A SOVIET EYE ON FRANCE FROM THE RUE DE GRENELLE IN PARIS, 1924–1940*

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The present article is about Soviet perceptions of French politics and society as reported by the five Soviet ambassadors in Paris between 1924 and 1940, and about how their reports influenced Soviet policy making in Moscow. This article is based largely upon unpublished documents from the Soviet foreign policy archives in Moscow (AVPRF), specifically opened to researchers in the 1990s. It contends that these Soviet ambassadors established effective relationships with French counterparts and that they were pragmatic, non-ideological realists trying unsuccessfully to improve Soviet relations with France. The narrative is about the failure of these efforts over a period of sixteen years and ultimately about the failure of the Soviet Union and France to form anti-Nazi alliance during the 1930s.

If you walk from the quai Voltaire on the left bank down the rue du Bac in the 7th arrondissement in Paris and then turn right on the rue de Grenelle, you will find number 79 on the south side of the street where the embassy of the Soviet Union was located. The Hôtel d’Estrées, built between 1711 and 1713, was set back from the street and protected by a walled courtyard. The tsarist government purchased the building in 1874 for its embassy. Between 1924, when France extended diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union, and 1940 when the Third Republic collapsed, the Soviet government sent five popredy or ambassadors to the embassy on the rue de Grenelle, all of whom were excellent political observers of French politics and politicians. These were Leonid Borisovich Krasin, Khristian Grigorievich Rakovskii, Valerian Savel’evich Dovgalevskii, Vladimir Petrovich Potemkin, and Iakov Zakharovich Surits. Krasin was an old Bolshevik, an early member of the Bolshevik party, but also an engineer who worked comfortably in the pre-war capitalist world. Rakovskii, born

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in Bulgaria, was a true internationalist revolutionary. Educated in France and Switzerland before the war, he was close to L. D. Trotsky, but also to Anatole de Monzie, a centre-right French politician and government minister during the inter-war years. Dovgalevskii and Surits were of Jewish descent. Surits took a degree in law at the University of Berlin while Dovgalevskii studied engineering in Toulouse. Surits, a former Menshevik, worked with Trotsky as a member of the Petrograd Soviet in 1917. Potemkin completed a degree in history at the University of Moscow and was a school teacher who fought under I. V. Stalin during the civil war. Rakovskii perished in the Stalinist purges in the 1930s, Krasin and Dovgalevskii died on the job, Krasin in 1926, and Dovgalevskii in 1934. Surits and Potemkin survived the Stalinist purges and World War II. In fact, Potemkin found the time to edit a three volume history of international relations.¹

These ambassadors had in common with many Soviet diplomats of the inter-war years a high level of formal education, most of which was obtained outside Russia. They were cosmopolitan, multilingual, and pragmatic. They were also capable negotiators, communicators, and observers. Soviet ambassadors in Paris met with politicians, ministers, officials, journalists, businessmen, and they recorded their conversations in official journals and in correspondence to Moscow. Topics of conversation ranged from vital to trivial. In Soviet records the French liked to talk and had a penchant for indiscretion; in French records, there is almost no trace of any conversations at all. French candi‐ness with Soviet counterparts may seem surprising in view of the hostile relationship between France and the Soviet Union during most of the inter-war years. Soviet ambassadors took the measure of their interlocutors and offered estimates of French politics, society, and foreign policy. Politics were a racket and influence peddling widespread and expensive, particularly in the press; blackmail, sleaze, violent rhetoric, and the stab in the back were commonplace. Governments came and went, political and financial stability was in doubt, and street rioting in Paris was a regular event. Even in the 1920s French foreign policy appeared to require British assent while Soviet Russia was an object of domestic politics for the right and the left. The right exploited the red scare while the centre-left pointed to the strategic importance of the Soviet Union to French security against Germany. In their reports to Moscow, Soviet ambassadors sent no doctrinaire analyses of French politics and society and no plans to promote revolution in France. They had no interest in isolating the Soviet Union from the capitalist west, nor did they receive directives from Moscow to do so. The reader looking for a Stalinist plot to dupe France into war and ruin will be disappointed. In this narrative, realpolitik, not revolutionary ambition, motivated Soviet foreign policy. The secret, private language of state—as
opposed to public Bolshevik speech—was more redolent of classical diplomacy than of Marx.

Soviet ambassadors tried to influence French policy by circulating in political society, establishing close contacts with influential politicians and officials, and paying off newspapers and journalists. What the Soviet government wanted—and what its ambassadors in Paris did their best to obtain—was a political and economic rapprochement. In the 1920s better economic relations would reinforce political ties and address vital Soviet needs to trade in European markets and obtain commercial credits or loans for reconstruction of a domestic economy ruined by war, foreign intervention, and civil war. In the 1930s more was at stake, for Nazi Germany threatened European peace. The conclusion of a Franco–Soviet mutual assistance pact in 1935 appeared to signal a significant improvement in relations but was nothing of the kind. At the rue de Grenelle it quickly became apparent that the French wanted to take back their signature even before the ink on the pact was dry. While British Conservatives worried that the pact might actually mean something, the Soviet government feared that it meant nothing at all. Soviet failures in France encouraged cynicism in Moscow, a place where cynicism flourished, and bloody cynicism at that. Soviet officials who advocated better relations with the west were reduced to frustration and bitterness by western rebuffs that undermined their credibility at a time when the purges made failure dangerous. Bolshevik politicians often hid their disappointment with angry public denunciations of rotten capitalism. In the mid-1930s the embassy in Paris was the most important Soviet diplomatic post in Europe; in 1939 it was a diplomatic backwater. At the rue de Grenelle it looked like the French government had forfeited its standing as a great power and surrendered its foreign policy independence to Britain. In Moscow it looked like France was going fascist, and doomed to defeat in any war with Germany. The story narrated by Soviet ambassadors in Paris is one of failure, not of success, in what should have been an important strategic relationship.

From the beginning success in Franco-Soviet relations was illusive. The Bolshevik revolution left bitter memories of billions lost in investments and loans to the tsarist government, nationalized, or repudiated by the Soviet government. The revolution in Russia threatened to spread Bolshevism in the west. The iconic image during the 1919 French parliamentary elections of a bloodthirsty revolutionary clenching a knife with broken teeth endured long after the right’s first electoral success, exploiting the red scare. In 1919 the Soviet government organized the Communist International, or Comintern to foment socialist revolution in the west. At the end of 1920 a French communist party was formed. The communist enemy was thus both internal and external. Links between the Comintern
and the French communist party created further tensions in France and also, paradoxically, in the Narkomindel, the commissariat for foreign affairs in Moscow. Georgi V. Chicherin, commissar for foreign affairs, and his deputy and successor Maksim M. Litvinov, disapproved of the Comintern’s amateurish meddling abroad which interfered in the Soviet Union’s diplomacy with the west. They criticized public statements by Soviet officials, “speaking Bolshevik” about the superiority of communism and the inevitable victory of world revolution. The Narkomindel wanted to compose with the west, not ruin it. In Paris Krasin explained the Comintern as a defensive weapon to counter the Allied military intervention in the Russian civil war (1918–1921), but the French found the argument to be irrelevant. What about now? they asked Krasin. The Narkomindel, he replied, had nothing to do with, nor did it want anything to do with the Comintern. Strictly speaking, this was true, but the Narkomindel was not the Politburo, the highest level of Soviet authority, and the Politburo was deep in the business of the Comintern.\(^2\) It was also true that anti-communist hostility in France had scarcely abated since the unsuccessful French campaign to overthrow the Bolsheviks, nor had memories of it dimmed in Moscow.

Early Soviet objectives in France were nevertheless to establish diplomatic relations and to conclude a debts settlement in exchange for low interest loans or credits. Before diplomatic recognition in October 1924, Franco-Soviet communications took place unofficially through shady go-betweenes on the Soviet payroll or through editorial exchanges in the press. Radical leader Édouard Herriot, independent socialist Paul Painlevé, and Monzie, met abroad with Soviet officials. Herriot and a then young Turk in the Radical party, Édouard Daladier, visited Moscow in 1922 for discussions with Soviet officials. Herriot made plain that his principal concern was French security and the need to re-establish Franco-Russian cooperation to discourage a resurgent Germany. The Germans will threaten us again within a generation, he predicted correctly. Painlevé’s message was essentially the same. Soviet officials were not so sure about Germany—having concluded the Treaty of Rapallo with the German government in 1922, normalizing diplomatic and trade relations—but they had their own reasons for wanting better relations with France, and so with Herriot and Painlevé they were willing to keep open the German question.\(^3\)

If the centre-right used the red scare to win parliamentary elections in 1919, the Cartel des gauches, an alliance of the Socialist and Radical parties, used the renewal of relations with Moscow to campaign for parliamentary elections in 1924. Herriot argued that better Franco-Soviet relations would improve national security and increase trade, producing jobs and prosperity. According to the Cartel, only the centre-left could obtain a debts settlement for the many French citizens who held tsarist
bonds and also voted. The Bloc national government, headed by the intransigent Raymond Poincaré, would never reach agreement with Moscow. The Cartel won the elections in 1924 and Herriot formed a government in which he was premier and foreign minister.

In October 1924 Herriot sent Monzie to Dover to meet secretly with Rakovskii, who was then Soviet chargé d'affaires in Britain, to discuss the terms of French recognition, which was announced on 29 October 1924. Rakovskii came over from London to take possession of the embassy on the rue de Grenelle, previously occupied by the last representative of the Russian Provisional Government. He also had discussions with Herriot and Monzie. From these meetings Rakovskii learned that the French had no concrete ideas about future negotiations, and that Herriot and Monzie, who would head the French delegation negotiating with the Soviets, did not see eye to eye. Monzie’s idea was to divide Soviet Russia into spheres of economic influence and involve other western governments in negotiations with Moscow. From the Soviet point of view, this approach was unacceptable, although Moscow’s idea of loans or long-term credits was equally unpopular in Paris. France was dependent on the United States. Washington had refused to recognize the Soviet Union, and would take it amiss if France made loans to the reds in Moscow without paying its wartime debts to the United States. Moreover, the franc was weak against the dollar and the pound sterling, and this made the French government vulnerable to American or British pressure. The Herriot cabinet was thus shaky, and rumours already circulated about its impending fall. Rakovskii sent good advice to Moscow: “We need to keep in mind the general psychology of the French people, declining population growth has created fear of the future . . . and all hope to find stronger support . . . than they have from [relations with] the Poles, Romanians, Yugoslavs. . . .” The Soviet Union would obviously be a stronger ally, but the Comintern raised doubts about true Soviet intentions.4

L. B. KRASIN, 1924–1925

Krasin arrived in Paris in early December 1924, well suited for his job. Before the war he had been an influential businessman; after it, as polpred and commissar for foreign trade, he had negotiated various agreements with the British government. In London he was regarded as “a good fisherman in the City”; in Paris, as a bon bourgeois. If any Soviet diplomat could work successfully in Paris, it was Krasin, and yet he immediately ran into trouble. Anti-communism was always close to the surface of French politics, and it burst out just as Krasin arrived in Paris, aroused by left-wing street demonstrations. A press campaign opened up on the French communists, but indirectly on the Soviet Union. At one of their
frequent meetings Herriot told Krasin that the anti-communist press campaign had shaken financial confidence. The way Krasin saw it, “someone, directing things from behind the curtains, yanked on the cord around the neck of the French franc . . . .” Herriot complained that he was under attack from all sides. French communists, he said, were playing into the hands of the right, and though Herriot did not ask, Krasin assumed that these complaints were intended to be forwarded to Moscow and thence to reach “comrades” here. The press campaign, according to Krasin, was intended to topple the Herriot government. The heaviest pressure appeared to come from Britain. “The dependence of France on England at the present time is already such that scarcely any French cabinet can pursue policies sharply different from the English.” Krasin was convinced that the British Foreign Office had subsidized the press campaign. Fifty or a hundred thousand pounds was a trifle for the Foreign Office, “and money here can get you anything you like with the press.” We need to keep this in mind, said Krasin, “if we want to have more or less systematic influence on French public opinion.” Putting out press releases is a waste of time: “one simply has to buy sympathy.”

The Soviet government sought “sympathy” through the payment of “allowances” (dovol’sviia) to French newspapers and journalists. This was the resumption of a tsarist practice prior to World War I, but no one in the Soviet government seemed to mind, even when L’Humanité, the communist daily, published a series of articles in 1923–1924 on tsarist “allowances” to the French press. Nor was the Soviet government the only one to pay; it had to compete with other embassies in Paris for the tender mercies of the French press. In December 1924 Krasin recommended drastically increasing subsidies. The first Soviet allowances appear to have been paid in 1922; the “semi-official” Paris daily Le Temps, with close ties to the Quai d’Orsay, received by far the largest sums. The deputy commissar for foreign affairs, Litvinov, scrupled at the cost, but paid the money. It was intensely irritating then that Soviet “allowances” did not mute the anti-communist obloquy of the French press. “We consider it necessary to inform the Politburo,” Litvinov advised Krasin, “about the absolutely unsatisfactory conduct of the big newspaper [this was Le Temps].” In its lead editorials it condemns the Soviet Union, but then almost inadvertently has “some more or less decent thing to say” on a back page. Either Le Temps changes its tune, or we cut them off. Litvinov suggested paying at the end of the month to ensure “decent” editorial conduct.

Krasin reported that the “big newspaper” continued to be completely hostile, and that other papers offered space for pro-Soviet articles on page 2 or 3, but without altering their hostile front page editorials. In January 1925 Krasin told Henri Rollin, the go-between with Le Temps, that he was
cut off until “his friends” changed their “malevolent position” toward the Soviet Union. In July 1925 Rollin went back to Krasin demanding to be paid for the previous half year. This was too much for Krasin: no payments should be resumed without guarantees.\textsuperscript{11} *Le Temps* is utterly hostile to us, Krasin observed, and the leader of the anti-Soviet press. “We completely understand, that from time to time the newspaper has to publish that which is dictated to it by the Quai d’Orsay, but in the given case the poisoned chalice did not originate at the Quai d’Orsay . . . it came from the editors of the paper who accordingly brought pressure to bear on the ministry of foreign affairs.” Krasin loosed his anger on Rollin, who shrugged and said he was only a go-between. “I am personally not an advocate of stinginess; on the contrary, as you know, I would sooner opt for boldness. When big business is on the line, small change does not close a deal . . . But in the given case I am disgusted by the limitless impudence of these gentlemen, who demand tribute for absolutely nothing in return unless they think their very existence merits God’s blessings.”

