'A Fearful Concatenation

of Circumstances': the

Anglo-Soviet

Rapprochement, 1934–6

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On 17 January 1936 Winston S. Churchill, the back-bench *bête noire* of the Conservative Party, wrote to his wife Clemmie from Marrakesh, where he was on holiday, about the frightful international situation. Japan had ruptured the conference on naval armaments, and Nazi Germany was rearming at break-neck speed. The 'two predatory military dictatorships', it seemed to Churchill, were now working together. 'No wonder', he said, 'the Russian bear is quaking for his skin and seeking protectors among the capitalist powers he deserted in the war and sought to destroy at the close of it. What – to quote a famous phrase – "What a fearful concatenation of circumstances"'.

Historians have not devoted much attention to Anglo-Soviet relations in the mid-1930s with the exception of an article by Robert Manne who asserted that anti-communism had little to do with the failure of an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. Manne challenged the interpretation of a number of British, Canadian and American historians who saw appeasement as an expression of pro-fascist and anti-communist ideology, and who emphasised British government culpability in failing to secure an alliance with the USSR against Nazi Germany. According to Manne, the history of British foreign policy in the 1930s has been misrepresented as

1 I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its generous financial support of my work and the Social Science Federation of Canada and the Canadian Federation for the Humanities for leave of absence to do continuing research. Thanks are also due to John C. Cairns, Keith Neilson and Robert J. Young for having commented on earlier drafts of this paper.


‘a morality play in which the anti-Hitler, pro-Soviet-alliance “anti-appeasers” were pitted against the pro-Hitler, anti-Soviet “appeasers” .’ 4 ‘Revisionist’ interpretations like Mann’s have become so prevalent that recent studies of British foreign policy in the mid-1930s rarely mention British relations with the USSR. 5

As seen from the revisionist position, British policy-makers developed a calculated, realistic response to the rise of Nazi Germany in which the USSR was not needed, respected or wanted. The British Government rearmed as rapidly as possible given financial and domestic political constraints, pursuing the only policy possible in the circumstances. 6 R. A. C. Parker has challenged this view and offers a ‘counter-revisionist’ interpretation, holding that there were legitimate policy alternatives which the British Government declined to pursue. The same may be said of British relations with the USSR. Churchill and some Foreign Office officials made a strong and, as it turned out, prescient case for better Anglo-Soviet relations. Contrary to the view of Manne and others, anti-bolshevism in the Conservative Party and among their National Liberal and Labour ‘hangers-on’ did indeed block the development of an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. This anti-red policy was based on fear, emotion and miscalculation, and it had much to do with the origins of the Second World War. A fresh reading of the evidence, which includes use of the Soviet published documents, suggests that the time has come to re-legitimise an earlier view of one important aspect of appeasement.

Sir Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign Office, and some of his ‘boys’, notably Laurence Collier, head of the Northern Department, were the strongest advocates of closer relations with the USSR. They considered an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement to be an important component of a new security system intended to contain or ensure the destruction of Nazi Germany. Churchill was their publicist and defender in the House of Commons and in the press. For the same reasons, Maksim M. Litvinov, the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and his ambassador in London, I. M. Maiskii, were equally convinced of the importance of an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement to European collective security. ‘Peace is indivisible,’ said Litvinov: if it is disturbed in one part of Europe, it will be disturbed everywhere. Only close co-operation between the USSR, Great Britain and France could dissuade Nazi Germany from aggression.

In London, Maiskii and Vansittart were the central figures in the effort to shape a new Anglo-Soviet relationship. And in the background, Churchill played the role

of promoter and advisor to Maiskii. All were motivated by their fear of Nazi Germany, which others could not see quite as clearly. Litvinov and Vansittart would eventually share the unfortunate appellation of Cassandra, their warnings against Nazism having been largely ignored by the British and French governments. Opponents said that Litvinov was bluffing about collective security; that Vansittart was too strident, too hysterical about Nazism; and that Churchill was blustering, untrustworthy, roguish.

The Anglo-Soviet rapprochement was a conspicuous departure from the previously hostile and at times belligerent relationship. After the bolshevik revolution in 1917, the Soviet Government nationalised private property and repudiated foreign debts contracted by the tsars. The bolsheviks promoted world revolution and withdrew from the Great War, condemning it as a bloody imperialist conflict in which the working classes were pawns and cannon fodder. The British Government riposted by sending armed forces to Russia to overthrow Soviet authority. From the Baltic Sea and northern Russia, to the Caucasus and Turkestan, to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean, British army and naval units supported the enemies of the Soviet state. The British Government sent guns, stores and munitions, costing £100 millions and sufficient to supply large anti-bolshevik armies. Against long odds, the bolsheviks won a merciless, destructive civil war which sputtered out in 1921.

The British coalition government was not united on policy towards Soviet Russia: the Liberal Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, was a pragmatist who thought of coming to terms with the bolsheviks either to fight Germany in early 1918 or to trade with them after 1920. Anti-bolshevik Tory 'die-hards', led by none other than Churchill, sought to check this policy and to strike down 'the foul baboonery of Bolshevism'. The tension between the 'die-hard' ideologues and the pragmatic Lloyd George went on until 1922 when the Tories forced him out as prime minister. Anglo-Soviet relations then deteriorated, save for a brief Labour interlude in 1924, until the British Government broke off diplomatic relations in May 1927.

The growth of Anglo-Soviet trade in the 1920s hampered the 'die-hard' agenda. At first, British merchants, like Arthur G. Marshall of Becos Traders, who conducted business in Soviet Russia were poorly received at the Foreign Office, where anti-bolshevism was as feverish as in the Tory Party. Foreign Office officials considered trade with the bolsheviks to be unseemly, and they hoped that British banks in the City would maintain their refusal to provide credit, either to the Soviet Government or to British traders wanting to sell to Soviet trade agencies. Paradoxically, the Labour Party, which promoted trade with the USSR, defended the interests of merchants like Marshall.7

As Anglo-Soviet trade increased in the 1920s, so did the pressure for pragmatism in relations with the USSR. Anti-bolshevism was one thing; the purse quite another. But such pragmatism was not strong enough to overcome fear of Comin-

tern (Communist International) propaganda and subversion in the British Empire. The India Office railed against communist propaganda and the training of Indian nationalists in Soviet Russia. The Home Office sought legal grounds for prosecution of British communists, and the Foreign Office hoped it would find them. The Soviet Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel) claimed that it had nothing to do with the Comintern, and that the Soviet Government could not answer for its activities. Foreign Office officials did not, for a minute, believe this line, but were increasingly frustrated by their impotence to combat bolshevik propaganda.

Soviet foreign policy was burdened with its own contradictions. '[T]he Soviet Govt. is faced with the eternal dilemma,' one Foreign Office official noted: 'If it chooses the path of peace and renounces... world revolution, it can hardly continue to exist except by becoming more and more as other govts. are and surrendering its Communist principles one by one.' Bolshevik 'ideologues' recognised the problem, also, and fought against it. In 1926 the Profintern, the Soviet international of trade unions, meddled in the British General Strike. When revolution broke out in China, the Comintern lent a hand. In 1925-6 the situation was bleak. To the Foreign Office, China was 'red', or about to become so, and the bolsheviks bore a heavy responsibility. When the revolutionary wave in China crested short in 1927 and a bloody settling of accounts ensued, the Foreign Office took grim satisfaction. 'Our prayers for a Russian downfall in China', commented one official, 'have been answered beyond our wildest expectations.' 'Propaganda', which came to include journalistic vituperation on both sides, nevertheless remained an important obstacle to better relations. The children's ditty that 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me' had no application in Anglo-Soviet relations.

In 1929 a new Labour minority government renewed diplomatic relations with the USSR. British merchants wanted the Russian business and were encouraged by the Soviet Government, which promised rich contracts. Even the Tories, who did not themselves want to renew relations with the bolsheviks, were said to be glad to see Labour accept responsibility. In 1929-30 the Labour Government opened up credit guarantee facilities to Russian trade and signed a commercial agreement with the USSR, but it could go no further because of Tory red-baiting in the House of Commons and in the press. I imagine, minuted one Foreign Office official, that if the British anti-communist press called 'a truce in the long range bombardment of Moscow... [h]alf their "copy" would go...'.

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8 Eg correspondence and minutes in N298/44/38, 10 Jan. 1923, Public Record Office, London, Foreign Office (thereafter PRO FO) 371 9333; and in N3053/44/38, 23 March 1923, PRO FO 371 9334.
9 Minute by William Strang, 20 Nov. 1923, N9015/43/38, PRO FO 371 9333.
12 Minute by C. H. Bateman, Northern Department, 28 Jan. 1930, N499/77/38, PRO FO 371 14866.
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In 1931 a Tory-dominated National Government was formed. The Foreign Office prepared a briefing paper for the new Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon:

It is one of the unfortunate legacies of the War that Anglo-Soviet relations have become a subject of the most acute internal political controversy . . . From being a pre-war enigma Russia has become a post-war obsession . . . a matter of party strife at most of the post-war appeals to the British electorate. So long as one section of opinion, even if a small one, hitches its wagon to the Soviet star, and another longs for nothing so much as the star’s eclipse, the task of reducing Anglo-Soviet relations to normal remains hopeless . . . 13

Subsequent events did not belie the Foreign Office analysis. In 1932 the British Government abrogated the Anglo-Soviet trade agreement. Relations deteriorated still further in March 1933 when Soviet police arrested British engineers in Moscow working for the Metro-Vickers Company.

The Metro-Vickers arrests occurred only six weeks after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933. During the spring and summer the Nazi Party consolidated its power. In October 1933 Germany withdrew from disarmament negotiations and from the League of Nations, all the while promising good intentions. Outside the British Government, ‘Winston’, the Tory gaudily, sounded an unwelcome alarm against the rising danger. ‘Nobody can watch the events which are taking place in Germany’, Churchill said in 1933, ‘without increasing anxiety about what their outcome will be. At present Germany is only partly armed and most of her fury is turned upon herself. But already her smaller neighbours . . . feel a deep disquietude.’14 For Churchill, Nazi Germany, not Soviet Russia, was now the main danger to British security.

In 1933 France and the USSR also recognised the peril. Soviet relations with France improved: Franco-Soviet negotiations focused on a trade agreement and on the conclusion of an Eastern security pact (guaranteeing security in Eastern Europe) and Soviet entry into the League of Nations or, failing that, a treaty of mutual assistance against Nazi Germany. At the same time, the Narkomindel sought better relations with Great Britain. Nazi Germany began to overshadow trade as the principal force for pragmatism in Anglo-Franco-Soviet relations.

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The Metro-Vickers affair was quietly settled in the summer of 1933 when Litvinov came to London. Litvinov played an important role in ending the dispute, as he would in the subsequent attempt to achieve a broad Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. During his stay in London, he met Foreign Office official R. A. Leeper, with whom he had dealt in 1918 as the first Soviet representative in Great Britain. Their personal meeting, a reunion after fifteen years, left a sufficient impression on Leeper that he wrote a long record of their conversation.

14 Gilbert, Prophet, 488.
In 1918 I was in almost daily contact with him for many months at a time when he was being subjected to innumerable annoyances & indignities. I had then found him, apart from occasional explosions, good-tempered & reasonable. He was in fact as frank & natural as the circumstances permitted. Fifteen years have passed . . . I had been told by journalists . . . that if I met him again I should find him very much changed with a hard crust of cynicism which he employs as a weapon of self-defence in dealing with foreigners . . . . I found nothing of the sort. Away from the atmosphere of Moscow he was exactly the same in his manner as formerly, affable & natural.

Leeper noted that Litvinov ‘spoke with regret rather than with bitterness’ about the difficulties of dealing with the British Government. ‘There were constant set backs,’ Litvinov said.

His main desire had always been to establish satisfactory working relations with us. He had married an English wife, he had lived longer in this country than in any other outside Russia, & he had in consequence a greater regard for it. Yet in conducting official relations with the British Government he was confronted with much greater difficulties than with any other Government . . . . Nowhere were the press & Parliament so vindictive against Russia . . . . He could only conclude that there were powerful influences at work here to prevent any kind of working arrangement between the two Governments.15

Some of Litvinov’s laments should be taken with a grain of salt; one could easily imagine him saying the same thing to a sympathetic French diplomat. Soviet relations with France were scarcely easier than with Great Britain. And many Foreign Office officials would have scoffed at Litvinov’s complaints, blaming the Soviet for all the difficulties. Leeper’s account is nevertheless a sympathetic introduction to the Soviet official who directed the effort for better relations with Great Britain.

The settlement of the Metro-Vickers dispute allowed the resumption of Anglo-Soviet trade negotiations which led, on 16 February 1934, to the conclusion of a new Anglo-Soviet trade agreement, barely a month after Soviet negotiators signed a similar accord with France. Shortly before the signature of the new agreement, Ambassador Maiskii told a prominent Conservative that the USSR wanted better relations with Great Britain.16 The Soviet Government put out the same message in the press: Izvestiia was hopeful that relations would improve, but said that the next move was up to Great Britain. Foreign Office officials were dubious. ‘The usual hopes for improved relations & real cooperation . . .’, minuted one clerk. Another commented: ‘When the Comintern ceases its pernicious propaganda against the British Empire . . .’ relations might then improve. ‘But it is for them to make the move.’17 And when the time came to attend a luncheon to mark the signing of the trade agreement, there was grumbling about who would go – and who would pay the bill. It was a corvée, said Sir Lancelot Oliphant, Assistant Permanent Under-

15 Untitled handwritten minute by Leeper, 17 June 1933, N4812/5/38, PRO FO 371 17241.
Secretary, and the Secretary of State should be spared the bother. Let someone else go instead.\textsuperscript{18}

In early March, Maiskii listened to the debate in the House of Commons on the trade agreement, and reported back to Moscow that all had gone well. An ‘anti-adventurist, realistic frame of mind’ was growing in the Conservative Party.\textsuperscript{19} Maiskii was premature in his estimate of the Tory mood. Two weeks earlier, the Soviet Government had sent a message through Ankara that it wanted better relations. Sir Percy Loraine, the British ambassador in Ankara, was discouraging. He reminded the Turkish Foreign Minister ‘that a very large proportion of opinion in England held the view that the whole political system and creed of Soviet Russia was the work of Satan and that in my country such widespread opinion had to be taken into account.’

