰⁴ On 13 March the Russo-Finnish war ended. The Soviet offered relatively generous terms, considering that the Finnish army was beaten. But the momentum of hostility was maintained. The French government 'picked a fight' with Moscow, demanding the recall of the Soviet ambassador on a pretext, just as it had done in October 1927 to expel the *polpred*, Kh. G. Rakovskii, who would die forgotten in 1941 at the hands of an anonymous Stalinist executioner. As Cadogan saw it, the French were making it hard to contemplate a flirtation with Maiskii. They still seemed to want a raid on Baku.¹⁰⁵

Butler kept up an unsung, but important, fight to entice the Foreign Office into resuming its courting of the Soviet Union, however plain and disagreeable the target of their future affections. 'I am becoming very alarmed', said Butler; '. . . There is a certain noble purity about British policy which tends – provided right is on our side and the human brain dictates the logic of an action – to add one enemy after another to those opposed to us.' Butler's position is the more remarkable because less than a year before he had been Chamberlain's only supporter in resisting pressure for an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance. He was sometimes dismissed as a weakling appeaser, but in these circumstances he held his ground for an unpopular cause. And this was not the only one, for he continued to hold to his earlier position that a truce in the war should not be excluded if the non-belligerent powers became involved in peace negotiations.¹⁰⁶

Maiskii also kept up his equally unsung part. 'The Finnish difficulty [is] now removed', the ambassador told Butler; '[we] should try to move towards a 'better understanding'. But, responded Butler, the war had 'left many bitter wounds'. 'We must now bandage them and heal them', came Maiskii's reply.

Butler was responsive: he told Maiskii that he hoped for an improvement in Anglo-Soviet relations. He repeatedly told his Foreign Office colleagues that British

conversation was circulated to Stalin and other members of the Soviet Politburo), *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 91–4; and Sir A. Clark Kerr, British ambassador in Chungking, from Cripps, no. 87 Tour Series (this cable was circulated to the War Cabinet), 4 March 1940, N2779/40/38, PRO FO 371 24846.

¹⁰⁴ Conversation of the plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in Great Britain with the Parliamentary under-secretary . . . Butler', 24 Feb. 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, 107–8; David Dilks (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938–1945* (London: Cassell, 1971), entries of 23–24 Feb. 1940, 255–6; Maclean's minute, 8 March 1940, N2779/40/38, PRO FO 371 24846; and Collier's minute, 25 March 1939, N3484/40/38, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ 'Sir O. Sargent', Cadogan, 18 March 1939, N3623/283/38, PRO FO 371 24852; Sargent's minute, 18 March 1939, *ibid.*; Campbell (Paris) to Cadogan, 24 March 1940, N3608/341/38, PRO FO 371 24853; and French embassy to Foreign Office, 5 April 1940, N4007G/40/38, PRO FO 371 24846.

¹⁰⁶ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 226, 230; John Costello, *Ten Days to Destiny: The Secret Story of the Hess Peace Initiative and British Efforts to Strike a Deal with Hitler* (New York: William Morris & Co., 1991), 54; Clive Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1993), *passim*; and Gilbert, *Finest Hour*, 190.

interests required better relations with the Soviet Union: ‘Labour is very averse to war with Russia.’ Whatever they might think, Russia held a place, in spite of Finland, ‘in the minds of many working men’. It would also keep Hitler off balance and uncertain about his eastern frontiers. ‘I feel that a reckless alienating of the Soviet Union [will] do more harm than good . . .’, Britain needed Russian co-operation if it were to close the blockade around Nazi Germany. To Maiskii, Butler said that Halifax would gladly see him if the ambassador had important questions to discuss.¹⁰⁷

Events moved quickly away from confrontation even if riled clerks and senior officials in the Foreign Office saw no need to propitiate the Soviet government. They were just throwing ‘dust in our eyes’.¹⁰⁸ Halifax, however, agreed with Butler’s position, and he was not alone. On 27 March Lord Chatfield, Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, asked Halifax to reopen the question of negotiations with the Soviet.¹⁰⁹ On the same day, with exquisite timing, Maiskii went to see Halifax to advise that the Soviet government was prepared to accept Stanley’s invitation of the previous October.¹¹⁰ It was hard to reject the offer out of hand, and the War Cabinet approved the possibility of resuming trade negotiations with the Soviet government. At nearly the same time the Soviet government declined to accord transit rights to Germany through Vladivostok, considered by the British to be ‘a bad gap’ in the blockade. And in early April the Soviet government temporarily suspended shipments of oil and grain to Germany because of the latter’s failure to deliver agreed-upon commodities to the Soviet Union.¹¹¹ And yet Molotov made a vitriolic speech about Anglo-French intentions at the end of March. These were the usual contradictions which marked both Soviet and British policy, but they may also have been camouflage to hide from German notice Soviet feelers in London.

