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## **“Only the USSR Has . . . Clean Hands”: The Soviet Perspective on the Failure of Collective Security and the Collapse of Czechoslovakia, 1934–1938 (Part 1)**

MICHAEL JABARA CARLEY

*The first part of this two part essay is a re-examination of the Czechoslovak crisis (1934–1938) based on papers from the Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii in Moscow. The essay is also grounded in British, French, and Romanian archives and the standard published collections, including the American and German series. It is about the development and conduct of Soviet collective security policy in the key years leading to the “Munich crisis” in September 1938. Evidence from the Moscow archives demonstrates that the Soviet government was serious about collective security and that it was ready to participate in an anti-Nazi alliance. Its initiatives were repeatedly rebuffed in Europe, notably in Paris and London. Even in Prague, the Czechoslovak president, Eduard Beneš, was an undependable ally. These rebuffs led the Soviet government to be cautious during the Munich crisis. The Soviet Union would not act unilaterally, but what it actually did do was intended to defend Czechoslovak security within the constraints of Anglo-French abandonment in which Beneš himself was complicit.*

As the Czechoslovak crisis reached its conclusion at the end of September 1938, Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, Maksim M. Litvinov, was in Geneva at the League of Nations. He was attempting to organise last minute support for Czechoslovakia which faced invasion by Nazi Germany and abandonment by its ally France. Europe seemed on the brink of war, and the British foreign secretary, Edward Lord Halifax, directed his representatives in Geneva to talk to Litvinov about what the Soviet Union would do if war broke out. The question must have irked Litvinov since he knew that the British government, especially its prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, would not go to war to protect Czechoslovak security. Nevertheless, the British delegation sought out Litvinov, who was quick to accuse Britain and

France of shilling for Adolf Hitler. "Only the USSR," Litvinov said, "has . . . clean hands" in regard to Czechoslovakia.<sup>1</sup>

For many historians, Litvinov's claim may seem unpersuasive. We still live with Cold War biases which Russian archivists have not helped to dispel by severely restricting access to Soviet foreign policy files. There are to be sure many studies of the Munich crisis focusing on French and British policy. Opinion ranges from traditional condemnation of the "guilty men," who sold out Czechoslovakia, to sympathetic understanding of the so-called "realists," who recognized that France and Britain did not have the guns and gold to wage war in 1938. The "realists" were therefore wise to buy time to rearm even if the cost of the time thus obtained was borne by Czechoslovakia. While some historians assert that Anglo-French statesmen had no choice but to negotiate with Hitler, others hold that there were realistic options including resistance to Nazi aggression, which were not chosen.<sup>2</sup>

The Soviet Union was the other Great Power involved in the Czechoslovak crisis, although historians have often overlooked or underestimated its role. There are notable exceptions: Silvio Pons, an Italian historian and pioneer of research in Soviet archives, has written that Soviet policy in 1938 was characterised by "watchfulness" and "passivity," more than "involvement." This position was due to the Stalinist purges and also to "strategic choice." The Soviet dictator, Iosef V. Stalin, viewed foreign policy through a Marxist-Leninist prism: war between the imperialist states was inevitable and for the Soviet Union there was little to distinguish between the future "capitalist" belligerents. According to Pons, France and Britain "cannot be held entirely responsible for the withdrawal and inaction of the USSR in the face of an increasingly tense European atmosphere."<sup>3</sup> Zara Steiner has also produced an interesting essay on the Munich crisis based on access to some important Russian archival files in which she demonstrates the cautiousness of Soviet foreign policy, though she tends to accept Pons' view that Stalin was a prisoner of his ideological world view.<sup>4</sup>

Hugh Ragsdale has written the most recent study in which he reverts to a traditional condemnation of Anglo-French appeasement quoting the *Manchester Guardian* (February 1939) to the effect that it was "a clever plan of selling off your friends in order to buy off your enemies." (p. xv). What is unique in Ragsdale's study is his curiosity to examine East European archives, notably Romanian, in assessing the Munich crisis. He believes that the Soviet government was more committed to support of Czechoslovakia than, say, Pons might allow, and that it mobilized large forces during the Munich crisis on its Polish and Romanian frontiers. Even more interesting, he found a certain disposition in Romania to cooperate with the USSR in the defence of Czechoslovakia, unlike Poland, which was openly hostile. The Red Army would have to cross Poland and/or Romania to reach Czechoslovakia, and the Romanian government appeared willing to consider this eventuality,

if France and the USSR were fully committed to defend Czechoslovak independence. Ragsdale's position essentially endorses that of the late Lev A. Bezymenskii, who asserted that Soviet support for Czechoslovakia was genuine.<sup>5</sup>

The defence of Czechoslovakia was organized around the mutual assistance pacts concluded between the Soviet Union, France and Czechoslovakia in 1935 and between France and Czechoslovakia in 1924–1925. Franco–Soviet relations had almost always been hostile, but Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933 caused both the French and Soviet governments to re-examine their relationship. In France it was the politicians Édouard Herriot, Joseph Paul-Boncour, and Louis Barthou who supervised the movement toward better relations. In Moscow, it was the foreign commissar, Maksim M. Litvinov, who became the principal spokesman for the Soviet policy of "collective security," which meant, in effect, the re-establishment of the First World War alliance against Germany.

From 1932 onward the Soviet government sought to improve relations not only with France, but with the United States, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and even the usually hostile Poland. It also sought to minimize strained relations with Italy, destabilized by the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in the autumn of 1935. Soviet policy was anti-Nazi, not anti-fascist, in spite of propaganda to the contrary. Litvinov was convinced of the aggressive aims of Nazi Germany, and warned both Stalin and his western interlocutors of the threat to European peace and security. He often taunted German diplomats, bringing up Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, his bestselling racist blueprint for German domination.

In October 1934 improving Franco–Soviet relations were dealt a blow by the assassination of Louis Barthou and his replacement by Pierre Laval, a determined anti-communist who was more interested in improving relations with Nazi Germany than with the Soviet Union. The discussion of a mutual assistance pact, started under Paul-Boncour and Litvinov in the autumn of 1933, was thus slowed down by Laval. The Soviet government was worried by Barthou's death and so were French advocates of Franco–Soviet rapprochement. They warned the Soviet ambassador in Paris, V. P. Potemkin, that Laval could reverse French policy.<sup>6</sup> Negotiations continued in the early months of 1935 with Litvinov pressing for an alliance with teeth and Laval and the permanent officials of the Quai d'Orsay extracting them, one by one. One French official called it "blackballing" Litvinov's proposals.<sup>7</sup> In fact, they were the Politburo's proposals including a French commitment to the security of the Baltic states, vulnerable to German aggression, and immediate, automatic delivery of mutual assistance in case of aggression against either contracting party. The Politburo, Stalin's cabinet, did not want treaty language tied up in the League of Nations where action could be blocked by a single dissenting vote.<sup>8</sup> On all points Laval refused to give way: the council of ministers, he said, had gone as far as it would go. He told Litvinov that he

was "completely indifferent" to the fate of the pact, and he told his friends that he felt like "a hounded dog" in negotiations with Litvinov and Potemkin. Because Laval refused to support a Baltic guarantee, Litvinov withdrew a reciprocal commitment to the security of Belgium, Switzerland and the demilitarized Rhineland. "On this point however the French immediately agreed," Litvinov later explained.<sup>9</sup> The Soviet Union meant business, if France did not. There was not much left to the pact, when Laval and the Quai d'Orsay had finished with it, tied up in League of Nations procedures without automatic, immediate delivery of mutual assistance and without military provisions.

Even after Laval agreed to a draft with Litvinov in Geneva on 17 April, officials at the Quai d'Orsay tried to weaken the language.<sup>10</sup> Potemkin raised strenuous objections, advising Herriot, who intervened, and Laval backed off a little, apparently not so indifferent after all to the fate of the pact. In Moscow, the exasperated Politburo, or perhaps one should say Stalin, appeared on the verge of telling the French that the Soviet Union could also live without the pact. The Politburo advised Potemkin in Paris not to hurry negotiations since Moscow might not approve the draft treaty. We don't want to create "the illusion that we apparently need the pact more than the French. . . ." To demonstrate its exasperation, the Politburo recalled Litvinov from Geneva.<sup>11</sup> According to Laval, it was just a tiff over wording, but the French ambassador in Moscow, Charles Alphan, rightly begged to differ, noticing Soviet anger, and warning that Stalin could break off negotiations.<sup>12</sup>

The pact thus teetered in the balance. V. S. Dovgalevskii, Potemkin's predecessor in Paris, had once said that you could never trust the French when it came to an agreement, even in the presence of stenographers.<sup>13</sup> His observation rang true in 1935. Litvinov returned to Moscow, meeting with Stalin and other members of the Politburo on 22 and 23 April to calm the exasperation. His reasoning was better the shell of a mutual assistance pact than none at all. The pact faced strong opposition inside and out of France. Conservative politician Georges Mandel had come to Litvinov's attention as a strong supporter of a pact with teeth, but few others were. Even Herriot, one of the earliest advocates of a Franco-Soviet rapprochement, was equivocal. Britain, Italy, Germany, and Poland all opposed the pact. So it was the shell or nothing, and the shell was still worth something in that it would, *inter alia*, hamper the formation of an anti-Soviet bloc and discourage France from composing with Germany. This latter observation was ironic: the French used the reverse reasoning to justify their adherence to the pact, that is, that it would discourage the Soviet Union from composing with Hitler. "Our security," Litvinov advised Stalin, "rests in the first place exclusively in the hands of the Red Army. For us, the pact has primarily political importance, lessening the chances of war not only from the side of Germany, but also from Poland and Japan." Potemkin thus concluded the agreement in Paris, with Laval, on 2 May 1935. After all, as Laval often said, "We have to sign something."<sup>14</sup>

On the following day, 3 May, having learned of the signature of the Franco–Soviet pact in Paris, Edvard Beneš, the Czechoslovak foreign minister and soon to be president, called in the Soviet minister in Prague, S. S. Aleksandrovskii, to discuss an agreement mirroring the Franco–Soviet pact.<sup>15</sup> Beneš asked for two amendments to the text: 1) that Czechoslovakia did not have an obligation to come to Soviet assistance in the event of a Soviet–Polish war; and 2) that the operation of the pact be placed within the framework of the 1925 Locarno accords. Once again, Litvinov advised Stalin to agree: the French had approved and it would thus be hard to refuse to proceed. According to Litvinov, he had already informed Beneš that the two pacts could not be identical since Czechoslovakia was not a signatory of the Locarno accords. Beneš replied that “Czechoslovakia could offer help only in those cases where such help is also offered by France.” The Soviet Union had no common border with Germany, and in the case of war Czechoslovakia would quickly be defeated unless France entered the fighting against Germany. Beneš’s real motive, as he told the French in April, was that he did not wish to go further than France in his commitments to the Soviet Union, and inclusion of the reference to Locarno would have added a further limitation on Czechoslovak obligations. Like Laval, Beneš wanted the treaty to be directed uniquely against Germany and not against Poland. This might be dangerous, Litvinov observed, since Czechoslovakia could find itself without allies in the case of Polish aggression and thus be “crushed.” Beneš admitted that the Soviet observation had merit and he promised to think it over, but Litvinov did not believe that the Czechoslovak government would change its position. As Litvinov put it to Potemkin, the Czechoslovaks wanted the same “narrow” terms as the French, and these circumstances “compel us to be cautious.”<sup>16</sup> On 4 May, the Politburo approved the text of the pact but with the inclusion of a stipulation that Soviet aid to the victim of aggression was conditional on France also rendering such aid.<sup>17</sup> The French did not want a pact with teeth; the Czechoslovaks did not want one without France and under the circumstances neither did the Soviet Union. The position of France was therefore critical: if it did not render assistance, Czechoslovakia could face an aggressor alone. The pacts of 1935 were thus a poor foundation to withstand the crisis of 1938.

On 16 May Beneš and Aleksandrovskii signed the Czechoslovak–Soviet pact just after Laval travelled to Moscow to meet Stalin, Litvinov, and others. In view of his reticence to sign any pact at all, it is surprising that Laval himself raised the question of general staff talks, necessary to actualize mutual assistance in the event of German aggression. Since the Soviet Union did not have common frontiers with Germany, mutual assistance also raised the issue of passage of Red Army forces across Poland and Romania either to reinforce Czechoslovakia and/or to attack Germany. The Poles were opposed to passage under any circumstances, holding grudges against both the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, but the Romanians were more open to

cooperation. In fact, Nicolae Titulescu, the Romanian foreign minister, maintained good relations with Litvinov, and supported the conclusion of the Franco–Soviet mutual assistance pact. When the pact ran into trouble in Paris, he used his influence to obtain French agreement. If the pact were not concluded, he told Litvinov, Hitler would achieve total victory and German insolence would have no limit. Failure would inevitably lead governments in the Danube basin to gravitate toward Berlin.<sup>18</sup>

Titulescu went so far as to say that the minor Powers were going to have to choose camps, the fascist or that of "collective security." He appeared to incline toward the latter and discussed a pact of mutual security with Litvinov, advising that even the Romanian King Carol approved of the principle. But Titulescu had his own agenda to secure Romanian suzerainty over Bessarabia, a territory seized from Soviet Russia in 1918 at the moment of its greatest weakness. In the event of military cooperation and the movement of Soviet troops into Bessarabia, Litvinov assured Titulescu of Red Army withdrawal upon Romanian request, which amounted to *de facto* acknowledgment of Romanian sovereignty. However, Titulescu made *de jure* Soviet recognition of Romanian possession of Bessarabia the precondition for Red Army passage to aid Czechoslovakia. The Romanian pact would also follow Czechoslovak terms, not recognizing Poland as a potential aggressor.<sup>19</sup>

Like the French and the Czechoslovaks, Titulescu offered limited satisfaction of Soviet desiderata in exchange for complete satisfaction of his. As he put it,

Our geographical position in relation to the Soviets requires us to take seriously the Russian reality, in the same way that we also examine seriously the German reality. It does not matter how long there is an exchange of opinion between higher Soviet politicians and representatives of the foreign policy of Romania, our position remains that we can neither accept nor reject the idea of a pact of mutual assistance with the Soviets.

