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To cite this article: Michael Jabara Carley (2019) Fiasco: The Anglo-Franco-Soviet Alliance That Never Was and the Unpublished British White Paper, 1939–1940, The International History Review, 41:4, 701–728, DOI: [10.1080/07075332.2018.1458043](https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2018.1458043)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2018.1458043>



Published online: 13 Apr 2018.



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Michael Jabara Carley

ABSTRACT

This article is about the Anglo-Franco-Soviet negotiations in 1939 for an alliance against Nazi Germany and about how the British government later tried to represent those negotiations to public opinion. The first part of the essay presents the Soviet point of view on the negotiations and how the British and French governments, though mainly the British, reacted to Soviet alliance proposals. It is a fresh representation of the Soviet perspective from published and unpublished Russian language sources.

The second part of the essay focuses on how the British sought to represent the abortive negotiations through a white paper, placing the blame for failure on the Soviet Union. France opposed publication because, however carefully prepared, the white paper showed that the Soviet side had made serious alliance proposals with precise, reciprocal undertakings which the British government was reticent to entertain. The French were all the more annoyed because the white paper omitted to underline that they had been more receptive to Soviet proposals. The trilingual, multi-archival evidence presented in the first part of the essay effectively supports the French perception of the white paper and more generally of the failed tripartite negotiations.

KEYWORDS

France; Britain; Soviet Union; appeasement; World War II

In December 1939, the British government decided to issue a white paper or blue book on the Anglo-Franco-Soviet negotiations of the previous spring and summer to conclude an anti-Nazi alliance.¹ The Soviet-Finnish “Winter War” had just broken out, and British public opinion was enflamed. There was a propaganda side to the white paper: it would feed public animosity against the USSR and build support for Britain and France at war with Nazi Germany. The Foreign Office also sought to reply to the embarrassing question about why the negotiations with the USSR had failed. The disastrous talks proved to be a fiasco and led to the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact which permitted the German army to invade Poland without fear of Soviet intervention. Without the USSR there was little Britain and France could do to help the quickly beleaguered Poles. It was such a calamitous beginning of the war that the British government felt the need to explain its actions and to assign blame to the Soviet side.

Was the USSR really to blame for what happened? To respond to this question, readers should consider a brief narrative of the trilateral discussions which took place between March and August 1939. To reconstruct those negotiations, there are large collections of archival papers from the three governments, both published and unpublished. The Soviet archives were last to be opened. These papers come from various sources, the most important being the

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This article was originally published with errors, which have now been corrected in the online version. Please see Correction (<http://doi.org/10.1080/11663081.2019.1592292>)

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Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (NKID). The Russian foreign ministry archives (AVPRF) have been gradually opened since the early 1990s, though not systematically. Nevertheless, a large number of both published and unpublished Soviet documents are cited in this essay, some for the first time. They permit a better understanding of the Soviet perspective on the critical events of the spring and summer of 1939.²

I

As Anglo-Franco-Soviet discussions began in late March 1939, Europe was in crisis. Nazi Germany had just occupied Prague without firing a shot, and the rump state of Czechoslovakia had disappeared. A week later, German forces seized the Memel district from Lithuania, likewise without a shot fired. Public opinion in France and Britain was alarmed. It looked like war was imminent. What could be done to stop German aggression? How could security be assured in Eastern Europe? There were so many questions without answers. In 1935, the Soviet Union had signed a pact of mutual assistance with France which turned out to be an empty shell. For more than five years the Soviet government had promoted collective security without success.³ Could the failures of the past be overcome and an agreement of last resort be reached with Moscow?

France and Britain found themselves facing a dilemma. The British and French governments had pursued a policy of appeasement culminating in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia at the Munich conference in September 1938.⁴ Even in early 1939, appeasement of Germany was settled policy in London and Paris although not uncontested in the press or by the Parliamentary Opposition. Its reverse side was an unwillingness to cooperate with the USSR against Nazi Germany. In December 1938, the German foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, had visited Paris to sign a much publicised Franco-German understanding to maintain 'peaceful and good neighbourly relations'. There was open discussion in the French right-wing press (and more confidential exchanges in government circles) about abandoning treaty commitments to Poland and the USSR. In early 1939, French and British missions were sent to Berlin to conduct trade negotiations.⁵

The Anglo-French elites hated and feared the Soviet Union. Divisions amongst these elites nevertheless existed. 'White crows', one Soviet diplomat called them, favoured an alliance with the USSR.⁶ They were pragmatists, realists, who reckoned that Nazi Germany was the greater threat to European security, and like the sixteenth-century alliance of the French Catholic king Francois 1^{er} and the Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, they should unite with Moscow against the common foe. 'We have to have the courage to look at things as they are', one relatively unknown French colonel noted in 1936, 'Everything must be subordinated to a single idea: organise against Germany all those who oppose it for whatever reason, in order to discourage it from making war, and if it does make war, to defeat it.'⁷ Ironically, this was in fact the unstated Soviet concept of collective security. As the European crisis intensified in March 1939, these 'white crows' in the west appeared to gain the upper hand.

In Britain, the Opposition in the House of Commons, the Labour and Liberal parties, pressed the government for action. So did dissident Conservatives. Winston Churchill, then a backbench Tory MP, insisted that without an alliance with the USSR, France and Britain could not help their allies or would-be allies in Eastern Europe. David Lloyd George, the former wartime Liberal prime minister, teamed up with Churchill in the House of Commons to push the prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, to conclude an alliance with the Soviet Union.

Chamberlain and other Conservatives were hard-core Sovietophobes. In 1924, the Conservatives had exploited the so-called 'Zinoviev Letter' and the Red Scare to win Parliamentary elections against the Labour party. In 1927, 'Die-Hard' Tories obtained a rupture of diplomatic relations with Moscow. Even in 1936, Conservative Anthony Eden, then Foreign Secretary, halted a promising rapprochement with the Soviet government because of communist

'propaganda'.⁸ If it had been up to the prime minister alone, there would have been no negotiations with the USSR. But his ministers pressed him, at first only a minority, then as the threat of war increased, practically all of them. The enemy of my enemy, they reckoned, is my ally. The Red Army could immediately mobilise 100 divisions; Britain could put two divisions into France in the first weeks of war. Gallup polls in Britain demonstrated strong support for an alliance with the USSR. In April 1939, one poll showed 87% in favour of an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance; only 7% opposed it.⁹ No wonder. One hundred divisions necessarily attracted attention when you only had two yourselves. It is true that in the west, many critics pointed to the Stalinist purges as a reason for discounting Soviet military strength. The Red Army could not go on the offensive, said Chamberlain. Could the British army, or the French? The French and British military attaches in Moscow, who were in a better position to know, reported that the Red Army was recovering from the purges and would prove a serious obstacle to any invader. By May 1939, even the British Imperial General Staff conceded that the USSR was an ally worth having, whatever its shortcomings.

Still, Chamberlain resisted. A cartoon by the iconic political cartoonist David Low at the end of March showed the PM being pushed from behind but leaning back from a line called collective security. Another in May presented Chamberlain on a horse called 'Anglo-Russ' that would not run.¹⁰ If Low knew enough to draw these cartoons, then everyone who mattered also knew who was holding up progress with Moscow. Chamberlain himself made no secret of his position. 'It doesn't make things easier to be badgered for a [meeting] of Parliament', he wrote to his sister Ida: '... and Winston ... is the worst of the lot, telephoning almost every hour of the day'. Lloyd George was a close second to Churchill on the prime minister's list of irritating colleagues, 'egging on' the Opposition with the 'pathetic belief that in Russia is the key to our salvation'.¹¹

We know a great deal about British and French sentiment toward the USSR during the spring of 1939, but less about Soviet views towards Britain and France. How did the Soviet government see matters as the European crisis intensified? Mistrust and cynicism best characterise the Soviet outlook. Anglo-French appeasement and anti-Soviet hostility embittered government officials in Moscow, those anyway who had not disappeared during the Stalinist purges. By the beginning of 1938, Maksim M. Litvinov, *narkom*, or commissar for foreign affairs, was sceptical of Anglo-French determination to resist Nazi aggression. His colleagues in the NKID had nearly written off a weak and fearful France, 'subservient to London's *ukaz*' and headed towards 'catastrophe'.¹²

After the Munich conference, Soviet confidence in Britain and France hit rock bottom. One NKID report accused Britain of pursuing a 'policy of connivances' (*politika popusti- tel'stva*) and 'continuous extortion' (*nepreryvnoe vymogatel'stvo*) against Czechoslovakia, and of agreements with the aggressor 'by means of payments at the expense of small countries and the USSR'. To this end, Britain had obtained the 'complete subordination ... of French foreign policy'. According to Chamberlain, Czechoslovakia was an 'artificial state', which should not pose an obstacle to agreement with Germany. The British prime minister 'hates the USSR and its socialist system', the report went on, and he 'has attempted to paralyse active Soviet participation in matters concerning the organisation of collective security'. Another NKID report observed that France had 'betrayed an allied power', refusing to fulfil its treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia. As its influence weakened in central and south-eastern Europe, the French government had sought to compensate by strengthening its relations with Britain. During the September crisis, French policy amounted to approving British plans for Czechoslovak dismemberment and to frightening French public opinion into believing that 'agreement with the aggressor' was the 'world's salvation'. Right-wing circles had ignored – 'hidden' said the report – Soviet proposals to support Czechoslovakia because they feared that in the event of war victory over fascism in alliance with the USSR could unleash 'socialist revolution in capitalist Europe. and in France itself'.¹³

The NKID indictments against Britain and France ranged far and wide – and were not inaccurate – but Litvinov needed no cues from his colleagues. He advised Iakov Z. Surits, his *polpred* or ambassador in Paris, that the Politburo, or Soviet cabinet, had not yet had a 'serious

conversation' about the Munich crisis, but for the time being would not denounce the Franco-Soviet pact.¹⁴ In early November, Litvinov thought the European situation had become dire. 'There is no doubt', he wrote to Surits 'that old man Chamberlain will go to the end of the road, which he has marked out, or rather which [Adolf] Hitler has marked out, and France will, come what may, trail along after him'.¹⁵

Was there any hope of escape from what appeared to be a catastrophic dead end? A fortnight later, the French chargé d'affaires, Jean Payart, called on Litvinov to find out. He 'had questions', Litvinov wrote in his *dnevnik*, or journal, 'about how I see the present international situation and its future development'. This is a question, Litvinov replied, better put to France and Britain. Payart persisted. 'I consider myself an advocate of collective security', he said, 'and I would like to know, do you still consider possible the policy of collective security?'

'On this, I said as follows', Litvinov wrote in his journal: 'We consider the Munich agreement to be an international calamity.'

England and France are now unlikely to retreat from the policy they have set out for themselves, which boils down to unilateral satisfaction of the demands of all three aggressors— Germany, Italy and Japan. They will present their claims in turn, and England and France will make them one concession after another. I believe, however, that they will reach a point where the people of England and France will have to stop them. Then, probably, we will return to the old path of collective security, because there are no other ways for preserving peace. England and France will, of course, come out of this situation seriously weakened, but still even then the potential forces of peace will be greater than the potential forces of aggression.¹⁶

So if Litvinov was contemptuous of Chamberlain and the French, he had not abandoned collective security. He must have believed that he retained the confidence of his 'boss' Iosif V. Stalin, if he felt comfortable speaking as he did to Payart, and then recording the conversation in an official record. The question was, could he hold on to Stalin's support?