I fear the ambassador has made ‘a mistake’, minuted the Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald: his remarks will surely get back to Moscow and into the Soviet press. But Simon, the Foreign Secretary, advised Loraine that there was no need to rush into negotiations with the Soviet Government, ‘until they show more willingness to stop the abuse and propaganda which the Comintern still showers on us and to meet us on the many questions of some importance . . . in which their attitude is still obstructive . . .’. The Soviet Government, he said, should ‘make the running’.\textsuperscript{20}

Collier, head of the Northern Department, made the point to Maiskii at a Soviet reception on 22 March. Maiskii replied that he was ‘anxious to make the signature of the Trade Agreement the starting point for a general rapprochement’. So much the better, responded Collier, but why ‘dissemble your love’? If we keep ‘rubbing it in’, Collier advised, the Soviet Government might eventually get the point. The Permanent Under-Secretary of State, Vansittart, approved. ‘Inform Lord Chilston [the British ambassador in Moscow] & tell him to rub in Mr. Collier’s lesson at a convenient opportunity.’\textsuperscript{21}

The Foreign Office was unenthusiastic about Soviet entry into the League of Nations, although the French Foreign Minister, Louis Barthou, lobbied for it, to reinforce the Franco-Soviet rapprochement. The French feared Nazi Germany, but also feared a renewal of Soviet–German co-operation, the so-called Rapallo policy, broken up by Hitler’s rants against communism in Russia. The Soviet Government was willing to enter the League – after condemning it from the beginning as an instrument of capitalist intrigue and aggression. Ambassador Chilston said that the Soviet leadership needed security for ‘internal consolidation’. ‘Peace is indispensable’; war would ‘interfere . . . dangerously’ with Soviet economic development. ‘This is not surprising,’ commented one Foreign Office official, ‘but it shows how terribly scared the Soviet Government must be that they are even willing to

\textsuperscript{18} Minute by Oliphant, 14 Feb. 1934, N1116/16/38, PRO FO 371 18303.

\textsuperscript{19} Maiskii to Narkomindel, 2 March 1934, DVP, xvii. 167–8.

\textsuperscript{20} Loraine, no. 12 saving, 22 Feb. 1934, N1316/16/38, PRO FO 371 18303; and Simon to Loraine, 29 March 1934, N1617/16/38, \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{21} Minutes by Collier, 23 March 1934, N1082/120/38, and 26 March 1934, N1699/120/38, PRO FO 371 18316; and Vansittart, 28 March 1934, N1082/120/38, \textit{ibid.}
swallow all their past jibes against the League of Nations.' Vansittart was caustic and mocking. 'The Soviet Union is feeling frightened. Fear ... is evidently a most healthy medicine in Russia. A little more will do her no harm, and she will certainly get it ... '. Let fear turn to funk, said Vansittart in effect, then we will see. Vansittart mellowed only slightly when he later qualified his position, though not his derision: 'for a not very exclusive, and at present rather hard-up, club, I should not dream of blackballing the candidate, though I should be very cautious in the cardroom.'

Chilston did not think that Russian communists had renounced their revolution-ary principles, and neither did most Tories in London. Maiskii tried to reassure them. 'At first we were very excited with our revolution — and so were you! We thought your system could be overthrown in a few months, and you thought we could not last beyond a few months. Now we know that we must put up with each other.' Vansittart was still sceptical: 'The difference in spirit between Russia and Germany and Japan is that she feels it will take her longer to get fit.'

Maiskii heard about the British lack of enthusiasm for Soviet entry into the League, but he thought it premature to discuss in any event. Not for long: the Soviet Government decided to 'make the running' with the British. On 21 June Commissar Litvinov met Chilston in Moscow. After a sharp exchange of opinion about the mutual hostility of their respective presses, 'Litvinov said he wished the Soviet Union could have more understanding and better political [emphasis in the original] relations with Great Britain because in his mind there was no doubt that Great Britain and Russia were the most important factors for peace of the world.' Chilston said his government was ready to exchange military attachés with the USSR; and Litvinov indicated that the Soviet Government had definitely decided to join the League of Nations. A week later Litvinov sent instructions to Maiskii to see Vansittart. 'Say that we on our side sincerely hope for the creation of better relations with England.'

On 3 July Maiskii saw Vansittart for the first of a long series of meetings which set into motion the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. Maiskii was a former Menshevik, who had come to London as Soviet ambassador in late 1912. '[M]any avoided him,' wrote Vansittart in his memoirs. 'I was sorry, since his hold at home was precarious ... I thought that he might be killed if he were not a success.' Vansittart and Maiskii took a liking to each other; their wives, according to Maiskii, had facilitated

22 Chilston, no. 46, 5 Feb. 1934, N755/2/38, PRO FO 371 18298; and minutes by R. G. Howe, 21 March 1934, Ibid., and Vansittart, 13 Jan. 1934, N140/2/38, PRO FO 371 18297; and 22 March 1934, N1741/2/38, PRO FO 371 18298.
25 Notes of conversation with Chilston, Litvinov, 21 June 1934, DVP, xvii, 806; Litvinov to V. P. Potemkin, Soviet ambassador in Rome, 27 June 1934, Ibid., 410–17; Chilston, no. 81, 22 June 1934, N3682/2/38, PRO FO 371 18298; and Chilston to Collier, 22 June 1934, N4027/16/38, PRO FO 371 18305.
26 Litvinov to Maiskii, 29 June 1934, DVP, xvii, 432–3.
matters by getting along first. 'Helping lame dogs over stiles is no duty', wrote Vansittart, 'when theirs is to bite, but my wife and I did our best to provide him and his with connections, and had them to meals à quatre or in company . . .'. The 'meals' were not only convivial, but useful. Company sometimes included 'Winston', Vansittart's old friend, and discussion focused on the nascent Anglo-Soviet rapprochement and its root cause – a rapidly rearming Nazi Germany.27

Both sides concluded that their first meetings went well. 'M. Maisky said that there was a strong and earnest desire in his country for closer and better Anglo-Soviet relations,' minuted Vansittart. 'This desire was, of course, to a large extent created by fear of Germany. His Excellency was quite frank on that point . . .'. Closely following Litvinov's instructions, Maiskii said the Soviet Government was suspicious of British policy towards Germany and Japan. Vansittart replied that 'no well-informed person – and M. Maisky himself was, of course, among the best informed – could for a moment credit so fantastic a tale as that of a British desire for warfare [between the USSR and Japan] in the Far East'. Vansittart gave assurances of British Government support for Soviet entry into the League and for an Eastern security pact, which the French were hard promoting. And when Maiskii raised the issue of British press hostility, Vansittart said that the press was independent and not guided by the British Government. Maiskii referred to the Times, known for its pro-German line; Vansittart replied that 'he entirely disagreed with the attitude of the Times towards Germany'.

Vansittart's account of the meeting differed from Maiskii's on only two points. According to Maiskii, 'Vansittart considered that Germany and Japan were at the present time the two greatest focal points of military danger'. Later, Maiskii said it was Vansittart who emphasised 'several times' that the British Government wanted better relations with the USSR and that he saw 'no serious questions which would divide us'. It remains to be seen, Maiskii concluded, if Vansittart really means business.28 Vansittart and Maiskii often put into each other's words the desire for better relations. It made the case more convincing to their sceptical superiors.

A week later, French Foreign Minister Barthou came to London to ask for British support for Soviet entry into the League and for an Eastern security pact. Barthou's mission was successful. The French ambassador in London, Charles Corbin, told Maiskii that Barthou had expected greater British opposition to French policy, and went away from the meetings 'very satisfied with the results'.29

However, Vansittart was riled by Chilstons's account of his meeting with Litvinov on 21 June, and the latter's pot calling the kettle black regarding the anti-Soviet tone of the British press. 'Satan rebuking sin', Chilston would say a few


28 Simon to Chilston, no. 352, 18 July 1934, NA029/16/38, PRO FO 371 18305; and Maiskii to Narkomindel, 3 July 1934, DVP, xvii. 436–7.

29 'Record of a conversation . . . with . . . Vansittart', Maiskii, 12 July 1934, DVP, xvii. 466–8; and Maiskii to Narkomindel, 12 July 1934, ibid., 468–9.
months later. Collier and Oliphant did not think it was worth complaining, but Vansittart disagreed.

I shall also tell M. Maisky the next time I see him that its of no use whatever to speak of improved relations in one breath and to blackguard us systematically with the other – despite my very friendly response to his advances . . . The Soviet Government cannot in fact have it both ways, and they have now got to choose. They will never reassure the public here of their friendly intentions if they go on with this nonsense. If they want better relations – for which we are quite ready – they must be reasonably polite to and reasonably truthful about us.51

Maiskii and Vansittart met again on 18 July. They went over the ground of their meeting on 3 July, restating the desire of their respective governments for improved relations. Vansittart gave Maiskii further assurances that British relations with Germany and Japan were not directed against the USSR, and he complained about allegations to this effect in the Soviet press. Such vituperation provided opportunities to hostile journalists and MPs who wanted to make trouble over Anglo-Soviet relations. Of course, the British Government did not mind ‘normal’ Soviet press criticism, but it was going too far to accuse the British Government of promoting war against the USSR.

‘I understand your concerns,’ replied Maiskii, ‘but I have to say that it was only two weeks ago that I had the opportunity to hear an explanation from a responsible Foreign Office representative, of the point of view of the British government on the most important international issues.’ Before that, Maiskii had to get his information from the newspapers or from ‘third-hand’ accounts. It would take time for Soviet opinion to note the change in British policy. The history of Anglo-Soviet relations had created great mistrust: it ‘cannot vanish at once, overnight’. People will ask, ‘for how long is this [shift in British policy]? Is it just a temporary manoeuvre? ‘So, don’t expect a miracle,’ said Maiskii.

Such comments about Soviet policy, of course, could have and did come from Foreign Office officials, though Vansittart did not say so. He only asked Maiskii to use his influence to encourage prudence in Moscow. Vansittart said he was convinced of Maiskii’s commitment to an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement, and the Soviet ambassador in his turn recorded that he was also persuaded of Vansittart’s commitment to the same end.32 ‘I want to believe’, said Litvinov, commenting on the result of Maiskii’s first meeting, that Vansittart’s statements are ‘sincere and without ulterior motive . . .’.33 Apparently, Simon wanted to believe, too, for he authorised a letter to Chilston restating Vansittart’s main points to Maiskii; and he reinforced Vansittart’s words that ‘we officials were quite ready’ for better relations – by striking out ‘officials’.34 On 25 July, five days after Simon wrote his minute to

31 Minutes by Collier, 12 July 1934, Oliphant, 13 July 1934, and Vansittart, 17 July 1934, N4027/16/38, PRO FO 371 18305.
33 Litvinov to Maiskii, 19 July 1934, ibid., 489–90.
34 Minute by Simon, 20 July 1934, and Vansittart to Chilston, 24 July 1934, N4027/16/38, PRO FO 371 18305.
Maiskii, USSR

Vansittart, Austrian Nazis assassinated the Austrian Chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuss. It was another warning of the Nazi danger, though Vansittart and Maiskii scarcely needed one.

The initial meetings between Vansittart and Maiskii had some effect in Moscow. On 7 August Chilston reported ‘a marked improvement’ in the tone of the Soviet press towards Great Britain, even if occasionally, there were lapses. ‘There is “a marked improvement”’, minuted Vansittart, ‘though it might well go further.’

Vansittart and Maiskii met again on 9 August for another ‘very serious political discussion’, according to the latter. Their separate accounts of the meeting are remarkably similar.

Vansittart hoped that the USSR, once it was a member of the League – which he likened once again to a ‘hard-up’ club for gentlemen – would cease its vitriolic attacks on the British Government. ‘What would be the position in any club card-room,’ Vansittart asked, ‘if members were continually accusing each other of having the fifth ace and a Thomson sub-machine gun under the table?’ Maiskii smiled at this comment, but Vansittart went on. He was ‘happy to hear’ that there has ‘been a real improvement in the attitude of the Russian press’. Maiskii said he had done what he could, but he noted that hostile British attacks continued on the USSR in the Times and other papers.

Naturally, no one could expect ‘complete perfection would be attained in these matters’, replied Vansittart – and according to Maiskii, he added that the Soviet Government should not pay too much attention to such attacks. ‘In fact, the expression of hostile opinions and of hostile propaganda had . . . become a luxury which should no longer be indulged.’ It was important to avoid anything which could disturb Anglo-Soviet relations. The interests of ‘high politics’, said Vansittart, should take precedence: we should stress what unites us, not what divides us. Maiskii heartily agreed, and emphasised that the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement was ‘an extraordinarily important factor for peace’. ‘I do not see at the present time’, added Maiskii – in what became the stock expression of interest in better relations – ‘any important international problems which could seriously divide us.’ La marche des événements, as Vansittart put it, was pushing the two countries together both in Europe and in the Far East. You know ‘what the real world situation’ is, said Vansittart; better Anglo-Soviet relations are ‘the path of real statesmanship’ and ‘of ordinary common sense’. Tell M. Litvinov what I have said, requested Vansittart. Maiskii replied that he would, and he was as good as his word.

Vansittart was ahead of Conservative opinion on Anglo-Soviet relations, as French Ambassador Corbin reported a week after Vansittart’s last meeting with Maiskii. The Tories mistrusted the Soviet, and did not like to see it moving closer to France. For most Tories, said Corbin, the rise of Nazism had only slightly

35 Chilston, no. 368, 7 Aug. 1934, and Vansittart’s minute, 8 Aug. 1934, N4622/16/38, PRO FO 371 18305; and Chilston, no. 396, 18 Aug. 1934, N4840/16/38, ibid.

overshadowed their continuing fear of the 'communist peril'.