Titulescu also advised Moscow that he was under pressure from Poland. Warsaw would consider such a pact to be incompatible with the Romanian–Polish alliance signed during the 1920s and directed against the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> Titulescu thus had his own problems. Poland and Laval were more likely to "break his neck," he said, than his own boss, King Carol. When Soviet–Romanian discussions of possible Red Army passage rights risked becoming public, Litvinov agreed with Titulescu to issue a *démenti* to calm "prattling" in the Romanian press. Moreover, right wing political forces in Romania were influential and Titulescu, as Alphand pointed out to Soviet officials, was the only obstacle preventing a shift in Romanian policy.<sup>21</sup>

In the meantime, Laval promised quick ratification of the mutual assistance pact, but no sooner had he returned to Paris than he dragged his feet, and here, Litvinov suspected that Titulescu might be contributing to the

delay in order to obtain what he wanted.<sup>22</sup> There were thus additional reasons for Stalin and his colleagues, to doubt their supposed “allies” without reference to Marxist-Leninist ideas about the inevitability of war and the absence of distinctions between capitalist states.

A political cartoon in a Norwegian newspaper summed up the French attitude toward the Soviet Union: a burly-looking Bolshevik, wearing a *budenovka*, a civil war campaign cap, had the fair, innocent Marianne on his arm with an apprehensive child carrying her wedding train.

“Are you content?” the Bolshevik spouse asked.

“Yes,” Marianne replied, “but I would be more so, if I did not detest you so.”<sup>23</sup>

British reaction to the “marriage” was also unenthusiastic. Sir Orme Garton Sargent, an assistant permanent under secretary in the Foreign Office, thought the French had been had: “. . . in this particular mutual guarantee treaty it is Russia who obtains the benefits and France who assumes the practical obligations. If so, we must take off our hats to M. Litvinov for his very astute and successful diplomacy whereby he has been able to bluff and browbeat the French, in a moment of panic, into concluding this advantageous and one-sided bargain.”<sup>24</sup> The bargain was one-sided, but not in the way Sargent imagined. Litvinov was “furious” with Laval for weakening the pact and only declined to send him a “cordial” telegram about it, to avoid making matters worse. Officials in the Quai d’Orsay were thinking of only a temporary agreement so as to leave the door open to Berlin. The French general staff was against a deepening of the pact: France had a number of accords with its allies and there was “no particular reason” for another with the Soviet Union! A peculiar statement indeed for a country in desperate need of powerful allies, but the general staff did not want to give Germany a pretext for sending troops into the demilitarized Rhineland, or Poland a reason for allying with Hitler against “the Russian danger.”<sup>25</sup>

Sargent’s disquiet about the Franco–Soviet pact was thus ill-founded, though not everyone in the Foreign Office shared his opinions. Sir Robert Vansittart, the permanent under secretary, took a different view, but even he noted that Litvinov was “obsessed” with the German danger, a complaint, ironically, often directed against Vansittart himself.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the British government, under Vansittart’s urging, had sent the Lord Privy Seal, Anthony Eden, to Moscow in March 1935 as a sign of better relations, and the discussions with Stalin, Litvinov, and others had gone well, leading to Soviet hopes that relations would improve.

There were nevertheless other obstacles in the way of the Soviet conceived anti-Nazi alliance. Poland had grievances with Russia dating back centuries, irritated by the inconclusive Polish–Soviet war of 1919–1920. It was at this time that Poland had also developed a grudge against Czechoslovakia over a territorial dispute and for not aiding it when the Red Army threatened Warsaw in August 1920. Poland played the critical role in the French conceived *cordon sanitaire* (1919) to dam up Bolshevism and to replace



Russia as a counter-weight against Germany. Franco–Polish ties were shaken in January 1934 when the Polish government signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. Barthou, French foreign minister at the time, took a dim view of Polish policy and was ready to jettison the Polish alliance for the Soviet, if necessary.<sup>27</sup> This was not, however, to be Laval's position or that of the French general staff.

Whenever Litvinov sought to improve relations with France, he also sought to do so with Poland to remove a potential obstacle in his way. So it was that Litvinov met the Polish foreign minister, Józef Beck, in mid-February 1934, as he would often do during the 1930s to attempt to talk some sense to his counterpart, or to the Polish ambassador in Moscow. Litvinov took his usual approach: Nazi Germany was a threat to European security which would eventually turn against Poland. Better to believe *Mein Kampf* than Hitler's soothing political speeches intended to disarm his adversaries. Make no mistake, Litvinov said, Hitler was bent on war and territorial expansion, and Poland would eventually become a target. The Nazi–Polish non-aggression pact was only a tactical manoeuvre to give Hitler time to achieve other more immediate objectives. Beck responded with that usual Polish certainty which so exasperated Litvinov: Poland did not have some "small, seasonal government"; there was no threat to Poland or any immediate danger of war in Europe. Litvinov had similar conversations with the Polish ambassador, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, who allowed that he could not understand Soviet disquiet concerning Nazi Germany. Litvinov reacted incredulously, reminding the Polish ambassador of his country's vulnerability. "Whenever Poland takes any small step forward," Litvinov said of Polish policy, "it then immediately hurries again to step backward." The exchanges between Litvinov and Łukasiewicz were often pointed, as when in June 1935 the Pole brought up the Czechoslovak–Soviet mutual assistance pact. He wondered about Soviet–Czechoslovak "intentions" since given the "geographic circumstances"—meaning the absence of a common Soviet frontier with Czechoslovakia or Germany—the pact "hangs in the air." "The geography," replied Litvinov, "is obviously well known to both countries, and nevertheless they reckoned the pact to be in their mutual interests."<sup>28</sup>

The Polish ambassador was not entirely wrong about the Czechoslovak pact "hanging in the air," Beneš used the same expression but for a different reason: the Czechoslovak and Soviet governments had ratified their pact which was dependent upon the French who had *not* ratified theirs. Beneš agreed therefore to press Laval, though the lobbying, if there was any, was ineffectual.<sup>29</sup> The Czechoslovaks were only beginning to pay the price of placing too much reliance on France.

Why did the hard-noised Stalin accept these dubious treaty arrangements? Litvinov convinced him that they were a necessary first step in the defence of Europe against Nazi Germany. His language to Stalin or to foreign diplomats was the same:

Hitler continues to resist any attempt at the organization of collective security because at the heart of his policy lies, consistent with the book "Mein Kampf," the concentration of force and the preparation of aggression in the first place toward the south-east and in an eastward direction. Under such conditions, there is no basis to believe in Hitler's promises about disarmament. We are therefore asking . . . that in negotiations with Germany everything be done to avoid letting Hitler interpret any agreement as consistent with his concept of dividing Europe into parts in which one can or cannot guarantee peace, which would encourage aggression against this or that part of Europe.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, peace was "indivisible": if peace were disturbed in one part of Europe, it would be disturbed in all of Europe. Here was another problem for Czechoslovak security because the British and French governments were not prepared to accept this general principle. Sargent, for example, resented what he perceived to be Litvinov's attempts to narrow British options. "The real opponent with whom we have to deal . . . is Litvinov," he observed, "who will fight hard to preserve the principle of simultaneity in all its aspects. . . ."<sup>31</sup> In the Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsay there was a strong desire to compose with Nazi Germany and not to close off German expansion in the east.

It was Britain which cut the first side deal with Hitler, the Anglo-German naval agreement on 18 June 1935. Both the French and Soviet governments were taken aback by British action. "Great Britain had snatched at an apparent advantage," observed the sharp-tongued Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan M. Maiskii, "as a greedy boy will snatch at a cake on the table; the result is likely to be an attack of indigestion."<sup>32</sup> Litvinov reckoned that the British had played into Hitler's hands. The French considered British action a betrayal. So it was to be each for himself, another step in the wrong direction if Czechoslovak security were to be protected.

Meanwhile, Laval sent the mutual assistance pact to the National Assembly, where it sat for months, in spite of having a legal opinion from his officials that he need not do so. According to Potemkin, Laval's delaying tactics were due to second thoughts and German protests.<sup>33</sup> Litvinov speculated that Laval would use ratification as a "trump for negotiations with Germany," and his impatience was quick to surface. When the French ambassador, Alphanand, met Litvinov in July to complain about a lack of cultural exchanges, mentioning the *Comédie française*, Litvinov said he would be happy to proceed in that domain, *after* ratification of the mutual assistance pact. He chose not to make a point about the *comédie* of Franco-Soviet relations. A few weeks later in Geneva, Litvinov complained to Laval who retaliated by reading from a folder of documents about communist activities in French colonies. This was a procedure Laval had used before when he wanted to divert attention from Soviet complaints about bad relations with Paris. Litvinov

thought he recognized a scene played out "during the time of Curzon," the die-hard British foreign secretary of the early 1920s. "I suggested," recorded Litvinov, "that the time had passed when any Curzons and their like, were able to allege that if only the Soviet government did not exist, then there would be no discontent and no anti-government movements in India and other colonies."<sup>34</sup>

Sometimes, even Foreign Office clerks acknowledged that criticism of Soviet "propaganda" was a sure sign of impending troubles. "To attach so much importance to Moscow's articles, manifestos, declarations and prophecies and so forth," noted one clerk, "would mean running the risk of appearing as ridiculous as those who were responsible for this propaganda."<sup>35</sup>

Soviet "propaganda" was an issue not only for Laval, but for Litvinov too. It had its roots in the creation of the Communist International in 1919, organised to spread world revolution, but also to defend Soviet Russia against western military intervention. After the end of the foreign intervention and Russian civil war in 1921, the Comintern gradually lost its *raison d'être* except as an instrument of Soviet foreign policy, though it riled western politicians or was useful to them as a pretext for poor relations with Moscow. "Propaganda," as viewed in the west, could mean almost anything: genuine propaganda in French or British colonies or in China, editorials in Soviet newspapers, even placards in Russian celebrating the 1917 revolution. Propaganda could also mean the public rhetoric of Soviet politicians in domestic debates. There was however another, *secret* language used inside the Commissariat for foreign affairs (NKID), couched in terms of *realpolitik*, and political, military, or economic calculation. The public language of the Soviet government and its politicians, framed in Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, clashed with the secret language of the NKID. Even Litvinov spoke "Bolshevik" in public—it was expected—but not in secret. During the 1920s, Litvinov often criticized Comintern agents and Soviet "orators," as he called them, for meddling abroad or making inappropriate public comments, harmful to Soviet foreign policy interests. In 1935 he warned against foreign language radio broadcasts which could easily slip from "information" into propaganda. Party militants, Litvinov implied, needed to be kept on a short leash. Foreign diplomats occasionally recorded Litvinov's scorn for the Comintern. "Useless," Litvinov said, who would certainly have been sympathetic to the popular Soviet epigram that ten foreign communists were not worth a single Soviet tractor. Even Stalin noted Litvinov's indifference toward "revolutionary" considerations.<sup>36</sup>

In the mid-1930s the Comintern was enlisted in the fight for "collective security" and it supported centre-left political coalitions or Popular Fronts such as those in France and Spain. Instead of the intended improvement in Soviet-western relations, the opposite occurred because, as Laval himself pointed out, the Popular Front included the French communist party, thus legitimising it.<sup>37</sup> In Laval's view these political coalitions made the communists formidable

political rivals, and so attacks on Soviet “propaganda” intensified because of the electoral successes of the French left for which the Soviet Union was not responsible. The criticism of “propaganda” intensified to the point where western diplomats in effect asked the Soviet Union to renounce its revolutionary origins, something which Stalin would and could not do.

By the autumn of 1935 relations between the delicate Marianne and the burly Bolshevik were deteriorating rapidly. “The anti-Soviet role of Laval,” Litvinov advised, “is coming to light more and more.” Ratification of the mutual assistance pact was in doubt in November, though Laval had said to Titulescu that it would be ratified, all the while unleashing the right wing press against it. Later on that month, Litvinov heard that Laval had told the Yugoslav prime minister that the Franco–Soviet pact was “dead.” “He does not hide from us or from others,” Litvinov noted, “that he is sounding out the Germans about a guarantee of Czechoslovakia. Such a guarantee would mean freedom of action for Germany in the East.”<sup>38</sup> Laval did want to sound out the Germans, and directed the French ambassador in Berlin, André François-Poncet, to ask for a meeting with Hitler. Litvinov told the French ambassador in Moscow that he did not think much would come of it, except to increase mistrust of Laval. Alphand replied that unfortunately Franco–Soviet relations had become tied up—again, he suggested—with domestic French politics. Stories about Soviet propaganda in the colonies had excited recent senatorial elections. According to the right, a government of the left could not hold power in France without the danger of disorder, an obvious reference to the formation of the Popular Front, organised to fight Parliamentary elections in the spring of 1936.<sup>39</sup> Vansittart, the Foreign Office permanent under secretary, told Maiskii that “Laval’s flirt with Germany” was going nowhere, and François-Poncet criticised Laval for alienating France’s potential allies.<sup>40</sup>

Laval’s own statements to Potemkin in Paris were enough to undermine assurances reaching Moscow from other sources. Laval informed Potemkin of François-Poncet’s discussions with Hitler. Both France and Germany wanted to establish good relations, according to Laval, but unfortunately the greatest obstacle to a Franco–German rapprochement was the Franco–Soviet pact. This sounded like Laval “trying to prepare us for the rejection of the pact. . . .” According to Potemkin, Laval was not above blackmailing the Soviet government: either Moscow discouraged a Popular Front campaign against him—Laval thinking that Stalin had only to say the word—or the pact would not be ratified. For the reader who may doubt Potemkin’s report, Laval and François-Poncet had been saying much the same thing to their German interlocutors. “You do mean to play the Bolsheviks a trick or two one of these days,” Laval joked with the German ambassador in Paris.<sup>41</sup> Was Laval’s idea of a “trick or two” some future invasion? Litvinov drew the correct conclusion: “Laval has already shown us how easy it is to transform even a mutual assistance pact into a scrap of paper.” As Litvinov had said

earlier to a French journalist, "Stalin . . . was disappointed by the policy of moral weakness of France."<sup>42</sup> The French might have retorted that Stalin was in no position to lecture about "morality," but, like many others, he had a perception of the French as weak and untrustworthy. This suspicion was not based on Stalin's ideological biases, but on his experience in dealing with the French.

