Stalin’s Moustache: 
The Soviet Union and the 
Coming of War

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His face’s lower part is dark
With the moustache’s hanging shade.
What words are hidden there from us,
For just a moment’s pause delayed?

‘To a Portrait of Stalin’, Alexander Tvardovskii

Michael Jabara Carley, 1939. The Alliance That Never Was and the
Coming of World War II (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), pp.xxv +

Patrick R. Osborn, Operation Pike. Britain Versus the Soviet Union,
0-313-31368-7

Gabriel Gorodetsky, Grand Delusion. Stalin and the German
Invasion of Russia (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,

Like Tvardovskii, historians have long been waiting to discover just
what is hidden behind Stalin’s moustache. Despite the immense
amount that has been written on the origins of the Second World War
and its extension in 1941 to become what the Soviets called the Great
Patriotic War, the role of the Soviet Union in the coming of war has
remained obscure.1 With Soviet archives nearly completely
unavailable until 1991 and only partially open since then, Soviet
policy has long been difficult to determine; often accessible only by
derivative means through the use of material from the archives of other countries. As the study of Soviet foreign policy has been hedged in by (often violent) ideological quarrels, this has meant that more heat than light has been generated, to the detriment of our understanding of Soviet policy.

It is for these reasons (and others that will be made clear below) that the three works under review are welcome additions to the literature. All three are based solidly on documentary evidence, all three make important contributions to our understanding and all three underscore the need for further work. Before looking at what these works mean for the broader aspects of the origins of the Second World War, it is necessary to outline what each of them contends.

Michael Carley’s study delivers more than its title would suggest. It is not only concerned with the events of 1939 – and particularly the Nazi–Soviet Pact – but also with Soviet foreign policy from at least 1938 (with earlier excursions) until the beginning of 1940. Carley is well known in the field. He is the former director of the Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme of the Canadian government and now the editor of the University of Akron Press. However, in addition to this, he has been a productive scholar, publishing a first book that deals with Franco-Soviet relations in 1918–20 and a plethora of substantial articles relating aspects of inter-war Soviet foreign and economic policy. These works, as is the book under review, are informed by Carley’s extensive research in the French, the British and the Soviet archives. They are imbued with the idea that the Cold War did not begin after 1945, but was a driving force in international politics from 1917 onwards. They also ensure that his new book is informed by his own research in the earlier period.

1939. The Alliance That Never Was has a deceptively simple conclusion. For Carley, the failure of the British and the French to reach an alliance with the Soviet Union in 1939 was due to the inherent anti-Bolshevism of the British (and also the French, but the latter were of little consequence in the negotiations). As a result of this, the British failed to follow up the continued Soviet adherence to the idea of collective security, ignoring repeated Soviet overtures to take a firm stand against Hitler before 1939 and then making only half-hearted efforts to reach agreement in that year. He takes the position that the Soviet Union would have supported a firm stand at Munich, and argues that the traditional view that the Anglo-French
failure to do so resulted in the Soviet Union opting for an alliance with Hitler instead.

This line of argument is not new – the ‘guilty men’ of Munich was a near-contemporary observation and even the Nazi–Soviet Pact had its defenders, albeit fewer of them. What is new is the vigour and erudition which Carley employs to make his point. This erudition does not bring with it any moral ambiguities; for Carley this is a story about ‘moral depravity and blindness, about villains and cowards, and about heroes’. To determine who is to be put in which category, Carley’s focus is on the formal diplomacy of the Soviet Union, as found in the correspondence between the Soviet Foreign Ministers, Maksim Litvinov (1930–39) and his successor, Viacheslav Molotov, and their ambassadors, in particular Ivan Maiskii (London), and Vladimir Potemkin (Paris). On the other side, Carley keeps his view on the officials in the British Foreign Office and at the Quai d’Orsay and the British and French representatives in Moscow.

In lively and direct prose, Carley shows how various Soviet proposals were rebuffed as insincere, despite the repeated protestations of the Soviet officials to the contrary. This he attributes to the unwillingness of their French and British listeners to go beyond ideological prejudice and to see their own interests clearly. Carley ties this to a belief among the British and French leaders that a successful war, in which they were allied with the Bolsheviks against the Germans would result in the spread of communism in Europe. Thus, in 1939, the alliance discussions with the Russians were pursued in a dilatory fashion, with the British refusal to accept Soviet demands characterized as ‘bazaar haggling’. This exculpation of the Soviets does not extend to the period after the signing of the Nazi–Soviet Pact. Carley is sharply critical of the Soviet invasion of Finland, showing how it put Moscow in the same category as the Nazis, provided an *ex post facto* justification for prewar anti-Soviet attitudes and nearly resulted in an Anglo-French attack on the Soviet Union.