Having vented his spleen, Krasin nevertheless proposed to tell Rollin and “his editor” that they should not lose patience while Moscow considered some “new agreement based on more rational terms.”\textsuperscript{12} Like Krasin, Litvinov was torn between paying and not paying, for not paying could make matters worse. “Not one [foreign] government pays as generously as we do,” observed Litvinov, “but we cannot in principle agree to pay for abuse . . . .” Litvinov again suggested offering end-of-month instalments to extract more “loyal” conduct.\textsuperscript{13} When Rakovskii succeeded Krasin at the end of 1925, he advised the Narkomindel to forget about buying the French press. Such efforts would eventually be discovered and would only backfire.\textsuperscript{14}

Apart from press subsidies, Krasin’s basic strategy was to get business started with French firms. Trade would demonstrate the tangible benefits of Franco–Soviet relations and break down what Krasin considered to be a financial blockade against the Soviet government. French Radicals seemed particularly attuned to this approach, many proposing business ventures to Soviet agencies. French security was important to Radical politicians, but so was personal enrichment. Once tangible benefits could be demonstrated, discussions for a debts settlement might then begin, though Monzie and Herriot were in no hurry to negotiate. Litvinov thought that a deal based on a debts settlement in exchange for a loan or extensive trade credits was unlikely: “A country not paying its own debts, beset by such troublesome creditors as England and America, cannot, even if it so wished, give loans to others, and still less to the USSR.”\textsuperscript{15} The French jibbed at paying British and American war debts, but demanded payment from the Soviet Union. Chicherin, commissar for foreign affairs, sometimes pointed out the inconsistency of the French position, but the Soviet government still sought agreement in Paris.
This was not easy to do for Soviet officials found it hard to pin down their French interlocutors. Krasin had a difficult time with Monzie, and he complained about him repeatedly in reports to Moscow. “I am forming the opinion that Monzie is simply not normal.” He is talented, but not overburdened with scruples. “No one can understand what he truly wants and what aims he sets for himself. . . .” In March 1925 Krasin noted that Monzie was busy trying to topple Herriot; he expected to be named finance minister (which he obtained in the last week of the Herriot ministry, but lost in the following Painlevé cabinet, having to settle for the less influential Instruction publique et Beaux-Arts). In response to Krasin’s obvious unhappiness about Monzie, the French brought in a new negotiator. This was Victor Dalbiez, a Radical-Socialist deputy and minister of liberated regions under Herriot. He got on well with Krasin, who hoped that he would supplant Monzie. The rivalry between Dalbiez and Monzie seesawed during the summer of 1925, and Krasin made no secret of his preferred interlocutor.

Herriot’s government fell on 10 April. Painlevé formed a new cabinet a week later and brought back as foreign minister Aristide Briand, and his secretary general, Philippe Berthelot. Krasin thought Painlevé well-intentioned about the Soviet Union, but that he would be hemmed in by his cabinet. As for Briand, the oft-times foreign minister, everyone knew that he liked to avoid hard work: in his office he seemed “a well-intentioned and charming lazybones, who has papers neither in his desk or on it. . . .” He is likeable on a personal level, noted Krasin, but I can’t “get any sense out of him. It is not that he is antagonistic to the USSR . . . but that he plainly cannot internalize and understand the political importance of a rapprochement between France and the USSR. . . . he builds all his policies on the English orientation. Working with Berthelot only strengthens him in this Anglophile direction.” Krasin worried about Berthelot, a man well informed on foreign affairs, but also “inimical” to the Soviet Union. In 1918 Berthelot had been a main architect of the French interventionist policy against Soviet Russia. Krasin nevertheless would meet with Berthelot on numerous occasions to try to win him over. He found him to be straightforward and friendly, but someone who would make few concessions on the issues.

Monzie remained a problem. As a government minister he attended the opening of the Soviet pavilion at the exhibition of decorative arts in Paris, but instead of the usual polite remarks, he rounded on the Soviet Union. Afterward, Monzie became “hysterical” when people in the crowd shouted “Vive les Soviets” and “Vive l’ambassadeur des Soviets.” “This is a political demonstration.” Monzie sputtered. Krasin tried to reason with “the deranged minister,” and just as things began to calm down there was a further provocation when school boys started to sing the Internationale. Monzie’s behaviour produced “a very strange impression” and even from
the French side, “I received apologies and expressions of regret.” Acting like a “hysterical woman,” perhaps frightened by seeming to be caught in a demonstration, Monzie only made matters worse. Krasin did not think there was much chance of getting on better terms with Monzie: “from this goat we will never get milk.” He was one of those advocates of better relations with the Soviet Union motivated by personal economic gain. “For six months we have been accumulating a rich material on the many-sided interests of de Monzie in the Russian question.” Basically it had to be Monzie’s way—his plans, his bank, his agents. Isn’t it time “to stop messing around with him?”

Better half an enemy, Chicherin replied, than a whole one. “The question of Monzie is nothing new for us.” He is an influential politician and combines hostility and friendliness toward the Soviet Union. This is not ideal, Chicherin said, but we cannot get rid of him. “Thus, we have always believed that we must follow a careful line, not trusting him, striving to use him as much as possible, even in times of setbacks, and trying to find with him a line of compromise.” We have to be “extraordinarily subtle and careful” with Monzie. “In general, black-and-white methods in human relations will only result in losing all our supporters.”

Although Krasin met with Painlevé, Briand, and others in the new cabinet, he made no progress, for the French still did not want to begin serious negotiations. Krasin also continued to complain about Monzie, who went around him to Berlin to another Soviet diplomat, Jean Arens. Monzie had met Arens as a go-between prior to recognition, and hoped perhaps to unstick Krasin from his Paris posting. Arens was authorized to go to Paris where he met Monzie in July 1925. Monzie warned that the earlier incident at the Soviet exhibit in Paris had been intentional, that he had “intimate” contacts with the secret police, and that he was ready to spring other unpleasant “surprises” on the Soviet embassy. Taken aback by Monzie’s “cynicism,” Arens passed on the warning to Moscow. “We have not sunk deep enough roots in Parisian political soil to be able to contend with such adversaries,” Arens warned: “I am not saying that ‘friendship’ with him will guarantee for us success in all our affairs, but enmity with him could without a doubt seriously hurt us in everything we do.” With sufficient “flexibility” and some “compromises,” we can avoid a further exacerbation of relations between Monzie and the embassy in Paris. But Arens did not see himself in the job. “I do not want to work in Paris,” he told Chicherin, for working with Monzie could drag on endlessly. “Political life in Paris is a disgusting sewer: in order to have any influence here, one has to work in the gutter offering oneself like a woman.” So Arens asked for another assignment.

Krasin felt that Arens had played into Monzie’s hands. Monzie’s boasting about secret police connexions meant that he could use “various
papers and documents” against the Soviet embassy and the French communist party. Of course the Soviet embassy was also collecting papers on Monzie. It was “turn-about is fair play,” as often occurred in Soviet-French relations. For Krasin, Monzie was beyond redemption; no one, not even Rakovskii, could get anything positive out of him.21

Apart from Monzie, Krasin was frustrated by French “bureaucracy” and his inability to obtain any agreement with the French government. Promises were made and not kept. Governments came and went. Their stated intentions could not be taken seriously because ministers would scarcely warm their chairs before losing them. Everyone here, noted Krasin, “feels putting their foot in the wrong place” and then “looking stupid in the eyes of public opinion.” Don’t forget, Krasin continued,

the intense rivalries between these gentlemen and their readiness to stab one another in the back. Berthelot, undoubtedly a clever man, understands that no government will gain any special laurels for settling the tsarist debt on the basis of 10 or 15 centimes on the franc. And if again around this question there are any special personal rivalries . . . then any wrong step could serve as the point of departure for a very unpleasant scandal, accusations in the press, questions in Parliament, and so on.22

In spite of Krasin’s scepticism, he made one last try to move negotiations forward, but his efforts ended in early September in a fiasco, with the French government dismissing his ideas out of hand. This was the last straw: “I am tired of sitting around useless in Paris especially when at home life is in full swing and there is a great deal of work to do.”23 Krasin left Paris intending to return in the autumn, though he never did. In November he and Rakovskii exchanged embassies, but Krasin spent only a little time in London before he died of leukemia in November 1926.

KH. G. RAKOVSKII, 1925–1927

The Soviet polpred in Paris thus went from being an international businessman to an international revolutionary, hardly someone likely to be well received in bourgeois France. Yet Rakovskii had good credentials for his job. He had successfully made the transition from revolutionary to diplomat during his time in London. In his younger days he had lived in France and even considered becoming a French citizen. This proved impossible because of his revolutionary activities, though he had the assistance of a young barrister named Monzie. Their acquaintance towards ended for twenty-five years. Whereas Krasin could not abide Monzie, Rakovskii renewed an old relationship. Personal chemistry thus improved,
and Rakovskii reported a more positive view of his principal French inter-
locutor. Like Krasin Rakovskii’s main task was to come to terms with the
French government and like Krasin he was to have a difficult time. Upon
his arrival in Paris he made the rounds with politicians and officials
including Briand, Painlevé, Dalbiez, and Berthelot. Briand ruminated on
American economic penetration in Europe and the need to stop it.
Painlevé said he had never favoured the “politics of barbed wire” around
Soviet Russia. Berthelot advised that Krasin’s ideas for a debt settlement
had run up against the minister of finance. Monzie and Dalbiez were more
willing to settle, said Berthelot, but if the ministry of finance gets
involved, it will become “more complicated.” Berthelot cautioned
Rakovskii that negotiations had to take place at the Quai d’Orsay with
Briand or himself; “not outside, with other people.” Rakovskii took this to
mean Monzie and Dalbiez, with whom he met nevertheless. Dalbiez
thought the general mood in France had improved. Rakovskii calculated
that Dalbiez did not have enough political influence. He fears being
“rubbed out” by Monzie.24

Relatively positive relations at the end of 1925 led to formal negotiations
in 1926 to obtain economic and political agreements. The Soviet govern-
ment was willing to settle the tsarist debt in exchange for a government
guaranteed loan or long-term trade credits and it offered to conclude a non-
aggression pact. The French wanted the debts settlement, but not the rest.
As always negotiations were complicated by government instability. Yet
another cabinet, Painlevé’s, fell in late November 1925. “Given that very
intense struggle between personal conceit and interest, which appears char-
acteristic of French political life, one needs to be extraordinarily careful,”
observed Rakovskii. Chicherin came to Paris at the end of November to
meet French ministers and officials. The French were cordial and reassuring,
but Chicherin could not be sure of their real intentions.25

In January 1926, on the eve of the Franco-Soviet conference, the
Soviet counsellor in Paris, Iakov Kh. Davtian, had breakfast with Rollin
and Edgars Roels from Le Temps. “France was going through an extraor-
dinarily difficult crisis,” Roels said, “which is a crisis of the system. Parlia-
mament had moved into a dead end and there appeared no way out of it.”
Davtian elaborated, “In the large mass of the population at every level
there exists discontent with parliament and parliamentary democracy.”
The French communist party offered no solutions for it was still weak and
on the other side the fascists “do not represent a real force sufficient to
launch a coup d’état.” Davtian did not see a solution to the parliamentary
crisis, though one was coming for the short term, in the form of a new
Poincaré government.26

Despite Rakovskii’s recommendation against press subsidies, the
Soviet government continued to pay. “You have no doubt observed,”
Davitian wrote to Litvinov, “that the line of the big newspaper is still unsatisfactory.” While *Le Temps* had stopped its “rude attacks,” it was not taking an “active” line on the Soviet Union. Roels and Rollin explained that “objective conditions” were not conducive to a more favourable position. Nevertheless, Davtian recommended paying, in view of upcoming negotiations in Paris. He also indicated that he had paid “all past debts” to *Le Temps*, and entered into relations with *La Volonté*, a newspaper supported by the left intelligentsia. He had personally made “pecuniary contact” with the editor Albert Dubarry, though in future money would be passed on by an intermediary. “It is impossible to work in Paris without being able to provide our point of view regularly and systematically to the wider press,” said Davtian, and for this one had to pay.27

The Franco–Soviet conference began on 25 February 1926. There were friendly opening speeches, but the real message which the French side gave out was that there was no need to hurry. “We have to prepare public opinion,” Berthelot said, and the French government has “more serious political problems” to solve with the United States and Britain. We don’t want to give the impression to public opinion, Dalbiez added, that French interests were not being sufficiently defended. Another member of the French delegation warned that a false step could provoke the press and “ruin everything.” French public opinion had not learned to distinguish between the Soviet Union and the Comintern. Monzie offered advice: don’t try “conquering” the press by paying it.28 Who was he kidding?

Negotiations continued through the spring with ups and downs. “We do not accept their proposals,” Rakovskii observed, “they do not accept our proposals. They want us to pay more on the debts, we want to pay less. Each side wants the other to move.” Monzie told Arens, back in Paris, that he was way ahead of his delegation and that he had to bargain for every small concession to the Soviet side. If this was going to work, Monzie pleaded slyly, “we had to help him.” In the meantime a new “furious” press campaign had broken out, though Rakovskii took it with a shrug.29 A few weeks later Rakovskii was not so matter of fact. Apparently it was no use paying *Le Temps* for the “big newspaper” was losing all restraint. Whenever the least incident occurs, “*Le Temps* makes the assumption that our regime is incompatible with the regime of capitalist states and that we must disappear.” *Le Temps* did not used to be so bad, Rakovskii reported, but the latest article “is suffused with the spirit of a sermon calling forth a crusade against Soviet authority.” Later, Rakovskii complained to Rollin, who said it was the Quai d’Orsay’s fault; Rakovskii countered that it was “Poles and Englishmen,” but who knew for sure? Not even the Préfecture de police could say for certain. Monzie said the British were doing “everything possible” to break up the Franco-Soviet conference. They were furious at the Soviet government for the revolution
in China which had caused hundreds of bankruptcies of British East Asia firms. According to Monzie, the son of oil mogul Calouste Gulbenkian was a British agent sent to Paris to organize an anti-Soviet press campaign.\textsuperscript{30} But again, who knew for certain? The difference between rumour and reality in Paris was often elusive.

In July 1926 Berthelot and Rakovskii discussed revolution and revolutionary propaganda in France. Berthelot made light of it by saying that the danger of revolution could come only with defeat in war or because of economic catastrophe. It’s not going to happen in France. Like Krasin, Rakovskii pointed out that Soviet Russia had used revolutionary propaganda as a means of self-defence during the foreign intervention. Whether the world revolutionary movement strengthened or not depended on the west. If the Soviet Union is allowed to develop in peace, if economic and diplomatic relations are honest and positive, “then the Russian masses will not be compelled to defend the development of their country through revolution in Berlin or Paris.”\textsuperscript{31} Drop the red scare and the credit blockade against the Soviet Union, Rakovskii said in effect, and the Comintern will cease to be a problem.

While these negotiations and discussions went on, there were four succeeding cabinets: Briand’s fell on 17 July and Herriot tried and failed to form a government. Franco–Soviet negotiations came to a halt. The financial crisis was at its worst. The French treasury is empty, noted Rakovskii, and “rats danced inside.”\textsuperscript{32} It was at this moment that Poincaré returned to power as premier and finance minister with a mandate to stabilize the French economy and also the Third Republic. Rakovskii perceived that Poincaré had another item on his agenda: to halt Franco–Soviet negotiations.