In the New Year, Litvinov's assessments became more acerbic. When the Soviet *polpred* in London, Ivan M. Maiskii, predicted that war was coming and asked for funds to build a bomb shelter at the embassy, Litvinov responded sceptically. 'I undertook to put it [your request] up for approval ... and I did, but I cannot promise anything as to the result ...'. Anyway, there was no rush. Litvinov would not exclude the possibility of war in 1939, but he did not think it likely. 'Chamberlain and even more the French have decided to avoid war in the coming years by any means—I would even say at any price. It is not true that the resources for concessions have supposedly run out or are running out.' Litvinov then enumerated a list of possibilities. He doubted Maiskii's contention that Hitler and Benito Mussolini could make impossible demands:

Let me remind you, that [they] have enough friends in England and the necessary sources [of intelligence] by which they can be sufficiently well informed beforehand of the limits of [possible] concessions.¹⁷

Litvinov poked fun at Maiskii's predictions of war. 'Apparently you've unwittingly succumbed to German-Italian propaganda and begun to believe in the readiness of Hitler and Mussolini to declare war on France and England.' It's still 'blackmail, to which England and France will yield in one way or another'.¹⁸

When Maiskii reported on a meeting with the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, Litvinov responded that his tactics were wrong to criticise France for 'passiveness and defeatism'. The trouble is that England justifies its 'flabbiness' because of French weakness, and France justifies its position, because of British weakness. 'We have to criticise France in Paris and England in London.' So, Litvinov said, 'we should talk to London about possible resistance from Paris with the proper firmness from the British government, and in Paris about the possible firmness of the English government'.¹⁹ Litvinov had thus not given up on collective security or abandoned his sense of humour. Unfortunately, the British and French knew each other too well to fall for Litvinov's proposed strategy.

Then there was the problem of Poland. The Polish governing elite hated the USSR, and the Polish government had for years obstructed Soviet proposals for collective security. During the

Munich crisis, Poland had pursued a 'policy of close collaboration with fascist Germany', according to one NKID report, and joined in on the partition of Czechoslovakia.²⁰ Toward the end of the year, however, the Polish ambassador in Moscow, Wactaw Grzybowski, proposed the settlement of outstanding issues and a general improvement of relations.²¹ Litvinov reacted sceptically. The Polish foreign minister, Józef Beck, was his *bête noire*. 'We do not harbour any illusions about the solidity of a rapprochement with Poland', Litvinov advised. It might only be a diplomatic manoeuvre and something to trade in bargaining with Hitler. Moreover, Beck was aware of 'intrigues' against him at home because of his risky foreign policy, 'putting Poland face to face with the greatest of dangers', and so he had 'decided to make a slight correction in his line toward us'. Still, there was nothing to lose from playing along even if a 'relaxation of tensions' was short-lived.²² The way Litvinov saw it, Poland was in a tough spot:

In so far as it depends on him, Beck will still try to retain freedom of action, manoeuvring between us and Germany, without tying himself too firmly to either side. But will Hitler allow him to do it? Will he not pose a dilemma to Poland—either total subordination to orders from Berlin and complicity in its policies, or else exposure to Hitler's anger and to the ensuing consequences?²³

As the *narkom*'s assessments of Beck went, this one was generous and accurate. Litvinov was not always so kind, thinking that in Polish manoeuvring, there was 'a noticeable inclination' towards Germany.²⁴ The de-contraction of Polish-Soviet relations continued until March 1939.

The French *président du Conseil*, Édouard Daladier, and his foreign minister, Georges Bonnet, were also targets of Litvinov's ire. 'I consider it necessary to add', he wrote to Surits in Paris, 'that in regard to France, there is *here* [emphasis added] not less mistrust but even more than toward England'.²⁵ The use of the word 'here' in his despatch meant the Soviet leadership in Moscow; Litvinov was not just expressing a personal opinion. French conduct during the Czechoslovak crisis, especially Bonnet's, had provoked a public Soviet expression of contempt for France which led to a rupture of personal relations between Litvinov and the departing French ambassador.²⁶

Sir Robert Vansittart, then 'chief diplomatic advisor' in the Foreign Office, who had long favoured an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement, persuaded the Cabinet to send, Robert Hudson, Secretary for Overseas Trade, to Moscow as a first step towards improving relations. He was expected to arrive in the Russian capital in the latter part of March. Litvinov remained doubtful. It was throwing a line to the USSR in case Britain and France were forced to go to war. These are 'only gestures and tactical manoeuvres', opined Litvinov, 'and [do] not [signal] a real desire by Chamberlain for cooperation with us'.²⁷

Maiskii wrote to his journal that there were signs of change in British policy. One important Conservative interlocutor told him that appeasement was dead. Chamberlain was 'not very happy' about it, but he had to go along with the change of mood, or resign. 'The country is saying', Maiskii observed, 'that Germany is the enemy'. He was not so certain, however, whether Chamberlain saw matters in the same way.²⁸

As usual, Litvinov was sceptical. If Hitler can restrain himself for just a little while and perhaps even makes some 'new peaceful gesture', Chamberlain and Daladier will again defend their 'Munich line'. Could Moscow count on any solid change of policy? In fact, 'the Czechoslovak events... fit entirely into the framework of the concept, agreeable to them [Chamberlain and Daladier], of the movement of Germany towards the East'. Litvinov still hoped that something might come of the Hudson mission, but he doubted it would dissipate 'the suspicion and mistrust' in Moscow. Again, Litvinov was not just speaking for himself. Hudson hoped the Soviet government would make concrete offers for he was not authorised to do so. 'I think', Litvinov advised Maiskii, 'that we [emphasis added] will not make such proposals to him'.

For five years we have been engaged in the field of international politics where we made suggestions and proposals about the organisation of peace and collective security, but the powers ignored them and acted in spite of them. If England and France have really changed their line, then let them either speak about the proposals we made earlier, or make their own suggestions. They should take the initiative.²⁹

The Hudson conversations in Moscow are interesting. According to the British account, 'Litvinov began by pointing out that if his policy had been followed the present situation would never have arisen.' The *narkom* held to this conviction long after. He said much the same to the future British ambassador in Moscow, Sir Stafford Cripps, in a bomb shelter in Moscow in the summer of 1941, and to Stalin at a Central Committee meeting in 1940. Litvinov went on for ten minutes 'in total silence', according to one witness. This is not surprising; it took remarkable courage to depart from party narratives to Stalin's face in the presence of the party leadership.³⁰

Sir William Seeds, the then British ambassador, ridiculed the Soviet commissar: 'Litvinov's review was most comprehensive ... developed with his usual mastery of the subject, it exhibited the constant retreat of the Western Democracies from one position after another, culminating in the Munich capitulation and the cold-shouldering of the Soviet Union.' Litvinov reserved special scorn for the French:

France was practically done for: she was ... full of German agents, disaffected and disunited ... He [Litvinov] foresaw in the not far-distant future a Europe entirely German from the Bay of Biscay to the Soviet frontier and bounded, as it were, simply by Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Even that would not satisfy German ambitions but the attack, he said smiling happily, would not be directed to the East.³¹

Litvinov had a point about the fate of France and the future of Europe, but in fact, he was not then so sure in which direction Hitler would strike.

From the British record it appears as though Litvinov and Hudson got on well. 'The Soviet government [Litvinov said] would be prepared to consult with H.M. [His Majesty's] Government and other governments regarding all suitable measures of resistance whether diplomatic or military or economic. He made it clear that he had in mind the possibility of resistance by force of arms.' There is no such comment in Litvinov's record either because Hudson exaggerated or because Litvinov had to respect his own colleagues' scepticism.³² Hudson stayed in Moscow for several days, but nothing concrete resulted from his mission.

When Litvinov talked about opinion 'in Moscow' or used the word 'we' to describe government thinking, he was not just expressing a personal opinion. When he spoke on his own responsibility, he made that clear to his colleagues.³³ Stalin himself had issued a public warning in a speech in Moscow on 10 March when he advised France and Britain not to count on the USSR to pull *their* 'chestnuts' out of the fire. Stalin implied that Moscow was not going to get ahead of France and Britain only to be left in the lurch to face Nazi Germany alone. As Litvinov had done privately, Stalin openly referred to the failures of collective security and wondered whether the Soviet Union could rely on Britain and France in the event of war.³⁴

While Hudson met with Soviet officials, other developments were unfolding in London. The British government finally took the initiative after refusing a proposal by Litvinov for a major international security conference in Bucharest. On 20 March, the Foreign Office proposed a four-power declaration, which included the Soviet Union and called for consultations in the event of a threat to European peace. Two days later, both the French and Soviet governments agreed to it. Only Poland had yet to reply.

On 24 March, the Polish foreign minister Beck rejected the British proposal. The Foreign Office did not immediately inform Maiskii of the Polish decision. The news leaked out over the next few days. On 25 March, Litvinov told Surits that he was unenthusiastic about the British proposal even if it was better than nothing. He doubted that Poland would agree, but he had no definite news.³⁵ On 28 March, Vladimir P. Potemkin, *zamnarkom*, or deputy commissar in the NKID, reassured Polish ambassador Grzybowski that the Soviet government wanted to improve relations. In a meeting on the following day, Payart asked Litvinov if, according to press reports, the Soviet government had put conditions on its agreement to the four-power declaration. 'We made no conditions', Litvinov replied, 'and we consider very important cooperation with Poland which we have always offered to her'. Still without news from London, Litvinov retained his doubts about

Polish intentions. 'I think that as long as Poland does not receive any direct blow from Germany, it is unlikely to change Beck's line of conduct.'³⁶

It was now 29 March. Litvinov wrote again to Surits that he had no definite information on the Polish response to the British proposal, 'although it was, apparently, sufficiently negative to provide Chamberlain and Bonnet with a pretext to avoid further action'.³⁷ The permanent under-secretary, Sir Alexander Cadogan, finally called in Maiskii on that day to tell him, according to the British record, that the four-power declaration was off. He was 'slightly embarrassed', Maiskii reported, perhaps because he had waited five days to advise the Soviet government. The Foreign Office had got the news on the evening of 24 March. The Poles nixed the British idea because they did not want to be 'associated openly with the Soviet government', or to provoke Germany.³⁸ It was not the first time that Poland had acted as a spoiler. The long silence from London made a bad impression in Moscow.

'The four power declaration failed because of Polish opposition', Maiskii wrote in his journal: 'the British government, telling us nothing, began strenuously to search for other methods "to stop aggression"'. The Foreign Office let it out to the press, in order to calm the opposition, that it was 'in close touch' with the Soviet government, but 'it is already 12 days since I have seen Halifax'.³⁹ Maiskii later denied a government statement in the House of Commons to the effect that he had been advised of the failure of the four-power declaration. 'Cadogan never communicated to me in direct and clear language that the four power declaration had failed.' This was an assumption, but 'there was no precise statement to this effect'. Cadogan's implication was that the 'declaration' could come back.⁴⁰ The nuanced language of the permanent undersecretary's record of meeting appears to bear out Maiskii's observations.