Still, the Soviet government did not abandon the anti-German alliance, though its supposed partners did, one by one. Litvinov had tried to improve relations with the United States, travelling to Washington in November 1933 to conclude a "gentlemen's agreement" with the new President Franklin Roosevelt, settling old grievances and mapping out future cooperation. Litvinov viewed the United States as a key member of an anti-German coalition. Unfortunately, the State Department treated the "gentlemen's agreement" like an unwanted newborn, and the rapprochement soon died.<sup>43</sup> Litvinov even sought to include Italy in his coalition, but Benito Mussolini's ambitions for empire in Abyssinia put obstacles in the way. The League of Nations also figured in Litvinov's plans, to frame and reinforce anti-German resistance.<sup>44</sup> Hence, in December 1935 Litvinov was furious when Laval negotiated a secret deal with the British foreign secretary to cede a large part of Abyssinia to Mussolini. Laval is "a determined enemy of the collective system of security including the League of Nations . . ." Litvinov reckoned: "if he remained in power, nothing would be left of the previous foreign policy of France."<sup>45</sup>

In 1936 Litvinov received good news when Laval was compelled to resign in January, discredited in the scandal created by the leaked Abyssinian negotiations. Ironically, Litvinov might have accepted Abyssinian partition if it been accomplished in a manner which did not weaken the League or the coalition he was attempting to build. Absent Laval, Litvinov hoped that Franco-Soviet relations would improve; and in fact, the National Assembly finally ratified the Franco-Soviet pact ratified in February-March, in spite of strong negative votes in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The debates were nasty, and Litvinov thought the Soviet press should sensitise the French to their own danger, noting for example that *Mein Kampf* had identified France as "a hereditary enemy of Germany" and that Hitlerite Germany represented a menace to all its neighbours, not only France, but "especially" Czechoslovakia. Litvinov sought Stalin's authorisation to warn the French premier of Soviet displeasure over "baseless attacks" in the Chamber—which he obtained—and at the same time asked for increased secret funds to influence the French press. Here was a reliable indicator of Soviet intentions for Moscow did not expend its gold carelessly. While trying to sensitise the French, Litvinov remained acutely aware of the Soviet Union's own danger, for as he put it, Hitler never passed up an opportunity to attack us.<sup>46</sup>

The good news about Laval's resignation thus proved to be an orphan. While the Soviet government remained committed to an anti-German alliance,

no one else did. Great Britain soon backed away from Litvinov's anti-German coalition. In December 1935 Anthony Eden had become foreign secretary. In Moscow his appointment sounded like good news; Litvinov thought he was a partisan of better relations with the Soviet Union. As it turned out, Eden was no friend. In February 1936 he put the brakes on improving Anglo-Soviet relations. The Moscow press ran a story, unwisely as it turned out, on the dire living conditions of the British working class. Eden was incensed: "This article convinces me that we should hold M. Maisky & his Govt. severely at arm's length. We wish for correct relations, but any cordiality towards a Govt. that behaves like this is strongly to be deprecated."<sup>47</sup> It says a great deal about the strength of anti-communism inside the British elite and the weakness of the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement that a trifling article in the Soviet press in Russian could have such an effect on Eden who had met with Stalin only eleven months earlier.

This change of policy was not immediately evident in Moscow, but the Soviet government soon had other bad news to contemplate. On 7 March Hitler ordered his troops into the Rhineland, and the French and British governments reacted only with protests. Did anyone at the Quai d'Orsay then remember or know about Litvinov's earlier willingness to offer a Soviet guarantee of the security of demilitarised Rhineland? Mandel, who became a regular informant of the Soviet embassy, indicated that in the upcoming legislative elections no one could stand on a policy of firmness toward Germany. Herriot thought that the communists and socialists would make electoral gains, possibly the right also. He speculated that Édouard Daladier, Herriot's rival in the Radical party, might form the new government. He warned Potemkin against Daladier who, he said, had a deep but hidden dislike of the communists and shared Laval's "Germanophilia." For Herriot, a German orientation was pointless: European security could only be guaranteed by a Paris-London-Moscow alignment. Outside of it, there could be no security. The problem, as Litvinov observed, was Herriot's "flabbiness," he could not hold to a firm line in a fight. When the Popular Front did win spring elections, as Herriot foresaw, Litvinov worried that big gains on the left, especially by the French communist party, could provoke a movement toward fascism.<sup>48</sup> None of this boded well for collective security or the security of Czechoslovakia.

Worse was yet to come. On 17 July a military revolt, soon led by General Francisco Franco, erupted against the Spanish Popular Front government. It was the beginning of a bloody civil war which continued until March 1939. It became a struggle of ideologies, right vs. left, fascist vs. communist. The British government, already worried about the French Popular Front, feared the spread of communism first in Spain and then in France. The newly elected French Popular Front government, headed by the Socialist Léon Blum, might have been expected to aid the Spanish "Republicans," and his first instinct was to do so. But Blum feared civil war if he did. Britain and

France therefore opted for "non-intervention" while fascist Italy and Nazi Germany intervened aggressively to support Franco.

The only remaining question was what would the Soviet Union do? As with the Popular Front victory in France, Litvinov saw the Spanish civil war as a threat to "collective security." It ended his faint hopes in Italy as a potential ally, and threatened Soviet relations, such as they were, with France and Britain. Litvinov therefore attempted to pursue a cautious line accepting Anglo-French non-intervention and agreeing to join a non-intervention committee to prevent foreign guns and soldiers from fuelling the Spanish conflict. Non-intervention was a "farce" of course, as Litvinov soon recognized, because the Italians and Germans were determined to support the Spanish "nationalists."

Stalin was incensed by Anglo-French policy and ordered guns, ammunition, and advisors to Madrid to help it resist the "fascist mutineers." The French and British governments reacted angrily to Soviet intervention—they did not want Moscow spreading Bolshevik revolution in Spain—and the Secretary-General of the Quai d'Orsay, Alexis Léger, threatened the Soviet *chargé d'affaires* with abrogation of the only recently ratified mutual assistance pact, if Moscow did not take a more passive role. Whether Léger was bluffing or not, Litvinov was alarmed by Spanish developments and in September obtained Stalin's consent for new *démarches* to strengthen collective security. During the autumn he attempted to pull back Soviet policy to a less aggressive position in Spain. He faced opposition both in Moscow and from Maiskii in London. Meeting Stalin six times in late October and in November, Litvinov argued that while Soviet arms shipments had successfully established a precarious military equilibrium in Spain, this could easily be broken by Germany and Italy, who were in a much better position to reinforce Franco than the Soviet Union could the Republicans. A further Soviet attempt to maintain the military equilibrium would only provoke stronger countermeasures by the other side. The Soviet Union could never keep up. We do not have a fleet in the Mediterranean and we are far away, reasoned Litvinov: without a change in Anglo-French policy, "we cannot change this situation."<sup>49</sup> The Spanish civil war had nothing directly to do with Czechoslovak security, but indirectly it did. If Franco-Soviet relations were further damaged by Soviet intervention in Spain, the consequences for Prague would be dire.

There was one other piece of bad news that went almost unnoticed in the early months of the Spanish civil war. The Romanian foreign minister Titulescu resigned at the end of August 1936 because of political intrigues against him and criticism that he had ventured too close to Moscow. During the early months of 1936 he had continued to discuss a Soviet-Romanian mutual assistance pact with Litvinov and the Soviet minister in Bucharest, M. S. Ostrovskii, but he could not conclude with Moscow if Britain and France failed to commit to collective security. The resignation of Titulescu

was another blow to Litvinov's policies and to the security of Czechoslovakia and it aroused concern in Moscow.<sup>50</sup>

The French were also worried. In September Yvon Delbos, the French foreign minister, met Tutulescu's successor, Victor Antonescu, in Geneva to obtain assurances about future Romanian policy. Delbos said he had the impression that Litvinov would agree to *de jure* Romania sovereignty over Bessarabia in exchange for the conclusion of a pact within which would be provision for Red Army passage rights in the event of German aggression against Czechoslovakia. Antonescu responded evasively: the matter was "very delicate" and would have to be put to the King and prime minister. Paul-Boncour, who was present at the meeting, reproached Antonescu: "Romania wants to obtain everything but it does not want to give anything in return." Delbos explained that he had persuaded Litvinov to relent on Bessarabia, but only in return for passage rights, for otherwise the mutual assistance pact with Czechoslovakia would be inoperable. In Bucharest, Antonescu explained to the French minister that Romania would not accept further treaty commitments "without first being certain of effective [French] support." As for relations with the Soviet Union, "public opinion" was "more and more anti-communist and hostile to an alliance with the Soviets." Ostrovskii expressed his disquiet to his French counterpart about the growth of anti-Soviet opinion. The Spanish civil war and the French popular front, said the Romanian minister in Moscow, aroused fears of communism even in Bucharest. Closer relations with the Soviet Union always stirred up trouble on the right, and in Romania the right and fascist right were growing stronger.<sup>51</sup>

Litvinov tried to calm fears, assuring Léger and other officials at the Quai d'Orsay, and London too, that the Soviet Union had no interest in spreading Bolshevism to Spain where in fact it was attempting to discourage radicalism. There were also meetings in Paris in November between Potemkin and French officials to discuss general staff talks. Potemkin advised Delbos of information from the Soviet military attaché in Berlin on weaknesses in French defences around Strasbourg. Potemkin observed that Czechoslovakia and France were vulnerable to German aggression and that "France itself could by no means feel itself in security." When Delbos replied that he would pass on the information about the defensive weaknesses along French border areas, Potemkin replied that France should be thinking not only about its own defences, but also about "a more active plan" to counter potential German aggression against Czechoslovakia. Germany was preparing for war, said Potemkin, and it was also trying to spread fear amongst French allies, so as to demoralise them and to pick them off one by one. This had also been Tutulescu's message. Potemkin stressed the obvious absence of a Franco-Soviet frontier and the need for Franco-Soviet staff talks to work out the "serious technical problems" of Franco-Soviet military cooperation.<sup>52</sup>

It is true that there were "serious technical problems," but the serious political difficulties were far greater. These amounted to continuing resistance



inside the French government and the French general staff to closer cooperation with the Soviet Union. Blum favoured the talks, as did his air minister, Pierre Cot, but Daladier, General Maurice Gamelin, the chief of staff, and others were opposed. More than that, the political environment in France was vitriolic, worked up on the right by the fear of war and revolution, and exacerbated by French communist support of the Spanish Republican government.

Daladier and Gamelin were not the only problem. Litvinov cautioned Potemkin not to move too quickly on staff talks. "Authoritative comrades here"—meaning Stalin and his closest colleagues—were also interested in putting off direct talks and would not mind if the French took the initiative. "We have absolutely reliable information," Litvinov continued, "that the French high command is completely opposed to the Franco-Soviet pact and openly talking about it."<sup>53</sup> Litvinov mentioned General Henri Giraud as one of the loudest critics, but he might also have named Generals Gamelin, Gérodius, Georges, Debeney, and Schweisguth, among others. They feared communist propaganda in the army, general strikes, mutinies, urban uprisings, and other nightmarish scenarios. Litvinov was well-briefed, apparently having read an intercepted secret report by the British military attaché in Paris, Colonel Frederick Beaumont-Nesbitt, who referred to Giraud's open opposition to the Franco-Soviet pact.<sup>54</sup>

Inside the French government there were still attempts to move forward. Blum informed Potemkin in December 1936 that there had been another meeting of the responsible ministers and Gamelin to discuss the "necessary measures to undertake in view of the approaching armed conflict." "The most threatened place in Europe is Czechoslovakia," said Blum: "It was decided that we should, without wasting any time, develop a concrete plan for its defence." France would mobilize its forces and send help to strengthen Czechoslovak air defences. In this context it was important to know what the Soviet Union would do to fulfill its treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia. For that, Blum's ministers concluded, the coordination of French, Czechoslovak, and Soviet military action was essential. This information sounded good, but would staff talks go ahead? "Regarding Daladier himself," Potemkin reported, "Blum himself told me that this individual is deeply hostile to us and that we should not count on him."<sup>55</sup>

Caution remained the rule in Moscow, though there were exchanges in early 1937 between the Soviet military attaché in Paris and senior officers of the French general staff. For Daladier and his generals the strategy was to stall without offending Moscow.<sup>56</sup> Blum and the air minister Cot still sought to overcome resistance in May but they ran into additional opposition from London where Eden intervened with Delbos and Léger to block the talks. The French defended themselves by describing their policy as "a half-way house" to avoid offending the Soviet Union and pushing it into a rapprochement with Germany without going too far in the other direction. Eden was

unsympathetic: "To many who disliked and feared the diplomatic influence of the Soviet Government in Europe this extension of Franco–Russian collaboration would be interpreted as restricting in a new and dangerous way the liberty of action of the French Government in European politics." Eden's comment was ironic since the British government was itself attempting to narrow France's "liberty of action," a point which Potemkin had already drawn to French attention. Eden also wanted to keep open options to Berlin and a new settlement in the west, a "western Locarno," just what Litvinov feared. In the end, the issue came down to the defence of Czechoslovakia, "essential to French interests," Delbos said: "We will not abandon Czechoslovakia. We cannot do so without disappearing from the map of Europe as a power of the first order." This prediction proved true, but Eden's intervention had an effect: the French ambassador in London advised at the end of May that "the French Government were going to reduce to the smallest possible compass any further developments of the Franco–Soviet Pact. . . ." <sup>57</sup>

British intervention in Franco–Soviet relations was another blow to Czechoslovak security, but Stalin contributed one of his own. In June he turned on his high command and after drumhead trials a number of senior officers were executed. While the British and French governments did not care about the disappearance of most of the "old Bolsheviks" which had started in the previous year, the execution of senior commanders was viewed as a matter of concern. This reaction was also ironic since the British and French governments had not wanted close relations with the Red Army before the purges, though the purges provided an effective *ex post facto* justification for refusing staff talks. Profiting thus from the clarity of hindsight, Étienne de Crouy-Chanel, Léger's private secretary, referring to the mutual assistance pact, said that "even before the execution of the Soviet generals . . . the French Government had never had the intention of agreeing to anything in the slightest degree binding. . . ." The pact's only value to France would be in the event that the Red Army could "take the offensive beyond its own frontiers and in particular of coming to the help of Czechoslovakia in the event of an attack by Germany." <sup>58</sup> These comments too are ironic since the French army, not to speak of the British—who did not have an army fit to fight in Europe—had no plans to take the offensive "beyond its frontiers" to aid the Czechoslovaks or the Soviets. Crouy was projecting France's own weaknesses onto the Soviet Union, but what then would be the French *quid pro quo* for a Soviet offensive? These were questions which the Soviets always asked, and the French always avoided. Franco–Soviet relations were, to amend a well-known epigram, a comedy wrapped in irony inside a tragedy.