In late August 1926 Rakovskii met Poincaré who said that he intended to take an active role in foreign policy, and that Rakovskii should come to him without going through Briand. “He gave the impression, well known already, of a formalist, a dry man, quite narrow, without any flexibility (in that regard the direct opposite of Briand).” On terms for an agreement, in particular on the matter of credits, Poincaré was evasive. He did not have any complaints about Soviet actions against French interests, “but he expressed the wish that we do not support revolutionary elements in France ‘who identified themselves with the Soviet government.’” Rakovskii protested his “loyalty on this point” to which Poincaré listened “quietly and sceptically,” alluding to party debates in Moscow (presumably between Stalin and the left opposition). These should be taken with a grain of salt, replied Rakovskii, though it is true that revolutionary “proselytism . . . was a natural reaction against the politics of intervention and quarantine.”\textsuperscript{33} Live and let live was Rakovskii’s message.

The Narkomindel was never optimistic about successful negotiations with the French, but in the autumn 1926, scepticism grew. The collapse of
the Cartel and Poincaré’s return to power boded ill, especially because the French made new demands in the negotiations. The Soviet government itself contemplated breaking off negotiations, which Rakovskii opposed. Monzie admitted that the British were trying to influence him “in every way possible.” He told Rakovskii of a 3-hour conversation with the British chargé d’affaires in Paris who said that Britain had taken a position of principle against the Soviet Union. Monzie admitted that the Quai d’Orsay “did not want to conclude with us before the summer holidays . . . so as not to irritate the English and Americans.”

In Moscow Litvinov was alarmed. The Soviet right arm did not know what the left was doing. Relations with Britain were strained to the breaking point, and relations with France were headed in the same direction. The Narkomindel was like Sisyphus—“in the literal sense of the word,” he said—“I have the feeling that we are flying at full speed toward a catastrophe and that the NKID [Narkomindel] is powerless to prevent or even delay it.” It was hard to control the Soviet press or Soviet big mouths—Litvinov more politely called them “orators”—“putting a stick in the wheel” of the Narkomindel, by talking too much Bolshevik about encouraging signs of capitalist decay in countries with which the Soviet Union was trying to improve relations. “Such is the way it has been, and unfortunately will probably be for a long time to come.” “We do what we can,” Litvinov said, “but we have to swim against the tide.” For Litvinov, and Chicherin also, Bolshevik party politics were an impediment to the successful conduct of Soviet foreign policy. In Moscow, however, the struggle for power between Stalin and his opposition took precedence over Litvinov’s raisons d’État, and like it or not, the public language of that struggle was Bolshevik.

In January 1927 Rakovskii, back in Paris after leave in Moscow, renewed contact with Monzie. “As you know, the direction of negotiations in the government has passed from Briand to Poincaré. Briand is very glad, and Monzie, imitating the voice of Briand, began to repeat his words: ‘Let Poincaré handle this business.’” “You know Briand,” added Monzie, “he changes his tune according to whom he is speaking. To you he will speak about friendship with Russia; in the corridors of the Chamber of Deputies he will whisper that he has proof of Soviet millions, which have been supplied for propaganda in France.”

There was one more formal session of the conference in March 1927; from then on, it was downhill. These developments occurred as Anglo-Soviet relations deteriorated over Comintern backing for the Chinese revolution—according to the Foreign Office, China was red, at least until March 1927 when the tide turned against the revolution. In April Albert Sarraut, the interior minister, made a highly publicized speech condemning communism. In May the British government broke off relations with
Moscow. This stirred up the many anti-communists in Paris who, approving the British example, wanted to follow it.

According to Litvinov, events in China had damaged Soviet prestige and strengthened Anglo-French ties. Monzie rang up Rakovskii to warn that Poincaré was “was very out of sorts.” Monzie still tried to push negotiations forward, but Poincaré’s officials blocked his way.38 Eirik Labonne, a foreign ministry official and Monzie’s right arm, told Rakovskii that Poincaré and finance ministry officials were dead set against a settlement with the Soviet Union. Parliamentary elections were coming in 1928, with the anticipation that an agreement with Moscow might help to return the Cartel to power. Dalbiez advised Chicherin, who was in Paris in May 1927, that the Bloc national was preparing a new anti-communist campaign.39 Still, Poincaré could not formally halt the negotiations for fear of losing bondholder votes. So the French government took the position: do not break off and do not conclude. Poincaré subjected Chicherin to “a rude, prolonged diatribe against the revolutionary communist policies of the Soviet government, against its interference in the internal affairs of other countries.” I talked to Monzie, reported Rakovskii, “about some kind of counter activity” with Herriot and Painlevé. Herriot is “spineless,” replied Monzie, but Painlevé might be able to do something.40

In fact, nothing could be done. Monzie tried to go around Poincaré to conclude a modest deal with Rakovskii, but Poincaré was too strong and Monzie too weak for that kind of intrigue. And Dalbiez, who had long supported a Franco-Soviet agreement, turned against it. Monzie showed Rakovskii Dalbiez’s memorandum on the subject: “Look at what Dalbiez has written who is among the most left of the leftists. From this you can judge to what little degree you can count on the support of French politicians.”41 Not above such things himself, Monzie was quick to recognize a stab in the back.

V. S. DOVGALEVSKII, 1928–1934

The best way to end negotiations was to get rid of Rakovskii, who played into Poincaré’s hands by signing an oppositionist political statement in Moscow during the summer in a moment of carelessness. In September–October 1927 a violent press campaign in Paris drove him from the rue de Grenelle, and formal Franco-Soviet negotiations came to an end. Rakovskii was replaced by Dovgalevskii, who came to Paris in January 1928. He did not have his predecessor’s high public profile which facilitated his first objective to avoid a diplomatic break with France. This task was not expected to be easy, though Briand assured Litvinov that there would be no rupture of relations.42 Dovgalevskii eventually met with Poincaré, who made it clear that he would not resume the Franco-Soviet conference, though he wanted to
avoid criticism from bondholders and to put the “odium” of failure on Moscow.43

A fresh conflict broke out in March 1928 when the French government tried to seize Soviet gold deposited in the United States. When Dovgalevskii protested to Briand, the latter blamed it on the finance ministry, Poincaré.44 The Bloc national won the 1928 parliamentary elections, but Poincaré continued to freeze relations with Moscow. Litvinov warned Dovgalevskii to be careful: “I fear that the relatively quiet period in Soviet-French relations will soon come to an end. Keeping this in mind, you must again verify [the locks on] cabinets and chests . . . in order not to be taken unawares. . . .” The French, he thought, would not conclude any agreement, even if entirely favourable to themselves. While in Paris things were relatively quiet over the summer and autumn of 1928, in Moscow relations between the Narkomindel and the French ambassador Jean Herbette were strained. Herbette had gone to Moscow in 1925 to support a Franco-Soviet rapprochement, but in 1927 he soured toward the Soviet Union. “We have reached the point of open struggle with him,” advised Litvinov: “his conduct has become intolerable and we have begun to prepare a dossier for an open attack against him.” He is “a serious obstacle to an improvement of our relations with France . . .”45 Litvinov held off on a formal request for recall, but relations with Herbette never improved and he was replaced in 1931.

Dovgalevskii got on better with Briand and Berthelot. In November 1928 Dovgalevskii called on Berthelot, who asked facetiously if the ambassador had come again to complain.

“I always come to complain,” replied Dovgalevskii.

“Complaints are . . . my specialty,” Berthelot quipped, “everyone comes here to complain.”

Toward the end of their meeting, “Berthelot turned to half-philosophical, half-lyrical themes, he complained to me that he personally has very many enemies. . . .46 So did the Soviet Union. Le Temps continued to be one of the most annoying. The available evidence does not indicate whether the Narkomindel continued to pay “allowances.” If they did pay, they were getting no return on investment. Litvinov, who paid grudgingly in the 1920s, vented his spleen: “We have had very sad experiences with French journalists, whose unscrupulousness surpasses anything we know about foreign journalists.” Their by-lines are almost always for sale to the highest bidder, and since most of those bidders are hostile to us, almost no positive articles are published. Visits by French journalists are thus of no use, if not harmful to us, and we uniformly deny visas to them. The Quai d’Orsay retaliated by refusing visas to Soviet journalists, but Litvinov reckoned the price worth paying. In Paris Dovgalevskii complained to Briand about Le Temps, but the latter advised him not to take it too seriously, any more than he, Briand, did when attacked by the Soviet press.47
Well, yes, but Briand was not paying the Soviet press to mute its obloquy toward France.

Poincaré resigned as premier in July 1929, and governmental instability resumed. The political merry-go-round returned to Paris with cabinets flung off every few months. There were two more governments in 1929 and four in 1930. In Moscow Chicherin had taken sick leave—he had been ill off and on for years—and never returned. Litvinov became interim commissar to be named officially in 1930. Changes in personnel did not matter. Tensions heated up again when the white general A. P. Kuteiev disappeared from downtown Paris in early 1930. The French press claimed he was kidnapped. The French government thought the kidnapping was done by the Soviet secret police. There was a new eruption of press vituperation, with new calls for a rupture of diplomatic relations with Moscow. Briand reassured Dovgalevskii and made light of the situation.

“Tell me, please,” Briand joked, “what did you do with the good general? How did you manage to kidnap such an important person in the middle of Paris? Was it all arranged for a movie scenario?”

Dovgalevskii took the affair more seriously, fearing that the embassy might be attacked by right wing mobs. So did Litvinov: “even the French press does not launch a concentrated attack on any government, if it is understood that this [attack] will contradict the policy and wishes of the [French] government.”

In the autumn of 1930 France started a trade war with the Soviet Union, and in the early 1931 the Narkomindel concluded that the prospects for Franco-Soviet relations were dim. Getting the worst of retaliatory measures, the French government took the initiative to call off the row. Berthelot sought out Dovgalevskii on his sick bed to start negotiations. Their success in settling the dispute marked the beginning of an improvement of relations which continued until October 1934.

The improvement came in fits and starts, and a non-aggression pact was concluded in late 1932 and a trade agreement in early 1934. The Soviet government deeply mistrusted the French. Rakovsky had referred to their Jesuit’s guile, and Dovgalevskii advised that the French were capable of reversing themselves twice over, even in the presence of stenographers. To be sure, the French did not trust the Soviets either, but they were the pot calling the kettle black. When talking to Dovgalevskii, Briand blamed the failure of earlier negotiations on Poincaré. Dovgalevskii advised the Narkomindel not to be in a hurry about negotiations because the French might think we need a favour. In 1931 the non-aggression pact was initialled, though the French government wanted to keep it secret for fear of touching off another press campaign. In principle, it was pointless to keep the pact secret for then it lost its value, but the French had to contend with the anti-Soviet hostility of their Polish and
Romanian allies. Of course, the news leaked and the resulting right wing tumult delayed the conclusion of the pact for over a year.

Semen B. Chlenov, Rakovskii’s right arm during the Franco-Soviet negotiations, was back in Paris and established or re-established relations with officials, politicians, and journalists, including Monzie and Labonne, still interested in “Russian affairs,” Rollin, apparently still on the Soviet payroll, and officials at the Quai d’Orsay. It was widely believed that the French government needed to improve relations with the Soviet Union. The “era of prosperity” was over, economic depression threatened, and France needed to increase trade and investment. The idea was to improve economic relations, separating the debts question from a trade agreement, and thereby to accumulate “political capital” so that a new government of the left could solve the “Russian question.” According to Monzie, parliamentary elections in 1932 figured in these calculations, the left hoping to claim some successes in Franco-Soviet relations, in order to divert attacks from the right. “I consider that the time is right,” advised Chlenov, “for serious negotiations in spite of the loud agitation against [us].”54

Litvinov wanted the speedy conclusion of agreements in Paris. “This is dictated by new developments in Europe.”55 He did not say what developments, but in Germany Nazi power was on the rise. Unfortunately, French cabinet ministers still lacked boldness: Robert Coulondre, a Quai d’Orsay official, told Soviet counterparts that the minister responsible for trade negotiations was unnerved by incessant right wing attacks against him. He is caught between two fires, Dovgalevskii explained: on the one side, as commerce minister he needs to respond to businessmen who want to trade in the Soviet Union; on the other he is a deputy of the right and his constituency is in Paris. The minister is therefore sensitive to attacks from the right-wing press, the more so, because he did not want journalists delving too closely into his past.56

There was more to it than that. The premier of the moment, ex-socialist Pierre Laval, reminded Dovgalevskii of his exasperation with the Comintern and its support of the French communist party.

“Moscow then and now finances revolution and strikes,” Laval commented. Dovgalevskii protested that his government had nothing to do with the Comintern.

“Unfortunately,” replied Laval, “the line drawn by you is not so clear.”

This was an old complaint and Litvinov had earlier explained to Dovgalevskii how to respond to it:

We of course firmly deny any financial ties whatsoever between the [Soviet] government and foreign communist parties, but it is impossible nevertheless to deny the fact that communist parties receive money from Moscow. We always explain the business thus: that communist
parties pay certain subscription fees to the Comintern, but since the Russian communist party is the largest party, its fees constitute a substantial part of the Comintern budget which is shared out between other parties. Thus, we by no means deny that the Comintern from Moscow sends money to French communist party, but we insist that this money does not come from the [Soviet] government or from government agencies. . . . You cannot entirely deny the receipt of money from Moscow by communist parties because on this point you cannot know. . . .

Here was a disingenuous argument, and you can see why Laval had a point. But Litvinov did not have the power to get rid of the Comintern, any more than he could control Bolshevik rhetoric in Moscow. He hoped that his western interlocutors would listen to what he and his ambassadors had to say in private and discount what Bolshevik “orators” were saying in public.

The Narkomindel wanted to press the French to sign the Franco–Soviet non-aggression pact, but did not know quite how to go about it. Litvinov tried André Tardieu, who for most of the period between November 1929 and May 1932 shared the premier’s chair with Laval. Tardieu was a traditional French nationalist on the right, hostile to Germany and to the Soviet Union. In March 1932 Litvinov complained to him that after nine months the French government was still delaying signature of the Franco–Soviet non-aggression pact.

“Just the time needed,” joked Tardieu, “for a child to be born.”

“Unfortunately, contact has proved to be barren,” Litvinov replied dryly.