On 31 March, Chamberlain announced a British guarantee of Polish security in the House of Commons. Two hours before the announcement, Halifax saw Maiskii to tell him what was about to happen. He showed Maiskii Chamberlain's statement and asked for his reaction to it. The ambassador quickly scanned the text. 'It is difficult for me to give any kind of informed opinion', Maiskii replied, 'in the end there is no clear indication that England will go to the aid of Poland by force of arms. What effects will this produce on Hitler? Will he believe in the seriousness of British intentions? I don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no.' Then out of the blue, Halifax asked if Chamberlain could say the Soviet government approved of the statement. Maiskii was taken aback. 'I immediately understood what was going on', he wrote to his journal, 'Chamberlain wants to use our name to cover himself against attacks from the Opposition.'

'I don't quite understand you Lord Halifax', Maiskii replied:

In preparing your Polish action you did not consult with us. The Soviet government has not seen the present declaration. I myself had the possibility to familiarise myself with it only a few minutes ago. In these circumstances how can the prime minister say that the Soviet government approves of his declaration?

'Halifax was embarrassed', Maiskii noted, 'and hastened to say: "Yes, of course, you are right"'. It's because of the Poles, Halifax explained, not because the British government does not want to consult with Moscow. The Poles oppose 'the participation of the USSR in any kind of general combination with them'.⁴¹ They were not the only obstacle; the prime minister was another.

Elsewhere in London, at the House of Commons, Chamberlain invited Lloyd George to chat. It was an unusual gesture because the prime minister disliked 'LIG', an 'unscrupulous little black-guard', as he once called him.⁴² Lloyd George was up in arms, and the Parliamentary whips thought the PM should try to calm him down. He wanted to talk about the British guarantee to Poland and he wanted to know where matters stood with the Soviet Union. Chamberlain said that Romania and Poland were 'making difficulties' about Moscow and that Britain could depend on Poland to serve as a potential second front against Germany without Soviet cooperation.

Lloyd George was incredulous and mocking: 'Without the USSR there cannot be a second front. Without the USSR the guarantee of Poland is an irresponsible gambler's throw, which can finish very badly for our country'.⁴³ According to Maiskii's report of this conversation,

undoubtedly from Lloyd George, Chamberlain did not know how to respond for he could not say to Lloyd George, what he was then saying privately to more sympathetic listeners, that he opposed a Soviet alliance. Fortunately, Poland provided the prime minister with an alibi.

In Moscow, that same day, Potemkin called in Grzybowski for confirmation of the Polish position. We are still trying to maintain a 'political balance' between Germany and the USSR, said the ambassador: 'The future position of Poland will depend on Hitler. If his attitude toward Poland takes on a clearly aggressive character, the oscillations of the Polish government would cease ...'.⁴⁴

Litvinov returned to his usual cynical analyses in a long despatch to Maiskii. 'Chamberlain is probably quite content. to dump the [four power] declaration and similar statements on Poland and Romania.' This was more or less true. The British talk about some kind of a bloc in which the USSR would participate, Litvinov continued, but there is no clarity about its members or its functions. The idea seems to be that the bloc would be formed between Britain, France and Poland, and possibly Romania. They would work out the details, 'and then. would inform us what role had been reserved for us'.

If they are thinking thus, then you cannot deny them their naiveté. Our démenti yesterday to insinuations in the press should dispel any English illusions regarding the acceptability for us of any role whatsoever which will be presented to us on the basis of decisions by some combination of governments without our participation. We [emphasis added] will prefer, probably, not to tie our hands.

Again Litvinov spoke of 'we', that is to say, Stalin and the Politburo. But let Litvinov continue: maybe Chamberlain thinks that Italy and Spain, possibly Japan will put pressure on Hitler to hold up his plans. Maybe he thinks he can frighten Hitler but who can say if Britain would really decide to go to war with Germany? 'In any case for us the situation presents a certain advantage, where they [Britain and France] turn to us, as the last decisive factor.' Maybe Chamberlain hopes to push Hitler in other directions, to the north-east, for example, expecting us to counter any such move, provoking a war in the east 'about which Chamberlain dreams'. Litvinov wondered why Britain was so willing to accommodate Beck's objections and manoeuvring: it is as if Poland were offering assistance to Britain and not the other way around:

The deciding word should belong to Chamberlain and Daladier, and not to Beck. It is not the first time that England makes to us proposals for cooperation and then withdraws them with references to real or possible objections of Germany, then Japan, and now Poland... For us, it is the intolerable situation of a person who they invite on a visit, but then they ask him not to come because other invited guests do not want to meet with him. We would prefer to be crossed off the invitation list. In as much as Chamberlain sends us invitations under the pressure of public opinion and tries to get away with general declarations about consultations, about conversations with the Soviet ambassador and so on, you should not help him in this... It is necessary to make the English understand our unhappiness with such types of 'consultation' and 'close collaboration'.

Then Litvinov turned to France which:

has faded away, even leaving to the English alone the conversations with us. During all this time Bonnet only once, namely on 31 March, unexpectedly turned to comrade Surits, with questions, what will be our position, in case of an attack on Poland and Romania. Nor did he stint, of course, on general phrases about his intentions not to ignore the USSR, but on the contrary, to collaborate with us and so on.⁴⁵

Litvinov was exasperated. 'We know very well', he wrote to his *polpred* in Berlin, 'that to hold back and stop aggression in Europe without us is impossible and that the later they [Britain and France] appeal for our help, the higher our price will be. We remain therefore entirely composed in the uproar raised around the so-called change in English policy'.⁴⁶ 'We', Litvinov again noted.

Exasperated though he was, Litvinov did not remain passive for at the beginning of April, he had several conversations with Grzybowski, prodding him over Polish hostility to the USSR and warning him of the Nazi danger to Poland.⁴⁷ At the same time, Maiskii, apparently on his own initiative, proposed through a go-between that Litvinov should visit London. In his journal, he

wrote that the idea was circulating in the government. At the Foreign Office, the proposal found no support. A bad idea, thought Sir Orme Sargent, deputy permanent undersecretary, which would arouse everyone's suspicions and produce no positive results. 'I hope we will not allow Maisky's fictitious grievances and Litvinov's assumed sulks to push us into action against our better judgement.'

'I agree', Cadogan wrote, 'Personally I regard association with the Soviet as more of a liability than an asset.' Halifax was less obdurate: 'We want if we can—without making a disproportionate amount of mischief—to keep them in with us.'⁴⁸

So were Soviet 'fictitious grievances' and 'assumed sulks' unfounded? What did Chamberlain think about Anglo-Soviet cooperation? 'I must confess to the most profound distrust of Russia', Chamberlain wrote to his sister Ida: 'I distrust her motives which seem to me to have little connection with our ideas of liberty and to be concerned only with getting everyone else by the ears'.⁴⁹ Was that it then? Litvinov was putting on an act, and Moscow, only interested in getting 'everyone else by the ears'?

From Paris, Surits reported that the French had finally faced realities: Nazi Germany was going to expand beyond its borders, and without allies, France could not defend itself.⁵⁰ In early April, Bonnet called in Surits almost every day to ask for news from Moscow and to stress the need for cooperation. Even Daladier summoned him to rail against the uncooperative Poles. On 7 April, Italian armies invaded Albania. Surits reported that he had seen Bonnet 'in a state of complete prostration'. War could break out at any time, Bonnet said, as he pointed to a pile of depressing intelligence reports on his desk. The French have panicked, Surits advised: they are not so finicky now about Soviet aid. All the same, French funk was not enough to reassure Surits. We can't trust them, he told Litvinov, and should only negotiate on the basis of strict reciprocity of obligations.⁵¹ Surits was preaching to the converted.

At the same time, the British also seemed to be moving. On 6 April, an Anglo-Polish defence agreement was concluded. On 13 April, the British government announced security guarantees for Romania and Greece, and France did the same. With Stalin's authorisation, Litvinov rebuked Maiskii for being too negative with Halifax and instructed him to convey to the Foreign Office Soviet openness to reciprocal cooperation in assisting Romania to preserve its independence. On the following day, the British invited the Soviet government to make unilateral guarantees to Poland and Romania, while Bonnet proposed strengthening the Franco-Soviet mutual assistance pact. Was momentum building at last for trilateral cooperation against the Axis? Dubious, Litvinov was blunt with Seeds, asking for specifics and insisting on reciprocity.⁵² That was nothing new.

What was new is that on 15 April, Litvinov sent Stalin a proposal for a tripartite political and military alliance with France and Britain. The British and French were beginning to show their hands, Litvinov wrote to Stalin: 'If we want to gain something from them, we also must disclose a little our own wishes. We ought not to wait for the other side to propose to us the very thing which we want.'⁵³ On the following day, Litvinov saw Stalin, some modifications were made and an eight-point proposal finalised. The USSR proposed the conclusion of a formal five- to ten-year agreement for immediate mutual assistance of every kind including military 'in case of aggression in Europe against any of the contracting parties'. Following points spelled out reciprocal obligations including the rendering of assistance to all the East European states from the Baltic to Black Seas, along Soviet frontiers. Military staff talks should take place 'in the shortest period of time' to establish the details of military assistance to all the countries named in the proposal. The contracting parties would agree to no separate peace. The Soviet proposal dotted the 'i's, or most of them. On 17 April, Litvinov handed the Soviet proposals to Seeds. 'A huge step!' Maiskii wrote to his journal: 'Now the general line is clear.'⁵⁴

After declaring that Britain and France should take the initiative, what made Litvinov and more importantly Stalin change their minds? On the face of it, the sudden shift in policy would

seem remarkable in view of Soviet mistrust of the British and French governments. One cannot say for certain, but it appears to have been a combination of circumstances: Bonnet's 'panic', the Italian invasion of Albania, the British declarations and Litvinov's pertinacity. During the 1920s, Litvinov had identified with Sisyphus, condemned to deal with all kinds of obstacles in defence of Soviet national interests.⁵⁵ In 1939, Sisyphus-Litvinov was still pushing his rock to the mountain's peak. Could he *this time* defy the Gods?