Litvinov and Potemkin knew that the Soviet Union's reputation had been badly damaged by the purges. However, they did not like to hear of French gloating about having successfully fended off staff talks, since it was Daladier in early 1937 who had passed information to Potemkin to the

effect that Germany had contacts in the Red Army high command who were planning a *coup d'état* against the Soviet government and a new alliance with Berlin against France.<sup>59</sup> Daladier's intervention is puzzling in view of his known but still hidden hatred of the French communists and by extension of the Soviet Union. What did he think would be accomplished in handing over his "intelligence" to Potemkin? Did he want to prevent a reversal of Soviet policy, or was Stalin's reaction the one he had hoped for? The existing evidence does not allow a response, but what is certain is that Litvinov's policy was in ruins. All the partners to his would-be coalition against Germany had fallen away one by one. He had taken a big risk for a big prize in promoting an anti-Nazi alliance. In the summer of 1937 Litvinov had nothing to show for his efforts, a failure all too obvious to Stalin, who would not have needed a Marxist-Leninist explanation to understand that the Soviet Union had no allies and was exposed to grave danger.

In the spring of 1937 the news continued to be bad. In London Neville Chamberlain had taken over as British prime minister and in Paris Blum's government had fallen after little more than a year in power. Czechoslovakia, recognizing the worsening situation, faced the necessity of seeking agreement with Germany, as Titulescu had foreseen, if France and Britain did not take a stronger stand. "There was no doubt that Czechoslovakia was on the first line of fire," observed Litvinov, facing danger from all sides. Britain was putting pressure on Beneš to settle the Sudeten question, that of the German population in the so-called Sudeten territories, so as not to provoke Hitler. The Czechoslovak government was however still holding out against surrendering its pacts with the Soviet Union and France or its territory to Berlin.<sup>60</sup>

If the Soviet government had trouble controlling its inclination to resort to Marxist framed public criticism of Britain and France, the British and French in turn had trouble controlling their anti-Marxist framed outbursts against Moscow. These were often found in the French press, as Litvinov pointed out, but he also complained about more official criticism coming from French ambassadors and other representatives abroad which made its way to Moscow. The French ambassador in Tokyo, for example, enjoyed a good rant against the Soviets, and Gamelin was heard to criticise the Popular Front and to praise Japan, "which was leading the struggle against Bolshevism."<sup>61</sup> Tensions between Japan and the Soviet Union were on the rise, and Litvinov did not appreciate French generals taking the side of Tokyo.

While French ambassadors in Moscow complained about nastiness in the Soviet press; Litvinov complained about the French. *Le Temps*, the semi-official Paris daily, often aroused Soviet ire, and for two reasons. First, because it was fed by Quai d'Orsay and, second, because it was fed by the Soviet embassy in Paris, about 500,000 francs a year beginning in the early 1920s, to mute its anti-Soviet vitriol. Sometimes, *Le Temps* did mute the vitriol, but not often and not for long, and this was an endless source of irritation

to the normally thrifty Litvinov who had to throw good money after bad. Litvinov raised the subject with Delbos, for example, in early 1937 when the Soviet government was still trying to move ahead on staff talks. Delbos denied that *Le Temps* was a semi-official organ of the Quai d'Orsay—which was untrue, everyone knew that it was. Of course, Litvinov could scarcely say that the Soviet Union was not getting its money's worth from *Le Temps*, or that the Soviet embassy was providing “allowances” to other papers and journalists, all to quiet anti-Soviet attacks and promote the Franco–Soviet pact, and all to no avail. To be sure, the Soviet embassy was not alone in this practice, or even the biggest spender. Germany and Italy were rumoured to pay out much more.<sup>62</sup>

Robert Coulondre, who succeeded Alphand as French ambassador in Moscow, complained often to Litvinov about Soviet “propaganda.” In November 1937 he objected to an article by Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian head of the Comintern, published in *L'Humanité*, the French communist daily, to mark the anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Moreover, the French communist party had abandoned its anti-war politics to support French national defence and Dimitrov was a strong partisan of the popular front strategy.<sup>63</sup> For the French right, however, the Popular Front was an abomination which had given legitimacy to the hated French communists. Dimitrov's other transgression was to praise the Comintern, especially active in Spain, another focus of the right's anger. Litvinov considered the complaint a trifle compared to the open hostility of the French government and press toward Moscow, and he drew attention to the “long list of disappointments which the policy of collective security had brought to the Soviet Union.”<sup>64</sup> Ironically, the Soviet embassy was paying large subsidies to promote collective security, *not* world revolution. Litvinov wondered what the British and French governments would think of the impressive sums which the Italians were investing in anti-British and anti-French propaganda. Soviet intelligence had intercepted “authentic documents” which gave the figures, 12.5 million lire, for propaganda distributed by Italian consulates in Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Alexandria, and across North Africa.<sup>65</sup> Litvinov's implication was that the French and British were applying double standards about “propaganda,” and they were.

This was the state to which Franco–Soviet relations had fallen at the end of 1937. Delbos made a tour of Eastern European capitals in December, skipping Moscow. His private comments while on tour quickly reached an offended Litvinov. The French foreign minister complained about what Litvinov called “imaginary” Comintern interference in French domestic affairs, while denigrating the value of the Franco–Soviet mutual assistance pact. Delbos had coddled Beck in Warsaw, instead of trying to obtain a change in hostile Polish policies. Litvinov nevertheless heard that the Romanian foreign minister Antonescu had complained about the “passivity” of French and British policy. “He apparently told Delbos,” Litvinov continued,

that the uninterrupted, unending concessions to Germany by Italy, England, and France were increasing the danger of war, and what is more, apparently, he demanded from Delbos that the Great Powers oppose at least once and at long last a determined *niet* in response to Italo-German pretensions. If London, Paris, and Moscow, forming a bloc, held to stern language in Geneva, then, in the opinion of Antonescu, all the small and middle powers would line up behind them and this would lessen significantly the danger of war.

Unfortunately, the French were paralysed: "Delbos said everywhere that Germany firstly threatens Austria, not Czechoslovakia." Once Austria was absorbed by Germany, Litvinov knew, Czechoslovakia's northern defences would be turned, and it would become the next target of German aggression. He guessed, not without sarcasm, that Delbos had got his orders from London to encourage the Czechoslovaks to make concessions to the Sudeten Germans, though the advice had not been well received in Prague. Litvinov was aware of British pressure on Beneš. The French knew also: in December Léger advised the Czechoslovak minister in Paris that British statements of concern about Eastern Europe were rhetorical and that Britain would not "lift a finger" in the East. Maiskii used this same expression in his diary. Stalin was not the only one to sense French weakness. The French *cote d'amour*, cracked one Romanian diplomat, is not what it used to be.<sup>66</sup>

Antonescu's language may have come as a surprise in Moscow, though Litvinov did not give him much credit for tenacity. Titulescu would have retorted that tenacity was a luxury for the small East European states which were surrounded by dangerous neighbours. In London the retired Titulescu told the Soviet ambassador Maiskii that peace in Europe depended on the building of a "peace front" led by Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Obviously, he could speak more freely without King Carol and the Romanian right looking over his shoulder. If the "peace front" is established, said Titulescu, all will be well. If not, there will be "a tragedy in two acts: first act, creation of a German *Mittel Europa*; second act, the ruin of the British Empire. So the British have a choice to make and that in short order."<sup>67</sup> In talking to Maiskii, Titulescu was preaching to the converted.

Litvinov's comments on French policy were mild compared to those of Ia. Z. Surits, now ambassador in Paris, and of Potemkin who had returned to Moscow as deputy commissar for foreign affairs. Surits was getting information from Mandel, Cot, Paul Reynaud, and other French politicians and journalists. It is surprising that they would speak so openly about French domestic and foreign policy, but it meant that Moscow was well informed and not just pursuing a Marxist critique of capitalism. Mandel and Reynaud urged the Soviet government to take a hard line with Daladier, still defence minister, but Surits did not think it would do any good. The malaise and divisions in French government and society ran too deep. Both Potemkin

and Surits concluded that France was headed toward fascist domination and the loss of its independence.<sup>68</sup>

Still, in January 1938 Litvinov held the door open, in offering a “general directive” on Soviet policy to Surits: “do not be the first to go forward, do not make ourselves out to be the only defenders of the League of Nations, attempting to push other governments, and maintain a calm, waiting position, supporting those proposals which go in the direction of our general policies.”<sup>69</sup> We will wait and see what happens, was Litvinov’s line, but the auguries were grim.

## NOTES

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## **“Only the USSR Has. . . Clean Hands”: The Soviet Perspective on the Failure of Collective Security and the Collapse of Czechoslovakia, 1934–1938 (Part 2)**

MICHAEL JABARA CARLEY

*The second part of this two part essay focuses on the Czechoslovak crisis in 1938, based on papers from the Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii in Moscow and the recently published journals of Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan M. Maiskii. The essay is also grounded in British, French, and Romanian archives, and the standard document collections, including the American and German series. The Soviet Union did all that it could do, given Anglo-French abdication, to help the Czechoslovak government defend its independence against Nazi Germany. The British and French portrayed a manipulative Soviet Union, seeking to abandon treaty commitments to Czechoslovakia, while at the same time they fled from obligations to Prague and projected their own evasions onto Moscow. In spite of everything, the Czechoslovak president, Edvard Beneš, might have held the fate of his country in his own hands. Would he do “something crazy”, would Czechoslovakia fight alone at the outset, hoping that public opinion would force France and Great Britain into war? Tragically, Beneš would not bid va banque and indeed was complicit in the Anglo-French abandonment of his country. By its reckoning, the Soviet Union escaped the crisis with “clean hands”, though a clear conscience was no consolation in Moscow, where the government had to contemplate the ruin of collective security and its own isolation in Europe.*

At the beginning of 1938 Soviet foreign policy in Europe was in ruins and Czechoslovakia was in a precarious position. Its potential allies were at odds with one another. France and Britain hesitated to take action likely to provoke Hitler. Commissar Litvinov’s efforts to form an anti-Nazi alliance had failed, overwhelmed by anti-communism, excited by the French Popular Front and the Spanish Civil War. This “long list of disappointments” made

Litvinov look like a foolish dreamer, and dangerous too, exposing the Soviet Union to isolation against Nazi Germany. He had to back off in self-defence, a point he reiterated to his ambassador in London, Maiskii: "As I told you in Geneva, we are now taking a wait-and-see position on all questions, and we do not intend to force our collaboration on anyone."<sup>1</sup> It was the only prudent position to take.