Litvinov also complained about a lack of progress in trade negotiations, but Tardieu could not see why France should trade with the Soviet Union in order to help it—according to the Soviet press—to achieve “supremacy over the capitalist world and even eliminate this world.” I am not against cooperation with the Soviet Union, Tardieu said, but only based on French interests. Then, according to Litvinov, Tardieu listed French grievances against the Soviet government: the treaty of Rapallo and subsequent Soviet relations with the German army, non-payment of debts, Comintern activities, the French communist party and Marcel Cachin, one of its leaders. Whenever Cachin makes a speech in the Chamber of Deputies, “in France they say that this speech was written by a foreign government, and this creates irritation.” Litvinov riposted by listing Soviet grievances against France: the hostile “bourgeois” press and the hostile activities of tsarist émigrés in France. On the Comintern Litvinov replied along lines similar to those he laid out for Dovgalevskii, though with less flim-flam, for Tardieu was not one to fall for it.

More importantly, Litvinov laid out the argument in favour of better relations. It was basic realpolitik: the Soviet government had no major conflicts
with France. “We look for cooperation with other countries, and we take this cooperation where we find it. We are free from any national prejudice, we would like to have friendly relations with France, and it is not our fault if this has not come to pass until now.” At the time of Rapallo and long afterward, “we were alone and isolated and we would have been idiots if we had refused collaboration, on which only Germany then agreed. Any government in our place would have done exactly the same thing.” Even though our systems are different, it does not mean we cannot trade on mutually profitable terms. Tardieu was “very friendly,” observed Litvinov, and said he would think things over. He might well have, but his ruminations would have been of no use for his government fell in May 1932.

National elections in the spring of 1932 moved the French government slightly to the left and put Herriot back in power as premier and foreign minister. Nevertheless, the guard was changing: Tardieu did not again lead the government. Poincaré, Briand, Painlevé, and Berthelot retired from the scene; all were dead by the end of 1934. Herriot remained, and he kept to his idée fixe on Franco-Soviet relations. For Herriot enemy no. 1 was Germany, and this conviction was only strengthened when Adolf Hitler took power in January 1933. Moving the government toward a rapprochement with Moscow was hard: Herriot admitted that he did not trust Quai d’Orsay officials. Soviet diplomats did not either. In 1925 Krasin had said that Quai d’Orsay officials were “enemies to the last man.” This was not quite true; there were a few cuckoos in the nest, like Labonne and Coulondre, but they were relatively junior officials.

Monzie was still around: he told the Soviet chargé d’affaires, Marcel I. Rozenberg, that “the German danger” made a Franco-Soviet rapprochement essential. The Soviet embassy heard that Herriot was anxious to conclude the non-aggression pact, but in Moscow there were doubts about the steadiness of his position. The non-aggression pact was finally signed in late November 1932, just before the fall of Herriot’s government. In 1933 his successor, Joseph Paul-Boncour, was also reported to be in a hurry to strengthen Franco-Soviet relations, and this was true. But the Soviet embassy worried about the instability of French cabinets and about continued public hostility.

In June 1933 Charles Alphand, another rare Quai d’Orsay Russophile, was sent to Moscow as French ambassador. Herriot and Pierre Cot, then air minister, made visits to Moscow in the autumn of 1933 to strengthen the developing Franco-Soviet rapprochement. Litvinov wanted to know if the frequent changes of government could jeopardize improving relations. “We are now comfortable, doing business with the present cabinet [it was Daladier’s first government], but we have no confidence that its political line will continue in the case of a change of government.” And what about the bureaucracy, would it support the new policy? Win it over, was Alphand’s reply. Cot’s visit to Moscow, he added, was evidence of the government’s
commitment to a rapprochement. In response to Litvinov’s anxieties about French governmental instability, Cot recommended arranging visits to Moscow of members of parliament of all parties.\textsuperscript{64}

In early 1934 Dovgalevskii explained French equivocation on security issues by a split in French opinion and in the cabinet between “pro-Soviet and pro-German doctrines.” Litvinov asked Alphand if the French government had called Hitler’s attention to the continued sales in Germany of Mein Kampf, Hitler’s blueprint for European conquest, in which France and the Soviet Union were primary targets. Mein Kampf came up often in Litvinov’s discussions with foreign diplomats. He reckoned that it was the true indicator of Nazi ambitions.\textsuperscript{66} In February 1934 right wing riots broke out in Paris, leading to the resignation of yet another French cabinet, Daladier’s again. Louis Barthou, the foreign minister in the succeeding government, reassured Dovgalevskii of his commitment to the rapprochement and he discussed with Litvinov a Franco-Soviet pact of mutual assistance.\textsuperscript{67} Barthou was a tough minded conservative, who also calculated that Nazi Germany was enemy no. 1. Events in 1934 moved along more or less satisfactorily from the Soviet point of view until the autumn.

Not long after the Soviet entry into the League of Nations, promoted by France, Barthou was killed in Marseilles in the assassination of the Yugoslav king. A few days after Barthou’s death Alphand went to see Litvinov with a letter from Henri de Kérillis, an influential right wing politician and journalist in Paris, who had recently visited Moscow. On returning home (and this was before Barthou’s assassination), Kérillis had found the situation much changed: right wing groups which had grudgingly accepted the need for the rapprochement with the Soviet Union because of the German danger, were now reassessing their position. This change had been brought about by the “united front” in France, when the socialist and communist parties had agreed to cooperate (in July 1934) in defence of the Republic and against fascism. It was the precursor of the Popular Front, which the Radical party joined a year later. The French right, said Kérillis, is becoming more afraid of “the communist danger than of the German.” Litvinov expressed his regret that French domestic politics were influencing foreign policy, though he would not have been surprised. Kérillis’ letter played to his fears of French instability and unreliability. He told Alphand that there was nothing he could do about the growing union of the French left, reckoning that “the Franco-Soviet rapprochement was prompted by the danger of German aggression, in the same way that the united front was likely the product of the danger of fascism, and fascism and aggression are the two sides of the same coin.”\textsuperscript{68} For Litvinov it was not a question of if Hitler would make war, but only when and where he would make it. France would be vital in forming an anti-Nazi alliance and that made Paris the most important Soviet diplomatic post abroad.\textsuperscript{69}
V. P. POTEMKIN, 1934–1937

Pierre Laval, Barthou’s successor as foreign minister, gave assurances to the Soviet embassy that French policy would not change, but these were untrue.\textsuperscript{70} The Soviet ambassador was now Potemkin, as Dovyalevskii had died of a heart attack in the spring of 1934. Like his predecessors Potemkin’s job was to solidify Franco–Soviet relations. His brief was made more difficult by a general European crisis created by the rising danger of Nazi Germany, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, the German occupation of the demilitarized Rhineland, and the Spanish civil war in 1936. Potemkin’s task was also made more complicated by Laval who had quite a different agenda than Barthou. In his reports to Moscow, Potemkin portrayed an evasive foreign minister who made excuses for not moving quickly to conclude a mutual assistance pact. In January 1935 Potemkin reported the concerns of French “friends” who said that Laval might surrender “our position” and do “irreparable” harm to the Franco-Soviet rapprochement. Laval made no secret of his desire for “an agreement with Germany.”\textsuperscript{71}

Elections were once again an issue. According to Potemkin, Laval had to look good to his constituents in the working class district of Aubervilliers, and a visit to Moscow to sign a mutual assistance pact would serve his interests. Laval boasted that he did not fear his left electors. He “counts,” Potemkin noted facetiously, “on our all-powerful relations with the united front, he thinks we have already given directives to support his candidacy, as someone useful for the Franco–Soviet rapprochement.”\textsuperscript{72}

Negotiations for the Franco–Soviet mutual assistance pact were intense in March and April 1935. Laval wanted any immediacy or definite obligations taken out of the draft treaty.\textsuperscript{73} Litvinov counted many opponents of the pact, in and out of France. Even among French workers there was fear that it might hasten war with Germany. So Litvinov gave way to Laval’s demands and recommended Politiburo approval, quoting Laval to the effect that “it was necessary to sign something.” Negotiations with the dead Barthou had gone too far simply to abandon them now. “We should not rest any serious hopes on the pact in the sense of real military support in the case of war,” said Litvinov: “Our security in the first instance remains exclusively in the hands of the Red Army.” The value of the pact was “primarily political . . . lessening the chances of war not only with Germany but also with Poland and Japan.” And it would act as an obstacle to any German effort to form an “anti-Soviet bloc” including France. Litvinov’s last comment was ironic: the French offered the same justification in reverse for concluding with Moscow. The pact would discourage a Soviet–German rapprochement! So Potemkin signed the mutual assistance pact in Paris on 2 May 1935 which was followed a fortnight later by
a mirror agreement with Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovaks wanted the same "narrow" terms as the French, Litvinov informed Potemkin, and this "compels us to be cautious." The Soviet government would not get out in front of its newfound, but milquetoast allies.

Laval thought the pact worth a trip to Moscow where, intoxicated with himself or with vodka, he raised the question of general staff talks. This idea coming from Laval must have surprised Litvinov. According to Potemkin, the French general staff knew nothing about it. Laval also promised speedy ratification of the pact, but already it looked like this would only happen in the autumn at the earliest. Like Dovgalevskii, Potemkin showed a certain reserve toward the French for fear that too much Soviet interest in closer ties would have the opposite effect. And the embassy reported increasing anti-communist agitation. The bourgeois press feared the growing strength of the Popular Front. *Le Temps* was still a problem. "Don't forget," Alphand said, "that of all the French papers, it is the most corrupt (prodazhnyi) . . . and the most bourgeois of all the bourgeois papers in France." In the political salons there were laments about too much Soviet influence in French internal affairs. You need to sweeten the pot, Alphand advised, don't think that the rapprochement can be based "solely . . . on mutual assistance," you need to settle the debts issue. It's a question of French "psychology." It would create more "enthusiasm" for Franco-Soviet relations. Litvinov became cynical about Laval and did not believe his explanations for the delay in ratification: "he wants to keep in his hands this trump for negotiations with Germany." In August Litvinov was blunt when he met Laval in Geneva, but it did no good. The ratification of the mutual assistance pact was put off until the new year.

One thing about Laval, he did not conceal his mind from Potemkin, though perhaps he should have, for he destroyed Soviet confidence in him and to some degree in France itself. In a meeting in November 1935, Laval, also now premier, informed Potemkin of recent discussions of the French ambassador in Berlin with Hitler. According to Laval, both France and Germany wanted to establish good relations in order to guarantee European peace. Unfortunately, the greatest obstacle to a Franco-German rapprochement was the mutual assistance pact with the Soviet Union.

Laval clearly gave to understand that the existence of Franco-Soviet collaboration within the context of the treaty of mutual assistance not only does not guarantee security in Europe, but also threatens to break up his policy of peace. . . . At the moment when the [French] parliament must consider the question of ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact, these signals from the head of the government naturally must compel us to be cautious.
There was more in Potemkin’s report: “Laval is trying to prepare us psychologically for the rejection of the pact of mutual assistance and the substitution for it of an agreement on, or even a derisory German declaration of, non-aggression. . . . Obviously, we have before us a plan, already ripening in the head of our unreliable partner.” Laval talked about going as far as “a crime” for the sake of peace, which Potemkin took to mean, “in regard to our pact.” As if this was not enough, Laval also tried to incriminate the Soviet government in rumoured activities against “the governmental order” and “in the campaign [in France] being conducted against himself.” Potemkin protested and Laval “retreated” to the argument that the Comintern was “an instrument of our communist party and comrade Stalin.” This was not a bad argument, but he went further. “Laval significantly gave to understand that on him depended the fate of our pact. If he remains in power, if the campaign against him being conducted by the left press abates, the pact could be ratified, although opposition will be strong against it.” Potemkin took these last comments to mean that either Laval was openly proposing a deal “close to blackmail” or that he was warning that the pact would be so discredited in parliament that even if it passed, it would have no “moral authority.”

Potemkin’s record of conversation mirrored what Laval or his ambassador in Berlin had been saying for months to German interlocutors. Laval shared the Fuhrer’s concern about Bolshevism. “In France . . . the danger was not underestimated.” The Franco-Soviet pact was an attempt to lead Russia away from “Bolshevizing Europe”; it was not directed against Germany. Laval had gone to Moscow “to take the wind out of the sails of the powerful parliamentary group in Paris . . . of communists, Marxists, Freemasons, and Jews.” If Germany and France can come to terms, said Laval, “France would hand her paper back to Russia.” And “after all,” he joked, “you do mean to play the Bolsheviks a trick or two one of these days.” As for Laval’s lines to Potemkin about the incompatibility of “the pact” with a rapprochement with Germany, these appear to have come direct from the German ambassador in Paris.

Laval’s meeting with Potemkin took place in the midst of a brutal political struggle in which Laval’s authority was crumbling in parliament. His secret negotiations with the British foreign secretary to cede a large part of Abyssinia to Mussolini in order to end fighting there, were leaked to the press and fatally weakened him. Litvinov told Alphand that he thought the main element of mistrust in the political situation lay with the French government. By the end of 1935 it appeared that Laval might refuse to ratify the mutual assistance pact or would turn it into a scrap of paper. Or, he could negotiate an agreement with Nazi Germany giving it a free hand in the east. “The anti-Soviet role of Laval is becoming more and more obvious . . . ,” Litvinov said: “There is a chance of Laval leaving the
cabinet, but I consider it possible, given the absolute flabbiness of the French Radicals and Herriot, that Laval will not only remain in the cabinet but will strengthen his position, in which case there will not be Franco-Soviet collaboration in the near future.79

Alphand went home on leave for the Christmas holidays and met Potemkin in Paris several times in December 1935 and January 1936. It was evident from their wide ranging discussions that, again, domestic politics were adversely affecting Franco-Soviet relations, especially, the strength of the Popular Front, which was preparing to fight parliamentary elections in the spring 1936. According to Alphand, the political situation was worsening. Laval was alarmed by the growth of the French communist party and the consolidation of the Popular Front. The communists did not trouble him while they remained a small “extremist” group; they were a counterbalance to similar groups, like Action française on the right. But when the communist party changed its position to support national defence, it gained legitimacy. Now Laval thinks that his government will soon fall. The activities of the Comintern do not help, Alphand noted: can’t you do something about them?80 Trouble was that the Comintern was pursuing a policy of united front against fascism and it was just this policy which troubled Laval and others on the right.

Potemkin also established relations with Georges Mandel, wartime Premier Georges Clemenceau’s right arm, and a member of the French cabinet since November 1934. He was an anti-communist, but also a proponent of Franco-Soviet cooperation. He condemned Laval for his “play” with Italy and Germany, “which could lead to the complete isolation of France on the European continent.” Laval had no sense of international relations, said Mandel: “he sees foreign policy from the angle of his own personal domestic political interests and from the point of view of a short-sighted provincial pacifism.”81

In early 1936 Litvinov worried about political developments in France and recommended increasing the Narkmindel annual budget for the French press to 2.9 million francs. This was necessary, Litvinov advised Stalin, because of Laval’s hostile policies and “the obvious instability demonstrated by friends in French circles including even Herriot. . . . We need to do more to cultivate French public opinion by means of further penetration in the French press. . . .” Litvinov followed this up in February with a detailed budget request, including nearly 500,000 francs per annum for Le Temps. On the Soviet payroll there remained Rollin and also the anti-fascist journalist Geneviève Tabouis (5,000 francs per month). We cannot sound out the most influential journalists, Litvinov said, without “confidence that their requests [for allowances] will be satisfied.” Litvinov had in mind such journalists of the right as Pertinax, Jules Sauerwein, and André Pironneau.82 Likewise, for “orders for separate
articles by high profile journalists, for the publication of brochures, for
the organization of public reports, conferences, and the like, we need to
have allocations in the amount of 35,000 francs, minimum.” Litvinov
had come a long way from the early days when Chicherin considered him
to be stingy on budget issues. And who would have believed that Soviet
patience with Le Temps would be so enduring or how committed the
Soviet government remained to the rapprochement with France?