VII

The conjuncture of circumstances seemed briefly to be right for a resumption of negotiations. To irritated clerks in the Foreign Office, it looked as if Maiskii had

¹⁰⁷ Butler’s minutes, 18 March 1940, N3485/40/38, PRO FO 371 24846; 29 March 1940, *ibid.*, ‘Attitude to Russia’, Butler, 5 April 1940, N3867/40/38, *ibid.*, and ‘Conversation of the plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in Great Britain I. M. Maiskii with the Parliamentary under-secretary . . . Butler’, 18 March 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 156–9.

¹⁰⁸ Minutes by Maclean, Collier, and Sargent, 21–6 March 1940, N3485/40/38, PRO FO 371 24846.

¹⁰⁹ Halifax’s minute, 22 March 1940, N3623/283/38, PRO FO 371 24852; and Chatfield to Halifax, 27 March 1940, N3715G/40/38, PRO FO 371 24846.

¹¹⁰ ‘Conversation of the plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in Great Britain I. M. Maiskii with the minister for foreign affairs . . . Halifax’, 27 March 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 188–91; Halifax to Le Rougetel, no. 146, confidential, 28 March 1940, N3706/5/38, PRO FO 371 24839.

¹¹¹ ‘Extract from War Cabinet Conclusions’, no. 77 (40), 29 March 1939, N3738/40/38; PRO FO 371 24846; and ‘Conversation[s] of the *Narkom* for foreign affairs V. M. Molotov with the ambassador of Germany von der Schulenberg’, 26 March & 5 April 1940 *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 184–7, 207–9.

pulled off another fast one: ‘. . . M. Maisky has been seeing a good deal of Mr Lloyd George of late, which . . . bodes no good . . . and we know that Lord Beaverbrook [the press baron and future member of the War Cabinet] and Low, the cartoonist, are both [his] friends . . .’ Fitzroy Maclean suggested some ‘inspired articles . . . emphasising the closeness and sinister character of Soviet–German co-operation’. To Sargent, however, the idea did not seem so opportune, ‘seeing that we are on the point of again exploring the possibility of a trade agreement with Russia . . .’¹¹²

If the moment was propitious, nothing came of it. But the debate inside the British government about Soviet intentions went on until the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. In the interim, the Foreign Office thought the Soviet wanted to keep Great Britain ‘in play’. But this was also what the British government, in its lucid moments, wanted to do. Neither side liked the other, and who could blame them? The clerks and many higher officials in the Foreign Office were dismissive of Soviet intentions and Soviet strength. As in the prewar period, there were often ideological underpinnings to these attitudes, but as with the French, these were cloaked in technical arguments about Soviet weakness and the Soviet ‘alliance’ with Nazi Germany.¹¹³ Because of ideological assumptions about the spread of communism in the event of Anglo–Franco–Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, some British officials did not want an alliance with the Soviet Union, even after June 1941. At the end of 1940 Cadogan could still rail in his diary against the 1936 French Popular Front and the ‘Red’ government in Spain: ‘. . . millions of people in Europe (I would not exclude myself) think that these things are awful’.¹¹⁴ The Soviet also saw weakness and lack of will on the British side, and feared having to fight alone against Nazi Germany, either in a phoney alliance with the Anglo–French or against an anti-communist bloc including Nazi Germany. The Bore War did nothing to reassure them. But it came to an end in April when Germany invaded Norway, getting there just as the British started to mine Norwegian waters.