In early March Litvinov received the French ambassador, Coulondre, to hear him launch into "a long tirade" about Soviet public criticism of France and talk of "international proletarian solidarity." It was a familiar theme of their discussions, but this time Litvinov addressed Coulondre's complaints in detail, noting that there was nothing new in recent Soviet comment, though he would secretly have wished that his comrade-orators had kept their mouths shut. He could not oblige them to do so—one was Stalin himself—but Litvinov remarked that if Moscow complained about every anti-Soviet attack in, say, the French parliament, "we would wear ourselves out." There was little profit in pot calling kettle black. We need to focus on what mattered, Litvinov said: "The entire world recognises that we are likely on the eve of war." He reminded Coulondre that the Soviet Union was not "rejecting cooperation with other countries . . . these countries are becoming more and more hostile to us, and rejecting cooperation [with us]." There has been no change in our foreign policy, Litvinov continued: yet influential people in France and Britain are talking against the Soviet Union. We cannot ignore these facts. Would Britain or France fail to seek a rapprochement with the Soviet Union, if not for the "social animosities" of their governing elites? Litvinov recalled that the Soviet Union and France had "common interests" and "common enemies," but that this crucial reality had vanished in the cauldron of the French elite's anti-Soviet hostility. Coulondre's account of the meeting muted Litvinov's anger, and not for the first time, even though the ambassador warned Paris of Soviet bitterness over the failure of collective security.<sup>2</sup>

On 12 March, the day after Litvinov's meeting with Coulondre, Hitler annexed Austria without a shot fired; German troops were welcomed by rapturous crowds. On 15 March the Czechoslovak minister in Moscow, Zdeněk Fierlinger, met the deputy commissar Potemkin to report the obvious: that *Anschluss* created "a serious threat" for Czechoslovakia. The French government, advised Fierlinger, had informed Prague that it would render immediate assistance in the event of German aggression. Potemkin was doubtful, pointing to signs of weakness in London on which France was dependent. Fierlinger raised the inevitable question: what would the Soviet position now be? Potemkin replied that the key question concerned France. If France honoured its treaty obligations, if it "opposed direct and real resistance to the German aggressor," Britain would be obliged to follow whether it liked it or not. "As for the Soviet Union no one could ever reproach it for failure to honour its international commitments."<sup>3</sup>

There may have been a flicker of hope in Moscow when Léon Blum formed a new government on 13 March, with Paul-Boncour, an architect of the Franco–Soviet rapprochement, as foreign minister. Yet when the Soviet ambassador, Surits, met Blum two days later he found him to be in “a state of panic” undoubtedly because he had just come from a meeting with the defence minister, Daladier, General Gamelin, and others who said that France could do little to help Czechoslovakia and that neither could the Soviet Union. This setback did not stop Paul-Boncour: one of his first actions was to inform the Romanian minister in Paris that he intended to start talks with Bucharest about Red Army passage rights.<sup>4</sup>

On 17 March Litvinov issued a call for an international conference to deal with the increasing danger of Nazi aggression. As he explained to Maiskii, “I sought to shake up a little pacifist public opinion, absolve us of responsibility for the final collapse of collective security, neutralise somewhat the campaign about our weakness, caused by the [purge] trials. If, contrary to expectations, public opinion succeeds in influencing the Chamberlain government to move in the direction of the collective discussion of European problems, then so much the better.” Litvinov nevertheless asked Surits to intervene “unofficially” to obtain French support. It might help, he thought, with the British.<sup>5</sup>

There was nothing doing: the British and French governments rejected the Soviet proposal, the Foreign Office with its usual disdain for Litvinov. Sir Alexander Cadogan, who had recently replaced Vansittart as permanent under secretary, noted that the Soviet declaration might create problems in the House of Commons: “The opposition will say ‘Here is collective security: march under the brave Litvinoff’s banner.’”

The Russian object is to precipitate confusion and war in Europe: they will not participate usefully themselves: they will hope for the world revolution as a result (and a very likely one, too).

So far as we are concerned, I think we need only acknowledge for the moment. If we decide upon a forward policy—of calling the German bluff—it may be something to have Russia behind us, more or less. If we move under Litvinoff’s orders, I believe we shall precipitate a conflict.<sup>6</sup>

It should be obvious from reading the excerpts of Litvinov’s correspondence that Cadogan’s assessment was way off the beam.

Litvinov was pessimistic when he wrote to Aleksandrovskii, his minister in Prague, at the end of March. Hitler could attack Czechoslovakia from three directions, Litvinov observed, and Czechoslovak president Beneš might cave in to pressure to make concessions. These could lead to his undoing. “In any case in its present encirclement, Czechoslovakia cannot long exist . . . *Anschluss* already guarantees to Hitler hegemony in Europe . . . quite apart from the future fate of Czechoslovakia.” Still, Litvinov, torn between

cynicism and a way forward, was interested in the Romanian position on the recurring issue of Red Army "passage." Apparently, the Romanians were worried about *Anschluss*, but Litvinov doubted whether King Carol would risk provoking Germany. The French and Czechoslovaks suggested that the Soviet Union should pay the cost of *their* security in offering to renounce formal Soviet claims on Bessarabia in exchange for passage rights across Romania, as though Romanian cooperation was not first of all a French and Czechoslovak interest. As Litvinov saw it, *they* should be attempting to obtain these rights, and perhaps unbeknownst to Moscow, the momentary French foreign minister, Paul-Boncour, was willing to try. The Soviet government was still open to cooperation with Bucharest "but not at the price of a renunciation of Bessarabia." Romania and the other remaining independent states in central Europe needed to unite against Germany for otherwise "they will be forced to submit to the German rod, one by one." This was a sound argument, but a new Romanian foreign minister, Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen, told Aleksandrovskii, who was on his way to Moscow in April for consultations, that "Romania, as a small country, could only pursue a policy of 'wait and see.'"<sup>7</sup>

Litvinov was exasperated by French attacks on Soviet military weakness because of the purges. Perhaps the attacks hit a raw nerve, but Litvinov calculated that they would redound against France by creating a mood in Moscow "unfavourable to the resolution of various desiderata of the French government." He was thinking about Soviet gas masks which the French wanted to buy, but there were larger issues at stake.<sup>8</sup> Litvinov's irritation with the French press was intensified by the ineffectiveness of Soviet "allowances." If there is no improvement, Litvinov instructed Surits, cut them off!<sup>9</sup>

The penultimate Moscow critique of French policy came not from Litvinov, but from Potemkin in early April 1938 while Blum was still premier.

In spite of the extremely tense international situation, the French government does not change its position of indecisiveness, inaction, and credulity in the face of events, creating a direct threat to the general peace and a direct threat to France itself. Neither the German seizure of Austria, nor the critical position of Czechoslovakia . . . nor the appearance of German and Italian troops on its own Spanish frontier . . . have forced France to wake up, to think about, and even to do something about its own security . . . As in the past, they do not take their eyes off England, in which they see their only hope of defence. As before, they do not want to understand that the very first demonstration of decisiveness, firmness, and independence of French foreign policy, as it was during the time of Louis Barthou, would immediately compel the high-handed aggressors to come to their senses, would remind England of

the danger of its own isolation and encourage all the healthy forces of democratic Europe in the struggle for peace.

Echoing Surits in Paris, Potemkin repeated that France was heading toward “catastrophe” unless it made a radical shift in foreign policy. As for Czechoslovakia, French policy was “cowardly and passive . . . No one believed that the French government would go to the aid of its ally.”

France was not the only target of Potemkin’s ire; he also singled out Poland which was “helping Hitler in his actions against Czechoslovakia.” Even the French ambassador in Berlin had confirmed Polish complicity: Warsaw intended to seize the Teschen district with its Polish population, if Czechoslovakia collapsed. Germany was likely encouraging the Polish “appetite” and pushing Poland toward conflict with the Soviet Union. “Hitler is counting on the inevitable crushing of Poland by our troops,” wrote Potemkin: “When we have occupied some areas (*nekotorye oblasti*) of Poland, Germany will do the same from its side. Basically fulfilling Germany’s plan, Poland itself is preparing its fourth partition and the loss of its national independence.” This was *not*, however, an objective of Soviet foreign policy, for Potemkin advised Surits to launch a press campaign through his contacts amongst French journalists, “explaining the traitorous role of Beck [the Polish foreign minister] and the fate awaiting Poland, if it continued further along the path marked out for it by Hitler.” “They are playing with fire,” Potemkin concluded, for the Poles also have unhappy minorities.<sup>10</sup>

The Blum government fell on 8 April, to be replaced two days later by a new cabinet headed by Daladier. The right-wing Radical politician, Georges Bonnet, replaced Paul-Boncour as foreign minister. Could the news from Paris get any worse? “I consider Daladier,” wrote Litvinov, “and especially Bonnet, even less disposed toward cooperation with us, than Delbos.”<sup>11</sup> The Czechoslovak foreign minister, Kamil Krofta, thought nevertheless that Prague could count on France and Britain. In Moscow no one believed it, and the NKID ordered the Soviet embassy in Prague to ship its archives home.<sup>12</sup> Potemkin warned Fierlinger that Britain was the key to the French position: if Chamberlain persuades France “not to irritate Germany,” with whom the British hoped to negotiate, “the French would not dare to take an independent position on the Czechoslovak question.” Hitler would see this at once and act with “impunity.” Fierlinger replied that Czechoslovakia would defend its independence, arms in hand; though without French and Soviet support its position would be “very difficult.” When in late April Daladier met Chamberlain in London, Fierlinger was encouraged. Potemkin was not so sure: “objective data” by no means confirmed British readiness to oppose German expansion in central and south-eastern Europe. This was an understatement: Litvinov had received information that “Chamberlain from the outset had stated that England could not guarantee the present status quo in Czechoslovakia” in



spite of concessions offered to the Sudeten Germans. Beneš would have to make far greater “sacrifices.” War was pointless, according to Chamberlain, Czechoslovakia would be crushed before any help could arrive. Fierlinger insisted that the Czechoslovak government would “manoeuvre and survive.”<sup>13</sup> Litvinov’s information was accurate. According to Bonnet, Czechoslovakia was nothing for the British but “rags and patches stitched together by the Versailles Treaty. No one should die to protect [it].”<sup>14</sup>

On 6 May Bonnet put out a message to Berlin through a go-between that the French government “had decided to bury” the Franco–Soviet pact, “to put it to sleep.” To the Americans, he and Daladier lost no time in saying that there was nothing they could do to help Czechoslovakia. France had “no more cards” to play, and not enough guns to confront Hitler. To go to war, “would mean the defeat and dismemberment of France.” In the event of German aggression against Czechoslovakia, therefore, “aside from protesting, France would do ‘absolutely nothing,’” said the deputy premier, Camille Chautemps. Britain would take the lead: “France could only muddy the waters. . . .”<sup>15</sup>

On 13 May Bonnet met Litvinov in Geneva. A crisis could break out within the next three months, advised Bonnet, and France would mobilise. What then would the Soviet Union do, he wanted to know, since Poland and Romania would not allow Red Army passage across their territories? Litvinov must have been sick of hearing this question since the French would never say what *they* would do. Mobilize and then what? Litvinov might well have replied. Bonnet was looking for the exits, and hoped the Soviets were too. But Litvinov responded constructively pointing out that the Soviet government did not have sufficient diplomatic influence on the border states to obtain passage rights. France would need to intervene. He noted that he was not competent to discuss military questions but that discussions with the Czechoslovak and French general staffs were essential. Even in 1935 such talks had been foreseen, Litvinov noted pointedly, but France had not been interested. Bonnet said that Litvinov’s response was “completely evasive.” but this was untrue. Litvinov also had meetings with Halifax and Comnen. You will be making a mistake, he warned Halifax, if you take Hitler’s reassuring words “for pure coin.” Hitler did not care a pin for the Sudeten Germans, he was interested in “the conquest of territory and strategic and economic position in Europe.” Halifax said he understood Litvinov’s arguments and recognised their persuasiveness, but he did not press them in London. As for Comnen, he stuck to generalities with Litvinov and avoided any concrete issues, although with Bonnet, according to the French record, he was blunt in saying that Romania would not permit Soviet passage across its territory. Comnen’s account of his meeting with Bonnet is more nuanced: when Bonnet asked if Romania would permit Soviet passage, Comnen replied that the question was too important to give an immediate answer, though “public opinion” was “unanimously” against it. If you want to count on Romania, Comnen told Bonnet, France and Britain need to recover their lost positions



in the Danube basin.<sup>16</sup> Romania was being cautious, but during the spring it “allowed the passage of airplanes and Russian materiel both in the air and on land” destined for Czechoslovakia.<sup>17</sup>

The Czechoslovak government’s actions in May seemed to justify Fierlinger’s earlier declarations to Potemkin. On 19–20 May it appeared that German military forces were concentrating on Czechoslovak frontiers, and on 21 May Prague ordered a partial mobilisation to counter it. Hitler was furious and swore to eradicate the Czechoslovak state. The British and French were caught off guard and alarmed by the sudden danger of war. The Foreign Office sent instructions to its ambassador in Berlin to recommend “moderation” to the German government. Bonnet sent similar instructions, not to Berlin, but to Prague. Litvinov may also have been caught off guard, but on 25 May he expressed his approval to Fierlinger of Czechoslovak actions.<sup>18</sup>

Daladier invited the German ambassador to supper to commiserate as one ex-soldier to another. War would be terrible: “Cossack and Mongol hordes” would flood into Europe. Daladier had not concluded the Czechoslovak alliance and “was certainly not happy about it.” But “if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia, the French would have to fight if they did not wish to be dishonoured.” The French had one line for the Germans; one line for the Americans, and one for the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup>

In the aftermath of the crisis, Bonnet called in the Polish ambassador to determine what support France could count on from Warsaw if war erupted over Czechoslovakia. The Polish reply was blunt: Czechoslovakia was an unviable state and a nest for communists. Warsaw would have Teschen, if Germany obtained the Sudeten territories. In June Litvinov directed Surits to warn Bonnet or Léger, but they were already aware of the Polish position. Litvinov wanted to know, “in the event of our decision to prevent Polish intervention,” if France would still consider itself bound by the Franco–Polish alliance. A leak to the press might be useful, Litvinov suggested, in warning off the Poles. Daladier feared a Polish stab in the back, but Bonnet delayed for a week before he affirmed that France would have no obligation to Poland if it attacked Czechoslovakia.<sup>20</sup>

In early June Litvinov calculated that Hitler would not soon “start an adventure” in Czechoslovakia, but would try to “squeeze” Beneš, forcing the maximum of concessions, through the intermediary of British diplomacy. There was even talk of neutralizing Czechoslovakia on the Swiss model, though Coulonde affirmed that France would not accept such a solution. “We know however,” countered Litvinov with his usual sarcasm, “that the limits of French resistance are determined in London.”<sup>21</sup> These observations were accurate and the British and French continued to pressure Beneš for concessions, the British sending a former Cabinet minister, Walter Lord Runciman, to Prague for this purpose in early August.