Potemkin again complained to Laval, just before the collapse of his
government, that the delay in the ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact
had created “an extremely unfavourable impression” in Moscow. What do
you want? Laval replied, the pact has aroused opposition which has
increased “many times” since May. “Public opinion in France sees that in
the last half year there has been extraordinary growth of the revolutionary
movement. . . . This is the work of the Comintern.” I recognize, said Laval,

the difference between the government of the USSR and the Comin-
tern. But the centre of the latter is in Moscow, and the bosses of the
Russian communist party direct the activities of the Third Interna-
tional. In France this activity is felt with special force. The Popular
Front is attempting to overturn the present government, and the
French communist party is discarding the slogans of defence of
democracy and defence of the country against Hitlerite Germany, to
strengthen its cells in the French army and its subversive activities in
French colonies, supplied with money from the Third International.

L’Humanité, the Communist daily in Paris, outdid itself in heaping shit
upon the “head of the government”. You can imagine, said Laval, the
reaction of “the moderate elements of French society” which were now
less favourable to the Franco-Soviet pact. It was not just L’Humanité
which irritated Laval, Herriot, Cot, and other Radicals and Socialists in
the Popular Front did also, the more so because they were advocates of a
Franco-Soviet rapprochement. In fact, Laval seemed to lump together the
Popular Front and the Comintern. Coincidentally, Tabouis and Pertinax
broke the story in Paris of Laval’s secret negotiations over Abyssinia.

On 22 January 1936 the Laval government fell. A caretaker cabinet
was formed until national elections in the spring. There was talk of refer-
ring the mutual assistance pact to The Hague court for adjudication. Litvinov
was in Paris in early February and met the new French foreign minister
Pierre-Étienne Flandin: we have our own “isolationists,” but we want
clearly in our relations with France, not the uncertainty created by Laval. The mutual assistance pact was finally approved by Chamber of Deputies
in February and the Senate in March 1936 after Germany sent troops into
the demilitarized Rhineland. The debate however was rancorous and little
appreciated in Moscow. “I am not sure,” Litvinov advised Potemkin before the Senate vote, “that we would not prefer simply to break the pact rather than to agree to The Hague procrastination which would give France the possibility again to use the pact as a bargaining counter with Germany.”

Even after ratification, bad news continued to arrive in Moscow. Henri Torrès, député, well-known lawyer, and advocate of Franco–Soviet cooperation, told Potemkin that he had met the Romanian minister at an official government luncheon. In the presence of his Polish counterpart and four or five right-wing deputies, the Romanian had “reviled” the Soviet Union and criticized the French government for concluding a pact with it. Torrès reacted angrily and cut him off, saying that his comments were inadmissible and compromised his country.

“If I had to choose between the barbarity of Stalin and the Hitler regime,” the minister retorted loudly, “I would prefer the German without a doubt.”

*Monsieur,* you are “playing into the hands of all-out reaction,” Torrès replied.

In March 1936 the Soviet embassy was discouraged by the weakness of the French response to the German violation of the demilitarized Rhineland, though German action may have saved the Franco–Soviet pact from defeat in the Senate. According to Potemkin, French weakness was not hard to understand. France feared the loss of British support. Allied and neutral countries alike were wavering before the increasing peril of war. There was little confidence in the Soviet Union as an ally. We are far away and do not have a common frontier with Germany. The Red Army is not ready for an offensive war. Mandel told Potemkin that “no one would stand in the elections [in the spring] as a proponent of war and an advocate of a policy of firmness. . . . The elections would take place under the ill-omen of pacifism.”

Herriot shared similar ideas with Potemkin: there can be no security in Europe without cooperation between Paris, London, and Moscow. Flandin had picked up Laval’s “Italophile tendencies,” which were pointless and dangerous. Herriot predicted that the communists and socialists would pick up seats in the coming elections, that the Radicals would hold their own, and that Daladier might form the next government. Herriot noted Daladier’s deep, but hidden dislike of the communists and his closeness to Laval because of their shared “Germanophilia.” He needed watching. If Daladier became premier, Laval might return to the cabinet. If this happened, Herriot would refuse to join the government, for he could not work with someone who had signed the Franco-Soviet pact and then sought to block its ratification or to transform it “into a simple scrap of paper.”

The parliamentary elections did not turn out quite as Herriot expected. The communists and socialists made big gains, but the Radicals lost
heavily. Litvinov reacted unenthusiastically: “however positive these results are at first glance, especially the victory of the communist party, I foresee as a result of the elections a strengthening of the work of the right parties and a further slipping toward the fascistization of France.” And like Herriot, Litvinov worried about Laval’s re-entry into the cabinet especially at the Quai d’Orsay. “In another country the result of the elections would exclude the possibility of the ministry of foreign affairs falling into the hands of Laval, but in France one has to reckon with such anomalies.” Nor would Daladier be any better. “Is it possible that the so much stronger communist and socialist parties cannot block the road to power of the fascist leaning (fashistvuiushchii) Laval or his single dimensional thinker in foreign policy Daladier?” Laval did not return to government until after the French debacle in 1940, but then France no longer counted. However, Daladier entered the new cabinet, as defence minister and vice-premier. The socialist Léon Blum led the new Popular Front government.

Matters worsened as 1936 unfolded. There was a wave of strikes in France in May and June. In July the Spanish civil war broke out, increasing polarization of right and left and doing more damage to Soviet foreign policy. Nazi Germany and fascist Italy supported the mutiny of General Francisco Franco; the British and French governments opted for “non-intervention.” The Soviet Union supported the Spanish Republicans, though not without misgivings. “The Spanish question has undoubtedly damaged our international position,” Litvinov observed in the autumn of 1936: “It has spoiled our relations with England and France and spread doubt in Bucharest and even in Prague.” For Litvinov civil war in Spain and political instability in France were bad news which threatened the anti-Nazi alliance he was trying to build.

In September 1936 Potemkin warned the French foreign minister, Yvon Delbos, that a “policy of capitulation” to fascist aggression would lead France to the loss of its allies and to isolation. Delbos protested that the government wanted to avoid war. And the British, you know the British, they do not like our strikes and are afraid of the spread of revolution. Potemkin was astonished: Why does France permit British interference in its affairs? Delbos replied lamely, though he might more honestly have admitted that French weakness encouraged interference by many European states including Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Litvinov was also worried: “A spirit of capitulation has arisen not only in France, but also in Czechoslovakia, furthered... by the inactivation of the Franco-Soviet and Czech-Soviet mutual assistance pacts.” Such pacts are normally strengthened by “military agreements or conventions.” If the French had shown no interest in general staff talks, the Czechoslovaks had taken an initiative, to which unfortunately “our military people” did not respond. “If we want to counteract the spirit of capitulation, then
we should in my opinion at least demonstrate our readiness for negotiations on the military realization of the pacts.” As a first step Blum should be sounded out.\textsuperscript{93}

In early October, with Politburo approval, Litvinov took the initiative himself, meeting Blum in Geneva. With remarkable candour, Blum said that staff talks were being “sabotaged” by the French general staff and by Daladier. Blum seemed tired and overcome by a sense of “doom.” “The discussion with Blum left me with a painful impression,” said Litvinov, “though I do not doubt his good intentions.”\textsuperscript{94} In Paris Potemkin guessed that Daladier and the chief of the French general staff, Maurice Gamelin, were the main opposition to staff talks. His surmise was confirmed by Cot, again air minister, who described to Potemkin a meeting chaired by Blum where Daladier and Gamelin had tried to delay staff talks. Cot threatened to resign if the talks did not proceed, at which point Daladier and Gamelin relented, though grudgingly. “It is clear how dangerous it is,” Potemkin observed, “to build illusions about the dispositions toward the USSR of certain influential members of the government and high command and how careful and reserved we must be in our work in strengthening Franco-Soviet cooperation.” We must not show too much interest in negotiations and we should expect “not a few obstacles” in our way.\textsuperscript{95} “Certain authoritative comrades here,” Litvinov replied, also prefer that talks be put off, though it is better to let the French take the initiative. Litvinov did not explain the position of his “authoritative comrades,” but he noted that the Soviet government had “absolutely reliable information that the French high command is resolutely opposed to the Franco-Soviet pact and is openly talking about it.”\textsuperscript{96}

There were further signs of trouble when Coulondre arrived in Moscow in November 1936 to replace Alphand as French ambassador. At his first meeting Litvinov he warned of the “critical” state of Franco-Soviet relations, especially because of the “position of the French Communist party.” The Soviet government, said Coulondre, needed to take the initiative in improving relations with France. This was too much for Litvinov. “First Laval, now Blum, and especially Delbos fancy that not only the general policies of PCF [Parti communiste français], but also any speech by Torrès, Cachin, and other heads of the party, any article and any comment in L’Humanité is coordinated with us and even directly inspired by us. On this point the French repeatedly speak directly or indirectly with comrade Potemkin.” “I suggest,” Litvinov wrote to Stalin, “that we need to put an end to such discussions.” The stiffness of Litvinov’s written reply set Coulondre back on his heels, but apart from that it was of no use.\textsuperscript{97} Each side was irritated by public criticism whether from L’Humanité or Le Temps. You would think that the hardened men on both sides would have withstood the criticism with greater equanimity.
Potemkin saw Blum again in mid-December. There has been another meeting, Blum advised, with the war, navy, and air ministers and the chief of staff Gamelin.

The subject of the meeting was . . . the growing danger of war and about what measures we must take in view of the approaching armed conflict. It was recognized that the most threatened place in Europe is Czechoslovakia. We recognized that it is necessary, because time is running out, to develop concrete plans for its defence. If the Germans attacked Czechoslovakia, France would immediately mobilize its army. At the same time it would send air forces to help Czechoslovakia.

From the French point of view, the big question remained what would the Soviet Union do in the event of war? The ministers concluded that “the question of coordination of the actions of France, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR must be discussed without delay by the three interested parties.” These discussions could start with the coordination of air defences; meetings would take place in Prague. Blum thought that starting with air defences would “inevitably raise questions of a broader nature,” and he added that this was also the view of the general staff. A few days after this meeting Gamelin called in the Soviet attaché: “the French general staff since Barthou’s time had supported and continued to support to this day the idea of a Franco-Soviet pact.” The military attaché came away from the meeting with the feeling that Gamelin meant what he said and discussions could indeed start on air defences. I know that “leading comrades” are reserved about staff talks, said Potemkin, but “I took no initiative.” Potemkin was not sure of the information he was getting from Monzie (still) and Tabouis that Gamelin was opposed to staff talks because of potential communist subversion in the army. With regard to Daladier, Blum himself “told me the last time that this individual is deeply hostile to us and that we should not count on him.” In spite of the contradictory information Potemkin still hoped the French had “decided to proceed to business.” As it turned out, Monzie and Tabouis were right. Cot and Blum had forced the hand of Daladier and Gamelin, who played along in order to take back control of the agenda and to subvert the talks. Take one step forward, they calculated, to take two steps back.

In the meantime, Le Temps continued to attack the Soviet Union. The Soviet embassy complained to the foreign minister Delbos, who said he would see what he could do. How much more than half a million a year would it take for Le Temps to mute its vitriol? The Soviet government continued to pay, as it had in the 1920s, for fear of how much worse the vitriol could become.

Matters worsened in 1937. In January cabinet minister Camille Chautemps told Potemkin that staff talks could provoke a German–Italian “preventative
war” and that the British opposed them. The Soviet government has no intention of forcing itself upon the French, replied Potemkin, but it’s a mistake for France to be constantly looking over it shoulder at Germany in expectation of its next outburst and to be subordinating its foreign policy to direction from London. Delbos did nothing about Le Temps, and Litvinov complained to him in Geneva: everyone knows that Le Temps is a mouthpiece of the Quai d’Orsay; its anti-Soviet attacks are undermining Franco-Soviet relations.

Staff talks continued to be the primary agenda item. There were some exchanges between the French general staff officers and the Soviet military attaché in January 1937. Alexis Léger, who had succeeded Berthelot in 1933, told Potemkin that it might be a good idea to slow things down. “Eventual” Franco–Soviet military cooperation “could cause England to abandon France.” That would be a catastrophe. The formation of the Popular Front, Léger continued, had increased British reserve toward the Franco–Soviet pact. After listening to all this, Potemkin must have been surprised when Léger complained about the slow Soviet reaction to the first meeting between the Soviet military attaché and French general staff officers. In response, Litvinov reminded Potemkin that he had strong doubts about support for the talks in Moscow, though he offered no explanation why. In February Léger reminded Potemkin of British opposition: “in influential business and government circles in London there were discussions about the bolshevization of France, about the dangerous social and economic experiments of the Popular Front government allegedly leading the country to revolution.”

Yet there were exchanges between the French general staff and Soviet military representatives in Paris between January and March 1937. Potemkin made a formal Soviet reply to Blum in mid-February, apparently reading a letter to him from Stalin. The French premier said he was “deeply touched” by the Soviet reply, but Blum avoided any specific comments. He levelled with Potemkin that there was still a problem with Daladier and some general staff officers, that they were sceptical about the “possibility of Franco-Soviet military collaboration.” Daladier contacted Potemkin in early March. With “an enigmatic air” he assured me that “things were moving forward, but moving with special caution, in order not to cause an undesirable commotion.” “I replied to Daladier,” said Potemkin, “that on our side we are observing in this affair the most careful discretion.” Daladier said he was glad to hear it. We should talk again, “not as war minister to ambassador, but as man to man.” Potemkin expected a new meeting with Daladier about staff talks and possibly about communist activities in the French army.

There were also problems over Soviet orders for war matériel, in particular from the armaments firm Schneider-Creusot. Daladier and Blum
had promised to support these orders, but Schneider refused to cooperate. Potemkin complained to Blum and Herriot, and both interceded to no avail, as Potemkin discovered when he talked to Armand St. Sauveur, son-in-law of the patron Eugène Schneider. St. Sauveur said that if Potemkin would speak with Blum to stop the Popular Front nationalization of his company, the Soviet orders would be filled. All it would take, said St. Sauveur, is “one word from you to Blum and it would be sufficient to stop the nationalization. . . .” If nationalization proceeded, Schneider would cancel all foreign orders including the Soviet’s. “I replied clearly to St. Sauveur that my appeal to Blum in this regard would be direct interference in the internal affairs of the country.” It sounded like blackmail to Potemkin and that is what he called it. As it turned out, Schneider managed its business without any Soviet help.