The end of the Bore War marked the beginning of many black weeks for the Anglo–French alliance. The Norwegian campaign was a fiasco, though worse was to come. In May the Germans launched their armoured offensive through the Ardennes, crushing the Franco–British armies and causing the collapse of French resistance in June. The only positive development for the Allied cause was the appointment of Churchill as prime minister. Now there would be no more fear of provoking Nazi Germany, though Churchill had few divisions and fewer guns to ‘bleed and burn’ the enemy. In the east, the Soviet government reacted to the French collapse by annexing the Baltic states, Bessarabia, and Bukovina. The Germans immediately began shifting divisions east to the Soviet frontier, while the British government sent out Cripps to be ambassador in Moscow.

France was done for, and Britain faced Nazi Germany alone. If ever the British and Soviet governments needed each other, it was now. Butler and Maiskii

¹¹² Untitled note by Maclean, 1 April 1940, and Sargent’s minute, 18 May 1940, N4091G/40/38, PRO FO 371 24846.

¹¹³ Alexander, *Gamelin*, pp. 291–8.

¹¹⁴ Gorodetsky, *Cripps*, 177ff; and Dilks, *Cadogan Diary*, entry of 4 Dec. 1940, 338.

continued their common cause, and Cripps too worked for an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. But it did not happen. On 1 July Cripps met Stalin to convey the British government's interest in better relations. Stalin reassured Cripps that the Soviet Union had not formed a 'bloc' with Germany against Great Britain; 'we have only a pact of non-aggression'. Beyond that, Stalin offered little encouragement.¹¹⁵ The Soviet reply should not have surprised the British given the military situation in western Europe. France had surrendered two weeks earlier and the British army was 'literally naked'; having left its guns and lorries on the beaches of Dunkirk. Churchill told Maiskii in July that the British government was determined to fight to the finish: 'The fate of Paris does not await London'. Brave talk by a brave prime minister, but could the British hold out? The beaten French and victorious Germans did not think so. There was no use hiding the truth, Maiskii reported, 'the danger is very great'. Even Churchill would not predict victory, but he warned Maiskii that if the British were beaten, Hitler would turn all his might against the Soviet Union.¹¹⁶

In August Cripps saw Molotov in order to reiterate Churchill's warning that Germany could turn east against the Soviet Union if its hands were freed in the west. Cripps also complained that the Soviet government applied two standards in its neutrality toward Nazi Germany and Great Britain. Molotov admitted that this was true: 'We have a non-aggression pact with Germany to which the USSR attaches great importance'; they did not have a similar agreement with Britain. It was a point of difference to which they could not close their eyes. While Molotov did not think anyone could disturb the Nazi-Soviet pact, he admitted the possibility of an improvement of trade relations. But instead of an improvement, commented Molotov, they received 'new surprises', unfriendly acts by the British government, against Soviet interests in the Baltic (the British seizure of Baltic assets in Great Britain after the absorption of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union). It was not for the Soviet Union therefore to take the initiative in improving trade relations.¹¹⁷ Cripps's account of the meeting gave a more positive gloss to Molotov's statements which admitted the possibility of an improvement in political relations (absent in the Soviet record). And Cripps was more optimistic about a gradual improvement in relations if Britain could show itself capable of resisting a German offensive and if it would make concessions to the Soviet government.¹¹⁸

Although these explanations of Soviet policy appear to have been candid and

¹¹⁵ 'Conversation in the Kremlin of the general secretary TsK VKP(b) I. V. Stalin with the ambassador of Great Britain in the USSR Sir S. Cripps,' very secret, 1 July 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 394–400; Cripps to Collier, 16 July 1940, N6526/30/38, PRO FO 371 24845; and 'Comments on the Recent Conversation between His Majesty's Ambassador at Moscow and M. Stalin', W.P. (40) 254, 9 July 1940, R6763G/316/44, PRO FO 371 25016.

¹¹⁶ Maiskii to Narkomindel, highest priority, 3–4 July 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 408–9 (cf. Churchill's brief minute on the meeting, 9 July 1940, N5973/5496/38, PRO FO 371 24856); and Gilbert, *Finest Hour*, 478, 503.

¹¹⁷ 'Conversation of the *Narkom* for foreign affairs of the USSR V. M. Molotov with the ambassador of Great Britain in the USSR Sir S. Cripps', 7 Aug. 1940 *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 485–7, 207–8.