Senior Foreign Office officials Cadogan and Sargent had demanded specifics from Litvinov and now here they were. So did Bonnet. Logically, the French and British should have grasped the Soviet proposals with both hands. But that is not what happened. In the Foreign Office, the Soviet demarche provoked sneering. 'Extremely inconvenient', said Cadogan. The French ambassador in London, Charles Corbin, would later observe that the British rejected the Soviet proposals with 'disdain'.⁵⁶

Much to British irritation, Bonnet was more receptive to the Soviet demarche. My 'first impression', he told Surits, 'is very favourable'.⁵⁷ This is easy to understand: France did not have the English Channel for use as a moat to keep out the Nazi Wehrmacht. Daladier and Bonnet had never liked the idea of a war fighting alliance with the USSR. Both feared the spread of communism in Europe should there be another war, but 100 Soviet divisions now looked more attractive. The French military attache in Moscow said the Red Army could field 250 divisions one year after mobilisation.⁵⁸ In fact, when war came to the USSR in 1941, the Red Army organised more than double that number. French public opinion, like the British, strongly favoured, indeed counted on a Soviet alliance though on the right, especially in France, there remained opposition to closer relations with Moscow. The virulence of the French right-wing press eventually drew a protest from Potemkin in the late spring. If you want us as allies, he told the French ambassador in so many words, stop insulting us.⁵⁹ Payart, the French charge d'affaires in Moscow, cautioned Paris that if France ignored the USSR, the Soviet government could turn to a policy of isolation or to a rapprochement with Germany. From 1933 onwards, the French embassy in Moscow had repeatedly issued this warning. French ambassador Corbin advised Cadogan that 'great care would have to be taken' in responding to the Soviet proposals. 'A flat rejection would enable the Russians to cause both governments considerable embarrassment, and it would be better if some practical counter proposals could be devised'.⁶⁰

From London there was only silence. Litvinov began to show signs of impatience: he rounded on Surits for not giving Bonnet a written as opposed to only an oral description of Soviet proposals, as if that would have made any difference to Bonnet.⁶¹ 'We consider ... our proposals to be a single and indissoluble whole', he advised Surits a few days later: 'The proposal as a whole is the minimum of our wishes. We would like to know the opinion of the French and British governments to the project as a whole'.⁶² Do Litvinov's reactions sound like a Soviet government not making serious proposals and not wanting serious replies? 'Scholars who continue to deny that Stalin ever wanted a military alliance with the West', Stephen Kotkin writes, 'have to explain why he offered one, in written form'.⁶³

On 21 April, Litvinov had a tense meeting with Stalin and his right arm Viacheslav M. Molotov, amongst others, about the negotiations with Britain and France. Maiskii was also there, having been recalled for consultations. He wondered if the writing was on the wall for Litvinov.⁶⁴ The longer the *narkom* waited for word from London, the more he worried. Maybe Chamberlain and Bonnet hope for an opening from Hitler, so that they can 'return to the Munich position'. Such 'recidivism' from Chamberlain and Bonnet, Litvinov wrote: 'I would by no means exclude. Chamberlain is conducting negotiations with the USSR only under pressure from the opposition, from some Conservatives and from public opinion'.⁶⁵ This was true.

In Moscow, it was easy to mistrust Chamberlain and Bonnet. This time, however, Litvinov was a little hard on Bonnet who had been trying to persuade the Foreign Office to move off its opposition to a Soviet alliance. We need to offer reciprocal guarantees and commitments to Moscow, Bonnet believed, but even so, his idea of reciprocity was limited. The USSR would come

to the aid of Britain and France if they acted against German aggression in Central or Eastern Europe, according to Bonnet's formula, but the French and British were not obliged to come to the aid of the USSR if it intervened in similar circumstances.

The French embassy forwarded Bonnet's idea to the Foreign Office where it received a cold reception. 'I am afraid this looks as if the French government would want to take something of the Russian plan', observed Cadogan, 'more than we should be disposed to do'. 'I don't like this much!' Halifax replied.⁶⁶ You can see why, as Seeds later explained, because Bonnet had 'cut across' British policy. 'When faced by two divergent proposals, only the fool (which the Russian is not) will not go all out for the more advantageous ...'.⁶⁷

On 25 April, in an uncharacteristic gesture of independence from the British, Bonnet handed over his own text to Surits. 'The formulation of the project', replied Litvinov, 'is insulting, but send it [the draft] nevertheless'.⁶⁸ On 28 April, eleven days after making the Soviet proposals, Litvinov told Payart that the British had still not responded and that Bonnet's reply was going in the wrong direction. London and Paris, Payart replied, were not keeping either him or Seeds informed of the negotiations.⁶⁹ On the same day, Litvinov reported to Stalin that it was not clear whether Bonnet's proposal had British approval or whether it was Bonnet's own idea. Surits had heard that the British were sticking to their original idea of unilateral guarantees.⁷⁰ Litvinov then received another telegram from Surits indicating that Bonnet was acting on his own and that his proposal was only '*officieux*', semi-official, and his '*personal suggestion*'.⁷¹ Were the French and British again putting off the Soviet government? In Moscow, it looked that way.

On 29 April, Halifax invited Maiskii to see him after the ambassador's return from Moscow. According to Halifax, it would be at least another week before he could expect a reply to Litvinov's demarche. The government was 'too busy', according to Maiskii's report, and 'did not have the time to discuss seriously the Soviet proposal'.⁷² Three days earlier, 'a reliable source' had told the German counsellor in London that the British government would give an answer to Soviet proposals 'tantamount to a rejection'. The late British historian D. C. Watt accused a 'Foreign Office traitor' of passing on this information, which was better than the NKID was getting.⁷³

Not everyone in the Foreign Office lined up behind the government position. Vansittart and Laurence Collier, head of the Northern Department, dissented. We appear to want 'to secure Russian help and at the same time to leave our hands free to enable Germany to expand eastward at Russian expense', Collier remarked. It is a bad idea for the 'Russians are not so naive as not to suspect this, and I hope that we ourselves will not be so naive as to think that we can have things both ways'. Soviet support was worth having, Collier insisted: 'we ought not to boggle at paying the obvious price—an assurance to the Russians, in return for their promise of help, that we will not leave them alone to face German expansion'.⁷⁴ Collier's superiors did not agree with him.

On that same day, Surits was summoned to the Quai d'Orsay, the French foreign ministry, for an urgent meeting. Off the bat, Bonnet asked if there was any news from Moscow about his proposal. Not yet, Surits replied. 'I have been all the time in discussions with the English', Bonnet said, 'but until now I have not obtained [their] agreement'. Bonnet handed Surits a new text of his proposal, blaming his secretary-general, Alexis Leger, for 'unfortunate' imprecisions in an earlier draft.⁷⁵ This meeting made a bad impression on Surits.

Bonnet's role in the history of the response to our proposal is very mysterious and suspicious.

On April 29th he showed me the English answer, which Seeds should have handed you on the same day. What is the reason for the delay? It is difficult, of course, to believe that Bonnet invented this whole story about an English response - a memorandum. Most likely, it was only a 'draft' of the response, which was transmitted to the French for information and delayed at Bonnet's request. This was done, of course, not because the draft was considered by Bonnet 'inadequate and not entirely successful' (this, as you will recall, Bonnet told me, although he did not mention that its delivery to you might be delayed), but because of the desire on behalf of both countries to keep [the initiative for] the negotiations with us in their own

hands. Bonnet apparently had committed to the English to examine our position and try to obtain from us an agreement that would not bind France and England too strongly, would not impose any special obligations on them in relation to the USSR, and at the same time ensure our assistance to the countries with which France and England are already bound... Bonnet, as you know, tried to explain all this as his oversight and blamed the 'unfortunate' first draft on Leger. But it is unlikely that anyone will believe that before sending such an important document the minister would not read over its contents. In any case, Bonnet is the least suitable mediator for us with London, and I am therefore glad that at last a direct connection with London has been restored through Maiskii."⁷⁶

The unfortunate impression made on Surits by the meeting with Bonnet got back to the Foreign Office. According to the Quai d'Orsay, Surits 'had seemed to suspect hidden objects (sic) in French and British governments' approach to Soviet government. In the heat of the conversation, and in order to dispel suspicions of Surits, Bonnet had given him the text of the French proposal modified on the spot.⁷⁷

The NKID forwarded Surits' revealing despatch to Stalin and the Politburo. The British and French were caught hiding their own disagreements, if not negotiating in bad faith. Halifax told Maiskii that the government had been 'too busy' to examine the Soviet proposals, but Bonnet said to Surits that he was in constant discussions about them with the British. The contradiction between the statements by Halifax and Bonnet would have jumped immediately to Litvinov's eyes, and Stalin's, in reading the telegrams from Paris and London. Bonnet was looking for a 'compromise' solution, but that was not working.

In the Cabinet Committee on Foreign Policy, Chamberlain opposed the Soviet proposition. 'The Soviet's present proposal was one for a definite military alliance between England, France and Russia', Chamberlain said: 'It could not be pretended that such an alliance was necessary in order that the smaller countries of Eastern Europe should be furnished with munitions.' Then there was the problem of Poland. According to Chamberlain, it should not be argued that:

a Russian connection was ideologically a thing to be abhorred. Instead of this he [Chamberlain] had argued that the objection to a public association of Poland with Russia was that it might be expected to sting Germany into aggressive action.⁷⁸

Was it only a question of munitions? Chamberlain held on to Poland as a pretext for not concluding an alliance with the USSR. The French were exasperated with the Poles. Beck is 'entirely cynical and false', Leger opined, and looking for a way 'to tuck in closer to Germany'.⁷⁹ This was about right. If pushed too hard, Beck could go over hand and foot to the German side. Then victory over Nazi Germany would mean the disappearance of the Polish bulwark against the USSR.

The discussion in London took place on 24 April. Halifax also backed unilateral declarations. 'A tri-partite pact on the lines proposed, would make war inevitable. On the other hand, he thought that it was only fair to assume that if we rejected Russia's proposals, Russia would sulk.' And then Halifax made this comment, almost as an afterthought: 'There was. always the bare possibility that a refusal of Russia's offer might even throw her into Germany's arms.'⁸⁰ Was anyone listening? If you asked the British and French everyman's opinion, war was already inevitable. Once again the Foreign Office reduced Soviet national interests to 'sulking'. Chamberlain confided to his sister Hilda:

Our chief trouble is with Russia. I confess to being deeply suspicious of her. I cannot believe that she has the same aims and objects that we have or any sympathy with democracy as such. She is afraid of Germany & Japan and would be delighted to see other people fight them. But she is probably very conscious of her military weakness and does not want to get into a conflict if she can help it. Her efforts are therefore devoted to egging on others but herself promising only vague assistance... .81

'Promising only vague assistance?' It was the Soviet Union pressing for a military alliance with clear reciprocal obligations and it was Chamberlain and Halifax who opposed it. Litvinov was well informed, and on 3 May, reported to Stalin:

The English are not in a hurry to reply to us. They were evidently waiting for the Soviet reply to Bonnet and would repeat their proposal for unilateral guarantees. I would therefore consider desirable to dispel as soon as possible Anglo-French illusions about the acceptability for us of the previous proposals.⁸²

Stalin sacked Litvinov that same day and named Molotov in his place. Litvinov's dismissal 'was unforeseen', Payart cabled to Paris: 'The event is grave.' British 'stalling' in response to the Soviet April proposals had apparently exasperated the Soviet leadership. The last straw, according to Payart, was Maiskii's 29 April meeting with Halifax and the British intention to stick with unilateral declarations.⁸³ Could Molotov get more respect and better results from Paris and London than Litvinov had been able to do? It remained to be seen. The British, in any case, dropped use of the word 'sulks' when it came to describing Molotov. They used other pejoratives, but not that one.