There was no further progress on staff talks or on orders for war matériel. Potemkin was called home to succeed N. N. Krestinskii as deputy commissar. Poor Krestinskii would soon perish in the Stalinist purges along with many colleagues from the Narkomindel. Potemkin did not see Daladier again, nor did the French general staff contact the Soviet chargé d’affaires, E. V. Girshfel’d. Potemkin had instructed him “not to show too much initiative,” though Girshfel’d wanted to see Delbos.

Potemkin, now in Moscow, again instructed Girshfel’d to sit tight and “not to force a decision on the French government.” Coulondre advised Potemkin that Daladier could still be brought around, “he was more or less positive about Franco-Soviet cooperation,” but he was “sensitive” to public criticism from the French communist party. Sensitive? Could Daladier have been too thin-skinned to suffer French communist criticism, or did he blame the communists for Radical election losses? Either way, after assailing Litvinov with complaints about Comintern interference in French domestic affairs, Coulondre now asked if the Soviet government could restrain French communist attacks on Daladier. If the attacks stopped, Daladier might be more “stable” on relations with the Soviet Union. Potemkin was polite and did not point out the inconsistencies in Coulondre’s position. More than that he instructed Girshfel’d to contact discretely “leading comrades in the party,” naming communist journalist Gabriel Péri, “to signal that we would consider it useful to moderate somewhat the aggressive tone of their press and party organs in regard to Daladier.” And Léger also, advised Potemkin, for Léger will stay at the Quai d’Orsay after Delbos goes, and Léger appeared to be taking a relatively “positive position” on Franco–Soviet cooperation and on an “independent” foreign policy, independent, that is, from Britain. Daladier was not more positive about Franco–Soviet relations, he was manoeuvring against Blum and Cot who were still trying to find a way to staff talks. As for Léger, Potemkin may have confused politesse for a positive
position. In French archives there is nothing to support Potemkin’s supposition, though of course Léger may have been saying one thing to Potemkin and another inside the Quai d’Orsay. In any event, the Soviet government was still trying to improve relations with France.

These relations suffered a major setback in June 1937 when the Soviet government summarily executed for alleged acts of treason some of the most senior officers in the Red Army. The Stalinist purges had begun the year before when a small group of “old Bolsheviks” was put on trial and then executed. The French government did not care about the “old Bolsheviks” with the exception of a few people like Rakovskii and Krestinskii who had worked for better Franco–Soviet relations. When the high command of the Red Army was purged, however, this was a different matter for the Red Army would be a major component of any allied resistance against Nazi Germany. In France it looked like the Soviet government was riddled with traitors or with madmen who had turned on their most capable military officers. The latter explanation seemed the more plausible, but however one saw it, the purges were an ideal pretext to stop closer military cooperation with the Soviet Union. Even Potemkin acknowledged that western coverage of “the liquidation of the military-fascist band” in the Red Army high command had harmed the reputation of the Soviet Union and set back Franco–Soviet relations. French ministers were smug about having stayed out of staff talks, but Litvinov thought they ought not to get so carried away. It was Daladier who had passed “intelligence” to Potemkin—Nazi disinfection as it turned out—about the Wehrmacht bragging of a spy inside the Red Army high command. In the meantime the Blum cabinet fell, and with that, the French government shifted toward the centre. The Popular Front had seen its best days, though this was not necessarily a negative development for Franco–Soviet relations.

**IA. Z. SURITS, 1937–1940**

Surits came from the Soviet embassy in Berlin and arrived in Paris in June 1937. His agenda was to prevent a further deterioration of Franco–Soviet relations. Soviet ambassadors in Paris never had an easy time of it, and Surits perhaps least of all. French anti-communism and anti-Soviet hostility, worked up by the Popular Front and the Spanish civil war, limited Surits to a passive role. He reported that Soviet “friends” on the French right who made their calculations based on national defence, were susceptible to reports of trials and arrests in the Soviet Union. Here Moscow could offer no help for the purges continued to cut into government ranks, including those of the Narkomindel. Stalin was determined to snuff out any opposition to his authority, real or imagined, and his security took precedence over national security.
In November Litvinov had a row with Coulondre when the latter brought up the Comintern again and in particular an article in *L’Humanité*. “I expressed the utmost astonishment that the French ambassador considered it necessary and possible to speak again with me about the Comintern and to repeat the fables that we are accustomed to reading in the fascist press.” Indeed, “if one is to judge from the French press, then one could come to the conclusion that France has a mutual assistance pact not with us, but with Germany or Italy, and that the vital interests of France are threatened not by the fascist states, but by the USSR.” And don’t you think we notice, Litvinov continued sarcastically, “the special warmth in regard to the USSR in the speeches of French statesmen who not so much defend the Soviet-French pact, as excuse themselves for having signed it. I asked Coulondre if he did not think these facts deserved more attention than the trifles which he considered necessary to raise with me.” The ambassador replied that he supported closer Anglo-Franco-Soviet cooperation and that he had only raised problems which prevented that closer cooperation. Coulondre’s own report of this meeting disguised Litvinov’s bile, perhaps wanting to prevent relations from deteriorating still further. At this point *any* French communist criticism of the government was considered “propaganda” produced and paid for in Moscow, whether it was or not.

Soviet irritation grew as estimates of French reliability declined. Surits wrote a devastating report in November 1937: “I have not until now met one French person who would not criticize the high politics of the present cabinet. No matter what the party affiliation all agree that France has ‘lost face abroad,’ is under the British thumb, and has lost its friends.” The “fear of tomorrow” grows stronger every day, said Surits, the French see danger all around them. For the French government, the mutual assistance pact was merely a hindrance to a Soviet–German rapprochement. French policy seemed incomprehensible because of the government’s apparent betrayal of its national interests, especially in Spain. The only way Surits could explain it was in the domination of class over national interests, and in French submission to British power, thought to be the only real protection for France against Nazi Germany. For France, and especially Britain, it was evident that the Soviet Union would play a decisive role in the struggle against fascism, and that the defeat of fascism would lead to the growth of Soviet influence in Europe. At this cost, victory was undesirable. If France had to choose between the USSR and fascism, it would choose fascism. The French, said Surits, were headed toward “complete capitulation to Hitler and Mussolini.” Even Romanians, who wanted to be strong French allies, were disgusted. Victor Antonescu, the Romanian foreign minister, complained about Anglo-French “passivity” that was “leading Europe to chaos.” “If London, Paris, and Moscow formed a bloc,
and talked tough in Geneva,” then according to Antonescu, “all the small and middle powers would follow them and this would significantly lessen the danger of war.”

The Narkomindel deserves credit, as it tried hard to improve relations with France, but even there, patience ran short in early 1938. “We are very dissatisfied with the present line of French foreign policy and with the personal conduct of Delbos,” Potemkin advised Surits, “It has been decided to hold the French rather far off, not seeking any closeness with them, and even more, not making to them any advances. They must understand that their tactics are clear to us, and that we do not entertain any illusions concerning the present government’s attitude toward Franco-Soviet cooperation. France needs the USSR, but we after all can without difficulty get along without the French.” This would have been fine with the French government, but Litvinov must have thought Potemkin’s note a little stiff for he followed with one of his own. We are keeping quiet and waiting, he wrote, but we will support proposals by others which go in the direction of our policies. As for Delbos, don’t reproach him and don’t push him. Litvinov still had his eye on grand strategy: “the most correct policy would be to recognize as a fact for the time-being of a German-Italian-Japanese coalition which should be opposed by another coalition even if not based on any firm commitments of mutual assistance . . . It is entirely conceivable that such an agreement [on cooperation] . . . would not be under an ideological cover, but under the flag of the defence of peace. Such a policy, however, supposes a rapprochement with the USSR, which, apparently England at the present time, will not yet contemplate.” Hence, France would not either.

The usual information and rumours flowed into Moscow. Daladier was supposedly coming around, for he realized that a Franco-German rapprochement was impossible. The French government was sending war supplies clandestinely to the Spanish Republicans. Surits began to talk to Paul Reynaud, a French politician of the right, who supported Franco-Soviet cooperation. Litvinov wanted to meet him. In March another French cabinet fell and Delbos finally left the Quai d’Orsay. Blum tried to form a broad based government that included the communists. On the right only a few assented, including Reynaud, who told Surits that it would be impossible to govern France without the support of the working class, i.e., the communist party: “I am not concerned that the communists are tied to the Third International in as much as the interests of the Third International at least for the present do not diverge from the interests of France.” Unfortunately, Surits reported, he is alone, “a white crow” on the right. Blum formed a government without the communists, but it lasted only a month.

In the meantime the German government annexed Austria on 13 March. Litvinov proposed an international conference to discuss European
security, but the British and French declined. Romanian opinion was unkind: “Nothing good could be expected from France,” said Gheorghe Tătărescu, the new Romanian minister in Paris, “its authority and importance have fallen catastrophically.” Judging from Potemkin’s mood, the Narkomindel had just about given up on France. With Austria gone, Czechoslovakia was the next target. Incredibly, or so it seemed in the Narkomindel, French policy remained passive. Potemkin remembered Barthou as the last decisive French leader and lamented the fact that there was no one like him now to remind the British about the danger of their own isolation against Germany and to give heart to France and to all of “democratic Europe.” Potemkin did not foresee a change in policy: “France is inevitably headed for catastrophe. Only a decisive reversal of all its policies can save it.”\footnote{121} There was no reversal, quite the contrary. Daladier became premier in April, and he named to the Quai d’Orsay, Georges Bonnet, a right wing Radical, who was not the person to inspire confidence in Moscow. “I consider Daladier and especially Bonnet,” Litvinov commented, “less disposed to collaboration with us, than even Delbos.”\footnote{122}

From the west, things did not look good in the Soviet Union. The last big Stalinist show trial was underway, including the unfortunate Rakovskii and Krestinskii. Davtian, Rozenberg, Arens, and Girshfel’d also disappeared. “Za čto?”, for what?, they might well have asked. Litvinov tried to conduct Soviet foreign policy as if nothing was amiss at home, but he could not do it, not only because some of his closest colleagues in the Narkomindel were disappearing or felt threatened—he did also—but because the French anti-communist press was having a field day. The Red Army was weak and collapsing, went the usual lines, and so was the Soviet Union, riddled as it was with traitors and oppositionists. “One has to recognize,” Litvinov observed, “that the French most of all are pushing an anti-Soviet line, which in the last analysis will also redound against France.” Litvinov continued to complain about the French press. As in the 1920s, Litvinov threatened to cut off “subsidies” to offending newspapers, though this time he did not mention Le Temps. We can’t pay for anti-Soviet calumny, Litvinov advised Surits, but he was prepared to increase rates: “we are ready to promise from ten to fifty thousand Swiss francs, but only on condition of complete loyalty.”\footnote{123} What a desperate mess, the Soviet Union was isolated, turning on its most talented leaders, paying off a hostile French press to avoid the complete collapse of its policy in western Europe. This might well have been Litvinov’s own view, but gone were the days when he could have commented sourly in the Narkomindel about the big mouths in Moscow or their bloody purges.

And then came Munich. Surits foresaw the outcome. There is no disposition on the part of France and Britain, he said in July 1938, to defend
Czechoslovakia. The British want to obtain from the Czechs by negotiation what Hitler wants to take by force. Surits was discouraged: “When you look carefully here at the press ... when you observe this panicky fear mixed with awe of German force and German ‘Macht,’ when day in and day out you are witness to an endless showing of heels, to concessions, to the gradual loss of independence in foreign policy ... one cannot help but feel a terrible foreboding.”\textsuperscript{124} Mandel continued to complain to Surits about French dependence on Britain. “France on all questions of present day politics is a debtor or supplicant ... peace or war now depends to a significant degree on internal conditions in France. The latter hangs on the franc, and the franc in the first instance depends on England. To go against England therefore cannot be risked.” Basically, it came to this: according to Mandel, if England wants, England gets. “Mandel recognizes, that the USSR has every right to be shocked by the weakness of French foreign policy ... but it would be wiser not to demonstrate too openly its displeasure with the policies of France because to a large degree, these are produced by objective conditions, by entirely domestic difficulties, the risk of losing the support of England and the fear of losing those client [state]s who remain in central and eastern Europe.” We will defend a strong line in Geneva, Mandel told Surits, “but ... the majority in the cabinet will compromise if England insists.”\textsuperscript{125}

As Mandel feared, the British did insist. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was determined to settle the Czechoslovak crisis without war whatever the cost to Czechoslovakia. “When I was a little boy,” he told a cheering crowd before he flew for the third time in a fortnight to Germany, “I used to repeat, if at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again. That’s what I am doing. . . .” One can only imagine how Litvinov must have cringed when he heard these lines.

During the Munich crisis France would not move without Britain, and Britain would not move. The Soviet Union was obligated to go to the aid of Czechoslovakia only if France did. The Soviet government, and Romanians too, believed that everything hinged on France, not Britain. As Potemkin saw it, if France went to the aid of Czechoslovakia, Britain would have to support France whether it wanted to or not, and no one could yet reproach the Soviet Union for failing to meet its treaty obligations.\textsuperscript{126} But no one moved, and the Czechoslovak government capitulated. Surits summed up the catastrophe. Nazi Germany, with French compliance and without firing a shot, has gained a population of more than three millions, acquired more than 27,000 square kilometres of territory with important factories, mines, fortifications. On and on he went. There had been no popular support for Czechoslovakia. On the contrary, “... for days we were all witnesses to the most disgraceful scenes when cowardice was elevated to virtue by cheering, thoughtless crowds and when the
capitulators were glorified as national heroes." With the exception of Mandel, Surits concluded, none of the present leaders of France were capable of command in a modern war.\textsuperscript{127}

This dispatch drew a reply from Litvinov: "I think you exaggerate" the apparent lack of popular enthusiasm and interest in the fate of Czechoslovakia. When it comes to going into the trenches, "no one should expect enthusiasm." Propaganda, noted Litvinov, creates enthusiasm. "I was in France at the time of the mobilization in 1914 and then also there was no enthusiasm. . . ." It was the skillful propaganda of the French government which created popular support for the war. The difference now, said Litvinov, is "that the French government did nothing to explain to the population the importance of Czechoslovakia from the point of view of the interests and the security of France itself."\textsuperscript{128} For Litvinov, that was the key point.