¹¹⁸ Cripps, nos. 591–2, 8 Aug. 1940, N6105/40/38, PRO FO 371 24847.

direct, some British officials took Molotov's statements rather badly. Vansittart, however, did not. He had calmed down since the heated atmosphere of the Finnish war, and saw again the value of better relations with the Soviet Union. He did not think, however, that concessions to the Soviet would bring it around. Concessions will not work 'until we both become and remain militarily stronger'. It was the eve of the Battle of Britain, and the threat of German invasion was on everyone's mind. To the Soviet the British had to prove that they could beat off the Nazis. When Great Britain was a first-rate military power, said Vansittart, 'Russia will come our way quick enough'.

Her interest will dictate it. Until that is remedied, there is nothing doing. It was the terrible exhibition of military weakness and blindness that we have offered during the last decade which caused Russia to double-cross us last year. We were simply not a tempting proposition. And it was this same notorious inefficiency which encouraged Fascism in France and is at the bottom of all the anti-British feeling in France ever since I can remember, and that is a very long time. We shall never have a reliable friend anywhere until we are thought both reliable and worthwhile ourselves. On the other hand, we shall always have friends provided we do not slip back into our old abominable habits.¹¹⁹

Vansittart's explanation had merit, and the British kept up their warnings about the German threat to Soviet security. Those who faced the Nazi peril 'were better advised if they clung together', Butler told Maiskii in October.¹²⁰ But Cripps did not like lecturing the Russians about the German danger, since he thought Molotov 'fully alive to the position'. Vansittart, relishing the irony of the situation, did not agree:

. . . the obvious is not always the same to all people, and . . . one has frequently to deal with people who do not wish to see the obvious in any circumstances. In dealing with the mythical habits of the ostrich it is often essential to go on pegging away at the obvious, and sometimes . . . it is necessary to convince people that we have seen the obvious. We have not always done so, and we cannot take it for granted that people always credit us with this quality.

Vansittart could not help but remember the 1930s and his own role in trying to alert his government to the obvious danger.

One of M. Maisky's most constant complaints against His Majesty's Government before 1939 was that they had not seen that it was inevitable that Germany would make war upon them. I was of course a very obvious person for him to select for this kind of talk. But it carries with it the corollary that Sir Stafford Cripps is now just as much entitled to reproach the Soviet Government with failing to see that it is obvious that Germany is going to make war on *them*.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ 'Secretary of State', Vansittart, 9 Aug. 1940, N6105/40/38, PRO FO 371 24847.

¹²⁰ 'Secretary of State, Sir Orme Sargent', Butler, 3 Oct. 1940, N6783/30/38, PRO FO 371 24845; and 'Conversation of the plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in Great Britain I. M. Maiskii with the Parliamentary under-secretary of state for foreign affairs R. Butler', Maiskii, 3 Oct. 1940, *DVP*, XXIII, bk. 1, 647–51.

¹²¹ Cripps, no. 865, immediate, 15 Oct. 1940, N6875/30/38, PRO FO 371 24845; and 'Secretary of State', Vansittart, 16 Oct. 1940, *ibid*.

The Soviet government was not unaware of the threat. Immediately after the fall of France Soviet intelligence and diplomatic sources sent plentiful evidence of a vast military build-up in the east. In the autumn of 1940 the Soviet government calculated that there were ninety-four German infantry and armoured divisions on its eastern frontiers, up from trifling numbers in the spring. This was an open secret; even Shirer, the American journalist in Berlin, was aware of the build-up, though not of its scope.¹²² The Cassandra-like roles were now, as Vansittart correctly noted, reversed. Molotov apparently failed to recognise the irony of the situation. Churchill told Maiskii that they had to forget about the past and get on with the present and future. But Molotov liked to remember past Anglo-French duplicity in order to justify present Soviet policy. He did not remember everything, however, for he had chosen to forget or at least to dismiss Litvinov's many early warnings of inevitable war. The price for doing so was to be unspeakably high, a point which may have troubled even the cold-blooded Molotov. Memories died hard: in 1942 Molotov and Litvinov, then Soviet ambassador in Washington, could still rage at one another over the Soviet abandonment of collective security. 'Litvinov remained among the living only by chance', remembered Molotov in retirement.¹²³