This book is well worth reading. It is the first available account of the complicated interactions between Britain, France and the Soviet Union that is solidly grounded in primary sources, and illuminates an aspect of the origins of the war that has long been in the shadows. But, are its main lines of approach correct? There has been a spate of scholarship recently about the Munich crisis. What emerges from it is that, despite Soviet mobilization in September 1938, the Soviet Union was not prepared to come to the aid of the Czechs unilaterally,
and insisted on knowing whether the French intended to honour their treaty obligations to Prague. Equally, it is clear that the French were searching desperately for an opportunity to avoid providing support for the Czechs unless someone else would bear the brunt of the fighting. This is consonant with Carley’s interpretation, but the evidence does not unequivocally support his contention that the Soviet Union would certainly have aided the Czechs had Britain and France done so. Stalin’s intentions are not revealed, either by Carley or the authors cited above, and it is best to conclude, with Zara Steiner, that the Soviet ‘decision-making apparatus during the Munich crisis remains obscure’. This point will be returned to below.

As to British policy, Carley’s work suffers from its sources. Because of its tight focus on the Foreign Office, 1939 does not consider the other influences on British decision making. It is particularly weak with respect to defence (and especially Imperial defence) matters. British policy with respect to the Soviet Union had an extra-European dimension, particularly in the Far East where Moscow was seen as both a threat to British interests and a potential ally against Japan’s depredations. As a result, Soviet offers of alliance had to be considered in the context of Britain’s world-wide defence issues, in which any agreement with Moscow would potentially ruin Anglo-American cooperation in the Far East or deflect Japan away from confrontation with the Soviet Union (which was beneficial to London) and towards an assault on British interests (which was not). Equally, the low British opinion of the Red Army after the Purges meant that any Soviet offers (whether sincere or not) were less attractive than Carley suggests. In fact, in a related aspect, there is an underlying assumption – that a successful conclusion to the Anglo-Franco-Soviet talks in 1939 would surely have prevented the outbreak of war – in Carley’s account that needs more evidence if it is to be accepted. First, would this have deterred Hitler? Second, the Red Army of 1939 (or 1938) was not the Red Army of 1944. Its feeble performance against the Finns and in 1941 suggests that neither Prague nor Warsaw would have been much safer if their security had been guaranteed by the Soviet forces.

There are also some key points about British foreign policy. First, policy was not the exclusive province of the Foreign Office or of Neville Chamberlain. For example, in 1935–36, an attempt to facilitate an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement by means of a loan was largely defeated by the efforts of the Board of Trade, as Carley
himself has shown. But support for the loan from such men as Sir Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Undersecretary at the Foreign Office, was not just a result of ‘Van’s’ desire to be on good terms with the Soviet Union for the sake of Moscow’s beaux yeux. Rather, it was part of his attempt to deal with the threat that Germany posed in the aftermath of the breakdown of the Stresa front. The point is, that Britain’s relations with the Soviet Union were not just a matter of its dealings with that country or with France, but part of a whole complex of how best to defend British interests everywhere. This point also is germane to Carley’s argument that the British unwillingness to accede to Soviet conditions during the 1939 negotiations was mere ‘haggling’. To agree to the Soviet definition of indirect aggression, which would have allowed the Soviet Union to invade Poland on the pretext that Warsaw in 1939 was going in the direction of Prague in 1938, would have been unconscionable and a repudiation of all that was best in British policy. It is hard to see how the moral dimension – and it is clear that there was one – of British foreign policy would have been better satisfied with the Red Army rather than the Wehrmacht occupying Warsaw.