A few days after Litvinov's sacking, the British government again proposed unilateral declarations. 'The mountain has given birth to a mouse', Maiskii remarked.⁸⁴ The 'mouse' meant in effect the flat rejection of the Soviet proposals of 17 April. The French were uncomfortable with the British position. Payart later explained to Potemkin that the Quai d'Orsay knew the French ideas given to Surits were unacceptable to the Foreign Office and so had gone along with the latest British proposals, thinking they were 'a step forward'. Potemkin replied that the British proposals were 'not sufficient' and that the British government would be so informed.⁸⁵

The French position, whatever Payart might say, was scarcely better than the British. Even as Bonnet tried to sell the 'French formula' to London, he emphasised that its appearance was more important than its substance. We are not thinking about 'a permanent entente' with Moscow, Bonnet advised Corbin, but only 'a casual agreement (*occasional*) confined to a clearly limited and concrete eventuality'.⁸⁶

Cadogan was almost as cavalier with Ambassador Corbin as he had been with Litvinov. He did not see any need for prior consultation with the French over British proposals to Moscow. 'But we must certainly remember to keep the French informed,' Cadogan advised his colleagues.⁸⁷ Maybe the British thought that the USSR would behave like the French. 'Our problem is to keep Russia in the back ground', Chamberlain explained to his sister Hilda, 'without antagonising her...'.⁸⁸ That was just what the Soviet government would not do, remain 'in the background'.

It was 10 May. Maiskii reported that the 'advocates of the Munich policy' were again bestirring themselves. 'I have already repeatedly had to point out that Chamberlain's "soul of souls" in the field of foreign policy can be summed up simply as an agreement with the aggressors at the expense of third countries. However, since mid-March, further open implementation of this policy has become very difficult for the prime minister'. Events in March, especially the disappearance of Czechoslovakia, had aroused public opinion. So now, Chamberlain has to manoeuvre, having abandoned his original positions and yielded ground to the 'so-called "new policy"'. But he will return to 'appeasement' if he can, although he faces large obstacles. Public opinion is 'decidedly anti-German and is demanding resistance to the aggressor'. Maiskii mentioned the Gallup poll reporting 87 per cent support for an 'immediate alliance with the USSR'.

Also very interesting was domestic reaction to the departure of Comrade Litvinov. During the first three days, the entire English press was heavily speculating on the reasons for his leaving and its significance. A lot of very diverse, sometimes completely fantastic theories were advanced. However, as a red thread, through all these arguments..., there was one alarming question: does it not mean a Soviet rejection of cooperation with Britain and France? And not only in the press. I know that on May 4th, that is, on the day after the departure of comrade Litvinov became known in England, the Foreign Office was in a state of panic, and the mood there began to calm down only on May 5th after relatively calm messages were received from Seeds in the sense that the departure of Comrade Litvinov did not signify a change of policy.

'I am inclined to the conclusion', Maiskii wrote, that the 'recidivism' of the appeasers 'scarcely has any chance of long life and that the logic of things must push England to a line of resistance against the aggressor'.⁸⁹

Maiskii reported regularly on British public opinion as of course he was expected to do. The NKID wanted to know whether the British government was serious about collective security against Nazi Germany. It had not been in the past. Maiskii tried to persuade Molotov that the circumstances had changed. His assessments were well informed; he had contacts everywhere in London. He did not hold out much hope for Chamberlain, but he worked on other members of the Conservative party as well as on members of the Parliamentary Opposition. Daniel Hucker, in a recent article in this journal, proposes that the Soviet perception of Anglo-French public opinion encouraged Soviet obduracy in negotiations. Hucker occasionally cites the English translation of excerpts from Maiskii's diary or Soviet comments second hand from British diplomats to buttress his point, but nothing from Soviet archives.⁹⁰ That is soft ground upon which to build such a supposition. Obduracy in Moscow derived from scepticism about Anglo-French determination to confront the Nazi aggressor. The failures of the previous five years to obtain agreements on collective security led Molotov to want to pin the French and British to the wall to make sure they would not leave the Soviet Union in the lurch against the Wehrmacht. This was not Soviet paranoia, it was Soviet experience. Would not any prudent diplomat in the same position, after years of being spurned, mistrust interlocutors like Chamberlain and Bonnet? Maiskii's reports appear to have encouraged the Soviet government to invest in continued negotiations. The obduracy in Moscow derived from doubts about British and French intentions which Maiskii and Surits could not overcome, and that for good reason.

Maiskii also wanted to persuade his British interlocutors that Litvinov's sacking did not indicate a change in Soviet policy. As if to underline this point, Molotov signalled to Warsaw on 10 May that the USSR was willing to support Poland against Germany. On the following day, the Polish ambassador Grzybowski returned a negative reply. Minister Beck is coming around, the ambassador later told Potemkin, but he never did. The Italian ambassador, Augusto Rosso, went to see the *zamnarkom* to ask about what was going on. 'The Polish government is anxious', replied Potemkin, 'about its territorial integrity which is threatened by Germany.' Rosso opined that the German government was sensing serious resistance to its expansion into Eastern Europe and did not like it. 'Naturally, the backbone of opposition to the German onslaught... is the USSR.' The ambassador admitted that his views did not entirely reflect those of his government, which was rather an understatement. Potemkin recorded no reply to Rosso's observations.⁹¹ In late June, Beck authorised Grzybowski to take summer holidays. *Incroyable indifférence et optimisme polonais*, noted the French ambassador in Moscow.⁹² In July, the Polish killing of a Soviet border guard soured relations. During a meeting with the Polish charge d'affaires, Potemkin refused to discuss any other issue even as the European crisis intensified.⁹³ Soviet-Polish relations were back to their usual dead end.

On 14 May, Molotov informed Seeds that unilateral guarantees were unacceptable. The pattern of the spring continued into the summer with the Soviet government pressing for strict reciprocity and specificity of commitments and the British, trying to avoid them. Bonnet let the Foreign Office take the lead. Maiskii would later say of France that it was Britain's 'brilliant no. 2', and increasingly under British domination after 1936. During the Spanish civil war, France became a mere 'appendix' of Britain. 'Paris always took its bearings from London on the most important questions of foreign policy.'⁹⁴ Like Litvinov, Maiskii was being a little hard on the French, but only a little.⁹⁵

Chamberlain continued to drag his feet and in one instance boasted to his sister Hilda of having proposed an illusory formulation of commitments which would allow Britain to escape them when so desired.⁹⁶ This was essentially what Bonnet had proposed earlier, and one may wonder whether Chamberlain's idea was of Gallic origin. It sounded like a continuation of the British 'policy of connivances' employed against Czechoslovakia. The Soviet side was on the alert for such deceptions and British evasions during the summer reinforced Soviet mistrust. The British of course claimed they were negotiating in good faith, and that it was the Soviet side, which kept upping its demands.⁹⁷

This is untrue. Soviet objectives were spelled out in April and May and maintained throughout the negotiations. It was a mistake, Maiskii would later say, for the Soviet side to state an 'irreducible minimum' at the outset and not move off it.⁹⁸ Amongst the main issues in dispute was Red Army transit across Poland and Romania to establish a front against the Wehrmacht. The USSR had no common frontiers with Germany. If Poland or Romania would not agree to passage rights, how could the Red Army come to grips with the common foe? The issue came up for the first time in 1934 and then every year thereafter. Security guarantees for the Baltic States, a sticking point in 1939, first came up in 1934. In the following year, Litvinov offered Soviet guarantees of French eastern frontiers in exchange for French guarantees of Soviet frontiers in the Baltic. The French turned down the Soviet offer. Litvinov had long considered the Baltic area a potential *place d'armes* for an assault on Leningrad. The question of staff talks, another key Soviet desideratum, arose for the first time in discussions with the French in 1935 and every year thereafter. Neither the French nor the British governments wanted them. In 1939, this issue was nothing new.⁹⁹ Nor was the difficult question of 'direct or indirect aggression' (indirect meaning the Nazi subversion of the independence of the East European states). Chamberlain himself used such terminology regarding Poland in a statement in the House of Commons on 6 April.

'What does the word "indirect" mean?' Maiskii asked Halifax on that same day: 'And who shall define whether or not such a threat exists?' These were reasonable questions. According to the British record, Maiskii pursued them with 'inquisitorial persistence'.¹⁰⁰ So when Molotov later raised the same issues, it was not upping the stakes. If the British made an evasive proposal, Molotov moved to check them. It was tick and tack. When the Italian ambassador asked what was going on, Potemkin replied: 'It is quite natural that the positions of the parties are subjected to close scrutiny for it is a matter of very serious mutual obligations.'¹⁰¹

'During the course of negotiations', explained the French ambassador Paul-Émile Naggia, 'suspicion falls on the one who proposes weak formulations.'¹⁰² In June, the Foreign Office sent William Strang, the head of the Central Department, to Moscow to assist Seeds in negotiations. Strang told Naggia that his instructions 'were to try not to draw nearer to the Russian point of view ... but to take back concessions made [earlier] to the Russians ...'.¹⁰³ This position proved impossible to defend, and Molotov obtained satisfaction on some points but not on others. One worried cabinet minister asked Maiskii how the negotiations could be quickly resolved. 'There is one very simple way,' Maiskii replied, half joking, half serious, 'accept Soviet proposals.'¹⁰⁴ The British wanted concessions from Molotov in exchange for their concessions. Molotov gave some ground on the linkage between political and military agreements, but on the key question of Soviet security in the Baltic, he would not budge. Once burned, twice shy, was the Soviet axiom. 'Too greedy', D. C. Watt said of the Soviet side.¹⁰⁵ 'The British PM appeared to be taking Stalin for a fool', Kotkin writes.¹⁰⁶ At the end of July, the French and British finally agreed to staff talks in Moscow. 'I can't make up my mind', Chamberlain wrote to Ida, 'whether the Bolshies are double crossing us and trying to make difficulties or whether they are only showing the cunning & suspicion of the peasant'.¹⁰⁷

Naggia worried about the interminable negotiations and pleaded with Paris to get a move on. He asked for plenipotentiary powers to conclude an agreement, but did not get them for that would have meant resuming an independent French policy. Bonnet wanted to let the British 'make the running'; France would stay in the background.¹⁰⁸ Maiskii accused the Foreign Office of 'stalling tactics'. He had heard that even the US president was confused by British 'methods'. London was acting not as if 'engaged in concluding the most important international treaty, but as if it were buying a Persian rug in the bazaar: it haggles for each trifle and adds a penny every half hour'.¹⁰⁹ Over lunch with Maiskii, Lloyd George offered his own opinion: 'Chamberlain until now has not reconciled himself to the idea of an Anglo-Soviet pact directed against Germany and, making use of any suitable pretext, would like to sidestep it.'¹¹⁰ This was true. The PM continued to complain to Hilda about the negotiations and the anxiety of his colleagues to get an agreement. 'I have to go very warily but I am so sceptical of the value of

Russian help that I should not feel that our position was greatly worsened if we had to do without them.' Even if we get an agreement, Chamberlain said in a subsequent letter to Hilda, 'I shall not regard it as a triumph.'¹¹¹

During the summer, David Low drew two cartoons showing Nazi representatives sitting in Molotov's outer office or standing at his door waiting for British and French diplomats to leave.¹¹² If Low could see the danger, why could not the people who held power in London and Paris? In fact, many did see the danger. The chiefs of staff worried about a possible Soviet turn towards Germany and argued for an alliance. Poland could not put up 'serious resistance to a German invasion'; the Soviet Union had to be brought on side. Chamberlain did not like hearing these arguments and attempted to limit discussion to 'political considerations'.¹¹³ Of course, the military 'considerations' should have taken precedence.