In October 1938 Coulondre was transferred to the French embassy in Berlin. He had pressed the Quai d'Orsay to take a stronger line in the Czechoslovak crisis. "It's not my fault," he told Potemkin, if things went wrong. This was true for Bonnet was too afraid of catastrophe in the event of war to listen to any advice from his ambassador in Moscow. There should have been a decent parting when Coulondre left Moscow, but it did not happen. Coulondre broke off personal relations with the Narkomindel, objecting to harsh Soviet editorials on the French capitulation. Better than most observers, Coulondre had recognized the depth of Soviet anger over Munich; on the other hand, the British ambassador in Moscow, Lord Chilston, breezily dismissed it as Soviet posturing.\textsuperscript{129}

From France the news continued to be bad. Surits reported on the Radical party conference in Marseilles at the end of October 1938 where Daladier and others attacked the French communists. Many Radicals were ready to denounce the Franco–Soviet pact, Surits advised, and to sacrifice their other eastern treaty obligations, if this would buy an agreement with Germany. Surits still identified a link between French domestic politics and relations with the Soviet Union. The right saw the Franco–Soviet pact as a factor strengthening the communist party. Their pressure on the French government focused on the pact, and made itself felt "at every step of the way."

Litvinov was scornful: "old man" Chamberlain would go the limit to obtain an agreement with Hitler, and the French, whether they liked it or not, would follow the British. There had been editorials in Le Temps and elsewhere urging the French government to break its eastern pacts. Litvinov assumed that Bonnet had inspired them.\textsuperscript{131} No doubt Litvinov's scorn was heartfelt, but it may also have been necessary to retain the confidence of Molotov and Stalin whose patience with the foreign commissar was running out.

In spite of the Soviet view of France, there was one last effort to create an anti-Nazi alliance, and the proposal came from the Soviet side. In 1939
Surits took a more hopeful view of the French political situation. He saw France with its back to the wall, and public opinion strongly favouring an alliance with the Soviet Union. Litvinov commented that in Moscow there was more distrust of France and Bonnet than there was of Britain and Chamberlain, and that London was now the “centre of all negotiations and actions concerning the present European situation.” Paris had lost its importance. To Litvinov, it looked like France was kaik, finished. Surits was not so sure, thinking that the French government might agree to an anti-Nazi alliance if only because France was in greater danger.

For jokers in Paris the British prime minister was *J’aime Berlin*. Even the foreign office had its comies: “If at first you can’t concede,” they said of Chamberlain, “fly, fly, fly again.” In March the Soviet ambassador in London reported that the British government might be ready to take a stronger position, especially after the German occupation of rump Czechoslovakia and of Memel in the Baltic.

On 17 April Litvinov handed to the British ambassador in Moscow an eight-point proposal for a political and military tripartite alliance with France and Britain. Senior officials in the foreign office derided Litvinov’s proposals though the Quai d’Orsay showed more interest. Litvinov so distrusted Bonnet that he rounded on Surits for not immediately giving the Quai d’Orsay a written copy of the Soviet alliance proposal. “When doing business with Bonnet, we need to take all precautionary measures.” Litvinov received no reply from the British, and he feared that Chamberlain and Bonnet could revert to their “Munich positions.” A few days later on 28 April, Surits reported that Bonnet was retreating from an initially positive reaction to Soviet proposals, and Litvinov had to advise Stalin on 3 May that Britain appeared to be in no hurry to respond.

Anglo-French stalling must have been too much for Stalin, who sacked Litvinov on 3 May. For the reader who might worry about Litvinov’s fate, he emerged again in December 1941 as Soviet ambassador in Washington. In the meantime, this Soviet Sisyphus, as he saw himself, would remain idle. Surits wrote quickly to get the attention of the new commissar for foreign affairs, V. M. Molotov. Essentially his argument was that the French were more vulnerable than the British and thus more likely to negotiate. According to Surits, Bonnet had told him that the hitch in negotiations lay with the British, who were opposed to any agreement which was too broad and too engaging. However difficult to believe Bonnet, said Surits, in this case, I think we can. Britain is looking for “parallel action” with us and not more. The French are thinking only of extending the existing Franco-Soviet pact, whereas for Chamberlain a tripartite alliance would be “too much of a break with his past.” However unsuited for his role, Bonnet is pushing the British. Our proposals prevent anyone from saying that “the USSR has evaded participation in the struggle
against the aggressor.” But we have wider interests than simply protecting ourselves against foreign reproach. “We also wanted to build a real barrier against the aggressor.” Surits argued that the Soviet government should negotiate with the French on terms they were likely to accept even if these did not go as far as Litvinov’s April proposals. This would encourage the smaller countries in eastern Europe not to compose with Nazi Germany and it would improve relations with France and Britain. If Nazi Germany attacked Poland or Romania, the French and British would have to support them. It would not be in Soviet interests to stand aside, whether there was a tripartite agreement or not. The Soviet Union would have to fight, “and it seems to me, that it would be better in this case to have the agreement [than not].” If war broke out, allied cooperation would inevitably be expanded. Work through the French, even Bonnet, finesse the British, make it impossible for Chamberlain to slip away. Take half a loaf rather than insisting on the whole. Surits’ argument was that the half loaf would lead to the whole more or less.136

If Surits had wanted to “speak Bolshevik,” he might have said that the corrupt Anglo–French bourgeoisie could not coexist with imperialist Germany. As communists, we should recognize this. Let’s be patient and wait . . . Paris and London will have to turn to us, if they want to survive. The point is that Surits, like his predecessors, spoke in terms of realpolitik and common sense. His strategy was sound, and who knows, it might have worked. But Molotov and Stalin calculated that London was where an agreement would be concluded, if indeed this was possible. Daladier and Bonnet could not be trusted; France by itself had no chance. In negotiations during the spring and summer Molotov focused his attention on London, ignoring Paris and thus Surits’ advice. Once Britain had accepted Soviet terms, France would go along. The plan almost worked, but as Surits feared, demands for the whole loaf played into Chamberlain’s hands, and he was able to raise doubts about Soviet intentions. This may strike the reader as ironic since Soviet leaders were more than entitled to doubt French and British good faith. And the French press continued to attack the Soviet Union. In June Potemkin complained to the new French ambassador, Paul-Émile Naggia, about articles in the right wing Paris daily Écho de Paris, and he asked the Quai d’Orsay to intervene. Even the President of the Republic, replied Naggia, had to endure such calumny. All the same, Potemkin replied, these attacks would not do while Anglo-Franco–Soviet alliance negotiations were underway.137

Bonnet recognized that there was a problem of trust, which for him was saying something. We want to dissipate Soviet doubts about Anglo-French “sincerity,” Bonnet told Surits in July: “This and only this is the root of all the difficulties.” The problem was that Bonnet and Daladier could not dissipate Soviet mistrust, or even the mistrust of French politicians.
like Mandel. “The evening after my meeting with Bonnet, I dined with Mandel,” Surits reported to Moscow: “he recognized the entire justice of our mistrust in the [Anglo-French] negotiators, that it was absolutely correct that we specify each point.” Mandel urged the Soviet government to accept nothing less than a real war-fighting alliance, which would prevent the Anglo-French from escaping with mere paper agreements. “It is better to lose a few weeks, than to allow vagueness and reservations.” Mandel inadvertently identified the danger with Surits’ proposals. Litvinov had tried the half loaf strategy, and it had failed. It troubles me, Mandel said, “that many people, ‘not without the help of the Munichmen of course’ are forming the opinion that Moscow ‘is manoeuvring between Berlin and Paris and London’ and that it is not especially counting on an agreement.” Even Surits hardened his position, warning that the Anglo-French were “cheats” attempting to deceive public opinion into putting the blame on Moscow for any failure of negotiations. “We should send them to the devil,” Surits said, after exposing their strategy. Surits’ sources of information were good for this is just what Bonnet had in mind to do in late May, six weeks before his meeting with Surits. Molotov, who was Stalin’s bloody right arm and knew a trick or two, would have treated Bonnet’s claims of “sincerity” with cynical derision. At the end of July or the beginning of August the Soviet government decided to listen to German proposals for a rapprochement, and a non-aggression pact was concluded on 23 August in Moscow.

After expressing his dismay with the Soviet volte-face, Bonnet did one of his own, trying to avert war by offering Poland as sacrifice. It did not work and war broke out on 1 September. In what must have been a real catharsis for Daladier, he banned _L’Humanité_ in late August and outlawed the French communist party in September. Franco-Soviet relations were frozen once again until the end of November when the outbreak of the Russo-Finnish war allowed the French to give vent to their more habitual anti-Bolshevik fury. At the end of December 1939 Surits warned that the French were completely out of control. Nearly all the French press is shouting that we are easy targets and riven with internal dissent. “Our embassy has become a plague zone and is surrounded by a swarm of plainclothes police.”

Until April 1940 Franco-Soviet relations were strained to the breaking point. French politicians and generals, even Reynaud, who became premier in March 1940, contemplated bombing the Caucasian oil fields or advancing on Leningrad, when at the same time they were loath to take the offensive against the Wehrmacht. In March 1940 the French government demanded the recall of Surits—a replay of 1927 when Rakovskii resided at the rue de Grenelle. Both ambassadors were strong advocates of better relations with France; indeed, all five wanted the Franco–Soviet
relationship to succeed. Only at the end of May 1940, when the Wehrmacht had routed Anglo–French forces, did the French government contemplate improving relations to retrieve a strategic Soviet counter-balance which it had rejected in the past. Labonnie went to Moscow as ambassador and he made a last, hopeless bid to save the situation. It was the same Labonnie who had worked with Monzie in 1927. This time Labonnie was alone. Monzie was still around, but he was more interested in better relations with Berlin and Rome than with Moscow. He had changed his ideas.

Soviet diplomats saw a lot of French politics, politicians, and journalists. In the early 1920s, Herriot, Painlevé, and Monzie were important informants. In the 1930s Herriot and Monzie continued their frequent contacts with the Soviet embassy, along with Paul-Boncour, Blum, Reynaud, Cot, Mandel, and Tabouis, among others. They provided the Soviet embassy with a window onto French political life and they contributed to the formation of a Soviet view of France. Indeed, Soviet diplomats felt more comfortable with strong French nationalists on the right, like Barthou and Mandel, than they did with less determined politicians of the centre-left like Herriot and Blum.

The reports sent back to Moscow were generally accurate, but not encouraging. French policy seemed unreliable and inconsistent at best and hostile at its worst. French cabinet politics were chaotic and destructive. Responsibility was something to be averted, not seized. The embassy was witness to and often the target of a virulent anti-communism which threatened at times to rupture Franco–Soviet diplomatic relations. Blackmailing journalists squeezed the Soviet embassy, though it was not the only one to pay. There was good money to be made. Nor was the blackmail limited to avid journalists, even Laval and Schneider-Creusot tried it. The boundaries between political and personal interests were often blurred.

In the 1930s Soviet ambassadors recorded the collapse of France as a great power, though they had seen signs of it in the previous decade. This collapse was due to a failure of French leadership, economic weakness, admiration for fascism and Nazi power, fear of war and socialist revolution, and subordination to British policy. At the rue de Grenelle, the Franco–Soviet mutual assistance pact appeared defective at birth, and so little valued by the French as to be almost worthless. In France the answer to the question of who was enemy no. 1 often came up wrong. With that wrong answer went the equally wrong idea that France could compose with Berlin based on some kind of German “free hand” in the east.

The Soviet government bore its own responsibility for the failure of relations with France. The Comintern was a constant source of irritation, as was the French communist party. However, even when the Comintern stood for a united front of all “democratic” parties against fascism, it was no help. For the right, which moved into the centre of French politics, the
united front only made matters worse by legitimizing the French communist party. Litvinov observed that even if the Comintern had disappeared, the communist party would not. Daladier outlawed the French communist party, only to drive it underground. As for the Stalinist purges, they appeared to be, and were, a dreadful act of self-destruction. They harmed Franco-Soviet relations, but they began after Laval’s shift in policy.

Neither side was an ideal partner, to say the least, but the Soviets were more willing to overlook shortcomings than the French who could see the mote in the Soviet eye, but not the beam in their own. While Soviet ambassadors sometimes betrayed sympathy for France and its predicaments, Potemkin and Surits foresaw French defeat against fascism. In the historical debate over the state of France on the eve of World War II, the evidence from the rue de Grenelle supports “decadence,” that view of a rotten, divided French society destined to collapse. In 1939 Surits noticed a resurgence, but it was too feeble to be taken seriously in Moscow. Given the information transmitted from the Soviet embassy between 1924 and 1939, it might appear remarkable that the Soviet government stuck so long to a policy of rapprochement and alliance with France. But what other options did the Soviet government have? Britain and the United States were hostile for most of the interwar years. So was Nazi Germany until 1939. France represented the only remaining major European ally, and a potential second front against Germany was as vital to Litvinov as it was to Herriot. One had only to look at a map to understand the strategic importance of Franco–Soviet cooperation.

Soviet diplomats could read a map and so could Stalin, but France raised too many doubts about its stability and its reliability as an ally. This was a long-term view of France, not one limited to 1938–39. Daladier might have asked indignantly how he could trust the Soviet Union, but Mandel considered Moscow a potential ally so vital that France must have its support. Unfortunately, Daladier and Bonnet, not Mandel, had the power to change French policy. For the Soviet Union, therefore, it was less difficult to consider German offers in the summer of 1939. After all, why should Stalin and Molotov have acted with greater foresight than their Anglo–French counterparts? Why should Stalin play for Surits’ half loaf, when Litvinov’s had failed so abysmally? To contemporaries and to historians afterward it looked like Stalin had made a hell of a choice, but for him there did not seem to be a realistic alternative which could have changed everything. The non-aggression pact was in a way the end-result of the long-term failure of Franco–Soviet relations, not so startling a conclusion when one remembers that a German–Soviet rapprochement was a nightmare of French diplomacy in the 1930s. The nightmare was unfortunately not terrifying enough to hold France to a wiser, more pragmatic course than the one it actually pursued. Ironically, Soviet ambassadors in Paris and their French interlocutors contributed to Moscow’s assessment of
the possibilities. The ambassadors at the rue de Grenelle were perhaps too good at their job.

NOTES


4. Rakovskii to Litvinov, no. 7, very secret, 9 Nov. 1924, Moscow, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sosial’no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 359, o. 1, d. 8, ll. 76–92.


7. Krasin to Narkomindel, no. 05/9, 7 Dec. 1924, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 104, p. 105, ll. 14–9; and Litvinov to Politburo, no. 630, very secret, 31 Dec. 1924, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 67, p. 103, ll. 30–32.


9. Litvinov to Politburo, no. 0319, secret, 2 May 1925, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 97, p. 105, ll. 23–24.