Litvinov may also have been a little ahead of Soviet opinion. On 18 September 1934 the USSR was admitted to the League of Nations, though entry proved more difficult than Litvinov had anticipated. He told Anthony Eden, the Lord Privy Seal, who was also in Geneva, that 'he was afraid that he had acted in advance of public opinion in his country and that his position in the next few months would be difficult'. In the Foreign Office, Collier interpreted Litvinov's comment to mean that some Soviet officials were dubious about the new policy, preferring a return to good relations with Germany. Litvinov may not have been too worried; J. V. Stalin, the red tsar, strongly favoured good Franco-Soviet and Anglo-Soviet relations and wanted on no account to disturb them.

Beyond the discussions between Vansittart and Maiskii, Anglo-Soviet relations showed a few tangible signs of improvement: on 4 November a long-standing dispute over the Lena Goldfields concession, contracted in the 1920s, was settled. Litvinov was as anxious as Vansittart to see the matter resolved.

Maiskii continued to lobby for better Anglo-Soviet relations. He saw Conservative MP Robert Boothby on 6 November, repeating all the desiderata of his summertime meetings with Vansittart. Three days later, Maiskii conveyed the same messages to the Foreign Secretary, Simon.

All well and good, replied Simon, but Anglo-Soviet interests 'would be best served if their was a definite dropping of Communist propaganda backed or inspired by Soviet Russia in countries outside it'. Maiskii's account does not make much of 'propaganda', but Simon's gave it more emphasis. 'Propaganda' did not come up when Maiskii saw Eden a few days later. According to Maiskii, Eden thought events in Germany were leading towards war, whatever Hitler might say about his desire for peace.

Maiskii and Vansittart met several times in December to resume their earlier dialogue. After both agreed that Anglo-Soviet relations had much improved, Maiskii said that his government was still worried about Anglo-Japanese cooperation in the Far East. Vansittart again denied any hostile British intention.

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38 Harold Patteson, British consul, Geneva, from Eden, no. 59 saving, 19 Sept. 1934, N5455/2/38, PRO FO 371 18300; and Patteson, from Eden, no. 60 saving, 27 Sept. 1934, N5602/2/38, PRO FO 371 18301.


40 Litvinov to Maiskii, 26 Oct. 1934, DVP, xvii. 631; and Litvinov to Maiskii, 4 Nov. 1934, ibid., 664.

41 Boothby to Eden, 6 Nov. 1934, N6328/16/38, PRO FO 371 18305.

42 Maiskii to Litvinov, 9 Nov. 1934, DVP, xvii. 667–8; and Simon's note on the interview with Maiskii, 9 Nov. 1934, N6462/16/38, PRO FO 371 18305.


Sir R. Vansittart replied in all good humour that he thought M. Maisky’s Government were far too full of suspicions; indeed, they seemed to be obsessed by them. He did not in the least object to the Ambassador ventilating them with him; indeed, he welcomed it, for suspicions were like a diseased tooth, and it was much better to have them out.

The two men exchanged further observations about the hostility of their respective presses, both sides being extremely sensitive to abuse. Maiskii hoped to remove these sources of friction for ‘what he really had in mind was a desire to accelerate the progress of Anglo-Soviet relations.’

He reminded Sir R. Vansittart that, in their last interview, he had said that, when relations were good and normal, he thought not only that they could well look after themselves, but that this was the best course. He agreed that relations were good, but good only as compared with the rather stormy period from which they had emerged. He would like, in fact, to see the stormy period succeeded by more warmth and favourable wind and sun.45

This meeting had a strong impact on Foreign Office officials. ‘The USSR was born into a world filled with suspicion’, minuted George Mounsey, Assistant Permanent Under-Secretary.

Its own genesis and youth were such as to necessarily foster this general atmosphere & suspicion on the part of its neighbours; and suspicion consequently within its own bosom. So it is not surprising to find this obsession still keeping a heavy hand on the Soviet and their representatives. But it is [emphasis in the original], I think a good sign and a step in advance that the latter will now come forward and voice their doubt and grievances . . .

All the more reason, therefore, to reassure the Soviet in any way we usefully can. But this must take time and can be achieved better by deeds than by words.46

Collier reported that Maiskii had heard loose talk in the House of Commons from unnamed MPs about Anglo-Japanese co-operation. Such ‘foolish language’, as Vansittart put it, had come from no less than two Under-Secretaries of State. ‘For my own part,’ minuted Collier, ‘I find it difficult to understand how anyone in his senses could advocate any policy which would strengthen Japan . . . our most dangerous and implacable enemy.’47 Vansittart confronted Maiskii and denied that the loose talk had any official standing. He also raised – to keep the balance even and ‘as a friend’ – the continuing British grievance. ‘It was really time that any interference by the Comintern in our domestic affairs should cease.’ I have ‘un-impeachable knowledge’, said Vansittart, ‘that such interference . . . [is] going on’. Maiskii interrupted that he knew nothing about it. But Vansittart had no doubt, and he told Maiskii that ‘it was most important for the Soviet Government and/or the Comintern . . . to stop it’. Vansittart had said it all before: there were ‘more important fish to fry’; Maiskii shouldn’t offer a pretext to those who want to block an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. Vansittart ‘repeated that, from the Soviet point of view, the horizon was surely not so unclouded as to permit of these goings-on, and

45 Simon to Chilston, no. 612, 27 Dec. 1934, N 7104/16/38, PRO FO 371 18306.
46 Minute by Mounsey, 31 Dec. 1934, ibid.
that this little game was emphatically not worth the candle compared with the greater and more real problems of European politics.\textsuperscript{48}

At the end of 1934 Anglo-Soviet relations were about as good as they had ever been during the interwar years, though the improvement was mostly talk between Vansittart and Maiskii. At the outset, talk was important, but a real rapprochement would have to move on to action, as Mounsey duly noted. Relations had come some way since the beginning of the year when Foreign Office officials winced at attending a Soviet luncheon. Nazi Germany continued to provide an incentive for further development of the rapprochement.

III

In January 1935 the Nazis won an overwhelming majority in a plebiscite in the Saar for re-unification with Germany. This was not one of Hitler’s sham elections, the plebiscite was League-organised. Vansittart was deeply worried. ‘With every month that passes’, he wrote, ‘I obtain more evidence that confirms my suspicions & convictions as to Germany’s ultimate policies & intentions. I think they will soon become evident to all but the biased and the blind.’\textsuperscript{49}

The ‘biased and the blind’ were nevertheless represented in important numbers inside and outside HM Government. Among them was Philip Kerr, Lord Lothian, who visited Berlin to ‘hobnob’ with Hitler in February 1935. The \textit{Times} let loose a campaign, featuring Lothian’s statements in Berlin: ‘Herr Hitler \ldots has said explicitly to me, as he has also said publicly, that what Germany wants is equality, not war; that she is prepared absolutely to renounce war \ldots’.\textsuperscript{50} ‘Balderdash,’ snarled Vansittart, Lothian is ‘an incorrigibly superficial Johnny-Know all’.\textsuperscript{51}

‘This was the kind of thing we had to listen to, day in, day out,’ remembered anti appeaser A. L. Rowse.\textsuperscript{52} Litvinov, who heard it also, figured that the British Government would only agree to security commitments in the West, and that it would persuade France to abandon the conclusion of an Eastern pact. Chilston reported Soviet anxiety, and Vansittart called in Maiskii to talk.\textsuperscript{53}

I told him, recorded Vansittart, ‘exactly what I think of Lord Lothian \& the Times \ldots & I don’t care who knows it’. He advised Chilston to give the same message to Litvinov.\textsuperscript{54} Maiskii did, too: it was a ‘preposterous’ idea, said Vansittart, to think that Great Britain could profitably untie Hitler’s hands in the East. Maiskii quoted Vansittart as saying: ‘We need to look at things realistically \ldots. The basic

\textsuperscript{48} Simon to Chilston, no. 613, confidential, 27 Dec. 1934, N7155/16/38, PRO FO 371 18306.

\textsuperscript{49} Minute by Vansittart, 9 Feb. 1935, C1076/55/18, PRO FO 371 18825.


\textsuperscript{51} Minute by Vansittart, 4 Feb. 1935, C785/55/18, PRO FO 371 18824.

\textsuperscript{52} Rowse, \textit{Appeasement}, 33.


\textsuperscript{54} Minute by Vansittart, 20 Feb. 1935, C1339/55/18, PRO FO 371 18826; and Vansittart to Chilston, private, 21 Feb. 1935, \textit{ibid}. 
fact, in Vansittart’s opinion, remains unchanged: in Europe has emerged an armed and rapidly rearming Germany, the true intentions of which no one knows precisely. This situation (similar also to that before 1914) is pushing together the countries bordering on Germany.’

Let’s not dredge up old quarrels, said Vansittart. ‘Our task now is to work on the improvement of Anglo-Soviet relations . . . . The past should be left to lie in the grave; we need to think about the future.’ Litvinov was nevertheless not fully reassured by Maiskii’s report.55 Vansittart sensed the Soviet disquiet, and wrote to Chilston: ‘We are very conscious of the importance of Russia in the present situation and of not doing anything which might make her feel that we and France were going to leave her in the lurch and that therefore she had best make terms with Germany before it is too late . . . ’.56

Vansittart also put up a paper to the Cabinet, making similar points. ‘For nearly a year it has been becoming increasingly evident that Russia is suffering from the fear of Germany which now animates, or paralyses, Europe.’ Russian policy has changed; Comintern propaganda has diminished; the Soviet Government wants better relations with Great Britain. ‘These things have a significance which we, as realists [emphasis added], must not miss; we must not overrate the change of heart, and we must not underrate the uses to which it can be turned in the acute world-problem ahead of us.’

Soviet fear of Nazi aggression had caused the formation of two schools in the Soviet Government: one led by Litvinov and the other by the Commissar for War, Voroshilov. Litvinov’s policies ‘were to our profit both politically and economically’; Voroshilov advocated the traditional policy of rapprochement with Germany, a position which, Vansittart warned, should not be discounted in spite of Hitler’s virulent anti-communism. ‘It is manifest’, concluded Vansittart, ‘that our interest lies in the predominance of the Litvinov school . . . ’. To strengthen it, the British Government should accept Maiskii’s often proffered suggestion of a visit to Moscow by a British minister. It would be ‘at little or no cost to ourselves’, and Maiskii has been ‘pressing’: a rebuff would damage Litvinov’s ‘precarious prestige’.57

At the same time, Maiskii, on Litvinov’s instructions, saw Simon about waning British support for an Eastern pact.58 Simon gave assurances; and after some misgivings, the Cabinet agreed to send Eden to Moscow, though the Foreign Secretary was also to go to Berlin. Simon’s visit was postponed because of Hitler’s diplomatic ‘indisposition’ after the publication on 4 March of a British Defence

56 Vansittart to Chilston, 21 Feb. 1935, as cited in n. 54 above.
White Paper calling for increased military expenditure. On 9 March the Nazi Government announced the existence of the *Luftwaffe*. On 13 March Maiskii reported seeing Simon about the upcoming visit: ‘Eden’s visit will have, according to Simon, historic importance, as visible evidence that “Russia has returned to Europe” and become an integral part of European politics’. Three days later, in defiance of Versailles treaty obligations, Hitler announced the re-introduction of conscription and the existence of a German army of 500,000 men. These actions were a further incentive for better Anglo-Soviet relations.

But then HM Government bungled. On 18 March, only two days after the last Nazi decree, it announced without consulting France or the USSR that the Simon visit to Berlin was back on. ‘I had never contemplated that H.M.G. were going to rush their fences in this tragic manner . . . ‘ minuted Vansittart. ‘We have forfeited confidence all round . . .’. It was scarcely a way to encourage old or new friends. Vansittart hastened to limit the damage; on 22 March Eden and Vansittart saw Maiskii, stressing the importance of Eden’s visit for the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement.

‘We are also interested’, replied Maiskii, ‘in establishing friendly relations between our countries . . . But friendship must be expressed not only in words but in deeds.’ The Soviet Government was worried about Simon’s rescheduled visit to Berlin. ‘In all relations with Hitler,’ insisted Maiskii, ‘the British must demonstrate firmness, firmness, and still more firmness. Any weakness in Berlin, would create further difficulty in Moscow.’ Eden and Vansittart replied that no European settlement would be possible without ‘the active participation of the USSR.’ Nazi policy, of course, was to sow discord between the French, British and Soviet Governments. Hitler fulminated against the danger of bolshevism, and he accused the USSR and France of trying to ‘encircle’ Germany. These were lines which appealed to many Tories and to certain Foreign Office officials.

On the eve of Eden’s visit to Moscow, two important themes characterised Anglo-Soviet relations. In December 1934, Assistant Under-Secretary Mounsey had stressed the importance of deeds in improving relations with the USSR. Maiskii also adopted this line, which he may well have heard from Vansittart. The other theme was ‘realism’, a term often employed by Vansittart to describe the driving force behind his policies. ‘I am not anti-German,’ he explained to Sir Eric Phipps, the British ambassador in Berlin,

I consider that the military preparations, both material and moral, being made by Germany . . . far exceed in dimensions anything which could possibly or conceivably be necessary for . . . the maintenance of [internal] order, alone. If these warlike preparations of body and spirit and steel were changed, I should be the first to change also with a great sigh of relief . . . But until those facts, and they are facts, are changed I am not going to have my attitude changed by words alone.