The French were also worried, as Daladier advised at a meeting in Geneva with British ministers in mid-May. According to Halifax, 'He [Daladier] thought their [the Soviet] attitude had stiffened since M. Litvinov's departure and that they were now on their dignity and would accept nothing less than complete equality and reciprocity.'

Do you think there is 'a danger of the Soviet breaking off talks?' Halifax asked. It's 'a serious danger', Daladier replied: 'Litvinov's departure certainly meant something and it might well be that the Soviet government would think it the best policy to retire into isolation and let Europe destroy itself if it would.' French ministers present at the meeting agreed: there was a 'serious danger of an accommodation between Germany and Russia if we failed to close with the Russians...'. When someone pointed out that Surits thought an agreement could be reached 'without undue difficulty', Halifax was doubtful. 'Russian policy was quite incalculable and was liable to sudden changes. It was impossible to follow the workings of the Soviet mind from day to day.'¹¹⁴ In fact, Surits did think an agreement could be achieved. What he said to the French, he said to Molotov.¹¹⁵ What was so hard to understand about Soviet frustration over years of failed collective efforts to stop Hitlerite Germany?

Let Chamberlain explain, as he did to his sister Ida, on the same day, Daladier rang alarms bells in Geneva: 'I have had a very tiresome week over the Russians. They may be just simple straight forward people but I cannot rid myself of the suspicion that they are chiefly concerned to see the 'capitalist' powers tear each other to pieces while they stay out themselves.' Nor was he moved by warnings of a Soviet-German rapprochement, even from his Cabinet colleagues. As he explained to Ida, these were 'a pretty sinister commentary on Russian reliability'.¹¹⁶ What an extraordinary statement from Chamberlain who had sought and continued to seek a rapprochement with Nazi Germany.

The penultimate acts of British folly occurred during the summer. British officials, Sir Horace Wilson, Chamberlain's main advisor, and Robert Hudson, still Secretary for Overseas Trade, entered into discussions in London with Helmut Wohlthat, a senior German economics official. The main line, which Halifax himself had taken with the German ambassador in London, was that if Hitler stopped his aggressive policies; there could still be Anglo-German entente.¹¹⁷ On 22 July, the news of a Hudson meeting with Wohlthat leaked to the press, and two days later, there were sharp questions in the House of Commons. Chamberlain was annoyed with Hudson, not in principle, but because the news leaked and because he had stolen his ideas from other colleagues. The prime minister still held the door ajar to Berlin through 'other and discreeter (sic) channels'.¹¹⁸

The second act of British folly was to send to Moscow for staff talks in August a low- ranking military delegation on a chartered merchantman, the *City of Exeter*, making thirteen knots, without written credentials and without plenipotentiary powers but with instructions to negotiate 'very slowly'. The French chief delegate, General Joseph Dou- menci, complained that he went to Moscow with 'empty hands', *les mains vides*.¹¹⁹ Naggia was thunderstruck. Even in 1935, he commented, 'the USSR proposed strong commitments to which we responded with weak formulations'.¹²⁰ This was true. What was the British government thinking? The deputy chiefs in

London made a clear case for an alliance and for insisting on Polish and Romanian cooperation.¹²¹ It was too late.

The Germans were waiting in the wings, just as cartoonist Low had depicted them. In July, they continued their pursuit of a rapprochement with Moscow launched during the spring. The German ambassador in Moscow, Friedrich Werner von Schulenburg, was the principal suitor. At the beginning of July, he was still frustrated by Molotov's aloofness. *Zamnarkom* Potemkin remained distant in a meeting with Schulenburg on 1 July, as he wrote to his journal, but nevertheless appeared to drop a hint. 'In reply to the [ambassador's] obviously provocative chatter, I limited myself to the dry remark that nothing prevented Germany from demonstrating the seriousness of its desire to improve relations with the USSR.'¹²² Potemkin's records of meeting often signalled the Soviet mood. He could be accommodating or reserved and sharp tongued. Call him Comrade Barometer. At the beginning of July, he was still signalling rough weather to Schulenburg.

At the end of July, everything changed. Molotov opened the door to offers from Berlin. The shift in Soviet policy occurred over a period of little more than three weeks, hastened apparently by the Anglo-French delegations' absence of plenipotentiary authority and by intelligence that a German attack on Poland was imminent.¹²³ In an epitaph for the staff talks, Molotov told the US ambassador on 16 August that the time for empty public declarations was over and that only 'concrete obligations' for mutual assistance against aggression were acceptable for Moscow. The Soviet government had committed a great deal of time to the negotiations with Britain and France, but their success did not depend only on the Soviet side.¹²⁴ Litvinov could have spoken these words. On the following day, Molotov handed Schulenburg a proposal for a non-aggression pact. On 23 August, the agreement was signed in Moscow. The Wehrmacht invaded Poland eight days later.

'You double-crossed us,' came the response from London and Paris: 'You were talking to the Germans at the same time you were talking to us.' This was Pot calling Kettle black. Could the Soviet side forget the Munich surrender or Wohlthat's discussions in London? Naggjar's formulation is apposite: *Après Munich, c'est la réponse du berger à la bergère*.¹²⁵

II

The 1939 negotiations were not easily forgotten. In September, an American journalist, Louis Fischer, who wrote for the US magazine, *The Nation*, asked the Foreign Office for inside information to do a story on the negotiations with the USSR. According to Fischer, the story would 'be good propaganda to put out through a neutral source—particularly ... the "Nation" which was distinctly leftish in character and could not be accused of conservative propaganda'. Neither Sargent nor Cadogan supported the idea. Halifax agreed: 'I don't think we should touch this. We can hardly gain anything in this way of disillusioning "left" feeling about Russia. It might not impossibly cause ourselves some embarrassment, therefore we seem to have little to gain, & perhaps something to lose.'¹²⁶ Fischer was well regarded by the Foreign Office News Department, but not so much by the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). One unsigned report in SIS files was hostile. '... Fischer is undoubtedly a distributor of Soviet funds and a trusted agent of the O.G.P.U.'¹²⁷ The SIS report sounds like a canard, but Halifax was right to fear embarrassment.

That *fin de non-recevoir* did not put an end to ideas of publicising the British view of the Soviet negotiations. In early October, an MP raised the issue during Parliamentary Questions. Will the Prime Minister arrange for the publication of a blue book on the negotiations with the USSR? Foreign Office officials, endorsed by higher authority, said no. 'The Soviet Government may not yet have definitely taken up their position by the side of Germany', minuted Frank Roberts, then a clerk in the Central Department, 'and we should not therefore do anything calculated to push them further along the German path'.¹²⁸ The question kept coming back. 'I have

glanced hastily through the voluminous files dealing with the Anglo-Soviet negotiations', Roberts again minuted, 'and there is really very little material which is suitable for publication. It is a very long and complicated story in which we either appear in a humiliated role, or alternatively, by defending ourselves effectively, show up the Soviet Government in such a light that our relations must inevitably suffer still further'.¹²⁹

In the meantime, the *City of Exeter*, that embarrassing merchantman, returned to the fore. Mr Roberts again explains: 'There has been a certain amount of public criticism of the fact that the military missions went to Moscow by a rather slow passenger ship, and the Russians have used this as an argument to show that our negotiations were not "serious"'. The French wanted to go by train, faster by a week and less expensive, but the Service Departments had insisted, according to Roberts, and the French reluctantly agreed. The difficulty was an invoice for £3,500. The Treasury department wanted to bill Paris. Roberts thought this was a bad idea. The French had not wanted to travel by ship in the first place and only agreed after 'considerable pressure' was applied. 'I therefore think', Roberts advised, 'that it would be a mistake to submit any bill to the French, and it might have unfortunate psychological consequences at the moment, in view of the fact that the French think that they are now bearing a greater burden than they should'.¹³⁰ Roberts was referring to the British Expeditionary Force in France which in December amounted to approximately five divisions, not many for holding the front against the Wehrmacht. The French army would have to stop an invasion if it came to that.

The Foreign Office held its ground on the blue book until the beginning of December when the outbreak of war between the Soviet Union and Finland changed everything. Public opinion erupted. In the Foreign Office, it seemed like an opportune time for a riposte. The first idea was to 'give out [an] inspired comment attacking the Soviet Union', to *The Times*, old reliable as a Foreign Office messenger. 'I think a few divulgations... would be most useful', Sargent commented.

Both from the point of view of answering belated criticisms of the failure of H. M. Government's Russian policy last summer and also as a means of satisfying the anti-Bolshevik feelings which have been aroused in this country by the attack on Finland. I mentioned the matter this morning to the S of S [Halifax], who was prepared to authorise the Ministry of Information to take this line, on the clear understanding however that we must not allow such anti-Bolshevik propaganda to get out of control. It is essential that it should not develop or degenerate into a clamour for war against the Soviet Union.

A main line of attack was that the negotiations had failed 'owing to the British and French refusal to agree to Russian demands which would have endangered the integrity of the Baltic states and of Finland'. This was a *post facto* argument. During the spring of 1939, Cabinet ministers had noted that 'the importance of securing an agreement with Russia was much greater than the risk of offending the smaller states'. Even Poland thought it should have some 'regard' over the Baltic States.¹³¹ 'It was true', Halifax said during one of the interminable discussions of the Soviet alliance, 'that we should go to the assistance of Holland if she was attacked by Germany without any request from Holland to do so ...'.¹³²

The *Times* article led to new Parliamentary Questions, and this time Chamberlain decided that the government would issue a white paper. There was still reticence in the Foreign Office, which was overruled for the time being. The purpose of the white paper, as Chamberlain put it, 'would be to tell the truth and not to attack the Soviet Government'. Cadogan asked Halifax for his approval:

I think there would be advantages in publication if, as seems probable, it would show that we honestly did our best to obtain an agreement and that delays and evasions came from the other side. it will be clear that the suspicions which we tried to dismiss from our minds were unfortunately well-founded.¹³³

There was also approval from the Ministry of Information and from the future distinguished historian E. H. Carr. 'If it could be showed (sic) that the negotiations had broken down mainly because we had refused to condone in advance Soviet aggression in the Balkan (sic) States, it

would be the best piece of propaganda in neutral countries that we had done.¹³⁴ Well then, was it to be 'truth' or propaganda?

Within a fortnight, the Foreign Office put together a collection of documents for the white paper.¹³⁵ There was discussion of what documents to publish or not and of whose susceptibilities to protect or not. Maiskii ended up in the latter of category. He had 'used his position quite shamelessly to intrigue against His Majesty's Government and we need not treat him too tenderly'.¹³⁶ So to say, Maiskii was good at his job.