VIII

In this story neither side was virtuous, but there were individuals whose foresight and courage stand out. Litvinov, who figures little in this account, was perhaps the most intrepid, fighting unsuccessfully for collective security. He was the West's preferred Soviet interlocutor, but his policies were spurned and derided by the French and British governments and thus became increasingly discredited in Moscow. Essentially, Litvinov looked at Hitler and Nazi Germany and applied Occam's razor, that the simplest explanation was the most appropriate. For the Anglo-French, Litvinov was the red stormy petrel, warning of the Nazi danger, only to conceal the greater danger of communist revolution. Not only did Litvinov have to fear the rejection of his policies in the West, he was never sure if he would survive the Stalinist purges which in 1937–8 decimated the ranks of his colleagues and friends at the Narkomindel. Litvinov stayed at his post until dismissed in 1939. The historian may still notice his shadow, however, as the British and Soviet governments tried to cope with the terrible dangers of the early war period. And there was Maiskii, disliked by Foreign Office officials because of his use of an influential network of connections in Great Britain, who nevertheless fought, deviously and at times dangerously, for an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. Unlike Molotov and Stalin, Maiskii appears not to have forgotten Litvinov's anti-Nazi

¹²² Notes from the commissariat of defence of the USSR (for Stalin and Molotov), no. 103202/06, 18 Sept. 1940, *Organy gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti SSSR v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine* (Moscow: 'Kniga i biznes', 1995, I, bk. 1, 253–8; and Shirer, *Diary*, 550, 558.

¹²³ Jonathan Haslam, 'Soviet-German Relations and the Origins of the Second World War: The Jury is Still Out', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 69, no. 4 (December 1997), 788; and *Molotov Remembers*, 69.

dictums. In May 1942 Eden praised Maiskii for his role in building bridges between Great Britain and the Soviet Union.¹²⁴ The Foreign Secretary was perhaps more right than he knew.

Vansittart needed no prodding from Maiskii or Litvinov to recognise early on the Nazi threat to peace. Like Litvinov, Vansittart was not rewarded for his foresight, but was promoted out of the way in 1938 because of his eloquent persistence in pointing out the weaknesses of British foreign policy. He too figures little in this story, though he occasionally returns to recall the failures of British policy in the 1930s against which he had warned. Butler and Cripps also saw the dangers and fought uphill to overcome the bloody-minded or ideologically driven opposition in the Foreign Office to a rapprochement with the Soviet Union.

Litvinov's warnings to the French and British governments came home finally to haunt the Soviet government itself. It would have taken the foresight and courage of a Litvinov to be receptive to British overtures and then to sell them to Stalin. For this role Molotov lacked the independence of mind and sophistication of his predecessor; he was not the kind to put behind him the mistrust developed and nurtured over the previous twenty-odd years. The events of these eight months in 1939 and 1940 did not take place in a vacuum, as the participants in this drama often remembered: they were part of the early cold war which the West and the Soviet had waged since the Bolshevik revolution in November 1917.

In the end, neither side, British or Soviet, was in a position to reproach the other for its appeasement of Nazi Germany, or the hostility of the one towards the other. The British feared the spread of communism or collusion with Nazi Germany, the Soviet, a capitalist war-making bloc against it which might include Nazi Germany. Each side could point to the other's contradictory policies and each side had good reasons for mistrust. And in the end each had to prove to the other its ability to survive the Nazi onslaught – the British in 1940 and the Soviet in 1941. The British government wanted grudgingly to draw the Soviet Union away from Nazi Germany, but only just succeeded in keeping it 'in play'. The Soviet was less interested than the British in a rapprochement, mindful of the dangerous impact this could have on its German relationship, but it for its part wanted to keep the British 'in play'. Like the British, it only just succeeded in doing so. This was enough, for in the end Nazi Germany's unslakable thirst for conquest brought about the rapprochement which Great Britain and the Soviet Union were incapable or unwilling to achieve on their own.

¹²⁴ From Eden's speech after the signature of the Anglo-Soviet treaty of mutual assistance, in Oleg A. Rzheshevsky (ed.), *War and Diplomacy: The Making of the Grand Alliance* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), 159; and Maiskii, *Memoirs*, 33.