59 Orme Garton Sargent, Assistant Permanent Under-Secretary, to Sir Eric Phipps, British ambassador in Berlin, 7 March 1935, *DBFP*, xii. 616–18.
60 Maiskii to Narkomindel, 13 March 1935 (two cables), *DVP*, xviii. 172–3, 625.
61 Minute by Vansittart, 19 March 1935, N524/17/38, PRO FO 371 19450.
I deal in plain speaking, said Vansittart, and ‘I expect from those who work with me in the Foreign Office . . . to be realists as I am’. Maiskii picked up on this theme in his correspondence to Moscow. For Vansittart, Maiskii reported, ‘“realist” is a synonym for someone who recognises all the seriousness of the German threat’. In his memoirs, Maiskii observed that, in regard to Anglo-Soviet relations, there were two main British political groupings: the one, driven by ‘class hatred’, held the upper hand over the other, motivated by ‘state interests’. Eden’s views were close to Maiskii’s; he remembered that the Cabinet was ‘unenthusiastic’ about Anglo-Soviet relations, some members ‘regarding communism as anti-Christ’. And if the Nazi menace caused other Cabinet members ‘to consider supping with the devil . . . [they] doubted whether he had much fare to offer’.

Eden’s visit, nevertheless, went off without difficulties. Litvinov warmly welcomed the Lord Privy Seal to Moscow, adopting Simon’s words to Maiskii, about the ‘historic importance’ of the visit. But Litvinov had to be satisfied with more talk because ‘deeds’, as Maiskii had advised on the eve of the visit, were not to be done. Most of the talk was between Eden and Litvinov, but Stalin and V. M. Molotov, chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, also joined one of three meetings on 28–29 March. Discussions were in most respects a recapitulation of the Maiski–Vansittart exchanges of the previous nine months. Eden gave an account of Simon’s meetings in Berlin, but the real topic of discussion was the Nazi threat to peace. ‘Mr. Eden said that the British Ministers had gone to Berlin to find out whether Germany was likely to play her part in European security. If not, and it rather looked as though this was the case, a good deal of hard thinking would be necessary.’

‘We do not have the slightest doubt’, said Litvinov, ‘about German aggressiveness. German foreign policy was inspired by two basic ideas – revanche and domination over Europe.’ Hitler counted on continuing Anglo-Soviet antagonism to further his aims, and ‘he obviously considered that hatred of the Soviet Union in the world at large was so great as to excuse any adventure on his part’. It was too early to say in which direction Hitler would strike first, but he would strike somewhere. Litvinov added that he thought ‘Germany had not forgotten the lessons of history, demonstrating that if one could sometimes invade [Russia], it was not so easy to remain there or to withdraw without loss’.

The Soviet Government were concerned not merely for their own frontiers, but for peace in Europe. They had enough work to do at home to keep them busy for half a century and it would take them decades to catch up with the rest of the world in technical developments and the standard of life. They did not want to be disturbed and they believed that a war in

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63 Vansittart to Phipps, 5 March 1935, DBFP, xii. 605–6.
65 Maiskii, Vospominaniia, 142–3, 289.
68 Maiskii to Narkomindel, 22 March 1935, as cited in n. 62 above.
Europe, even if they were not directly involved, would eventually drag them in. It was for this reason that they strongly supported the idea of collective security . . .

As the discussions continued, Eden avowed that the British Government was ‘not so convinced’ as the Soviet of German aggressiveness, and that it ‘had hitherto wished not to believe badly of Germany’s intentions’. Germany wanted ‘to keep her hands free’, replied Litvinov: Molotov had challenged Hitler to renounce his designs for conquest in the USSR, outlined in Mein Kampf. The Führer did not respond, though the Soviet Government construed his silence to be an answer of sorts. Litvinov repeated his concerns about the vacillation of British policy. ‘It was perfectly true that Soviet public opinion was highly suspicious . . . . If any government shows signs of being too indulgent towards Germany, the Soviet public jumped easily to unfavourable conclusions.’

Discussions about ‘propaganda’ also ensued, unfolding along the same lines as those between Vansittart and Maiskii. Eden admitted that ‘Anglo-Soviet relations had been a party matter in England for a long time . . .’. Litvinov eventually replied that grievances over propaganda ‘usually served as a cover for an anti-Soviet policy’. Although Eden did not say it, this was sometimes a Foreign Office view also.

The meeting with Stalin and Molotov took place on 29 March. Stalin considered present circumstances to be more dangerous than in 1913 because of two potential aggressors. Eden thought the situation ‘anxious’ though not ‘alarming’. Stalin restated Litvinov’s views, but noted that future European security, or the lack of it, would depend on British policies. As the official conversation ended, Molotov invited Eden to take tea. Relaxing, Eden noticed a large and beautiful wall map and commented on the size of the USSR. Stalin jokingly replied, ‘Yes, a large country, but with many problems.’ Eden then remarked on the small size of the British Isles in comparison.

‘A small island,’ replied Stalin, ‘but on which much depends.’ ‘What if this small island said to Germany: We will give you neither money, nor raw materials, nor steel, – peace in Europe would be assured.’ The Soviet record of the meeting noted that Eden made no reply. Litvinov saw Eden off to the railway station, wishing him well. ‘Your success’, he said, ‘will be our success – now.’ Eden had his doubts; Vansittart would have had them, too, as he read over the record of Eden’s meetings. Vansittart’s view of Nazi Germany was far closer to Litvinov’s than it was to Eden’s. Their divergence of opinion would not facilitate the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement

69 ‘Record of an Anglo-Soviet conversation held at the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, Moscow, on March 28, 1935, at 3 p.m.’, DBFP, xii. 771–84; Chilston, no. 46, 28 March 1935, C2608/55/18, PRO FO 371 18832; and ‘Record of a conversation of the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs with the Lord Privy Seal of Great Britain Eden’, 28 March 1935, DVP, xvii. 228–39.

70 ‘Record of an Anglo-Soviet Conversation . . . on March 29 at 11.30 a.m.’, DBFP, xii. 784–91; ‘Record of a conversation with Eden’, 29 March 1935, DVP, xviii. 240–5; and Bateman’s interesting minute and draft answer to a Parliamentary Question, 19 April 1932, N2418/22/38, PRO FO 371 16319.


72 Eden, Dictators, 180.
when Eden became Foreign Secretary in December 1935 and the time came to move from words to deeds.

IV

In the meantime, the Foreign Office was divided over the issue of Franco-Soviet relations. The French and British Governments were scarcely on the best of terms. They were like a married couple who were still intimate, but cheated and bickered constantly. In 1933–4, the French pursued a resolute course for security against Nazi Germany; the British thought in terms of disarmament and accommodation, and considered the French to be insensitive and belligerent. ‘France was “a bad show” . . . ’ in some British circles, noted Vansittart, though the French reciprocated the disaffection.73 ‘Bad show’ or not, while the hard-nosed Barthou was in the Quai d’Orsay, he commanded respect in London for French foreign policy.

In power politics, strength is respected; weakness is not. After the assassination of Barthou by Croatian fascists in October 1934, the French compass went awry and the Foreign Office noticed. Pierre Laval, a lapsed socialist, became Foreign Minister and obstructed the Franco-Soviet rapprochement. He feared the spread of communism in France, and made no secret of his preference for a settlement with Nazi Germany. Hitler was unresponsive, and French partisans of Barthou’s policy were strong enough to push Laval reluctantly forward. Litvinov was disquieted by French political developments, and so were Foreign Office officials, though for different reasons.74

Orme Sargent, Assistant Permanent Under-Secretary, opposed closer Franco-Soviet relations. It was proxy opposition to the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. In January 1935 he wrote a long memorandum against further British support for an Eastern pact, a Russian conception, he said, bound to fail because of German and Polish opposition. Litvinov really wanted a Franco-Soviet alliance, and the French, unable to obtain adequate British security guarantees, and having ‘lost faith’ in the Poles (who had negotiated a non-aggression pact with Germany in January 1934), ‘felt compelled to accept Russia’s offer of co-operation’. But the French were not entirely persuaded of ‘Russia’s honesty’ or of a Franco-Soviet community of interests, and wanted to avoid ‘an all-embracing alliance if they could help it, especially as they realised that such an alliance would shock and offend Great Britain’.

Continued British support for the Eastern pact, argued Sargent, would play into German hands, allowing Hitler to attract sympathy from British public opinion. A Franco-Soviet alliance would be ‘a first step’ towards ‘a return to the pre-war grouping of Powers’. This prospect was ‘so horrible’ that the British Government should press the French Government to adopt new policies. ‘We too have means of

73 Vansittart, Procession, 474.
influencing the French Government, and British support and approval is still of
great value to France.75

Sargent attracted opposition: polite and politic from Vansittart, but barbed and
caucus from Collier. Vansittart agreed that they ought to find an alternative to the
Eastern pact which would be acceptable to Germany. But he disagreed that the
British Government should attempt to pressure the French into refusing a Soviet
alliance. 'Silence would be best on our part. We could not of course approve. But I
don't think we should lecture.'76

Sargent noted that the different Foreign Office departments had 'somewhat
divergent' views, and he suggested a memorandum trying to reconcile them.77 The
opposite occurred: the memorandum ignited the simmering dispute. Collier, R. F.
Wigram, head of the Central Department, and C. W. Orde, head of the Far Eastern
Department, wrote the piece which concluded, inter alia, that the British Govern-
ment ought to be prepared to envisage the conclusion of a Franco-Soviet mutual
assistance pact.78

'A wise & excellent memo,' Vansittart minuted. 'We must not for a moment
imagine that it is only a French interest to "ménager" Russia. On the contrary it is
very much a British interest also; and we must have this fact constantly present to
our minds, if we are to be the political realists, which the gravity of the times
demands.'79 Sargent returned to the charge, but Vansittart held him off. A Franco-
Soviet alliance was not desirable, Vansittart admitted. 'But if it happens we shall
have to make the best of it, as of many other things in an imperfect world.'80 Collier
refused to sign a compromise memorandum which implied that a Franco-Soviet
accord should be discouraged. To resolve the impasse, Vansittart signed a modified
draft which stood between the opposing positions of Sargent and Collier, though,
to be sure, closer to the latter.81

Vansittart’s signature did not end the dispute. While preparations unfolded for
Eden’s trip to Moscow, Sargent hammered away, not liking too close a relationship
with the USSR: 'We don’t want to give them an exaggerated sense of their own
importance or to suggest to them that they can dictate our German policy to us.'82
And Sargent strongly discounted the possibility of a Soviet–German rappro-
chement – which often worried the French. This was a ‘bluff, sneered Sargent; it
was the 'argument which Litvinov has used all along in order to bring the French
Government up to the scratch . . .'.83 Sargent also restated his abhorrence of a return

76 Minute by Vansittart, 28 Jan. 1935, ibid.
77 Minute by Sargent, 6 Feb. 1935, C869/55/18, PRO FO 371 18824.
79 Minute by Vansittart, 13 Feb. 1935, ibid.
80 ‘Sir R. Vansittart’, Sargent, 20 Feb. 1935; Vansittart’s various marginal notes, ibid.; and Collier
to Sargent, 20 Feb. 1935, ibid.
1935, DBFP, xii. 559–63, or N880/135/38, PRO FO 371 19460.
82 Minute by Sargent, 19 Feb. 1935, C1339/55/18, PRO FO 371 18826.
83 ‘Memorandum by Mr. Sargent’, 7 Feb. 1935, DBFP, xii. 501–2; and Sargent’s minute, 1 April
1935, C2656/55/18, PRO FO 371 18833.
to ‘the pre-war system of the balance of power’. Collier countered that ‘we are . . .
already back in the days of the “balance of power”’.
Sargent paid no mind. ‘British opinion might look askance at the idea of co-operating very closely with a French Government whose foreign policy was controlled by a Franco-Russian alliance’. The French had ‘let themselves be bluffed and dazed by Russian threats and promises’.

If Russia is allowed to dictate to France – and ourselves – the conditions on which we are to carry on its [sic] affairs of Western Europe – and that is what it is rapidly coming to – we may say goodbye to any European settlement. We shall have all our time cut out in pulling the chestnuts out of the fire for M. Litvinov

Sargent’s opposition was unrelenting: ‘If . . . we closed to Germany all means of expansion in the east, where she is less likely to come into conflict with British, or indeed any other, interests than elsewhere, we must be prepared for German pressure down the Danube to be increased proportionately.’ Ambassador Phipps warned against putting up too much ‘barbed wire’ in the east or south, lest the Nazi ‘beast’ head west. Sargent agreed. ‘I have never quite been able to accept the truth of M. Litvinov’s dictum about the “indivisibility of peace” . . .’. Litvinov would have cried foul, but Sargent did not care a pin, and he repeated that British opinion would view a Franco-Soviet alliance ‘with the gravest suspicions’. Vansittart allowed his irritation to show. ‘Well, so do I, and so, I think do we all.’ But as long as Germany remained ‘obdurate’, Great Britain would have to support collective security ‘with or without Germany’. ‘There is no other way, and we must now face facts and Europe as they are and not as we would wish them in a more reasonable world.’ Central Department head Wigram backed this view. ‘We are now in the realm of stern reality. It is useless any longer to play with words.87

Sargent sent instructions to Clerk in Paris to remind the French Government not to go beyond its Locarno obligations in any pact with the Soviet. Maiskii heard about it, and saw Vansittart on 26 April to ask if the British Government would oppose the Franco-Soviet and Czech-Soviet mutual assistance pacts, then nearing conclusion. Maiskii reported that he had asked the question twice, but both times Vansittart repeated that the British Government would not oppose the pacts, and that this was ‘not only his personal opinion, but also the opinion of the government’. Vansittart cautioned that it was ‘very important’ to keep the pacts ‘“within the bounds of the League of Nations” for this mystical phrase, as he put it, will greatly facilitate favourable or at least tolerant opinion toward the pacts in British political and press circles.88

85 Minute by Sargent, 22 March 1935, N1313/53/38, PRO FO 371 19456.
86 Phipps to Sargent, 4 April 1935, C2892/55/18, PRO FO 371 18834; and Sargent’s minute, 12 April 1935, ibid.
87 Minutes by Sargent, 1 April 1935, Vansittart, 1 April 1935, C2656/55/18, PRO FO 371 18833; and Wigram, 3 April 1935, C2794/55/18, ibid.
88 ‘Eastern Pact’, Sargent, 18 April 1935, C3333/55/18, PRO FO 371 18837; Simon to Sir George R. Clerk, British ambassador in Paris, no. 108, 18 April 1935, ibid.; Clerk, no. 78 saving, 19 April 1935, DBFP, xii. 191–2; Litvinov to Maiskii, 25 April 1935, DVP, xviii. 299; Maiskii to Narkomindel, 26
Litvinov was not sure, having heard more rumours of British pressure on the Quai d’Orsay to weaken or block the Franco-Soviet pact. ‘Go see Vansittart about this,’ Litvinov tersely instructed.\(^8^9\) When Maiskii did, Vansittart repeated his assurances. ‘Of course, in England, there are people who want and consider possible an agreement with Germany. Important educational work is still necessary for the appropriate restructuring of British public opinion.’ HM Government was coming around, said Vansittart, as he tried to calm Soviet apprehensions – and perhaps his own as well.\(^9^0\) If Maiskii had known of Sargent’s views, he would have been dismayed. On 2 May Simon reinforced Vansittart’s position by declaring in the House of Commons that the Franco-Soviet pact was in effect acceptable to the British Government.\(^9^1\) As far as Sargent was concerned, this was public relations, and did not in the least change his view that Litvinov had ‘browbeat the French, in a moment of panic’, into concluding ‘a one-sided [Soviet] bargain’.\(^9^2\) The pact was signed in Paris on 9 May, and French Foreign Minister Laval went to Moscow to consummate the new Franco-Soviet relationship.