'Publication of the truth' remained an objective of the exercise. Other departments were consulted. 'Fair and accurate' was the War Department view, though it had a quibble about British instructions and the British delegation's powers. This was a sensitive issue, which provoked discussion. Halifax ruled out including anything too 'controversial' from Maiskii. Recently promoted to assistant undersecretary, Strang was in a hurry to publish. 'The time is now from the propaganda point of view.'¹³⁷ So it was propaganda after all, which was upper most in Foreign Office calculations.

Everything went smoothly. The Foreign Office had page proofs before Christmas and circulated them for comment to the interested departments. Publication was planned for mid-January with a first print-run of 100,000 copies. But then there was a snag. Halifax asked that proofs be sent for comment to the French and Polish embassies. Before he had even seen them, French ambassador Corbin went to talk to Cadogan. 'He was bound, to tell me that in Paris he found that the Quai d'Orsay had certain misgivings about the publication. He wondered whether it was really necessary and whether it would really achieve any positive good.' Cadogan tried to head off the ambassador's obvious manoeuvre by saying that there was no going back on the government's decision to publish. Corbin persisted. Amongst his 'misgivings' was 'the reflection' that in the earlier stages of the negotiations, 'it was the French government which had urged concessions on us [to the USSR] and he thought that possibly if this were to appear from the publication of the documents it might give an unfortunate impression'. Corbin had heard that the white paper would not include 'much of the direct correspondence between Paris and London', but he did not see how this could be avoided. Then the ambassador hinted that the French government might publish a 'yellow book' to set matters straight.¹³⁸

Corbin would not be put off. A week later, he returned to the charge having seen the proofs and consulted Paris. In a six-page memorandum, Corbin noted that the French government had 'serious reservations' about publication of what he called the 'English blue book'.

The general impression which emerges from the reading of this document is that, from the beginning to the end of the negotiations, the Russian government did not cease to insist upon giving to the agreement under discussion the maximum scope and efficacy. Sincere or feigned, this determination of the Soviet government to cover effectively all the routes of a German aggression seemed all through the negotiations to run up against Anglo-French reticence and against the intention of the two governments to limit the field of Russian intervention.

It is true, Corbin noted, that an argument could be drawn from the documents that the French and British governments were defending the interests of the small powers. There was something in the draft for those for and against the USSR, especially after the occupation of eastern Poland (in mid-September 1939) and the invasion of Finland. Nevertheless, those who believed that the USSR only turned to Germany 'after having taken the measure of the hesitations of France and England, of their repugnance to commit themselves thoroughly vis-a-vis Moscow, of their scruples to facilitate direct action of the Russian armies against Germany, would find in the projected publication a certain number of arguments in their favour'. Corbin brought up again the possibility, the threat in fact, of a French yellow book. The Quai d'Orsay was particularly irked by the omission of documents demonstrating French efforts to show more flexibility towards Soviet proposals.

The publication of the exchange of views [between the French and British governments] would necessarily underline the differences which at times developed between the English and French positions. It would particularly highlight the actions undertaken by the French side, especially at the beginning, in order to

obtain, given the importance of the objective to be reached, a greater openness toward Soviet desiderata. It is surely unnecessary to point to the drawbacks of the polemics which would follow the manipulation of these divergences of policy possibly from various points of view. The French government is certain that the Foreign Office will want to associate itself with its intense desire to avoid anything that could damage, in the opinion of foreign states, the complete solidarity uniting our two countries.

Finally, Corbin added that the Soviet government could respond to the 'double publication' (this was the veiled threat of the French yellow book) with its own collection of documents, where 'the authors would not be burdened by any scruple of accuracy and sincerity and which could risk to provide important weapons to German-Soviet propaganda'. What Corbin meant was that the fragile Daladier government could not stand a cross-fire between left and right provoked by the white paper. And Corbin had one last request. Would the Foreign Office please delete Litvinov's comments in March 1939 that 'France was practically done for'? How ironic. In six months, France would in fact be 'done for', and Corbin, out of a job.

'We must talk about this', Halifax minuted: 'I don't much like going against the strong feeling of the French Govt. There is something to their argument, tho' I think they exaggerate.'¹³⁹ The French also acted through the British embassy in Paris passing the same message. 'A cursory reading [of the white paper]', wrote the British ambassador in Paris, 'might seem to imply that at the earlier stages of the negotiations it had been the Russians who were pressing us for precise undertakings which we had been reluctant to give'. Was this not so? Then the British ambassador reiterated that the Soviet Government might 'issue a reply which would not have the objective character of the White Paper and might also cause some confusion'.¹⁴⁰

Maiskii had followed the news of the white paper since it was announced in the House of Commons in mid-December. The Winter War was destabilising Anglo-Soviet relations. Ambassadors Seeds and Naggiar had been recalled from Moscow. Maiskii was worried. Along with the white paper, these actions could be a prelude to the rupture of diplomatic relations.¹⁴¹

On 5 January, Maiskii wrote to his journal that Strang had called at the embassy. On Halifax's instructions, he offered Maiskii the opportunity to examine proofs of the blue book. The idea was 'that if there were any passages in the records of conversations between the Secretary of State and himself which might embarrass him, he could let me know', according to Strang's account, 'and we could then consider how to deal with them'.¹⁴²

'I admit it', Maiskii wrote, 'the temptation at once to take "the book" in my hands was very strong. But I immediately checked myself, for there and then like a lightning bolt flashing through my mind came the thought that the "pious" Halifax had set a trap for me'. So Maiskii declined the invitation, as he told Strang, since the British government was publishing the blue book on its own responsibility without the collaboration of the USSR. Here is how Maiskii put it, '... in actual fact, if I had accepted his "kind" offer ... it would have given him [Halifax] in the future the possibility to say that the Soviet government was informed of the contents of the 'book' before publication and that it agreed with the text at least in part'. Well then, Strang replied, Lord Halifax 'regarded it as his moral duty to make you his offer [...]. Now he will consider that his conscience is clear'. Maiskii mocked Halifax's plummy sanctimony and grandee morality. With his mind thus at ease, the ambassador noted sarcastically, the foreign secretary could proceed to 'his next intrigue in the dirty kitchen of British foreign policy'.¹⁴³

Maiskii soon heard about the contents of the white paper through an unnamed source. 'The reader of the 'book' would have to conclude', Maiskii recorded, 'that the USSR—is in essence, a "wolf in sheep's clothing" and that the British government acted very wisely, not allowing the conclusion of a pact with such dangerous partners'.¹⁴⁴ That was the Foreign Office message. 'This will be a first rate piece of propaganda for us', minuted one Foreign Office clerk. Carr was particularly keen to go ahead. He was planning extensive publicity and had sent advance proofs 'to most of the press attaches [in London], who were being authorised to make translations'. Of course, nothing to be released until the white paper had been issued. We must make sure, Carr noted, that last-minute revisions are sent out so that press attachés can correct their

copy.¹⁴⁵ Carr's zeal seems now to be somewhat incongruous for he soon left the Ministry of Information to become a leader writer at *The Times* where he began to praise the Soviet Union.

The French guessed correctly, by the way, that the NKID would reply to a white paper. Potemkin called a meeting of NKID officials on 7 January, only two days after Strang visited Maiskii. Apart from Potemkin those present were F. T. Gusev, Maiskii's eventual successor in London, A. E. Bogomolov, eventual ambassador to the various Allied governments in exile in London, and A. A. Sobolev, NKID secretary general who later became Gusev's counsellor in London. 'The main objective of the proposed publication of documents', according to the minutes, was 'exposure of Anglo-French policy, which, in its negotiations with the USSR, sought to draw the Soviet Union into an armed conflict with Germany and transfer the entire burden of this struggle to the USSR without taking on specific obligations and remaining on the sidelines. Demonstrate through the documents that, with regard to Germany, the Soviet Union from the very beginning to the end of the negotiations was alien to any aggressive intentions and persisted in its goal solely to protect the peace and its own defense'.

Thus, the battle lines were drawn. Documents would be selected from the period 15 March to 1 September 1939, and as a second possibility, from September 1938 to examine the Czechoslovak Crisis. The proposed collection would ventilate Soviet grievances, as in fact Litvinov had discussed them with his ambassadors. Moreover, to underline British hypocrisy, the NKID planned to focus on Wohlthat's negotiations with British officials in June-July 1939.¹⁴⁶

In London, the Polish government in exile also advised the Foreign Office that publication of the white book would be 'inopportune'. You can see why the Poles would object, but it was French opposition, which caused the Cabinet on 18 January to postpone publication 'to a more appropriate time'. Despite Cadogan's statement to Corbin, the government did after all go back on the decision to publish. It was agreed that Chamberlain would 'consult' with the leaders of the Opposition 'in regard to any necessary arrangements ... to give effect to this decision'.¹⁴⁷

On that same day, Rab Butler, the Parliamentary undersecretary in the Foreign Office, 'mentioned' to Maiskii that there were 'different opinions in the British as well as French governments on the expediency of publication of the [Blue Book]'.¹⁴⁸ Butler and Maiskii met frequently during this period to keep the lid from blowing off Anglo-Soviet relations. They often discussed the subject of Soviet-German relations.

The 'basic difficulty', Butler noted, 'is rooted in the fact that the USSR is supporting our mortal enemy. Many people in England now believe that between the USSR and Germany exists 'a *castiron*' [in English in the original], poured from iron agreement which in effect transforms both governments into a single, unbreakable bloc'.

'I laughed', Maiskii wrote, '... and recommended to Butler to believe a little less all the newspaper canards about a "Soviet-German alliance".'

'If we knew with certainty', replied Butler, 'that the USSR really was conducting its own independent policy, much, very much could be different.' Maiskii insisted that the USSR pursued its own interests and policies. Don't take us for *political simpletons* (in English in the original), he would say to Butler on another occasion.¹⁴⁹

Then there were more complications. 'The story has got about', Roberts advised, 'that the French have been pressing us not to release the White Paper.' What was worse, the Germans had broadcast the news in English even before Corbin had left his memorandum with Cadogan.¹⁵⁰ The Soviet embassy also picked up the news from George Bilainkin, a journalist with the Kemsley newspaper group, who had heard:

From the best of sources that the 'Blue Book' was not being released because the French and Polish governments objected, saying that the book clearly showed that England had frozen the negotiations and did not wish to conclude the pact with the USSR. Chamberlain supposedly browsed the book and came to the conclusion it was better not to publish it. However, inasmuch as they had formally promised

publication. in Parliament, they called in the leaders of the opposition [Clement] Attlee and [Archibald] Sinclair and consulted with them.¹⁵¹

What Maiskii did not hear is that Attlee, who had previously been doubtful about publication of the white paper, told Chamberlain that he had changed his mind. The prime minister was forced to take the matter back to Cabinet. 'If it is decided to publish', Roberts noted, 'we shall have to explain the position to the French (and the Poles).'¹⁵² While the Poles in exile were not in a position to protest, the French showed no signs of backing down. The white paper was turning into a fiasco.