On another front, there is the matter of ideology. Carley is convinced that British policy was largely motivated by ideology. If so, he has not proven his point. While Neville Chamberlain is an easy and convenient strawman, with his obvious anti-Soviet bias, the general position is not so clear. For example, within the Foreign Office there were divided opinions about the relative dangers of Fascism and Communism to British interests, with most of the key personnel believing that it was the former that was the more immediate problem. Also, men like Halifax were much more willing to treat with the Soviets than was the prime minister. For example, at the height of Anglo-Soviet tension in April 1927, with the clamour that would result in the breach with the Soviet Union in full voice, he had advised that relations should not be broken off. Instead, he had argued that a policy of engagement, ‘by trade and otherwise’, was necessary to draw that country ‘out of her isolation’. And, within the Cabinet generally, there was a strong push to force Chamberlain to take the Soviet negotiations further than he might have wished. Had Carley consulted a wider range of private papers and the relevant Cabinet documents, he would have been forced to reconsider his position. Finally, in considering ideology there is also the matter of whether Anglo-Soviet relations can be considered as
entirely distinct from Anglo-Russian relations. In his useful effort to push back the origins of the Cold War to 1917 (and those who study the American aspects of the Cold War need to take this stricture into consideration more than do those who look at the British side of this question), Carley does not consider that Anglo-Soviet relations can be easily seen as part of the Anglo-Russian/Soviet rivalry that began as long ago as the eighteenth century. Should we push the Cold War's beginning back to the Ochakov crisis of 1791 or merely consider the Cold War as a subset of the Great Game between London and St Petersburg (Moscow)?

If Stalin were worried about Anglo-French intentions towards the Soviet Union, Patrick Osborn's *Operation Pike* would have reinforced the Soviet leader's misgivings. Osborn, an archivist for the American National Archives and Records Administration, has provided a very useful study of British policy towards the Soviet Union from 1939 to 1941 and, in particular, of the little-known Anglo-French plans to attack the Soviet Union in the period from September 1939 to June 1940. Here, Osborn builds on the work of Stephen Miner and, in particular, Brock Millman, but goes well beyond either of them. In an account that is firmly grounded in the archives, Osborn shows how the British and the French came to the conclusion that the Nazi-Soviet Pact in effect made Moscow an ally of Hitler. British military strategy was based on a long-term attempt to utilize blockades to bring Germany to its knees – in the supposed fashion of the First World War – and the economic provisions of the Nazi-Soviet Pact punched a hole in the wall that the British had attempted to build around Germany.

The result was that the British began to consider treating the Soviet Union as a belligerent and taking action against it. The most obvious point of attack was against Baku, the source of the bulk of Soviet oil and, it was believed, a potential source of the oil that was essential for the German war effort. Plans to attack Baku long predated the war, going back as early as 1927 (and, possibly, although Osborn does not discuss this, originating with the British 'Dunsterforce' that occupied Baku in 1917). Equally, the Soviet attack on Finland opened up another alluring possibility: that British assistance for Helsinki could be part and parcel of an attempt to deprive the Germans of the Swedish iron ore at Gallivare. The desire to bomb to Baku, the on-going efforts of the French to create a Balkan front in the fashion of the Salonikan expedition in the First
World War and the British desire to keep the eastern Mediterranean in secure hands, meant that Anglo-Turkish relations become pivotal. All of these events worried Stalin. With a solid flow of information from well-placed spies within the British decision-making structure outlining the possible Anglo-French actions and possessed of a belief that an Anglo-German attack on the Soviet Union was always a lurking possibility, the Soviet dictator, Osborn argues persuasively, decided to liquidate, in the Katyn forest, the potential leaders of a Polish uprising that might follow an Anglo-French attack. Only the rapid German takeover of Norway and the equally rapid collapse of France brought an end to the British thoughts of adding the Soviet Union to its list of actual, as opposed to potential enemies.

This is a very good book on a limited topic. It does not promise more than it delivers, its documentary base is exemplary and its conclusions are judicious and carefully considered. While Osborn has used no Russian-language sources, his inferences about Soviet policy have the ring of truth about them, and follow quite well the lines developed by Carley and, as will be shown below, Gorodetsky. The book has a couple of technical slips. Sir Robert Vansittart is inexplicably referred to as Sir Richard Vansittart, and Sir Maurice Hankey is given too much credit for initiating the Dardanelles campaign in the First World War. These a minor cavils that do not detract from a useful study that helps fill some of the gap that exists for the period of the ‘Phoney War’.