V

For the time being, the Foreign Office put Franco-Soviet relations to the side, and turned to other matters. On 28 May Maiskii met Vansittart to discuss the implications of Hitler’s latest ‘peace speech’, promising the usual good intentions and railing against bolshevism. Vansittart, taking the cue, objected to Comintern subsidies for the British communist paper the *Daily Worker*. There’s no use in denying it, Vansittart said, ‘the matter was not open to argument’. The subsidies are ‘a waste of money’, and self-defeating on the level of ‘high policy which should not be occupied with or disturbed by petty considerations...’.\(^9^3\) ‘Propaganda’ was never far from the Foreign Office mind; it hung like a millstone round the neck. For the Soviet, however, ‘propaganda’ was like bad temper, and part of the rough and ready of relations with the capitalist West. Ironically, the Comintern went over to a ‘united front’ strategy against fascism in 1935, which instead of reassuring Anglo-French conservatives, disquieted them all the more.\(^9^4\)

Litvinov watched British policy closely, worrying to Maiskii about possible vacillation towards Nazi Germany. Inform Vansittart, he wrote, that the Soviet Government opposes any side deals with Hitler, guaranteeing security in one part of

April 1935, *ibid.*, 301–2; and Simon to Noel Charles, British chargé d’affaires in Moscow, no. 227, 2 May 1935, C3251/55/18, PRO FO 371 18838.

\(^8^9\) Litvinov to Maiskii, 29 April 1935, *DVP*, xviii. 305–6.


\(^9^1\) Corbin, nos 573–7, 4 May 1935, *DDF*, x. 475–6.

\(^9^2\) Minute by Sargent, 4 May 1935, C3613/55/18, PRO FO 371 18838.

\(^9^3\) Memorandum by Vansittart, 28 May 1935, N2761/998/38, PRO FO 371 19467.

Europe but not in another. On 6 June Maiskii delivered the message. Vansittart replied with the usual assurances, and he advised 'privately' that Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary for India, would be replacing Simon as Foreign Secretary. Vansittart was 'somewhat concerned' that the appointment might be greeted, 'as it were . . . with bayonets', because of Hoare's previous anti-bolshevism. Don't worry about Hoare, said Vansittart, he is 'a realist'. He will soon invite you in for a talk; then you will see that you have nothing to fear. Maiskii commented that deeds, not words, would determine the Soviet view of the reshuffled Cabinet.

On 12 June Maiskii met Hoare for the first time to convey Litvinov's concerns. The new Foreign Secretary replied evasively, not wanting to be cornered by the ambassador's 'legalistic cross-examination of our attitude'. Hoare countered by raising the propaganda question, along the usual lines. 'I thought it worth telling him', noted Hoare, 'that it would be extremely difficult to persuade the Conservatives in this country to accept a pro-Russian policy if the Soviet Government failed to eliminate the source of trouble that had often poisoned our relations in the past.'

Hoare favoured 'the further development of political and economic relations', and hoped that the Soviet press would hold its fire on the new Cabinet. Deeds would determine the position, Maiskii replied. He warned Litvinov that Hoare, 'as the new man [in the Foreign Office] and wanting a success', might seek a quick agreement with Germany. We will have to wait and see.

In the meantime, Churchill continued to berate the Government for its miserly, shortsighted defence expenditures and policies. The British Government had started to rearm, but far too slowly for Churchill. On 14 June Vansittart invited Maiskii to his home for a dinner en famille. Winston was there. According to Maiskii, he 'had sought the possibility of chatting with me'. The conversation was 'long and interesting'.

Eighteen years ago, said Churchill, I led the struggle against the Russian Revolution because it threatened the British Empire. Now, times have changed; the USSR would not, in the short term, threaten the Empire. The question of propaganda is losing its importance. On the other hand, 'a new menacing danger has arisen in Germany . . . a huge, scientifically organized war machine, led by commonplace American gangsters'. Hitler's first advances would not be against the USSR – this would be too hazardous – but in central and south-eastern Europe in order to create a Mittel Europa. If Germany succeeded, 'England would become a plaything of German imperialism'. All those nations desiring peace would have to form a defensive alliance, 'but from a tactical-political point of view this alliance had to go by the pseudonym of "collective security" and exist under the aegis of the League of Nations'. Churchill's principal message, however, was more concrete. According to Maiskii,

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95 Litvinov to Maiskii, 3 June 1935, DVP, xviii. 371–2.
97 Memorandum by Hoare, 12 June 1935, N3187/17/38, PRO FO 371 19451; and minute by Hoare, 14 June 1935, C4564/55/18, PRO FO 371 18845.
98 Maiskii to Narkomindel, 13 June 1935, DVP, xviii. 393–4.
Churchill fully approved our pacts with France and Czechoslovakia and in general considers Soviet foreign policy very sensible, restrained, and without mistakes. In England there is now a strong tendency espousing the organization of ‘western security’ on the basis of agreement with Germany and the granting to it of freedom of action in the East, but Churchill is convinced that in the end the partisans of ‘indivisible peace’ and rapprochement with France and the USSR will win out. He himself is an advocate of this latter school. Churchill asked me only to keep in mind that victory would not come at once – there will be zig-zags, vacillation, etc. – and that we therefore must remain patient and restrained.

A ‘zig-zag’ occurred four days later, on 18 June, when the British Government signed a naval limitation agreement with Nazi Germany. Anglo-German negotiations were concluded on 12 June, the same day Hoare met Maiskii for the first time. Little wonder the new Foreign Secretary was diffident about Litvinov’s fretting over possible side deals with Hitler. If the new British Cabinet was to be judged by its deeds, it was off to a bad start.

The French and Italian Governments were angered by the agreement, as was the Soviet. ‘Great Britain had snatched at an apparent advantage’, said Maiskii, ‘as a greedy boy will snatch at a cake on the table; the result is likely to be an attack of indigestion . . . . Besides, what value do we really attach to Hitler’s promises?’ Foreign Office official Frank Ashton-Gwatkin tried to defend the British position. ‘Germans had told me that without armaments Germany would be regarded and treated as a second-rate country and they were tired of that, but that they do not want to fight.’ Go tell that story to your grandmother, Maiskii retorted. One Foreign Office clerk offered the lame excuse that the French had been given ten days’ prior notice, even suggesting that the Anglo-German agreement was the quid pro quo for the Franco-Soviet pact. It was, he said, in effect, each for himself – just the kind of attitude Hitler wanted to encourage.

VI

The Anglo-German naval agreement did not break the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement, though it aggravated Soviet mistrust of the British Government. Vansittart, still pressing the case for good relations with the USSR, suffocated from overpowering frustration at his inability to make the Government see the urgency of rearmament against Nazi Germany. We need to keep the Soviet ‘friendly’, he said, and we should not be led astray in pursuit of the ‘jack-o-lantern’ of placating Hitler. The pro-Germans at the Times and in the House of Lords were ‘living in a fool’s paradise’. Only ‘timely realism’ could lead the way out of ‘that dangerous

100 Report of meeting between Maiskii and Ashton-Gwatkin, 3 July 1935, N3423/135/38, PRO FO 371 19460.
101 Chilston, no. 533, 6 Dec. 1935, N6304/135/38, PRO FO 371 19460.
102 J. L. Dodds to Chilston, 16 Aug. 1935, N3888/17/38, PRO FO 371 19451.
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realm. 'There is not a week to lose,' Vansittart minuted later, in rearming against Germany.103

Vansittart seemed to hold the Government on course – if only barely. In July Hoare and the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, met Maiskii. The psalm of rapprochement – that there were no serious points of conflict between the two countries – was intoned once again. Baldwin, who was very cordial, suggested that increased trade would be the best way to strengthen friendly relations.104

Better trade relations, and in particular a British loan to the USSR, would test whether the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement could move from talk to deeds. The idea of a loan was not new: it had arisen periodically almost from the beginning of Anglo-Soviet relations. The Soviet Government needed a loan or long-term credits; in exchange, the British wanted Soviet orders and a settlement of tsarist debts to British nationals. Maiskii had again broached the idea in June 1934; and Foreign Office and Treasury officials began to consider it seriously at the beginning of 1935.105 From the outset, the loan had political implications. According to Vansittart, it would 'get rid of a troublesome dispute in our relations with Russia, which we both wish to improve in view of the clearly growing German menace.' A settlement would also satisfy British claimants, who had 'votes and friends'. Simon had concurred on both points.106 The Foreign Office idea was to combine a long-term loan to the USSR at above market interest rates, with the so-called 'Baring balances', former tsarist cash deposits in the Baring and other London banks, to settle British claims against the Soviet Government. The difference between the higher and market interest rates and the Baring balances would be used to pay off the claimants. In April 1935 Victor Cazalet, a Conservative MP and advocate of the claimants, broached the idea, as did Marshall of Becos Traders, who promoted it with Maiskii and the City. According to one Treasury official, improving Anglo-Soviet relations might make such an arrangement 'feasible'. Collier was of a similar opinion.107

Maiskii was incredulous 'that the present Government should ask Parliament to guarantee a loan to Russia'. And he discouraged any connection between a loan and a debts settlement. 'Anglo-Soviet co-operation was a new-born enfant... It might sicken at any disagreeable references to the past.' Soviet officials complained

103 Minutes by Vansittart, 17 May 1935, C3943/55/18, PRO FO 371 18840; 15 June 1935, C4564/55/18, PRO FO 371 18845; 5 July 1935, C5178/55/18, PRO FO 371 18847; and 9 Nov. 1935, C7647/55/18, PRO FO 371 18851.
104 Maiskii to Narkomindel, 17 July 1935, DVP, xviii. 457–8; and Maiskii to Narkomindel, 20 July 1935, ibid., 461–2.
105 Record of a conversation between Arthur G. Marshall, Becos Traders, and Leonard Browett, Board of Trade, by R. Kelf-Cohen, Board of Trade, 1 June 1934, N3506/16/38, PRO FO 371 18304; and Sir Frederick Leith-Ross, Treasury, to F. H. Nixon, Export Credit Guarantee Department, 1 Feb. 1935, PRO Treasury (thereafter PRO T) 160 791/F7438/10.
107 See various papers in N1883/1/38, 12 April 1935, and N2711/1/38, 28 May 1935, PRO FO 371 19447; Leith-Ross to Sir Horace Wilson, Treasury, and to Runciman, 9 May 1935, PRO T160 749/F14202/1; and minute by Collier, 27 June 1935, N3253/1/38, PRO FO 371 19448.
about high interest rates; Anglo-Soviet trade, they said, was like 'love without joy'. But British officials rejoined that if the USSR wanted cheaper, longer credit, it must settle British claims. Naturally, the Soviet Government preferred cheaper, longer credit without settling the claims, but Maiskii said it 'might be prepared to discuss' such an arrangement if convinced that the British meant business.\textsuperscript{108}

Opposition arose among officials in the Treasury, but especially at the Board of Trade, where from its lowest clerks to the president, Walter Runciman, antagonism to a Soviet loan was unstinting. Board of Trade resistance was ostensibly based on the risk of default being greater than if existing commercial credits were extended and increased, and premiums reduced. Runciman also opposed the loan for 'political reasons'. Treasury official S. D. Waley noted that 'guaranteed loans for foreign countries are usually unpopular ...'. The British press 'would no doubt feel that if we wanted to develop any country with guaranteed loans we had better choose our Colonial Empire rather than Communist Russia, and a good many people would sympathise with ... [this] view'. The economic difficulties were not 'insuperable ... the decision must really turn on the question whether a proposal to guarantee a loan for Russia is politically practicable'.\textsuperscript{109} Neville Chamberlain, the Chancellor, 'wasn't going to have any serious party difficulties over it. He thought Hailsham [Douglas Hogg, Lord Chancellor, and a Tory 'die-hard'] & his sort would be very hostile.'\textsuperscript{110} And one Treasury official thought that 'Litvinov is likely to claim a great diplomatic victory: he will not of course admit any obligation on Russia's part to compensate the claimants but will assert that he has persuaded the British Govt. to find the compensation themselves'.\textsuperscript{111}

Vansittart, supported by Hoare, promoted the loan proposal. 'From the FO point of view the loan is better business.'\textsuperscript{112} At the same time, Chilston observed that the loan would 'have a marked political effect on the European situation. The Soviet Government would certainly make use of such an event to prove that Great Britain really means more than what she says about the Eastern Pact and it would thus serve as a further weapon in the Soviet campaign against Germany.'\textsuperscript{113} Similarly, Ashton-Gwatkin had 'gained the impression that a loan from H.M.G. would restore in Soviet eyes the balance upset by the [Anglo-German naval]

\textsuperscript{108} Memo by Ashton-Gwatkin, 4 July 1935, N\textsuperscript{3}422/17/38, PRO FO 371 19451; minute by Collier, 29 July 1935, N\textsuperscript{3}844/17/38, \textit{ibid.}; 'Note of Conversation on 29th July, 1935', Leith-Ross, N\textsuperscript{3}870/17/38, \textit{ibid.}; 'Russia', Leith-Ross, 30 July 1935, \textit{ibid.}; 'Interview with Mr. Rosengolz, People's Commissar for Foreign Trade, on August 5th, 1935', Ashton-Gwatkin, N\textsuperscript{4}113/17/38, \textit{ibid.}; and 'Russia', by Waley [?], nd [but early Aug. 1935], PRO T\textsuperscript{160} 749/F\textsuperscript{14202}/1.