The Foreign Office went back to Corbin to see if the French government would reconsider the question. Doubtful, was the ambassador's reply. Painting out the 'discordance at particular moments between French and British policy' had raised hackles in Paris.¹⁵³ The fiasco was deepening. The government found itself caught between the French, Attlee and MPs in the House of Commons asking awkward Parliamentary Questions. There were also some doubts in the Foreign Office over the drafting of an introduction to the white paper, which might necessarily be too one-sided. Like the French, Roberts worried about how Moscow could respond, not knowing that the NKID was getting ready to return fire. 'We must also bear in mind', Roberts noted, 'that we are opening the door to whatever tendentious falsifications (sic) the Soviet Govt. may choose to issue as a reply.' Pot was again calling Kettle black. The Foreign Office and Ministry of Information were aiming for 'good propaganda'; and leaving out French and British policy differences was of course 'tendentious'.¹⁵⁴

News of the delay in publication and French objections provoked malicious comments in the British press. In response, there was only silence from the Quai d'Orsay. Strang wrote to Ambassador Campbell in Paris to try a new line of argument, '... as it were, countering] *their* embarrassments with a statement of *our own* [emphasis in the original]'.¹⁵⁵ Daladier remained adamant: no white paper.¹⁵⁶ On 6 March, Chamberlain announced in the House of Commons that the white paper would not be published 'at present'.¹⁵⁷ This language left the door ajar, to reopen at a later date, but it never was. Mr Roberts was tasked with getting back the proofs in various quarters and destroying them. There were a number of copies circulating, some in embassies, and he did not get them back without difficulties. It was the last chapter in the fiasco. Let Roberts recount the story.

Mr. French [of the Foreign Office] was rung up this afternoon by the Stationery Office to say that they had been approached by one Miss Suckling of Photostat Limited. A private customer had asked Photostat to make a [copy] immediately of a proof of the. White Paper. In view of a note attached to the copy given to them they suspected that this customer must be in touch with the Roumanian Legation. . .

In fact, it was the copy given to the Romanian minister, Viorel Tilea. It was embarrassing for the Foreign Office and for M. Tilea because it revealed sloppy security of a confidential document. The only person who came out well in the *affaire* was the sharp-eyed Miss Suckling. Tilea went to see Sargent and himself broached the subject 'with protestations of injured innocence and embarrassment'. The minister blamed everything on a translator working for the legation: 'he hoped that we had never supposed that even if he, M. Tilea, had wished to betray the confidence we had placed in him, he would have been so stupid as to have adopted such a clumsy method of obtaining a copy.'. It turned out, after Tilea had made 'somewhat belated enquiries' that 'the young man' in question who had worked for the legation for many years, had 'habits and opinions. not altogether orthodox'. In fact, he was a lecturer at the University of London. But let Sargent continue from his long memorandum: 'He [his name was Victor Cornea] seems to have somewhat socialistic views and, what is still more strange, it appears that he changes his place of residence nearly every week.' Sargent suggested making 'a few enquiries' at M.I.5 about Cornea, who had 'again vanished'.¹⁵⁸

Roberts finally advised that he had received all the outstanding copies and had destroyed them, but maybe not.¹⁵⁹ In 1941, Maiskii obtained a photographic film of the white paper 'by

unofficial means' for which he got into desperate trouble after the war. Given the many proofs let out for consultation, who knows whence came Maiskii's microfilm. Anywhere was possible.¹⁶⁰

III

Other more important matters soon intruded, especially the fall of France. Britain then had to fight on alone, its army having been run out of Europe without its guns and Lorries. One supposes that the Soviet proposals of April 1939 would have looked good in London as everything was falling apart. Due in some measure to Maiskii and Butler, a rupture of Anglo-Soviet relations was avoided, and the Winter War ended in mid-March. No thanks to the French, who contemplated war against the USSR and tried to sabotage Soviet- Finnish peace negotiations.

After the Winter War ended, the British government resumed efforts from the previous autumn to draw the USSR into more cooperative relations. Those efforts were unsuccessful until the Nazi invasion of the USSR changed everything. The Soviet side had not wanted to be left alone to fight the Wehrmacht, and yet there it was during the summer of 1941 fighting almost alone. Daladier objected to the white paper because it would pour oil upon the flames of French politics and bring down his government. He had to resign anyway in mid-March 1940. This narrative is not without its ironies. The French rarely objected to British policy: the white paper was one case where they did, another being when Bonnet tried to nudge the British toward an agreement with Moscow.

In London, French obstinacy over the white paper was perplexing. Foreign Office officials saw themselves as honest and well-intended. The white paper, they said, represented 'the truth' about the failed 1939 negotiations. But Carr was out for 'good propaganda' which normally only resembles 'the truth'. French dissidence was written out of the collection as were the sententious minutes of Halifax, Cadogan and Sargent against the Soviet alliance. Chamberlain's comments in Cabinet Conclusions and the Committee on Foreign Policy were not included. Collier and Vansittart are invisible. So were expressions of concern about the possibility of a Soviet rapprochement with Germany. The result was a sanitised presentation of the negotiations mainly via the telegrams of Halifax and Seeds taken out of the longer context of failed negotiations in the 1930s.

The white paper concealed the British government's responsibility for the failure of the 1939 negotiations. The archival evidence demonstrates that the Soviet government made serious proposals for an anti-Nazi war fighting alliance, which the Foreign Office, and especially Chamberlain, did not want to entertain. The selection of documents for the white paper, as careful as it was, could not hide the reality which caused the French to oppose publication. Chamberlain wanted to finesse the Soviet government. That strategy did not work. Molotov forced the British and French back to the Soviet agenda, but without getting the alliance. The lumbering *City of Exeter* carrying a British head of delegation without written credentials or pleni-potentiary powers, instructed to negotiate 'very slowly', must have been the camel-breaking straw for Stalin and his colleagues, not people who took kindly to being deceived or treated lightly. They looked for an alternative and agreed to the non-aggression pact. How abhorrent to compose with Hitler, but after all is that not what Britain and France had tried to do? Stalin confirmed the Soviet position during the war in dinner conversation with his American and British allies.¹⁶¹ And yes, Stalin made the big decisions. He approved the 17 April proposals to France and Britain; they were Soviet proposals, not Litvinov's personal policy. Stalin also made the decision on the non-aggression pact. Did Stalin think Nazi Germany was just another state with which one could make deals? Or was he pursuing a risky policy of playing for time? Either way Soviet strategy turned out badly in June 1941 when the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union.

Do the Russian documents matter? These papers show that Soviet officials communicated amongst themselves as though they were serious about an anti-Nazi alliance in spite of cynicism

over Anglo-French policy. They became angry, and in Litvinov's case worried, when there was no response from London. They saw that something was wrong when they got conflicting messages from Paris and London about Soviet proposals, and they guessed that it was the same old Anglo-French bad faith. They tried to pin down the British. Chamberlain saw Soviet policy as a ruse to get Britain and France into a war with Germany while the USSR sat aside waiting until the end to spread communist revolution in Europe. The Soviet side saw it the other way around convinced by various Anglo-French attempts to come to terms with Hitler. No wonder everything went wrong.

The British decision not to publish the white paper postponed the exchange of fire until 1948 when the US State Department published a collection of documents intended to indict the USSR in the origins of the Second World War. The Soviet government replied with its own publication, *Falsifiers of History*, demonstrating *inter alia* the affinities of the British and French elites for Nazi Germany.¹⁶² These were the opening salvos in a struggle to control the historical narrative of World War II that continues to the present day. It is therefore worth exploring what happened in 1939 in order to try to set the record straight.

Notes

1. The terms 'white paper' and 'blue book' were used interchangeably but the Foreign Office used 'white paper' as the header on its document jacket covers.
2. For a summary of the historiography of appeasement and war origins, M. J. Carley, 1939: *The Alliance that Never Was and the Coming of World War II* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), xiii–xix. Cf., Geoffrey Roberts, 'The Alliance that Failed: Moscow and the Triple Alliance Negotiations, 1939', *European History Quarterly*, xxvi (1996), 383–414; V. Ia. Sipols, *Diplomaticheskaiia bor'ba nakanune vtoroi voiny* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1989); I. A. Chelyshev, *SSSR- Frantsiia: Trudnye gody 1938–1941* (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii, Rossiiskoi Akademii nauk, 1999); M. I. Mel'tiukhov, 17 sentiabria 1939: *Sovetsko-pol'skie konflikti, 1918–1939* (Moscow: Veche, 2009); Silvio Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War 1936–1941* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002); Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933–1939* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Annie Lacroix-Riz, *De Munich à Vichy: L'assassinat de la Troisième République 1938–1940* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008), Georges Vidal, *Une Alliance Improbable: L'armée française et la Russie soviétique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015); and Sabine Dullin, *Des hommes d'influences: Les ambassadeurs de Staline en Europe, 1930–1939* (Paris: Payot, 2001).
3. M. J. Carley, 'Who Betrayed Whom? Franco-Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1932–1939' in C. Koch (ed), *Gab es einen Stalin-Hitler-Pakt? Charakter, Bedeutung und Deutung des deutsch-sowjetischen Nichtangriffsvertrages vom 23. August 1939* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2015), 119–37.
4. M. J. Carley, "'Only the USSR has Clean Hands": the Soviet Perspective on the Failure of Collective Security and the Collapse of Czechoslovakia, 1934–1938', part 1, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, xxi (2010), 202–5; part 2, xxi (2010), 368–96; and Hugh Ragsdale, *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis, and the Coming of World War II* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
5. Carley, 1939, 83–5, 135; Annie Lacroix-Riz, *Le choix de la défaite: Les élites françaises dans les années 1930* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006), 474–82.
6. Iakov Z. Surits, Soviet *polpred* (ambassador) in Paris, to Maksim M. Litvinov, Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, no. 137, secret, 26 Mar. 1938, *Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, Moscow, fond 011, opis' 2, papka 17, delo 165, listy 105–91 (hereinafter AVPRF, f., op., p., d., l [I]).
7. The historical allusion is from Colonel Charles De Gaulle to his mother on 20 December 1936 (Vidal, *Alliance improbable*, 280, from Charles de Gaulle, *Lettres, notes et carnets, 1905–1941* [Paris: Robert Laffont, 2010], 828–29).
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56. Corbin, no. 409, 25 May 1939, *Documents diplomatiques français, 1936–1939* (hereinafter DDF), 2^e série, 19vols. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1963–1986), xvi, 562–66.
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58. Colonel Auguste-Antoine Palasse to General Henri Fernand Dentz, deputy chief of staff, no. 1955, 18 June 1938, Chateau de Vincennes, *Service historique de l'armée de terre* (hereinafter SHAT), 7N 3186.
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank *Nachalnik* Anna Nikolaevna Zaleeva and her colleagues at the *Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, the Russian foreign ministry archives in Moscow, for access to the *dela* cited in this article;and Frédéric Dessberg, Joseph Maiolo, Vladimir O. Pechatnov and, especially, Zara Steiner for having read and commented on earlier drafts of the manuscript. I also wish to recognise the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which is supporting, through a major "Insight" grant, the research upon which the present article is based.