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Carley, M.J. (2014). Silent Conflict: A Hidden History of Early Soviet-Western Relations

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Book Review

Carley, M.J. (2014). *Silent Conflict: A Hidden History of Early Soviet–Western Relations*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 456 pp., \$42.03, £27.95.

To start with, this is an unusually intrepid book, which does not pretend to seek popularity by pursuing the fashionable or the comfortable. If it does become popular, it will be because of its fresh revelations and because the author has convictions and an uncompromising style with which to communicate them.

Russia reconstituting itself after a major internal upheaval with severe repercussions for an uncomprehending West, has become a recurrent concern in world history and is one of the most discussed themes of our own time. The book can also be read as a valuable contribution to the sprawling debate on the origins of the breakdown of the interwar system in Europe. The latter half of the interwar story in the Soviet context, with appeasement as its main theme, has been examined and forcefully argued by Michael Carley in a previous book and in a series of assiduously researched articles.¹ This current study examines how it all began, the “period of persuasion,” as Keith Neilson called it,² when Soviet foreign policy was not rigid, adjusting more or less flexibly to the security and trading needs of the Soviet state.

Apart from a handful of spectacular flare-ups, Soviet–Western relations during the interwar years were indeed played out in apparent silence. Yet, this should not have led generations of western historians to treat these relations as a side-show. Quite the contrary, and *Silent Conflict* shows us why. The book investigates the complexity of interactions between revolutionary Russia on the one hand and the UK, France, Germany, and the United States on the other hand from the inception of the Bolshevik state in 1917 until 1930—with an added window on Soviet involvement in revolutionary ferment in China from 1921 to 1927. During this dress rehearsal for the Cold War, the Soviet experiment went terribly wrong as Stalin’s grip on power solidified by the end of the 1920s. Yet, as Carley shows, the West’s attitude to the Soviet regime had been hostile from the very beginning. They tried to smother it at birth. As imperatives of trade dominated the earliest attempts to normalise relations in a war ravaged, economically faltering, Europe, the

only reason for any thaw in the 1920s was down to mutual commercial ambitions.

What will surprise the discerning reader is that while the NKID (People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of *Narkomindel*) were pragmatists against all the odds, the western chancelleries were anything but. The so-called Die-Hards in London and their counterparts in the *Bloc national* in Paris kept on the ideological pressure to prevent any meaningful rapprochement with the Soviet Union.

Perhaps for the first time in English, we are not merely peering with our western eyes through a narrow peephole into a remote and mysterious Soviet state, made incomprehensible and inaccessible by language barriers and closed archives. Almost disappointingly for sensation seekers, in Carley's book interwar Russia is no longer "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" to quote Churchill's well-known epigram. In addition to exhaustive research in the long-accessible Western archives in the UK, France and the US, the author's meticulous work in two Russian archives: The Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Federation which houses the departmental papers of the NKID; and in the Russian State Archives for Socio-Political History, significantly reconstitutes the narrative from a Soviet perspective. As the author himself points out, until the opening of the Russian archives in the 1990s, western scholars had to focus on the public statements of Soviet politicians, which were almost totally restricted to doctrinal disputes. Makers of foreign policy used the behind-closed-doors secret language of the Soviet Union, surprisingly devoid of ideological content.

We learn from these hidden files that the *Narkomindel* had three enemies: in the words of Georgy Vasilyevich Chicherin, the first People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, the Comintern was the "internal enemy" causing the NKID "a million torments" (p. 412). The GPU, the intelligence service and secret police was the second enemy—"always trying to thwart, to cheat us . . . exceeding all limits"; the third enemy, in Asian operations, was the NKVT, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade who, according to Chicherin, were "permeated with hucksterism and an imperialist mentality . . . cheat[ing] and rob[b]ing" Russia's clients (p. 413). Among many other insights, the secret files reveal the bitter rivalries between Chicherin and his successor (from 1930) Maxim Litvinov who lived in the first people's commissar's shadow throughout the 1920s—to become an unlikely survivor of the first phase of Stalin's ruthless purges.

The book is written in accordance with the best traditions of what may be called *new diplomatic history*, empowered by prosopographical and other social analytical methods that banish from readers' minds G.M. Young's unkind dictum about diplomatic history ("what one clerk wrote to another"). We find mini biographies of the prominent western and Soviet *dramatis personae* accompanied by rare photographs and an exquisite selection of contemporary cartoons by David Low and Count Miklós Bánffy (pseudonym

Ben Myll). The cartoons are not mere aesthetic add-on or entertainment: they go into the heart of the matter, speaking volumes without words.

This volume is more than a handbook of early Soviet foreign policy. It also helps to understand some of the thorniest internal intricacies of the slow-motion submersion of Soviet Russia into the Stalinist nightmare of the 1930s.

The seemingly intractable story of the “Zinoviev Letter” (perhaps the most egregious political cover-up of the twentieth century) receives prominent treatment in the book. Strictly based on primary evidence, including secret service records, Carley argues that hardly anyone in the British establishment of the time is exempt from blame: “The Labour and Conservative Parties [were] complicit in the cover-up” (p. 128). In addition to being pusillanimous, the Labour leader MacDonald was also incompetent, paralysed by the crisis to such an extent that “Crowe [Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office] was in effect Foreign Secretary” for the duration (p. 130). Perhaps most startlingly, Crowe, who had escaped censure in most previous analyses, comes across as a sharp dissimulator with “a disposition toward insubordination” to his Labour superiors (p. 129). Only John D. Gregory, head of the Northern Department of the FO at the time, who—like apparently everyone else—suspected that the letter was a forgery and tried to restrain Crowe, receives a circumspect exoneration.

While some knowledge of Russian helps the reader in understanding a few nuanced allusions in the book, it is written in an engaging, sometimes even conversational, style.

Many conclusions of the author’s investigations are counterintuitive to some deeply ingrained wisdoms held by the western historical establishment. The debates which will inevitably be sparked by this book are likely to reverberate among international historians for a long time to come.

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NOTES

1. Carley, Michael Jabara Carley, *1939: The alliance that never was and the coming of World War II* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999); “‘Only the USSR Has . . . Clean Hands’: The Soviet Perspective on the Failure of Collective Security and the Collapse of Czechoslovakia, 1934–1938,” Part 1: *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 21/2: pp. 202–25; Part 2: *D & S*, 21/3: pp. 368–396.

2. Keith Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).