\textsuperscript{109} Minute by Dodds, 31 July 1935, N\textsuperscript{3}844/17/38, PRO FO 371 19451; and 'Sir Frederick Phillips', by Waley, 30 July 1935, PRO T\textsuperscript{160} 749/F\textsuperscript{14202}/1.

\textsuperscript{110} Donald Ferguson, private secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, [?] to Waley, personal, 8 July 1935, PRO T\textsuperscript{160} 749/F\textsuperscript{14202}/1.

\textsuperscript{111} Minute by Sir Frederick Phillips, Treasury, 26 Nov. 1935 on 'Russia', by Waley, 26 Nov. 1935, PRO T\textsuperscript{160} 749/F\textsuperscript{14202}/2.

\textsuperscript{112} Minutes by Vansittart, 31 July 1935, and Hoare, 4 Aug. 1935, N\textsuperscript{3}844/17/38, PRO FO 371 19451.

\textsuperscript{113} Chilston, no. 352E., 13 Aug. 1935, N\textsuperscript{4}113/17/38, PRO FO 371 19451.
agreement, as it would show the world that we trusted the Soviet Government'.

The proposal dragged during the summer of 1935 because of the mounting Abyssinian crisis and then because of national elections, which took place in November and led to a Conservative victory. Collier was impatient with the delays and tried unsuccessfully to 'get a move on'.

Board of Trade opposition blocked Collier’s efforts, but there was also opposition in the Foreign Office. Sargent, who disliked the Anglo–Soviet rapprochement as much as the Franco–Soviet, opposed the loan. His ire was aroused by a meeting in September between a British go-between and Litvinov in Geneva to discuss the loan and quid pro quo of a debts settlement. Litvinov ruled out a formal settlement, but said that the USSR would consider a long-term loan at over-market interest rates. The margin and the Baring balances could be used to pay off claimants, though the Soviet Government would not acknowledge that it was doing so. Litvinov said he would support such an arrangement and thought that his government might accept it. A month later Maiskii confirmed the position: what the British Government did with the proceeds of a long-term loan was not a Soviet affair.

For Sargent, it was too much like movement forward on an agreement. What, he asked, would Germany, Poland and France have to say? The loan ‘will have a very real political effect however much we may protest that it represents a purely financial arrangement. In fact, the matter ought to be considered as part of the whole of the European complex.’ Vansittart disagreed. ‘I don’t think we should hesitate on account of what any of these three countries may say. France will be jealous, Poland will perhaps be annoyed – but what expensive altruism has Poland ever displayed for us? As for the Germans, why, they have tried to do practically the same thing. We should only be succeeding where they failed . . . .’

Hoare was in favour, but Eden was not so sure. ‘What will the Russians do with the proceeds of a loan, spend some part of it in communist propaganda, here & elsewhere? This is an aspect of Russian policy that remains most unsatisfactory from our point of view.’ Collier intervened to reassure Eden. He was only reluctantly converted ‘in view of happenings in his constituency’.

Apparently, British communists criticised Eden during the election campaign, though the attacks could only have been a minor irritant – a mere gnat’s zinging in the ear. Eden won the constituency by a large majority. He held a grudge, nevertheless, and remembered it when Vansittart again pressed for the Soviet loan.

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114 Minutes by Dodds, 3 Sept. 1935, also 21 Aug. 1935, C6091/55/18, PRO FO 371 18850; and minute by Hoare, 4 Sept. 1935, N3844/17/38, PRO FO 371 19451.
117 Record of conversation between Ashton-Gwatkin and Maiskii, 8 Nov. 1935, N5808/17/38, PRO FO 371 19452.
‘I have no sympathy to spare for M. Maisky,’ minuted Eden. ‘I hope the next time M. Maisky comes with complaints he will be told that our goodwill depends on his Govt’s good behaviour; i.e. keep their noses & fingers out of our domestic politics. I have had some taste of the consequences of this lately & M. Maisky will get no sympathy from me. I am through with the Muscovites of this hue’.119 In fact, Eden soon made the point to Maiskii directly, though the Soviet ambassador held his own in the tit-for-tat conversation.120 Comintern propaganda rankled, but practical matters also arose to mute British complaints. H.M. Government needed Soviet support on Abyssinia, when this crisis developed during the summer.121

Restraint was short-lived. The Foreign Office strongly intervened with the BBC to stop a broadcast by British communist, Harry Pollitt. Vansittart put the case plainly. ‘So long as we are expected to make representations to the Soviet Government against Soviet propaganda in this country, it is clearly an embarrassment to have the B.B.C. lending themselves to that propaganda . . .’. ‘It seems to me,’ minuted the Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Lord Stanhope,

That the B.B.C. & its Board have not appreciated the point, which is that the spreading of Communism in this country is an offence and if undertaken by an individual in government service entails his dismissal . . . Why did they not give talks on cat burglary. Both were illegal but at any rate cat-burglary was more exciting and, to the individual, sometimes more lucrative.

I suggest that the illegality of preaching communism should be impressed on the B.B.C.122

The question dragged on until February 1936 when the Cabinet finally intervened to cancel the broadcasts. ‘Communist propaganda,’ said a Cabinet paper, ‘though probably ineffective in this country, remains a considerable danger in other parts of the Empire, particularly India.’ The hitch was that H.M. Government did not want to be seen to be intervening with the BBC. ‘Jolly good!’, thought the Cabinet, when the deed was done without disclosure.123

If ‘propaganda’ hindered Anglo-Soviet relations, other circumstances still favoured rapprochement. Collier saw the loan as a means of guaranteeing Soviet orders and ‘scooping’ the Russian market for British manufacturers.124 Competitors for Russian business – at that moment France and Nazi Germany were both negotiating with the USSR – roused those in the Foreign Office who favoured a

119 Memorandum by Vansittart, 18 Nov. 1935, N5966/17/38, PRO FO 371 19452; and note by Eden, 20 Nov. 1935, ibid.
120 Memorandum by Eden, 21 Nov. 1935, N6030/17/38, PRO FO 371 19452.
121 Minutes by Dodds to Oliphant and by Hoare, 28 Aug. and 1 Sept. 1935, N4283/17/38, PRO FO 371 19451.
123 ‘Proposed Broadcasts by the British Broadcasting Corporation’, CP 29 (36), secret, Eden, 7 Feb. 1936, Cabinet conclusions no. 6 (36), 12 Feb. 1936, and Cabinet conclusions no. 8 (36), 19 Feb. 1936, PRO FO 371 20344.
British loan.\textsuperscript{125} Hoare pressed the case, and he obtained Chamberlain’s consent, but not Runciman’s.\textsuperscript{126} Even Treasury officials had their doubts. Waley noted that the ‘Chambers of Commerce oppose a loan to Russia’. Sir Frederick Phillips, a Treasury Under-Secretary, thought ‘the F.O. proposal . . . a rather tactless line of approach which might easily get us into trouble’. And Chamberlain changed his mind. ‘The more I think of the loan proposal the less I like it.’\textsuperscript{127}

Impatience in the Foreign Office was palpable. Vansittart minced: ‘I am becoming most alarmed at these long delays . . . . We shall – as in other matters – miss a very large boat if we cannot make up our minds even now . . . .’ Frustration was equally palpable. ‘We are up against a determined effort by the Board of Trade’, noted Collier, ‘to obstruct the loan proposal at all costs.’ The Board of Trade has ‘constantly shifted the ground of their objection to the loan’; whenever we knock down one argument, they advance another.\textsuperscript{128} Maiskii ‘is beginning to wonder’, said Vansittart, ‘whether we really intend to do anything at all to improve Anglo-Soviet trade, or Anglo-Soviet relations generally’.\textsuperscript{129} No doubt Vansittart wondered also.

On the other hand, Chilston signalled from Moscow that Anglo-Soviet relations had never been better, though it would ‘take a long time’ before Soviet suspicions entirely disappeared. On 18 December Baldwin confirmed Chilston’s assessment in the House of Commons.\textsuperscript{130} At the same time Churchill had Maiskii over to dinner, perhaps to buck him up, but also to send a message to Moscow.

Germany is the greatest danger to the British Empire, said Churchill, it is rearming at break-neck speed, and in eighteen to twenty months, could ‘throw a torch in the powder keg’, provoking war. ‘In England there are influential pro-German circles, who want to allow Germany freedom of action in the East, but they are only a minority’. The Anglo-German naval agreement was a terrible mistake, but it should not be seen as the launching of an Anglo-German entente.

Recognition of the German danger is growing in British governing circles, but they still have not lost all hope that they can negotiate some acceptable compromise with Germany . . . . Time and events will teach them. But these circles do not want to irritate Hitler because they


\textsuperscript{126} Nixon to Waley, enclosing untitled memorandum, 17 Oct. 1935, PRO T\textsuperscript{1}60 791/F7438/10; ‘Russia’, Waley, 10 Oct. 1935, \textit{ibid.}; memorandum by Hoare, 28 Nov. 1935, N\textsuperscript{6}160/17/38, PRO FO 371 19452; and Hoare to Runciman, 4 Dec. 1935, \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{127} ‘Sir R. Hopkins [secretary, Treasury]’, Waley, 5 Dec. 1935, including Phillips’ minute, nd, PRO T\textsuperscript{1}60 749/F14202/2; and Chamberlain’s minute, 25 Dec. 1935, on ‘Mr. Rowan, Russia’, Waley, 25 Dec. 1935, \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{128} Minutes by Vansittart, 21 Dec. 1935, N\textsuperscript{6}684/17/38; and Collier, 28 Dec. 1935, N\textsuperscript{6}698/17/38, PRO FO 371 19452.

\textsuperscript{129} Vansittart to W. B. Brown, Board of Trade, 4 Jan. 1936, N\textsuperscript{6}6698/17/38, PRO FO 371 19452; and Collier to Waley, 23 Dec. 1935, N\textsuperscript{6}684/17/38, \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{130} Chilston, no. 533, 6 Dec. 1935, N\textsuperscript{6}304/135/38, PRO FO 371 19460; and parliamentary question, 18 Dec. 1935, N\textsuperscript{6}601/17/38, PRO FO 371 19452.
obviously fear him, especially considering the present unsatisfactory state of British armaments.

Churchill stressed common Anglo-Soviet interests, and their common enemies. ‘A strong and well armed Russia . . . was a direct British interest.' Churchill spoke well of the Red Army, said Maiskii; ‘he wants to say [to us]: “Arm, arm, arm yet again, for our common enemy is at the gates”'.131

Churchill offered the same advice to H.M. Government, but he could not persuade it to act with sufficient urgency and resources. Moreover, the Government got into trouble, trying to find a way out of the Abyssinian crisis. Hoare received the blame, and was forced to resign on 18 December. These events were not good news for Churchill or for other advocates of collective security. Nor was Churchill pleased by Anthony Eden's appointment as Foreign Secretary to succeed Hoare.132 Maiskii affected to have higher hopes. He wrote a letter of congratulations to Eden, recalling his visit to Moscow and stressing the importance of Anglo-Soviet relations. Eden acknowledged Maiskii's letter with a perfunctory single paragraph.133 The cursory reply was the first slight draft of the ill-wind to blow down the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement.

When Eden accepted his seals of office in December 1935, he was only thirty-eight years old. Many of his colleagues considered him to be inexperienced. He had a reputation for being precious and thin-skinned, as indeed was demonstrated by his over-reaction to criticism during the election campaign. On the other hand, Vansittart was a generation older, single-minded and not one to suffer fools gladly. He was used to having his way with Simon and Hoare, and he thought any idiot should see the clear and present Nazi danger to British security. In his memoirs, Eden characterised Vansittart as ‘a sincere, almost fanatical, crusader . . . more a Secretary of State in mentality than a permanent official'. The overly susceptible Eden had to prove who was boss – a task made easier because Vansittart had been implicated in the Abyssinian crisis which brought down Hoare and nearly brought him down also. Vansittart never recovered, but Eden would never let him.134

VII

These circumstances inevitably affected Anglo-Soviet relations in a year which Churchill predicted, would bring ‘measureless perils' to Europe.135 The Italian conquest of Abyssinia and the resulting damage to the League’s credibility weakened the possibilities of resistance to Nazi aggression. In the circumstances, it would

135 Manchester, Caged Lion, 166.
have been logical to strengthen ties with the USSR to counterbalance the setback in Abyssinia. The first order of business, therefore, should have been to proceed with the loan to the USSR, but it did not happen.

The simmering dispute between Sargent and Collier blew up again in December in the midst of the Abyssinian crisis. War and Foreign Office intelligence had picked up evidence of a possible improvement in German–Soviet relations. Collier used this intelligence to press the case for greater collaboration with the USSR and for the loan. Sargent strongly objected and tried to brake Collier’s enthusiasm for better Anglo–Soviet relations. The best way to combat a Soviet–German rapprochement, Sargent believed, was through a British policy of collaboration ‘with both [emphasis in the original] Germany and Russia, and more particularly with Germany . . .’. ‘We ought . . . to test Hitler’s intentions & sincerity, before putting all our eggs in the Russian basket.’ Although Vansittart declined to enter the debate, he noted that a Soviet–German rapprochement was not an ‘immediate possibility’ – unless ‘we mismanage the situation . . .’.