In view of Soviet pessimism about Anglo–French intentions, Litvinov sent a cautionary note to Aleksandrovskii in June, advising that the Soviet government did not want to get ahead of France regarding Czechoslovakia, since Soviet assistance to Prague was subordinated to that of the French. “We consider . . . that questions [about mutual assistance] should be discussed necessarily between representatives of the French, Czechoslovak, and Soviet general staffs. Such discussions we will not solicit and you should not raise, but only explain . . . in the event of a formal query to you.” But Litvinov did not entirely discourage Aleksandrovskii: “With such frantic pressure from the side of England and France, you, of course, must strengthen the spirit of the Czechoslovaks and their resistance to this pressure.” We will not support a solution by force of the Czechoslovak problem, Litvinov explained, but we would not at all oppose a solution fully preserving Czechoslovak “political independence,” reducing tensions and preventing the danger of armed confrontation. Nor would the Soviet Union accept a “neutralisation” of Czechoslovakia leading to the renunciation of its mutual assistance pacts with France and the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> These instructions were thus a reiteration of Soviet prudence. The Soviet Union was not going to stick its neck out against Nazi Germany when other states were unwilling to stick out theirs.

On 20 July Bonnet summoned the Czechoslovak minister, Štefan Osuský, in order to clarify “the French position” on the security of Czechoslovakia. “The Czechoslovak government must know clearly our position: France will not make war for the Sudeten *affaire*. Certainly, publicly we will affirm our solidarity, as desired by the Czechoslovak government, but our solidarity should permit the Czechoslovak government to obtain a peaceful and honourable solution.” At the end Bonnet repeated, that “the Czechoslovak government must understand that France as well as England will not go to war. It was important above all that matters should be clear,” said Bonnet, expressing his pained crocodile regret. The difference was stark between Bonnet’s *démarche* and those of Moscow. At a meeting with Surits four days later, Bonnet did not mention his warning to Osuský, saying only that the French and British governments were applying “pressure” on Prague to obtain a negotiated settlement with the Sudeten Germans. “We cannot impose an agreement on Prague,” Bonnet avowed, which would be “incompatible with the sovereignty of Czechoslovakia and which threatened its dismemberment.”<sup>23</sup> Did Bonnet take Surits for a fool? His statement bore no resemblance to actual French policy. In any event, Litvinov had warned that the Sudeten issue was a ploy to cover the extension of German domination; it had nothing to do with minority rights. Unfortunately, the French and British would not listen to Litvinov’s warnings, or they ridiculed his “lecturing.” In September when French cabinet ministers learned of Bonnet’s actions, they protested that the council of ministers had not authorised them.<sup>24</sup>

In August Litvinov sent further instructions to Aleksandrovskii.

We are extraordinarily interested in the preservation of the independence of Czechoslovakia, in the blocking of Hitlerite ambitions toward the southeast, but without the western powers we cannot do anything substantial, while they do not consider it necessary to obtain our assistance, they ignore us and between themselves decide everything concerning the German–Czechoslovak conflict. We do not know whether Czechoslovakia itself has at some time pointed out to its western “friends” the necessity of drawing in the USSR. In these circumstances for us publicly and officially to criticise the actions of England and France would provoke accusations of our attempting to block their “peaceful action” in encouraging Czechoslovak inflexibility, and thus would not be of any use to Czechoslovakia itself. . . . It is sufficient that I have pointed out the absence of pressure from our side on Czechoslovakia and letting them have their complete freedom of action.

Litvinov was also worried about Polish intervention and feared that Aleksandrovskii might have gone too far in explaining the Soviet position. He therefore reminded Aleksandrovskii that Beneš himself did not want the extension of the Soviet–Czechoslovak pact to cover aggression by Poland.

It does not mean that we will treat this with indifference and that in no circumstances will take action against it. By our *démarches* in Paris [in June] we seem to have given a sufficiently strong warning to Poland. We, probably, in the future will not refuse to take the necessary steps, so that Poland has to look back at us regarding its aggressive intentions toward Czechoslovakia. . . . The [1932] non-aggression pact with Poland, as you must know, contains a clause in which it says that in the case of aggression of one of the contracting parties against a third government, obligations under the pact are vitiated. Thus, in the case of an attack by Poland on Czechoslovakia, the pact with Poland does not bind us.<sup>25</sup>

Litvinov’s careful language should nevertheless be considered an indication of support for Czechoslovakia in contradistinction to the messages coming from Paris and London.

At the end of August Moscow could only guess what the French had said to the Czechoslovaks about assistance in the case of German aggression. Aleksandrovskii had received indications from his contacts in Prague that the French were making “promises,” but Litvinov speculated that the “promises” might be imaginary or exaggerated in order to facilitate Czechoslovak negotiations for Soviet assistance. Litvinov was thus uninformed of Bonnet’s July *démarche*, meaning that the Czechoslovaks had not advised Aleksandrovskii. The French minister in Prague, Victor de Lacroix, reported that Beneš had reacted emotionally to Osuský’s report of Bonnet’s statement, as well he might

have done. A close ally would have urgently forwarded this information to Moscow: Krofta only hinted at it with Aleksandrovskii on 27 July when he characterised Bonnet as a “dreadful coward,” who took fright at the first sign of danger. It was a good thing, Krofta said, that he was not the only one to speak for France.<sup>26</sup> It *would* have been a good thing if others in Paris had spoken a different language than Bonnet. There were few French politicians who did; Surits called them “white crows.”<sup>27</sup>

Beneš did not inform Moscow of the Bonnet *démarche*, either because he feared weakening Soviet–Czechoslovak military cooperation, or because he wanted to manoeuvre out of danger or around Bonnet to hold together the fragile coalition—indeed, one hesitates to call it that—in defence of his country. In so doing, he underestimated Litvinov, who was at that moment Czechoslovakia’s most determined ally, but Beneš would not get closer to Moscow at the expense of Paris. As he said, even in July *before* Bonnet’s *démarche*, his position remained “subordinated” to that of France.<sup>28</sup>

Litvinov was still not ready to call it quits. On 27 July, the same day that Krofta met Aleksandrovskii, he talked to Coulondre in Moscow. It was like a hundred previous conversations which Litvinov had with western counterparts: the “aggressor states” were “carnivores” who attacked the weak. Show the bayonet and they would retreat. The Germans are bluffing, said Litvinov. But what if they are not, replied Coulondre. We need “to show a united front and a brave heart,” was Litvinov’s reply.<sup>29</sup>

On 29 July, two days after Litvinov spoke to Coulondre, the Red Army in the Far East became engaged in border fighting with Japanese forces in Manchuria at Lake Khasan, not far from Vladivostok. The Soviet Union was therefore no better prepared for a European war than France or Britain, having to guard a long Siberian frontier against the Japanese and to cope with the domestic upheavals caused by Stalin’s bloody purges. Yet Soviet policy against Nazi Germany remained firm, or at least as firm as it could be, given Anglo–French weakness.

On 22 August Litvinov met the German ambassador who asked about western and Soviet intentions in the event of a crisis. One wonders what got into the usually cautious Litvinov for he replied that the Czechoslovaks, “as one, will fight for their independence, that France in the event of a German attack on Czechoslovakia, would march against Germany, that England, whether Chamberlain liked it or not, could not leave France without support, and we also will fulfil our obligations to Czechoslovakia.” The explanation for Litvinov’s unusual aggressiveness may be exasperation with the German ambassador’s attempt to shift blame to Prague for rising tensions, or it was a bluff to deter Berlin. Rumours of his statement got back to Bonnet, who had no intention of marching against Germany, and he asked for clarification from Moscow. The French chargé d’affaires, Payart, confirmed Litvinov’s statement.<sup>30</sup>

Bonnet met Surits on 25 August, to obtain his own clarifications. He opined that the Czechoslovak situation was grave and confirmed that the French government's position remained unchanged: "if Germany invaded Czechoslovakia by military force, France would respect its commitments." Surits would perhaps have considered this statement to be good news—had he believed it—but Bonnet had not given the same message to Osuský.<sup>31</sup> Prague knew this, but Moscow did not.

On 31 August Bonnet repeated the French position to Payart and instructed him to see Litvinov to ask again what the Soviet government intended to do to support Czechoslovakia in the event of war. The passage issue was still a problem, he said, "in spite of all my efforts."<sup>32</sup> It is hard to know what these efforts might have been since Bonnet was concerned not to provoke Poland into jumping head-long into the Nazi camp. As for the Romanians, Bonnet does not appear to have taken any action at all. Bonnet's Soviet interlocutors wondered whether they could trust anything he said, and with good reason. On the same day he sent instructions to Payart, Bonnet told the British chargé d'affaires that if Czechoslovakia did not accept an arbitrated settlement, as might be proposed by Lord Runciman, who was still in Czechoslovakia, "that was their lookout, *tant pis pour eux*." Bonnet was certain the German government "would not refuse to accept a fair British proposal. . .," but he was not so sure about Czechoslovakia. Even before Bonnet had a response from Payart, he complained to the British ambassador in Paris, Sir Eric Phipps, that he was being "pestered" by Surits, "acting on instructions from M. Litvinoff, to show more firmness in Czechoslovakia . . ." Bonnet then said "that Russia's one wish is to stir up general war in the troubled waters of which she will fish."<sup>33</sup> This belief was widespread amongst the Anglo-French governing elite in contrast to actual Soviet efforts, led by Litvinov, to organise a grand alliance against Nazi Germany, either to contain it, or defeat it in war, should containment fail.

While Bonnet was offering his comments to Phipps, Litvinov responded in Moscow to the latest French query. Before doing so he asked for instructions, meeting Stalin on 1 September. On the following day Litvinov informed Payart that if France supported Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union would fulfill its obligations with the utmost determination, using every possible avenue of assistance. As for the question of Red Army passage, while nothing could be expected from Poland, Romania might prove more cooperative, especially if the League issued a judgement against German aggression, if only by majority vote. Tripartite staff talks should take place, and Litvinov affirmed that the Soviet Union was ready to participate in them. He also reverted to the idea of a high profile Franco-Anglo-Soviet conference to discourage Hitler from invading Czechoslovakia. Having made the Soviet suggestions, which were similar to those he had offered during the spring, he asked what France proposed to do, since the Soviet commitment was conditional on French intervention. Following the usual

French pattern, Payart dodged the question. Litvinov did not let Payart's evasion go unanswered: "Hitler bases his calculations on a double-hypothesis, that France will move, but only if England moves, and that England will not move."<sup>34</sup> This epigram summed up the situation, though Litvinov was being too generous to France. It is doubtful whether Daladier and Bonnet would have moved in any circumstances, short of being compelled to do so by public indignation aroused by Czechoslovak resistance to German aggression.

When Bonnet received Litvinov's reply, he misrepresented it to Phipps, who forwarded what he heard to London. "M. Bonnet feels that Russia is showing much more caution . . . than she wishes others to show." This was a projection of Bonnet's own position onto Litvinov and even Daladier felt obliged to correct it. But Daladier was only slightly more determined than his minister and he shared Bonnet's nightmare about red "Cossacks" spreading revolution into Europe. In London Maiskii worried that the French government was attempting to keep secret the Payart-Litvinov meeting and so he leaked it to Winston Churchill, then a backbench MP. Churchill wanted to stop Hitler in Czechoslovakia and forwarded Litvinov's message to Halifax, who would not take it further. Even if he had, Chamberlain was convinced he could negotiate with Hitler. On 8 September Maiskii met Halifax who said the British government wanted "a peaceful solution of the conflict."

"And the price does not really interest you?" Maiskii asked.

"Halifax shrugged and noted that the price would be determined by circumstances." On the following day Halifax told the French ambassador, Charles Corbin, that Britain was not prepared to go to war "on account of aggression by Germany on Czechoslovakia." Maiskii wrote in his diary at the end of August that he had met the former Liberal prime minister, David Lloyd George, who discouraged any idea that Britain and France would protect Czechoslovak independence.<sup>35</sup>

Litvinov returned to Geneva in early September where Maiskii and Surits joined him. He met Bonnet on the 11<sup>th</sup>, though the meeting went badly. Bonnet said that he had forwarded to London Litvinov's proposals and that the British government had rejected them. Bonnet was again disingenuous for he had misrepresented Litvinov's ideas to Phipps, though Halifax did in fact reject them, as conveyed by Churchill. Bonnet blamed everything on London. According to Litvinov, "Bonnet threw up his hands, he says it's impossible to do anything." This behaviour made a poor impression on Litvinov who apparently had trouble keeping his temper. He reported that Bonnet made no proposals and that he had been reserved.<sup>36</sup> Bonnet claimed that Litvinov had been evasive during the meeting and was looking for an escape from obligations to Czechoslovakia. Again, Bonnet was projecting his own intentions onto Litvinov.

Since Coulondre had heard only Bonnet's version of the meeting, he went in some alarm to see Potemkin who repeated the Soviet position.



Fierlinger also met Potemkin for he too had heard the Bonnet version of things from Coulondre. Potemkin repeated the Soviet willingness to participate in staff talks, still refused on the French side, and to support Czechoslovakia, "together with France, by all means and ways available to us." The French government, Potemkin added, had not even informed some of its own people of the Payart-Litvinov meeting. Fierlinger should have been encouraged by Potemkin's assurances, for he could not have made them without Stalin's authorisation.<sup>37</sup>

Back in Paris, as the second week of September ended, Bonnet was cracking up. According to Phipps, he "seems completely to have lost his nerve and to be ready for any solution to avoid war." Phipps was so concerned that he went to see Daladier, who reaffirmed that France would support Czechoslovakia if attacked by Germany. This he avowed with little enthusiasm, according to Phipps. So Bonnet was saying one thing and Daladier, another. The Czechoslovak minister in London, Jan Masaryk, heard about the Phipps conversations, obviously from a Foreign Office source: "Bonnet said that it is necessary to preserve peace, even sacrificing Czechoslovakia, and that France is not ready and does not want to fight for us. Then Phipps spoke with Daladier, who was a little more determined, but not much."<sup>38</sup> Daladier knew that France should resist, but he did not have the confidence to see it through.