So, too, does Gabriel Gorodetsky’s fine book. Gorodetsky is the holder of the Samuel Rubin Chair for Russian and East European History at Tel Aviv University, where he is also Professor of History and Director of the Curiel Centre for International Affairs. He has published widely in Anglo-Soviet relations, being best known for one book dealing with the period from 1924 to 1927 and a second covering the mission of Sir Stafford Cripps to Moscow. His new book has two purposes, which are related to each other but which do not always make for easy reading. The first is to refute the contention, put forward most recently by V. Suvorov, that the Soviet Union was planning an attack on Germany in 1941 and that the German assault was merely a preemptive strike to thwart Stalin’s attempt to take over Central Europe. In order to rebut this, and the German epigoni that have seized upon it in an attempt to rehabilitate Nazi foreign policy, the bulk of Gorodetsky’s book is an attempt to outline the course of Stalin’s foreign policy from 1939 to 1941.
Here, much of what he has to say in the first two chapters act as the obverse side of Osborn’s monograph. Gorodetsky confirms Stalin’s fears about British actions in the Balkans. Utilizing important new archival sources that reveal the intelligence material that was given to the Soviet leader, Gorodetsky is able to show a Stalin desperately trying to avoid committing the Soviet Union to the Germans, while at the same time being fearful that the Western bandits would join together to fall on the Soviet Union. Gorodetsky is also very good at outlining the weaknesses of the Red Army, making it apparent just how absurd are Suvorov’s claims about the imminence of a Soviet attack on Germany.

Another strength of this book is its attention to Soviet actions and diplomacy towards powers other than Britain and Germany. Gorodetsky’s research in the Bulgarian, Swedish and Yugoslav archives (along with that in the Russian, British and French repositories) allows him to flesh out Soviet attempts to ensure their own security in the Balkans and to keep the Germans from utilizing the position of strength after the fall of France (ironically, a position that Stalin had helped them gain) to undermine Soviet security. And, interestingly, Gorodetsky notes the attempts by the Soviets to improve relations with Japan in the Far East in order to be able to deal more efficaciously with the Germans.

But much of this effort was thwarted by Stalin’s own prejudices. He could not bring himself to believe, despite the flood of information that came to him from a variety of sources (including a highly efficient spy network operating in Britain, Germany and Japan in particular), that all of his attempts to appease Hitler and to find a *modus vivendi* were doomed and that the British, in particular, were not trying to draw him into a war with Berlin for their own ends. Conditioned by ideology and his own experiences during the Allied Intervention in 1917–19, Stalin preferred to interpret all information – and here the Hess mission (nicely teased out by Gorodetsky) seemed to confirm all his fears – as pointing towards a separate Anglo-German peace and a subsequent combined assault on the Soviet Union. Far from planning an assault on Germany, Stalin was careful to avoid any action that might be considered a ‘provocation’ by Germany and hence justify a Nazi attack.

Where do these three useful books take us with regard to the origins of the Second World War? On the one hand, they make us more aware of the crucial Soviet dimension, both in the run-up to 1
September 1939 and in the subsequent period to 22 June 1941. Carley’s book, in particular, is a useful corrective to those accounts that focus almost exclusively on the Anglo-German component of events. It also makes it very clear that official Soviet diplomacy was working hard to create an anti-Nazi coalition. Osborn and Gorodetsky demonstrate clearly that there was a strong possibility that the Nazi–Soviet Pact and the Winter War could easily have led to precipitate action by the Anglo-French grouping, while Gorodetsky puts paid to any idea that the Soviet Union planned to attack Nazi Germany in 1941.

This is all very satisfactory. But what of Stalin’s moustache and what lay behind it? Here, we are not that much further forward. Carley contends that the policy pursued by Litvinov and his ambassadors was necessarily the real Soviet policy; that the Soviet advocacy of collective security was sincere. He argues this on the not unreasonable grounds that those who attempted to implement a policy contrary to Stalin’s wishes were not likely to remain among the living. This, however, is to assume that Stalin was not playing a double game designed to involve Britain and France in the war with Germany that Stalin assumed they were trying to provoke between Moscow and Berlin. For this, in the absence of archival material, we have no evidence either way. Equally, it is to assume that the Soviet concept of collective security and that of, in particular, the British were the same. The alliance negotiations in 1939 make this seem dubious. Stalin wanted a war-fighting alliance, dressed up as collective action; the British sincerely wanted collective action that would be compatible with the League Covenant (albeit loosely interpreted) and public opinion.