Maiskii saw Eden on 6 January 1936 to urge a deepening of the Anglo–Soviet rapprochement and the conclusion of the loan. Vansittart warned that Maiskii was getting impatient. ‘He is most [emphasis in the original] anxious that no further time should be lost, and professes himself unable to understand the delay.’ The loan would ‘counter all the premature talk of an agreement with Germany, to which M. Laval [the French premier] has given so much currency.’ And Vansittart added, as if to confirm Churchill’s statements to Maiskii in December 1935, ‘There is also a lot of loose talk and looser thinking on the subject here [emphasis in the original], of which he [Maiskii] is well aware.’

Sargent did not let Maiskii’s advocacy of the loan pass unchallenged. ‘May I put in a plea that . . . due consideration should be given to the political effects abroad of such action . . .’. The loan would ‘appear to public opinion throughout Europe as a highly significant act implying an unusual and close political co-operation between the two Governments’. And Hitler would claim that the loan was part of ‘the French encirclement policy’. Such developments would make it more difficult for the British Government ‘to come to terms with Germany’. Collier never accepted this line of argument, commenting months later that ‘The Germans would not hate the [Franco-Soviet] pact so much if it were not a real obstacle in their way’.

Eden, who liked Sargent’s argument better, still worried about Comintern propaganda, and was reluctant to take the loan to Cabinet. ‘I could do so’, he

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137 Maiskii to Narkomindel, 6 Jan. 1936, DVP, xix. 13–14; and Eden to Chilston, no. 11, 6 Jan. 1936, N120/20/38, PRO FO 371 20338.

138 Minute by Vansittart, 7 Jan. 1936, N120/20/38, PRO FO 371 20338; and memorandum by Collier, 7 Jan. 1936, N125/20/38, ibid.

139 Sargent to Vansittart, 9 Jan. 1936, N425/20/38, ibid.

140 Minute by Collier, 25 Nov. 1936, N5715/187/38, PRO FO 371 20347.
minuted, 'with more conviction were I not troubled with the suspicion that some at least of this money will find its way into communist propaganda in the Empire.' 'I don't trust [the Soviet],' Eden had commented earlier, '& am sure there is hatred in his heart for all we stand for.'

The Parliamentary Under-Secretaries, Lords Stanhope and Cranborne, also weighed in. 'I ask myself,' said Stanhope, 'what is our policy? Is it to improve our relations with Russia or [emphasis in the original] with Germany & Japan?'

I cannot say that I look with much enthusiasm on being friends with Russia or Germany or Japan – I mistrust them all, but I mistrust Russia most of the three. Apart from the fact that the 'Russian steam-roller' was of little benefit to us after 1916 . . . I share with S. of S. the suspicion that a good deal of this money is likely to be used for the break-up of the greatest bulwark against Bolshevism viz. the British Empire.

And Stanhope concluded, 'I think we must first decide as to our future policy – is it to be anti-German & pro-Russian or the reverse, or can we ride both horses simultaneously . . .'. Cranborne came to similar conclusions. The Soviet Government 'will remain unalterably malignant to the British Empire, & will intrigue against us whenever and wherever they can . . .'.

Vansittart replied that HM Government should look after its own interests in trade matters and 'not allow ourselves to be intimidated by rivals'. On the issue of European security, Vansittart doubted whether Germany could be 'brought back into the comity of nations' at a price which Great Britain could afford to pay. If we are unprepared to pay the price, said Vansittart, HM Government should not negotiate: 'until we know the answer to the possibilities of bringing Germany back, we ought to be careful to discourage no one who is in the same boat. There are many of them, and one happens for the present [emphasis in the original] to be Russia.'

Collier also replied in a long memorandum, recapitulating the arguments in favour of close Anglo-Soviet relations. If the Soviet Government wanted a British 'political gesture' in the form of a loan, 'they are actuated, not by a desire to attack Germany, but by fear of aggression from her'. If the British Government yielded to German pressure against a loan, the Nazis 'would deduce that we were too much afraid of them to hamper their ambitions in Eastern Europe'. Collier put heavy emphasis on the commercial advantages of a loan. As for Comintern activity, it 'is not likely to be much affected either way, but if anything, is more likely to be directed against other Governments if the Soviet Government enter into an arrangement which will given them as much interest in our stability as we shall have in theirs'.

'Very good special pleading,' commented Stanhope, who also complained that the loan proposal had gone 'straight up to the Permanent Under-Secretary & the S.'

142 Minutes by Stanhope and Cranborne, 14 Jan. 1936, ibid.
144 Memorandum by Collier, 23 Jan. 1936, N425/20/38, ibid.
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of S.' without wider vetting – where he and others could have blocked it.\textsuperscript{145} The issue was temporarily put aside until the return to London of Ambassador Phipps from Berlin.

The Soviet Government made a penultimate effort to lobby for the loan and for better relations. Litvinov saw Eden in January, pressing the case for collective security. Nazi Germany, he said, 'understood no other language than that of force'. Only a determined coalition of the European powers could discourage Nazi aggression. Litvinov warned Eden that some of his colleagues were beginning to doubt the wisdom of collective security. He blamed these doubts on Laval who had stalled ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact and been caught flirting with Hitler. But Litvinov stressed his continuing support for collective security – it was the only possible alternative – he wanted 'to do every thing in his power' to improve Anglo-Soviet relations.

'Was there not any further step that could be taken?' Litvinov asked.

'I could think of nothing new,' Eden replied.\textsuperscript{146} Sargent dismissed the Soviet position. 'M. Litvinov advocates the policy of encirclement pure and simple.' Collier rejoined that, "Encirclement" is a tenden-
cious (sic) word!'.\textsuperscript{147} Vansittart, who surely knew the battle for the loan was lost, did not give up the position, even though wounded by the Abyssinian crisis and by Eden's boyish efforts to prove who was master of the Foreign Office.

I have been willing to wait for Sir E. Phipps by way of fair play to those who think that our moves in this game should be governed by the fear of offending Germany & compromising our chances of a distant and hitherto undefined agreement – undefined even in our own minds . . . . In anticipation of that I would again urge that our guiding star should be our own interests and not a will o' the wisp. They are the only safe guide . . . .\textsuperscript{148}

Phipps, who came to London in early February, discouraged the loan because it would offer Hitler a pretext to reoccupy the Rhineland demilitarised zone. At the same time, possible French and German loans fell through, removing the threat of competition. The German embassy in London also applied pressure. Phipps was the last straw, but Eden’s mind was made up; he would not take the loan to the Cabinet.\textsuperscript{149} Vansittart and Collier, unpersuaded by Phipps, reckoned that Hitler would do what he could get away with, 'whatever the excuse or lack of it'. When Collier mentioned Phipps's objection to Board of Trade officials, they responded

\textsuperscript{145} Minutes by Stanhope, nd, and 14 Jan. 1936, N425/20/38, ibid.

\textsuperscript{146} Eden to Chilston, no. 56, 30 Jan. 1936, N622/20/38, PRO FO 371 20339.


\textsuperscript{148} Minute by Vansittart, 1 Feb. 1936, N515/187/38, PRO FO 371 20346.

\textsuperscript{149} 'Notes of meeting held in the Secretary of State's room at the Foreign Office on February 3rd, 1936', C979/4/18, PRO FO 371 19885; minutes by Wigram, 4 Feb. 1936, and Eden, 10 Feb. 1936, C835/4/18, PRO FO 371 19884; and Phipps, no. 29 saving, 15 Feb. 1936, and minutes, N923/187/38, PRO FO 371 20346.
‘with incredulous laughter’. Their laughter riled Sargent, but Collier was equally annoyed.\footnote{Collier to Chilston, secret, 5 Feb. 1936, N803/20/38, PRO FO 371 20339; and minutes by Collier, 10 Feb. 1936 and Sargent, 21 Feb. 1936, N756/187/38, PRO FO 371 20346; and Collier to Oliphant, 24 Feb. 1936, \textit{ibid}.}

Unaware of the Foreign Office’s rejection of the loan, Maiskii saw the Secretary for War, Duff Cooper, on 5 February, and Eden a few days later. Maiskii had no trouble with Cooper, who shared Churchill’s view of Germany, but did not make headway with Eden.\footnote{‘Record of a conversation . . . with . . . [Duff] Cooper’, Maiskii, 5 Feb. 1936, DVP, xix. 62–4; ‘Record of a conversation . . . with . . . Eden’, Maiskii, 11 Feb. 1936, \textit{ibid}., 73–80; and Eden to Chilston, no. 76, 11 Feb. 1936, N833/20/38, PRO FO 371 20339.} Collier lunched with Maiskii on 13 February to give him the bad news.

‘What [is] happening about the loan?’ Maiskii asked.

It’s ‘off’, Collier replied. The loan did not have sufficient support in the Cabinet. Longer credits had been approved, and this was ‘better than nothing’.

That’s ‘a pity’, said Maiskii, ‘a loan would have been worth . . . while for political reasons’, but credits were less interesting. Maiskii, who knew of the Board of Trade’s opposition, asked why the Foreign Office recommendation had been turned down. Collier could not say that Eden had blocked the loan, so he explained that the Cabinet anticipated strong opposition in the House of Commons – though Collier himself did not believe this to be so. The Foreign Office in general and he in particular favoured the loan, Collier said disingenuously, but not the Cabinet. The majority in the Cabinet wanted to trade with the USSR and were ready to lend money, ‘but they wanted to do it with the least possible commotion’. A long-term loan ‘would undoubtedly provoke a great hubbub and would have a large political effect’. Credits would reduce commotion to the minimum.\footnote{‘Record of a conversation . . . with . . . Collier’, Maiskii, 13 Feb. 1936, DVP, xix. 86–8; minute by Collier, 14 Feb. 1936, N833/20/38, PRO FO 371 20339; and Collier to Browett, Board of Trade, 14 Feb. 1936, N856/20/38, \textit{ibid}.} Obviously, Collier could not say that Eden and the two Parliamentary Under-Secretaries disliked Comintern ‘propaganda’, distrusted Soviet motives and did not want to irritate Hitler. Nor could he have wanted to say that he and Vansittart were isolated.

Sargent’s policy held sway. He argued against a visit by Duff Cooper to the USSR and, more importantly, against French ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact, which Laval had delayed for the seven months before his resignation at the end of January 1936. It is a ‘fatal policy’, said Sargent, ‘which can . . . only lead to one ultimate result, namely a European war in which the Soviet Government, in their capacity of agents of the Third International, would probably be the only beneficiaries’.\footnote{Minute by Sargent, 2 Jan. 1936, C1/1/17, PRO FO 371 19855.} A cogent argument for Eden, but he declined to intervene with the French, though Cooper’s visit was dropped. Eden even blocked a low-level War Office mission to study the Red Army, of which Sargent was contemptuous – in spite of
favourable estimates of growing Soviet military strength. These decisions took
place as the Cabinet struck a committee ‘to investigate the possibility of a general
understanding with Germany’. Sargent advised that the government should not do
anything ‘which might cause unnecessary irritation or suspicion in Germany’. Oliphant
described Sargent’s main question, as a matter of ‘Germany v Russia’.

Eden was readily outraged by Soviet ‘propaganda’, as when he read a Chilston
report of hostile Soviet press coverage of working-class living conditions in
England. Collier did not make much of it, but Eden bristled: ‘This article convinces
me that we should hold M. Maisky & his Govt. severely at arm’s length. We wish
for correct relations, but any cordiality towards a Govt. that behaves like this is
strongly to be deprecated’. Eden reiterated his position to Phipps. Essentially, it
was Sargent’s policy. ‘I am really anxious to avoid giving the Germans any pretext
as far as I can for believing that we are willing to join in a policy of encirclement.’ As
for the USSR, ‘I want the footing to be friendly ... but ... I have no illusions as to
the real feelings of the Soviet Government towards the capitalist State’.

Chilston spelled out some of the ‘unspoken assumptions’ which determined the
British position. For him, ‘any real friendliness ... of relations [with the Soviet] is
difficult to conceive’.

‘The immense difference in the system and institutions of the government, in
mentality, and in the conception of liberties of the subject, the fact that no
expression of public opinion and sentiment can have any outlet in this country ... all
these aspects make a broad gulf which for the present has no bridge, however
good may be political relations ...’. Chilston also echoed Eden’s objections to
communist propaganda.

Such is the hypocrisy of the Janus-headed Communist State which, facing both ways, stands
for peace for itself, peace in its own time, while simultaneously wishing to disturb
the internal security of those with whom it claims to collaborate for the ‘peace indivisible’
and collective security ... . Well might the stern rebuke of the prophet – ‘What hast thou to do
with peace?’ be applied to that State which protects, nurtures and uses the Comintern.

While HM Government could not set aside misgivings about close co-operation
with the Soviet, its ‘will o’ the wisp’ of placating Hitler looked foolish only a few
weeks later when, on 7 March, German troops marched into the demilitarised
Rhineland. We will be in for a rough time, Maiskii reported, because British
‘Germanophiles’ have their wind up, ready to be beguiled by Hitler’s protestations

154 Minutes by Eden, 29 March 1936, N1840/1298/38, PRO FO 371 20352; Sargent, 2 March
1936, C1081/4/18, PRO FO 371 19886; report by Colonel E. O. Skafe, British military attaché in
155 Minutes by Sargent and Vansittart, 1 Feb. 1936, and by Eden, 3 Feb. 1936, C573/92/62, PRO
FO 371 19879; ‘S. of S.’, Sargent, 19 Feb. 1936, N833/20/38, PRO FO 371 20339; and Oliphant’s
minute, 20 Feb. 1936, ibid.
156 Chilston, no. 96, 10 Feb. 1936, N880/20/38, PRO FO 371 20339; and minutes by Collier, 19
157 Eden to Phipps, private, 28 Feb. 1936, N1693/20/38, ibid.
20352.
of peaceful intent. 'If British press opinion is indicative of government policy', replied a morose Litvinov, 'it means a return to the policy of a prize to the aggressor, the break-up of collective security, and the end of the League of Nations.' Litvinov usually recovered quickly from bouts of pessimism. 'I am leaving today for Geneva', he advised, to see what can be done. In the meantime, Maiskii gave Cranborne assurances of Soviet support at the League, though not without warning once again that 'Germany had become, to use an American phrase, "Aggressor n° I"'.