Bonnet was angry, blaming the Czechoslovaks for their reluctance to capitulate. "M. Bonnet expressed great indignation with [the] Czechs who, it seems, mean to mobilize without consulting the French," Phipps reported: "He has therefore given a broad hint to M. Benes (sic) that France may have to reconsider her obligations toward Czechoslovakia." It was more than a hint. "We are not ready for war," explained Bonnet: "we must therefore make most far-reaching concessions to the Sudetens and to Germany . . . this must be done in spite of [the] Czechs and Soviets . . ." And quickly too, Bonnet added.<sup>39</sup>

On the evening of 14 September, news broke that Chamberlain was flying on the following day to meet Hitler in Berchtesgaden. He had consulted neither the French, nor the Czechoslovaks, and of course not the Soviets. He was confident he could negotiate with Hitler and avoid war. "What!" Maiskii wrote in his journal: "The head of the British empire is going to Canossa cap in hand to the German Fuehrer. This is what has become of the British bourgeoisie!" Krofta had a similar reaction: a "humbling surrender." he said: only the British could fail to see it. As for the French, Bonnet, Lacroix, and François-Poncet were all "defeatists." Comnen too viewed the Berchtesgaden meeting as a sign of Anglo-French weakness, and a demonstration of "how dangerous" it was to go too far in the defence of Czechoslovakia. Litvinov warned Moscow that the French appeared to have thrown in the towel. "There remains no doubt that Czechoslovakia will be betrayed, the only question is will Czechoslovakia be reconciled to it."<sup>40</sup>

The outcome, therefore, was still uncertain. Following Chamberlain's meeting with Hitler, the British and French governments applied heavy pressure on Prague to make territorial concessions to Germany, presenting Beneš with a take it or leave it proposal on 19 September. That same day Bonnet called in Osuský to advise him that resistance was impossible. According to Osuský's report, Bonnet said: "You cannot be sure that France will help. All depends on how much England will be in solidarity with France. He [Bonnet] declared that if President Beneš does not accept the Franco-British proposals, England will lose interest in Czechoslovakia and this will have extremely serious consequences." In Geneva, Maiskii heard that Osuský had left the Quai d'Orsay, weeping. In London, the Czechoslovak ambassador, Masaryk, had reacted differently, cursing the British in his best Russian. When the French cabinet heard on 19 September that Bonnet had threatened to abandon Czechoslovakia, there was an uproar, but not sufficient to change French policy. The cabinet voted unanimously to support the Anglo-French ultimatum to Prague. Well, Beneš called it an "ultimatum." the French and British ministers in Prague at first insisted that it was "advice." During the evening of 20 September Beneš summoned the French minister Lacroix to ask him for an Anglo-Soviet ultimatum—duly provided just after 2 a.m. on the 21<sup>st</sup>—so he could persuade his own cabinet to yield. It does not appear that Aleksandrovskii or perhaps even Krofta were aware of the Czech president's manoeuvring.<sup>41</sup> When news of the ultimatum reached Geneva, Maiskii remarked that there were no limits to how low the British and French would stoop.<sup>42</sup> Beneš's own conduct, however, would not have inspired confidence in Moscow or Bucharest.

Bonnet told Phipps that the Soviets were "furious." but then the ambassador mixed up foreign policy with local labour issues. "I suggested," Phipps wrote, "that even when the Soviet Government had had no reason whatever to be furious with France they had done nothing to stop the various strikes here, nor had they ceased their propaganda for the fatal forty-hour week. It would be interesting to see what more they could do now that they were angry."<sup>43</sup> Even local labour disputes were Soviet doing: it sounded like a rant at the club over dinner and a good Bordeaux rather than serious comment.

On 19 September, the same day that Bonnet was warning Osuský, Beneš called in Aleksandrovskii to ask if the Soviet government would give immediate assistance to Czechoslovakia if France did also; and he asked whether the Soviet Union would support Czechoslovak action in the League of Nations if it launched an appeal for help. On the following day, 20 September, the Politburo, which meant Stalin, of course, replied in the affirmative. This was the day after the French cabinet had met in tumult. Potemkin immediately cabled the Politburo decision to Aleksandrovskii, who telephoned Beneš at 7 p.m. that evening to advise him of the reply from Moscow.<sup>44</sup> Obviously, this Soviet reassurance had no effect on Beneš



for only a short time later he suggested that France and Britain issue an ultimatum which the Czechoslovak government could then accept.

According to Fierlinger, French conduct was being characterised in Moscow as “open betrayal.” even amongst the diplomatic corps. Bonnet was “the biggest coward,” said Potemkin, making excuses about insufficient aviation and “the unwilling of the Soviet Union to help us.” It was Potemkin’s personal opinion, said Fierlinger, that the Franco–Soviet pact is “useless.” “Evidently tomorrow the Soviets will publicly expose Bonnet’s fraud.”<sup>45</sup>

Potemkin was referring to Litvinov’s speech on 21 September in Geneva where he repeated the major points of his declaration to Payart, so that Bonnet could no longer distort them. The speech had little impact, although British representatives, who heard it, realized that Bonnet had distorted Soviet proposals. “A disgusting liar,” was one comment. It was on this occasion that an angry Litvinov told the British that only the Soviet Union had “clean hands” with respect to Czechoslovakia.<sup>46</sup>

On the same day, 21 September, Prague accepted the Anglo–French ultimatum, but Beneš called in Aleksandrovskii to ask new questions. According to Aleksandrovskii, Beneš inquired about Red Army passage across Romania and about the Soviet reaction to a potential Polish attack on Czechoslovakia. When Potemkin saw Fierlinger the following day, 22 September, he asked about “Beneš’s incomprehensible silence concerning to what degree Czechoslovakia counted on guaranteed help from France against German aggression,” particularly if Hitler made new demands on Prague and war resulted. “I reminded Fierlinger,” Potemkin said, “that the given question is of capital importance to the USSR.” It turns out that Beneš had also raised another question: would Moscow be willing to conclude a new Soviet–Czechoslovak pact? Potemkin replied that it was not clear what Beneš had in mind and that such a proposal would have to be studied. Obviously, neither Potemkin nor Fierlinger knew about Beneš’s clandestine capitulation during the evening of 20 September. Fierlinger asked for a Soviet reply that would reassure Prague.<sup>47</sup> But if Beneš would not fight, what could anyone else say or do to help Czechoslovakia?

In Moscow it seemed that putative allies were always asking what the Soviet Union would do in a crisis without ever saying what *they* would do at the same time. The conversation in Prague indicated that Beneš had gone fishing with Aleksandrovskii without ever advising Moscow that France had abandoned Czechoslovakia, or indeed that he had been complicit in the Anglo–French ultimatum of the early morning of 21 September. The problem was, as it had always been, that without France, the Soviet–Czechoslovak mutual assistance pact was inoperable. An aggressive approach would have been to confide in Moscow, expose Bonnet, as Laval had been exposed in the Abyssinian scandal, and attempt to bring down the Daladier government. This Beneš could not do in view of his own involvement in the Anglo–French ultimatum.

Still, the manoeuvring went on and still the Soviet Union did what it could to help Czechoslovakia. On 22 September Krofta advised Aleksandrovskii that Polish troops were concentrating on Czechoslovakia frontiers. "It would be good," suggested Krofta, to remind Warsaw that the Soviet–Polish non-aggression pact would cease to operate at the moment Poland attacked Czechoslovakia. When Surits on the same day raised the question of Polish claims against Prague, Bonnet replied evasively. In Moscow, however, Potemkin called in the Polish chargé d'affaires at 4 a.m. on 23 September to warn him that if Poland attacked Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union would denounce the Soviet–Polish non-aggression pact. Potemkin then informed Coulondre, who wanted to know if denunciation meant that the Soviet Union would intervene militarily. "The note does not say it," replied Potemkin, "but it is a warning given to Poland." In contrast, Bonnet sought a "friendly arrangement" to allow Poland to annex Teschen without a fight.<sup>48</sup>

While the Poles acted like Hitler's "little cousins," the Romanians pursued a more positive line. In Geneva Comnen told the British "that, in case of war, supplies would probably pass through Roumania to Czechoslovakia and he thought there would be no difficulty in such a case in allowing transit, especially aeroplanes." He stressed the difficulties of moving across northern Romania, but he was disposed to help if Britain and France came into the conflict. According to the Romanian minister in Prague, Aleksandrovskii informed Krofta that Litvinov had been pleased with his discussions with Comnen: Litvinov "is under the impression" that they were only looking for the right "formula to allow Russian support." The Polish ambassador in London heard about these discussions: "Litvinoff expected that they would all be in it together on the same side and then the march through would be okay." In early September Soviet planes moved across Romanian territory, though Comnen was ready to deny it, if necessary.<sup>49</sup>

Was Litvinov preparing the diplomatic ground for military action, in case the crisis spun out of control? Was Aleksandrovskii trying to keep the Czechoslovaks in the game? All one can say for certain is that the Soviet Union and Romania were being careful not to over-commit, especially with rumours circulating wildly that Britain and France had abandoned Prague and that Czechoslovakia was "finished." The German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop boasted to the Romanian minister in Berlin that no one would dare attack Germany. Stalin can do nothing because of Japan, and an army that kills its generals, he added, "does not exist for us." No doubt, the Germans were encouraging panic, especially in Bucharest: Czechoslovakia would be "crushed like a walnut." Soviet and Romanian support was a "fantasy." France and Britain would do nothing; "Beneš's game" was up.<sup>50</sup>

Nonetheless, the Red Army began to mobilise on 21 September. Orders were issued for a military build-up on the Polish and Romanian frontiers. This included 76 infantry and cavalry divisions, three tank corps and 22 tank and 17 air brigades.<sup>51</sup> Czechoslovakia started to mobilise on 22–23 September, without Anglo–French objection, because of German *Freikorps* incursions in the border areas. On the same day Chamberlain met Hitler again in Godesberg to deliver Czechoslovak surrender only to be confronted with fresh German demands. On 24 September the French ordered partial mobilisation and the British mobilised their fleet. The crisis could still spin out of control.

In the meantime, on 22 September, Fierlinger had met Coulondre in Moscow, relating his conversation of that day with Potemkin, who, according to Fierlinger, regretted that Prague had not requested Soviet assistance independent of the Franco–Czechoslovak mutual assistance pact.<sup>52</sup> Did Potemkin mean to imply that the Soviet government was contemplating unilateral intervention? On the next day, after Potemkin heard about Fierlinger's remarks to Coulondre, he asked for an explanation from the Czechoslovak minister. Fierlinger was caught red-handed. Potemkin expressed his "bewilderment" that the minister could so interpret their previous discussion. "Being even more embarrassed, Fierlinger admitted that yesterday he spoke with Coulondre about our conversation during which he wanted to suggest to the French that Czechoslovakia could even do without them; remarking to the ambassador that the USSR, as it were, would not mind concluding with Czechoslovakia a new bilateral agreement." This is not what Coulondre had reported to Paris (i.e., suggesting the possibility of Soviet unilateral action), but Potemkin did not know that and chewed out Fierlinger for misrepresenting his views on the third question put by Beneš (that of a new Czechoslovak–Soviet pact) which the Soviet government had not discussed. "I warned Fierlinger that in my next conversation with Coulondre, I would have to give the ambassador the necessary explanations on this point." According to Potemkin, "Fierlinger fell into complete despair. He asked me not to say anything to Coulondre so that 'he did not make an even bigger mess' in the given question." Fifteen minutes after Fierlinger left, he telephoned Potemkin, reading to him his telegram to Prague, saying there had been some kind of mix-up in the forwarding of his cables. Fierlinger had nevertheless been caught out, for it was not first time that he had implied to Prague that the Soviet Union might intervene unilaterally.<sup>53</sup> There is no available evidence to suggest that the Soviet Union would have so acted.

In Paris the government was barely holding together: five cabinet ministers threatened to resign, Reynaud, Mandel, Jean Zay, César Campinchi, and Jean Champetier de Ribes. A few diplomats inside the Quai d'Orsay also manoeuvred without success for a tougher line against Nazi Germany. As Zay put it, there still remained a shred of "French dignity," but it was only a shred.<sup>54</sup> On 23 September there was a warning in the Moscow

press that Poland also had unhappy minorities in its Ukrainian territories. On 24 September Coulondre recommended to Paris that in view of “the imminence of conflict” Litvinov’s proposal for staff talks be accepted “immediately.” When he did not receive a reply, he cabled again three days later along with a warning about Polish designs on Teschen. According to the Polish ambassador in Moscow, Foreign Minister Beck was convinced of Anglo–French passivity and “did not intend to leave to Germany the exclusive benefit of an amputation of Czechoslovakia.” Warnings to the same effect arrived from the French embassy in Warsaw. What worried the French ambassador, Léon Noël, was that Poland could move into the German camp and that an “ideological war” would break out. The Polish ambassador in Berlin advised his Romanian counterpart that a “new Europe” was in the making, based on race and the “*National-Staat*.” Resistance to it “could be fatal.” Rumours circulated that Bonnet had suffered a nervous collapse which might explain why he did not reply to Coulondre’s recommendation for staff talks until 28 September and then evasively. “M. Bonnet is not much impressed,” reported Phipps, “by this prospective [of] late and limited Russian help. He now further fears Poland would also be on the wrong side in the event of war.”<sup>55</sup>

At the same time there was tumult in the streets of Paris as the French right accused the Communists of “egging on war” and preparing for revolution to set up “a Communist regime.” Even in Prague the right accused the Soviet Union of responsibility for Czechoslovak capitulation. Potemkin directed Aleksandrovskii to publicise Litvinov’s Geneva speech to counter such claims.<sup>56</sup>

In the last week of September, the Soviet Union had done as much as it could do to help Czechoslovakia. Litvinov remained in Geneva, but his activities were only of academic interest to the British and French governments, bent upon finding an escape from the nightmarish scenarios which haunted them. They were not, however, anxious to take full responsibility for their actions. When the Czechoslovak ambassador Masaryk confronted Halifax, the latter said that Chamberlain was only a “messenger” for Hitler.

“A messenger for a murderer and criminal,” Masaryk retorted.