18. Krasin to Narkomindel, report no. 31, 6 June 1925, AVPRF, f. 04, o. 42, d. 53698, p. 262, ll. 70–76.
19. Chicherin to Davtian, no. 1, 12 June 1925, AVPRF, f. 04, o. 42, d. 53714, p. 264, l. 6.
23. Krasin to Litvinov, report no. 45, very secret, 1 Sept. 1925, AVPRF, f. 04, o. 42, d. 53699, p. 262, ll. 91–97.
25. Rakovskii’s journal, no. 0321, very secret, 17 Nov. 1925, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 104, p. 105, ll. 327–19; and Rakovskii’s journal, no. 2. late Nov. 1925, ibid., ll. 362–51.
26. Excerpt from Davtian’s journal, very secret, meeting with Roels and Rollin on 13 January, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 47, p. 13, l. 65; and Davtian to Litvinov, letter no. 19, very secret, 18 Jan. 1926, ibid., ll. 60–63.
27. Davtian to Litvinov, no. 121/D, personal & very secret, 18 Jan. 1926, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 47, p. 13, l. 71; and Davtian to Litvinov, letter no. 22, very secret, 25 Jan. 1926, ibid., ll. 91–93.
29. Rakovskii to Litvinov, no. 18, very secret, 3 May 1926, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 50, p. 14, ll. 24–28; and Arens’ journal, no. 9, very secret, 9 June 1926, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 52, p. 14, ll. 41–42.
30. Rakovskii to Chicherin and Litvinov, no. 0324, very secret, received 19 June 1926, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 215, p. 113, ll. 306–301; excerpt from Rakovskii’s journal, no. 0358, very secret, July 1926, ibid., ll. 338–37; and Arens’ journal, no. 12, 26 July 1926, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 52, p. 14, ll. 37–40.
32. Rakovskii to Litvinov, no. 0336, 21 June 1926, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 215, p. 113, l. 318.
33. Rakovskii to Litvinov, personal letter, secret, 26 Aug. 1926, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 53, p. 14, ll. 151–53.
34. Rakovskii to Litvinov, no. 1, very secret, 4 Oct. 1926, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 53, p. 14, ll. 172–80; and Rakovskii to Litvinov, personal, 24 Dec. 1926, ibid., ll. 342–44.
35. “Conversation with de Monzie on 16 October [1926],” very secret, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 215, p. 113, ll. 406–05.
36. Litvinov to Chicherin, no. 3044, secret, 15 Jan. 1927, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 89, p. 21, ll. 7–9; Litvinov to Chicherin, no. 3076, secret, 26 Jan. 1927, ibid., ll. 10–11; and Litvinov to Chicherin, no. 3090, secret, 29 Jan. 1927, ibid., l. 12.
38. Rakovskii to Litvinov, no. 10, very secret, 23 April 1927, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 306, p. 117, ll. 105–08; Litvinov to Chicherin (in San Rafael, France), no. 3297, secret, 22 April 1927, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 89, p. 21, ll. 25–27; Rakovskii to Litvinov, no. 12 very secret, 6 May 1927, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 306, p. 117, ll. 118–23; and Rakovskii to Litvinov, no. 17, very secret, 27 May 1927, ibid., ll. 132–37.
42. Dovgalevskii to Litvinov, no. 0964/s, 26 Oct. 1928, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 408, p. 125, ll. 162–63; and Litvinov to Chicherin, secret, 4 Dec. 1927, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 6, d. 89, p. 21, ll. 49–53.
44. Dovgalevskii to Chicherin, no. 0253/s, very secret, 23 March 1928, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 408, p. 124, ll. 79–82; and Dovgalevskii to Chicherin, no. 0377/s, very secret, 13 April 1928, ibid., ll. 91–94.
47. Litvinov to A. V. Lunacharskii, commissar for education, no. L/2753, secret, 21 May 1928, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 8, d. 66, p. 41, l. 68; and “Record of conversation . . . with Briand on 9 January 1929,” AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 488, p. 131, ll. 3–6.
48. “Record of a conversation of . . . V. S. Dovgalevskii with Briand on 25 March 1930,” very secret, 1 April 1930, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 585, p. 139, ll. 30–37; and Litvinov’s journal, on a meeting with Herbette, 26 Feb. 1930, ibid., l. 17.
53. Dovgalevskii to Narkomindel, 10 Aug. 1931, DVP, XIV, p. 452.
54. Chlenov to Litvinov, no. 1380/s secret, personal, 12 July 1931, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 15, d. 668, p. 149, ll. 3–1.
55. Excerpt from Litvinov to Dovgalevskii, no. L/21663, 26 July 1931, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 668, p. 149, l. 79.
57. “Record of a conversation of comrade V. S. Dovgalevskii with Laval on 28 January 1932,” secret, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 16, d. 730, p. 154, ll. 15–13; and Litvinov to Dovgalevskii, no. L/3338, secret, 7 Feb. 1930, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 584, p. 139, ll. 3–2.
58. Krestinskii to Dovgalevskii, no. fl3–5006, 9 Feb. 1932, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 16, d. 720, p. 154, ll. 5–4; and Litvinov (Geneva) to Dovgalevskii, secret, 17 March 1932, ibid., ll. 13–8.
62. Rozenberg to Litvinov, 13 Sept. 1932, DVP, XV, pp. 527–528; and Krestinskii to Dovgalevskii, no. fl3–5373, secret, 10 June 1932, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 16, d. 720, p. 154, l. 23.
64. Litvinov’s journal, conversation with P. Cot, secret, 20 Sept. 1933, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 13, d. 4, p. 89, ll.126–27; and Litvinov’s journal, meeting with Alphand, secret, 22 Sept. 1933, ibid., ll. 128–30.
66. Litvinov’s journal, meeting with Alphand, secret, 4 Jan. 1934, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, d. 4, p. 95, l. 10; and Litvinov’s journal, meetings with Jozef Beck, Polish foreign minister, 13–15 Feb. 1934, ibid., ll. 53–63.

68. Litvinov’s journal, meeting with Alphand, secret, 13 Oct. 1934, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, d. 4, p. 95, ll. 222–24.

69. Litvinov to Stalin, no. 4238/L, secret, 31 Oct. 1934, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, d. 117, p. 103, l. 221; and Litvinov to Stalin, no. 4240/L, very secret, 1 Nov. 1934, ibid., ll. 227–30.


71. Potemkin to Krestinskii, no. 58, very secret, 25 Jan. 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, d. 814, p. 164, ll. 166–70; and Litvinov to Stalin, no. 4240/L, very secret, 1 Nov. 1934, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 14, d. 117, p. 103, ll. 227–30.

72. Potemkin to Krestinskii, no. 177, secret, 26 March 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, d. 814, p. 164, ll. 143–50.


74. “About the negotiations with France,” not signed or dated, but by Litvinov, submitted to the Politburo on 22 April 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, d. 122, p. 113, ll. 179–182 (thanks to O. N. Ken for his notes on this file); and Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 148/L, secret, 4 May 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, d. 814, p. 164, l. 106.

75. Potemkin to Litvinov, no. 355, secret, 26 June 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, d. 814, p. 164, ll. 133–41; and “Conversation with Alphand,” Rubinin, no. 16296/s, secret, 23 May 1935, ibid., ll. 54–56.

76. Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 227/L, secret, 4 July 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, d. 814, p. 164, ll. 96–100; and Litvinov’s journal, “record of conversation with Laval on 2 August 1935,” secret, ibid., ll. 7–13.


79. Potemkin to Litvinov, highest priority, 22 Nov. 1935, DVP, XVIII, pp. 562–63; Potemkin to Litvinov, immediate, 27 Nov. 1935, ibid., pp. 567–68; Litvinov to Potemkin, 4 Nov. 1935, ibid., p. 667; Litvinov to Ivan M. Maiskii, Soviet ambassador in London, no. 289/L, secret, 4 November 1935, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 15, d. 16, p. 106, ll. 35–37; and Litvinov’s journal, meeting with Alphand, secret, 29 Nov. 1935, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 19, d. 814, p. 164, ll. 2–3.

80. “Conversation of the ambassador with Alphand,” no. 13, secret, Potemkin, 10 Jan. 1936, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 20, d. 828, p. 167, ll. 18–11.


82. Litvinov to Stalin, no. 3517/L, secret, 13 Jan. 1936, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 16, d. 1, p. 114, ll. 9–13.
83. Litvinov to Stalin, no. 3556/L, secret, 22 Feb. 1936, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 16, d. 1, p. 114, ll. 61–65.
86. Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 3566/L, secret, 4 March 1936, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 20, d. 828, p. 167, ll. 3–2.
87. Potemkin’s journal, “Conversation with the deputy Torrès [on 17 March],” no. 123, secret, 26 March 1936, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 20, d. 828, p. 167, ll. 78–76.
88. Potemkin to Narkomindel, highest priority, 26 Feb. 1936, DVP, XIX, pp. 102–03; Litvinov to Maiskii, 9 March 1936, ibid., p. 130; Krestinskii to Potemkin, 22 March 1936, ibid., pp. 182–83; and Potemkin’s journal, “conversation with Mandel,” no. 124, secret, 26 March 1936, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 20, d. 828, p. 167, ll. 84–79.
90. Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 3613/L, secret, 4 May 1936, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 20, d. 828, p. 167, ll. 10–9.
91. Litvinov to Rozenberg (then polpred in Madrid), no. 3732/L, 4 Nov. 1936, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 16, d. 64, p. 119, ll. 45–46.
93. Litvinov to Stalin, no. 3693/L, very secret, 7 Sept. 1936, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 16, d. 1, p. 114, ll. 193–96.
97. A. F. Neiman (Narkomindel, Moscow) to Potemkin, no. 0787/s, 14 November 1936, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 20, d. 828 (II), p. 167, ll. 22–21; and Litvinov to Stalin, no. 3737/L, secret, 9 Nov. 1936, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 16, d. 1, p. 114, l. 244.
98. Potemkin to Litvinov, no. 689, very secret, 26 Dec. 1936, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 20, d. 828, p. 167, ll. 185–83.
103. Potemkin to Litvinov, no. 53, secret, 28 Jan. 1937, AVPRF, f. 011, o.1, d. 76, p. 8, ll. 17–18; and Litvinov to Potemkin, no. 33/L, secret, 4 Feb. 1937, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 17, d. 109, p. 135, l. 16.


106. Potemkin to Litvinov, no. 131, secret, 11 March 1937, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 1, d. 76, p. 8, ll. 83–79.

107. Potemkin to Litvinov, no. 54/s, secret, 2 Feb. 1937, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 1, d. 76, p. 8, ll. 43–36; and also Potemkin to Litvinov, no. 28, secret, 11 Jan. 1937, ibid., ll. 17–8.

108. Girshfel’d to Potemkin, no. 183, very secret, 26 April 1937, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 1, d. 76, p. 8, ll. 89–88.

109. Potemkin to Girshfel’d, no. 1125, secret, 4 May 1937, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 17, d. 109, p. 135, ll. 25–27; and Potemkin to Surits (in Berlin), no. 1126, 4 May 1937, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 21, d. 839, p. 169, ll. 22–20.

110. Delbos to Coulondre, no. 139, 4 March 1938, Paris, Ministère des Affaires étrangères (hereafter MAÉ), Bureaux du chiffre, Télégrammes, Moscou, départ, 1938–1 Octobre 1939.

111. Potemkin to Surits, no. 1181, secret, 21 June 1937, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 21, d. 839, p. 169, ll. 29–27.

112. Litvinov to Surits, no. 267/L, secret, 21 June 1937, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 17, d. 109, p. 135, l. 35.


115. Surits to Litvinov, no. 466/s, secret, 27 Nov. 1937, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 1 d. 76, p. 8, ll. 186–80.


118. Litvinov to Maiskii, no. 439/L, secret, 3 Dec. 1937, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 17, d. 109, p. 135, ll. 59–63.

119. Girshfel’d to Potemkin, no. 44, very secret, 11 Feb. 1938, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 2, d. 165, p. 17, l. 51; and Girshfel’d to Potemkin, no. 72/s, very secret, 26 Feb. 1938, ibid., ll. 84–83.

120. Surits to Litvinov, no. 107/s, secret, 11 March 1938, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 2, d. 165, p. 17, ll. 90–85; and Surits to Litvinov, no. 137, secret, 26 March 1938, ibid., ll. 105–91.

121. Potemkin to Surits, no. 6200, secret, 4 April 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, d. 158, p. 148, ll. 25–30; and Litvinov to Surits, no. 5203/L, 17 April 1938, ibid., ll. 32–34.
122. Litvinov to Maiskii, no. 5201/L, secret, 17 April 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, d. 26, p. 140, ll. 22–24.

123. Litvinov to Surits, no. 5174/L, secret, 3 April 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, d. 158, p. 148, ll. 20–23; and Litvinov to Surits, no. 5203/L, 17 April 1938, ibid., ll. 32–34.

124. Surits to Litvinov, no. 291/s, secret, 27 July 1938, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 2, d. 165, p. 17, ll. 159–44.


127. Surits to Litvinov, no. 347, secret, 2 Oct. 1938, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 2, d. 165, p. 17, ll. 201–192. For the most recent study of the Munich crisis, see Hugh Ragsdale, The Soviets, the Munich Crisis and the Coming of World War II (Cambridge, 2004).

128. Litvinov to Surits, no. 5496/L, secret, 19 Oct. 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, d. 158, p. 148, l. 72.


132. Litvinov to Surits, no. 4236/L, secret, 19 March 1939, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 912, p. 176, l. 30; Litvinov to Surits, no. 4276/L, secret, 29 March 1939, ibid., ll. 24–26; Litvinov to Surits, no. 4299/L secret, 4 April 1939, ibid., ll. 22–23; and Litvinov to Surits, no. 4326/L, secret, 11 April, ibid., ll. 17–20.

133. Surits to Litvinov, no. 72, secret, 26 March 1939, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 4, d. 178, p. 32, ll. 82–68.


135. Litvinov to Surits, no. 4357/L, secret, 19 April 1939, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 4, d. 178, p. 32, ll. 90–89; Litvinov to Surits, no. 4380/L, secret, 23 April 1939, AVPRF, f. 0136, d. 912, p. 176, ll. 11–12; Surits to Litvinov, very secret, 28 April 1939, DVP, XXII, book 1, pp. 316–17; and Litvinov to Stalin, secret, 3 May 1939, ibid., pp. 325–26. For detailed accounts of tripartite alliance negotiations, see Carley, 1939; Geoffrey Roberts, “The Alliance that Failed: Moscow and Triple Alliance Negotiations, 1939,” European History Quarterly, vol. 26,

136. Surits to Molotov, no. 116, secret, 6 May 1939, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 4, d. 178, p. 32, ll. 98–95; and Surits to Molotov, high priority, very secret, 10 May 1939, DVP, XXII, book 1, pp. 354–55.


139. Surits to Narkomindel, very secret, 19 July 1939, DVP, XXII, bk. 1, pp. 544–45; and “Visite de Monsieur Souritz du 26 mai 1939, extrait des notes personnelles du Ministre des Affaires étrangères,” MAE, Papiers 1940, Cabinet Georges Bonnet/16, ff. 266–68.


142. “Conversation of ... V. M. Molotov with ... Labonne,” 14 June 1940, DVP, XXIII, bk. 1, pp. 342–45.