Whatever 'the Soviet' might or might not have done about the Nazi occupation of the demilitarised zone, the British intended to do nothing. Churchill grumbled in the House of Commons corridors 'about funk versus national honour'. The French were bitter and angry, one French diplomat accusing the British of betrayal. The general mood 'was one of fear', noted National Labour MP Harold Nicolson. 'The country will not stand for anything that makes for war. On all sides one hears sympathy for Germany.' For Nicolson, 'pro-German' meant 'afraid of war'. The French, of course, had the most to lose, but they would not act without the British. The Rhineland crisis thus passed with a great wringing of hands, and no action to stop Hitler. And France lost the decisive strategic advantage provided by the demilitarised zone.

Maiskii soldiered on. On 2 April he saw Runciman; they discussed Anglo-Soviet trade, but they also talked about Hitler. After the stress of the Rhineland crisis, Runciman wanted to take the Easter holiday to get away. Maiskii chided that Hitler might spring another surprise and disturb his holiday. 'I asked Runciman', said Maiskii, 'what should now be done'. Runciman shrugged his shoulders. 'In such moments, as now, it is better to go slow, perhaps something turns up [original in English].'

A 'typical' reply of the 'old generation of British ministers', remarked Maiskii. 'Why not take Hitler at his word,' Runciman went on. 'If only one knew what he wanted.' Maiskii smiled: 'I can tell you . . . what Hitler wants.' And Maiskii proceeded to do so, stressing the importance of close Anglo-Franco-Soviet cooperation and a 'powerful League of Nations' to stop him. 'But this will mean the "encirclement" of Germany,' Runciman replied.

'I explained . . . the difference between "encirclement" and self-defence based on collective security,' Maiskii reported. Runciman countered that Hitler would still trumpet 'encirclement', and anyway, the strategy had not worked. It has not been tried, said Maiskii. There were many people in Britain who were afraid of Hitler, conceded the ambassador, but this is no reason to turn a blind eye to the aggressor. Maiskii warned of the early outbreak of a new war, unless a powerful system of collective security was created.

159 Maiskii to Narkomindel, 8 March, 1936, DVP, xix. 128–9; Litvinov to Maiskii, 9 March 1936, ibid., 130; Maiskii to Litvinov, 10 March 1936, ibid., 134; and untitled record of conversation with Maiskii by Cranborne, 10 March 1936, C1716/4/18, PRO FO 371 19890.

‘Is it possible so soon?’ asked Runciman. Maiskii reiterated his position, and Runciman conceded that these were ‘dangerous . . . difficult times’. So they were. I think, Maiskii concluded facetiously, that I may have spoiled Runciman’s mood on the eve of his holidays.161 The trouble was that the Soviet ambassador probably did not spoil Runciman’s mood in the least.

On the following day Maiskii and Churchill lunched together; according to one source, the two had become ‘bosom friends’.162 What a contrast in moods: Maiskii reported finding Churchill in a combative frame of mind: sooner or later Hitlerite Germany would have to be stopped. Of course, the Soviet Government needed no persuasion on this point, and Churchill’s real message to Maiskii was one of encouragement and prudence. ‘There are fools who attempt to draw a distinction between [security] in western and eastern Europe. Litvinov is right, peace in Europe is indivisible.’ But we have to work within the bounds of the League, because words like ‘union’ and ‘alliance’ would frighten British public opinion. Direct Soviet participation in an anti-German alliance would be premature; it could frighten some Conservatives. They are coming round, but their ‘previous enmity is still far from eliminated’. Churchill related, ‘with a laugh’, that he had recently given a speech at an old Tory club, where he had promoted ‘with his thick-headed friends’ the need for Anglo-Franco-Soviet co-operation against Germany. They had ‘swallowed’ the idea regarding France, but had objected to co-operation with the USSR. ‘I became angry,’ Churchill said, ‘and replied: “Be politicians and realists”.’

We would be the most complete idiots, if because of the hypothetical danger of socialism, threatening our children or grandchildren, we refused help from the USSR against Germany in the present. My arguments produced a very powerful impression on my dull-witted listeners, and they wavered somewhat in their implacability to your country. But such opinion has nevertheless to be taken into account . . . . In another year our Conservatives will be so frightened by the growth of German rearmament that they will even be able to swallow the Bolsheviks.163

Maiskii continued his rounds, seeing Eden at the end of April and Vansittart a fortnight later. He reproached Eden for the wavering in British policy towards Germany and Italy. Eden blamed public opinion, which was hostile to France. Maiskii retorted that the British Government should lead, and not be led by, public opinion. The only way to maintain peace in Europe was an Anglo-Franco-Soviet agreement. Not in the ‘Red spring’ of 1936, when British Tories saw France as ‘half-riddled’ with bolshevism because of the electoral success of the Radical-Socialist-Communist coalition, the Popular Front. Ambassador Phipps worried that the communist tail might wag the socialist dog. ‘By hook or by crook’, said Sargent, France had to be prevented from ‘going Bolshevik’ – even at the risk of ‘something very like interference in . . . [French] internal affairs’.164

162 Gilbert, Prophet, 723.
164 Maiskii to Narkomindel, 28 April 1936, DVP, xix. 248–50; Eden to D. MacKillop, British chargé d’affaires in Moscow, no. 247, 28 April 1936, C3231/4/18, PRO FO 371 19904; Phipps, no. 129
Vansittart thought the prospects were ‘very dangerous’, and that Austria or Czechoslovakia would likely be Germany’s next target. If nothing was done soon, Germany would establish its hegemony in central Europe. The British political situation was in complete disorder, according to Vansittart, but he hoped it would soon change for the better. Vansittart was bucking himself up as much as Maiskii. He was in a black humour in the spring of 1936: it was ‘uphill work’ steadying ‘foolish & ill-instructed’ British opinion. ‘Germany is certainly going to try to assimilate her neighbours in central and Eastern Europe’, and Vansittart did not see how to stop it ‘unless our own people is prepared to be at least three or four times as viril as it is now’. Collier was in better spirits. ‘Luckily for Anglo-Russian relations, the prospect of an Anglo-German agreement is rapidly receding!’ But two months later he was as worried as Vansittart about a ‘disastrous’ British volte-face. ‘I have naturally proceeded hitherto on the assumption that there was some continuity in [British] policy and that it would not be dictated by the “Times” and Lord Rothermere [proprietor of the Express newspapers] – otherwise the Northern Department might as well shut up shop.’ As events would prove, it might just as well.

In May 1936 Collier and Vansittart tried to revive the loan to the USSR. Vansittart recommended that the question be put before the Cabinet, but Eden disagreed. ‘I do not myself feel any enthusiasm for proceeding with this loan project at present. However plausible our reasons, it will be resented in Germany & consequently diminish whatever chances may remain of a western European settlement. Nor do I want exceptionally intimate relations with the Soviets. “Correct” is all that they should be.’

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July made matters worse. ‘Spain’ reinforced Tory pro-German and anti-Russian ‘tendencies’, Nicolson recorded in his journal. Baldwin was ‘much affected by the Spanish troubles’, according to Thomas Jones, Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet. ‘I told Eden’, said Baldwin, ‘that on no account, French or other, must he bring us in to fight on the side of the Russians.’ Foreign intervention in Spain could lead to the formation of ideological blocs, warned Sargent. It was all too horrible to contemplate. Vansittart passed on the message to his French counterpart, Alexis Léger: if France goes further to the left or closer to the Soviet, British opinion would take it badly amiss. ‘The British Government was upheld by a very large Conservative majority’, said Vansittart.
'who were never prepared, and now probably less than ever, to make much sacrifice for red eyes.' Spain! made the 'red eyes' seem to burn all the more fiercely.169

Even Churchill was worried about the prospect of a 'Red' victory in Spain. In November 1936 he still told Maiskii that an Anglo-Franco-Soviet combination was the only way to control Germany, but he expressed disapproval of Soviet 'interference' in Spain. It made more difficult the maintenance of an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. Maiskii argued that the Spanish Civil War was an element of the struggle against Germany. 'What do you want,' Churchill finally exclaimed, 'that I support the dictatorship of the proletariat in Spain?' Maiskii pressed his point, and Churchill, somewhat mollified, finally promised to remain neutral in upcoming Parliamentary debates. How long the promise would hold, Maiskii could not say.170

VIII

By the end of 1936 Anglo-Soviet relations were returning to their usual dismal state. The question of a German-Soviet rapprochement came up again at this time, but Chilstons did not think it very likely. The Foreign Office was relieved, and Chilstons report, much praised. Although no one listened, Collier had earlier warned that the USSR would only turn to Germany, if HM Government 'fail[ed] them . . . but not otherwise'.171

Litvinov criticised British policy for 'falling in meekly with the wishes of the . . . aggressors'. The USSR, as he would so often say, could afford to stand back and wait to see how the Anglo-French would decide their policies. But 'the aggressors', he warned, 'are attempting to isolate the West from the Soviet Union; it is not a matter of isolating the Union itself, for it is the West that would find itself defenceless were the manoeuvre to succeed . . .'. There is something to be said for 'Litvinov's prophecy', noted one Foreign Office clerk. And Collier minuted that British 'complaisance' towards Hitler had 'done grave disservice to French and British interests'. 'People who do not wish to be complaisant must be armed,' added Vansittart, 'as I have pointed out for many years.'172

British 'complaisance' towards Germany was the obverse of its reluctance to move closer to the USSR. 'Germany v Russia' was the question, observed Olliphant, and the British Government opted for coming to terms with Germany. War was undesirable, really a 'silly . . . business', said Maurice Hankey, Secretary to the Cabinet, especially because a long war would leave Europe in ruins and 'prey to

Bolshevism'.

'Let gallant little Germany glut her fill of the reds in the East and keep decadent France quiet while she does so,' said one Tory MP. 'Otherwise we shall have not only reds in the West but bombs in London...'. Prime Minister Baldwin expressed similar opinions. More's the reason, observed Sargent in another context, for HM Government to exercise 'a droit de regard' over French policy. Here were the other not so 'unspoken assumptions' behind British policy, which lingered on right into the Second World War. As one Foreign Office official had observed in March 1936, if Nazi Germany was really bent on war, 'there is nothing left for the ex-allies to do but to cut out Hitlerism with a knife...'. Only Russia could assure victory against Germany, but Russia was red, and the Tories would not ally with red Russia. After August 1936, the Stalinist purges reinforced British anti-Soviet assumptions, but by then, the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement was dead.

The psalm of rapprochement had been that there were no serious Anglo-Soviet conflicts of interest – except for propaganda. Foreign Office officials noted that 'propaganda' was diminishing and that Litvinov appeared to be 'playing the European game without cheating'. Such observations were drowned out in the din of Tory anti-communist revivalism. French Ambassador Corbin sent the message back to Paris. For many influential Tories, 'Bolshevism incarnates the anti-Christ'. Eden employed the same image. Vansittart often criticised Soviet 'propaganda', and Litvinov just as often questioned British good faith. But after mollifying their respective adversaries and sceptics they pursued tenaciously a real Anglo-Soviet rapprochement. All was to no avail.

Action, no words, would be the measure of the rapprochement, and by this unforgiving standard, Anglo-Soviet relations failed. Vansittart–Collier 'realism' did not prevail over those who pursued the 'will o' the wisp', the 'jack-o'-lantern' of a settlement with Germany. Hitler encouraged the mirage by invoking national equality, encirclement and bolshevism. Many Tories were taken in because they hated the bolsheviks and disdained the half-red French. Vansittart and Maiskii warned repeatedly of the real danger. Churchill remonstrated in Parliament and the press; Vansittart and Collier 'pegged away' in the Foreign Office. Vansittart had the confidence of Simon and Hoare. But the Abyssinian crisis forced Hoare to resign, and Eden, annoyed by British communists and determined to show who was boss, brought his petty causes into the Foreign Office. In early 1936 – before the Popular

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173 Post, Dilemmas, 255.
175 Minute by Sargent, 15 Oct. 1936, C7262/92/62, PRO FO 371 19880.
176 See eg Lord Halifax, Foreign Secretary, to Sir M. Peterson, British representative in Spain, no. 800, 5 Oct, 1939, C15821/15/18, PRO FO 371 22985; 'First Month of the War', Leeper, 4 Oct. 1939, C16151/15/18, ibid.; untitled memorandum, secret, FO, 19 Oct. 1939, C16324/15/18, ibid.; and minute by Sargent, 11 Oct. 1939, C16573/15/18, ibid.
177 Minute by Gladwyn Jebb, 16 March 1936, C1558/4/18, PRO FO 371 19888.
Front victory, the Spanish Civil War and the Stalinist purges — Eden blocked the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement, though subsequent events would probably have doomed it to failure in any case. The new secretary of state wanted no more than ‘correct’ relations with the USSR. The Tory Government kicked the Soviet ‘out of the boat’, as Vansittart put it, before knowing whether an improbable settlement with Nazi Germany could be reached. After falling out with Italy over Abyssinia, it was scarcely wise policy to spurn another potential ally.

An earlier generation of historians held that British Tories mixed up the interests of their social order and their country, and therefore did not respond quickly enough to the Nazi menace. The conduct of British relations with the USSR in 1935–6 lends credence to Parker’s ‘counter-revisionist’ arguments. The 1930s may not have seen a morality play enacted, pitting anti-appeasers against appeasers. But international relations are rarely conducted on the basis of moral rights and wrongs; they are governed by perceptions of national interest. On this ground, HM Government failed. Anti-communism clouded the Government’s vision, and greatly contributed to the stumbling after a ‘will o’ the wisp’ which was never close enough to grasp.