And what motivated Stalin? Fighting a historiographical war against the Icebreaker’s crew, Gorodetsky says that ‘Stalin was little affected by sentiment or ideology in the pursuit of foreign policy’ (p.316). But, this is to define the influence of ideology rather narrowly. While he proves his point that Stalin was in no way plotting a war against Germany driven by ideological imperatives to expand the revolution westwards21 (a belief in which, Carley contends, drove British policy), a good deal of Gorodetsky’s evidence argues that Stalin’s perceptions of the world were profoundly shaped by his ideological beliefs. From what few authentic glimpses we have of his thought processes concerning foreign policy, we see that Stalin believed, in best Marxist–Leninist fashion, that all of the Western
powers, and in particular Britain, had as their primary motivation the
destruction of the workers' paradise. For this reason, he was unable
to read the entrails correctly, and his prejudices led his minions to be
less than candid in providing him with information and opinions that
ran counter to his views (and here may be the answer to Carley).
While Stalin pursued a 'rational and level-headed' policy (Gorodetsky, p.316), that policy was ideologically determined in the
broadest sense of the word. Perhaps, then, we might turn Carley on
his head and argue that the failure of the Anglo-Soviet negotiations
in 1939 was due to Soviet, rather than British, ideological antipathy.
Whether or not this is the case, these three books have provided us
with a good deal to think about, and we are all in the debt of their
authors.

NOTES

1. The most comprehensive study remains Donald Cameron Watt, How War Came. The
Sidney Aster, 1939: The Making of the Second World War (London, 1973) is still very
useful and Andrew J. Crozier, The Causes of the Second World War (London, 1997) is an
The A.J.P. Taylor Debate after Twenty-Five Years (London, 1986) deals thoroughly with
one aspect of the debate, while R.A.C. Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement. British
Policy and the Coming of the Second World War (London, 1993) applies a corrective to
efforts justify Chamberlain's policy on grounds of finance and economics.

2. Honourable exceptions, to mention only a few, include Jonathan Haslam's key studies,
Soviet Foreign Policy, 1930–1933: The Impact of the Depression (London, 1983), The
Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–1939 (London,
1984), The Soviet Union and the Threat from the East, 1933–41 (London, 1992), and
those of Geoffrey Roberts, The Unholy Alliance. Stalin's Pact with Hitler (London,
1989) and The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War. Russo-German
Relations and the Road to War, 1933–1941 (London, 1995). The latter two works
introduce the literature.

3. Michael Jabara Carley, Revolution and Intervention. The French Government and the
Russian Civil War 1917–1919 (Kingston and Montreal, 1983); 'The Politics of Anti-
Bolshevism: The French Government and the Russo-Polish War, December 1919 to
May 1920', Historical Journal, 19/1 (1976); 'Anti-Bolshevism in French Foreign Policy:
The Crisis in Poland in 1920', International History Review, 2/3 (1980), pp.410–31;
'From Revolution to Dissolution: The Quai d'Orsay, the Banque Russo-Asiatique, and
the Chinese Eastern Railway, 1917–1926', International History Review, 12/4 (1990),
Journal of History, 29 (1994), pp.147–72; 'Anti-Bolshevism in French Foreign Policy:
The Crisis in Poland in 1920', International History Review, 2/3 (1980), pp.410–31;
Europe-Asia Studies, 52/7 (2000), pp.1275–305; 'Five Kopecks for Five Kopecks:
Franco-Soviet Trade Negotiations', Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique, 33/1 (1992),
pp.23–58; "A Fearful Concatenation of Circumstances": The Anglo-Soviet
'End of the "Low, Dishonest Decade": Failure of the Anglo-Franco-Soviet Alliance in


13. Halifax (then, Lord Irwin) to Robert Cecil, private and personal letter, 6 April 1927, Cecil Papers, Add MSS 51084, British Library.


17. The impact of the blockade in the First World War is disputed; see N.P. Howard, ‘The Social and Political Consequences of the Allied Food Blockade of Germany, 1918–19’, *German History*, 11/2 (1993), pp.161–88. However, what is not in doubt is the British belief in its efficacy and the plans of the Royal Navy to institute a blockade upon the outbreak of war.


21. By doing so, Gorodetsky drives a stake into the heart of all arguments that attempts to link post-1945 Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe with the events of 1938–41, for an example of which see R.C. Raack, *Stalin’s Drive to the West 1938–1945. The Origins of the Cold War* (Stanford, 1995).