“Unfortunately, that is the way it is,” was Halifax’s reported reply.

If Beneš was not advising Moscow of Anglo–French abandonment, Masaryk was. Maiskii heard about Halifax’s comment in Geneva. “Comedy goes hand in hand with tragedy,” he noted in his journal.<sup>57</sup>

In Paris, Phipps summed up the position: “Unless German aggression were so brutal, bloody, and prolonged . . . as to infuriate French public opinion to the extent of making it lose its reason, war now would be most unpopular in France. I think therefore that His Majesty’s Government should realise extreme danger of even appearing to encourage small, but noisy and corrupt, war group here. All that is best in France is against war, *almost* at any price.” Even Halifax did not like the reference to a “noisy and corrupt

war group,” but Phipps was not wrong in describing the views preponderant amongst the French elite. He defended himself by saying that he had meant “the Communists who are paid by Moscow and have been working for war for months.”<sup>58</sup>

On Sunday, 25 September, it was relatively quiet in Geneva. Litvinov had with him a number of his ambassadors, and inevitably the question came up: “*Nu, kak . . .* will there be war or not?” Litvinov thought the Anglo–French would cave in and Surits agreed, but others present thought they would have to fight, if the Czechoslovaks resisted.

“Are Chamberlain and Daladier going to stand up when it becomes necessary to say the word war! Maybe they will not stand up,” thought Maiskii.

“Knowing my British, I am inclined to agree with you,” he replied to Litvinov: “But in the present situation there are unknown factors which now may play a big role, for example, the conduct of the Czechs at the moment of danger . . . .” It was in the back of people’s minds: what if Beneš does “something crazy”? If the Czechoslovaks resisted, Phipps thought, it would be difficult to keep French public opinion in check for more than ten days. Bonnet was sure, however, that France would not fight, no matter what happened. Only the communists would make trouble.<sup>59</sup>

That same Sunday Daladier and Bonnet met with Chamberlain, Halifax and others in London to discuss the latest developments and to determine what to do next. Daladier argued in favour of resistance to further German demands, but in the end he did not insist or he let himself be finessed by Chamberlain. Maiskii heard of the discussions on the following day and that Gamelin had gone to London to brief the British. Bonnet was “playing the most sinister role . . . insisting on the necessity to avoid war at any cost.” Daladier was in general supporting Bonnet, according to Maiskii, and it is true that Daladier did not sack Bonnet or silence him. Daladier said that France would honour its commitments to Czechoslovakia; Bonnet said it could not. According to Maiskii, Gamelin was offended by Bonnet’s calling into question “the honour of the French army.” If war had to be fought, Gamelin insisted, France would emerge victorious. The Germans had not had time to strengthen their defences on the so-called Siegfried line in the west; “for the time-being it was only a wall of marmalade.” This was more or less what Daladier had said during his meeting in London. Maiskii was well informed. He also heard that Chamberlain had told opposition leaders that Hitler was “an honourable man.” who would keep the peace after having obtained the Sudeten territories. Arthur Greenwood and Clement Atlee were incredulous.

“Have you read Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*?,” they asked.

“Yes,” replied Chamberlain angrily, “I have read it, but beyond that I have seen Hitler and you have not!”

What if the Sudeten territories are not Hitler’s last demand?

Chamberlain again replied irritably: "I have met Hitler and I believe him."<sup>60</sup>

On 28 September Bonnet was still on the edge of panic, again blaming Beneš for campaigning against the British and French governments "and working with all the forces in favour of a 'preventive war'".<sup>61</sup> Now, resistance to Nazi aggression became a yearning for "preventive war." This was a message of anti-communist propaganda.

Beneš's position was of course more complex, the leader of a small country, manoeuvring for survival. Aleksandrovskii reckoned that Beneš "both wanted and was afraid of" Soviet aid. "In his last conversations with me he each time convulsively grasped at the possibility of our help and summoned me for conversations just when he had received the latest hard blow from England and France." When the immediate danger had passed or when he thought he had found some "new exit" out of the trap, "he immediately showed significantly less interest in our relations. From the very beginning to the end . . . he fully hoped and still hopes to obtain the maximum possible for Czechoslovakia by means of support from England and France, and about the help of the USSR, sees it as an extreme, suicidal means of defence for bourgeois Czechoslovakia against an attack from Hitler." Beneš said he did not want to "take the responsibility for the start of a new world war"—this guilt originated perhaps from Anglo-French reproaches—and that Germany would have to fire the first shot, but Hitler had not done so, whence came all his problems. "Pressure . . . starting with Hitler and ending with Daladier was an insufficient basis to stand up and fight." Aleksandrovskii said he had never criticised Beneš, but only acted as a go-between forwarding his observations to Moscow. His comments were not really criticism either, but rather a good analysis of Beneš's dilemma since 1935, a dilemma reinforced because he too feared the spread of Bolshevism into Europe and this hampered the defence of his country against Hitler. Others who might have supported Beneš could not be more Czechoslovak than Czechoslovakia itself, as Comnen noted after the crisis.<sup>62</sup> Much to the relief of his adversaries, Beneš was not going to do "something crazy."

As Aleksandrovskii prepared his report for Moscow, the last acts of the Czechoslovak debacle were already unfolding. With British and French encouragement, Mussolini persuaded Hitler to agree to a four power conference to settle the crisis, excluding the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.<sup>63</sup> For Chamberlain it was a chance to prove that he could negotiate with Hitler. On the morning of 29 September he flew for the third time in a fortnight to Germany, this time to Munich, where the conference was to take place. As he left, a Pathé Gazette newsreel shows him walking quickly to his plane at Heston aerodrome, excited, eyes glowing, speaking to a crowd of cabinet ministers and supporters: "When I was a little boy, I used to repeat, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.' That's what I am doing. When I come back I hope I may be able to say, as Hotspur says in Henry IV, 'Out



of this nettle, danger, we plucked this flower, safely.” “Hurrah!” the small crowd responded. As the prime minister’s plane was about to take off, the narrator says “God speed Mr. Chamberlain!”<sup>64</sup>

The rest of the story is well-known: an agreement was concluded at Munich which led six months later to the disappearance of Czechoslovakia. A Pathé Gazette newsreel portrays Chamberlain, Daladier, Hitler, and Mussolini in the early hours of 30 September signing the Munich accords. Afterwards, Chamberlain is seen leaning forward, peering contentedly as a German official sifts through his papers looking for the English version of the text. Daladier, observing the scene, turns abruptly and walks away, apparently not wanting *his* copy of the agreement. The absence of the Czechoslovaks and the Soviets strikes the eye.<sup>65</sup> In Prague Beneš asked again for Soviet advice, but then later in the day informed Aleksandrovskii that he had accepted the Munich transaction. In London Maiskii saw Masaryk, sobbing, “They have sold me into German slavery, like the Negroes were once sold into slavery in America.” “I shook his hand warmly,” Maiskii noted in his journal.<sup>66</sup>

All that remained for the Soviet government to do was to assess the damage. In early October Litvinov passed through Paris on his way back to Moscow. He refused an invitation from Bonnet to go to the Quai d’Orsay, but then the minister turned up at the Soviet embassy where he wanted to talk about the Munich outcome. Did Bonnet go to gloat? Not according to Litvinov, but he gloated to Phipps, having obviously recovered from his long, dark funk: “Bonnet remarked to me that the Soviets’ pretension to dictate French foreign policy was not going to be satisfied. He smiled when he referred to the probable extent of Soviet help had war broken out, and also at Russia’s extreme valour from a safe and respectable distance from the scene of hostilities.” Bonnet continued to project French shortcomings on to the Soviet Union. Litvinov observed that Daladier had become a popular hero, but that the European press was deifying Chamberlain. Gifts and flowers were piling up at his door, street names were being changed in his honour, and he was proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize. Litvinov did not mention it, but Pathé Gazette produced a newsreel on Munich: “Four strong men sat ‘round a table,” proclaimed the excited narrator, “and there was peace in Europe!” Daladier’s open car made its way through big crowds in Paris, flags hanging from buildings, the Marseillaise booming in the streets, and Bonnet in the backseat smiling.<sup>67</sup>

By the time Litvinov returned to Moscow, he was in a fury and he took it out on France, a country, said the *Journal de Moscou* (the NKID’s semi-official weekly newspaper), which had not succeeded in saving even its honour at Munich. Such comment merely confirmed what Daladier had admitted to the German ambassador back in May, but an angry Coulondre demanded an apology.<sup>68</sup> A tempest in a teapot, Litvinov must have thought: I have bigger problems to worry about, notably the collapse of Soviet foreign

policy in Europe and my own future. Soviet comment about Britain was just as unsparing. Someone in Moscow remembered the context of Chamberlain's citation from Henry IV, which spoke of "dangerous . . . purposes." "uncertain . . . friends." and "cowardly" minions.<sup>69</sup> Foreign Office jokers came up with a new version of Chamberlain's epigram: "If at first you can't concede, fly, fly, fly again." As for the Poles, "their game is 'too thin,'" Comnen noted: it is a "policy of adventure" which risked attracting Hitler's unwanted notice. According to one French diplomat, the Poles "were like the ghouls who in former centuries crawled the battlefields to kill and rob the wounded." Like "vultures," said Daladier, though he was in no position to criticise.<sup>70</sup>

Surits wrote that France had suffered a second Sedan, a catastrophic defeat, and he was disgusted by the cheering crowds in Paris. Maiskii reported that Chamberlain was in complete control and that he would continue his "retreat before the aggressor." Litvinov agreed but he did not think, as Surits did, that widespread defeatist opinion had led to Munich. A strong French government would have led public opinion. "The French government," wrote Litvinov, "did nothing to explain to the population the importance of Czechoslovakia from the point of view of the interests and security of France itself." As for the Franco-Soviet pact, the hollow shell which Litvinov had thought worth signing in 1935, it was shattered. Surits reported that the Radicals, amongst whom were Daladier and Bonnet, contemplated denouncing it, if denunciation would buy an agreement with Hitler. The far-right and the right, whose ideas spilled well into the centre of French politics, despised the Franco-Soviet pact, for it had strengthened and legitimised "their main and most hated enemy, the French communist party . . . it becomes entirely understandable why on a par with the Spanish question the main pressure from the right develops along the line of our pact, along the line of relations with the USSR."<sup>71</sup>

In December 1938 Ribbentrop visited Paris to sign a Franco-German declaration. Litvinov could not imagine what price had been paid for Ribbentrop's visit, though he speculated, with his now habitual sarcasm, that Hitler had offered a "free gift" to strengthen the internal situation of Bonnet and Daladier. The longer they stayed in power the better for Hitler, Litvinov implied. He wondered whether Bonnet had made some "secret promises." nothing in writing, of course, and without the knowledge of members of the cabinet.<sup>72</sup> In Paris too there was speculation about what Bonnet might have said to Ribbentrop and in particular whether he had offered a free hand to Hitler in the east if only Germany would leave France in peace.

On the last day of 1938, it was perhaps appropriate that Litvinov would complain about an editorial in *Le Temps*, undoubtedly inspired by Bonnet, preparing the ground for a further agreement with Germany. Litvinov did not think that Bonnet had any definite terms in mind, except the "liquidation" of the Franco-Soviet and Franco-Polish pacts. Perhaps, he contemplated the



offer of a free hand in the east, but Litvinov thought Bonnet was miscalculating for Hitler would not pay anything for his “so-called freedom of action in the east.” He did not need to.<sup>73</sup>

Litvinov’s correspondence in the aftermath of the Munich debacle was bleak, but as events would prove in 1939, he retained his commitment to a grand alliance against Hitler. He tried a last time in April 1939, offering a tripartite political and military alliance to London and Paris. Although the French were initially interested, the British rejected the Soviet proposal with their usual disdain. It was the last straw: Stalin sacked Litvinov on 3 May 1939.<sup>74</sup> He must have thought that another approach had to be tried for obviously Litvinov’s was not working.

Soviet policy during the Munich crisis cannot be examined outside the context of the previous failures of Soviet collective security. Litvinov had pressed without success for effective cooperation against Nazi Germany. His policies were not personal; they were approved by the Politburo and hence by Stalin. In fact, during the last half of the 1930s, there was no Soviet policy which Stalin did not own.<sup>75</sup> When “the boss” appeared to veer off course, Litvinov intervened to bring him back. He persuaded Stalin to accept the empty shell of the 1935 mutual assistance pact when it was in jeopardy in Moscow; he obtained Stalin’s approval in September 1936 to renew Soviet efforts to consolidate an anti-Nazi coalition; he pulled Stalin back from a too aggressive policy in Spain; he appears to have persuaded Stalin to explore the possibility of staff talks with the French in 1936–1937 in spite of justifiable scepticism; and he obtained Stalin’s approval for the Soviet position to support Czechoslovakia as he explained it to Payart on 2 September 1938. In all of these actions, Litvinov was motivated by *raisons d’État*: by his calculations about the Nazi menace and the need to organise a great coalition of states against it.

In Litvinov’s secret letters and notes cited in this essay, only one is framed in Marxist-Leninist terminology, when in 1936 he suggested a line to Stalin for a warning to France in the Soviet press. Stalin might have laughed at Litvinov’s awkward attempt to “speak Bolshevik.” If an ideology guided Litvinov, it is one which is traditional and universal: that of not bowing to a bully. And there was another: that the enemy of my enemy is my ally. The “white crows” in Paris understood the concept, and long before, so had the Catholic kings of France who formed an alliance with the Muslim sultans of the Ottoman Empire. It was the elite of the Third Republic who had forgotten their history, or chose not to follow it.

Then what about Stalin? Was he a prisoner of ideological convictions; was he blind to distinctions between “imperialist” adversaries? Were his suspicions of the French based on ideological prejudices, or on the long experience of dealing with a hostile French government? During the 1930s Stalin was preoccupied with domestic politics and killing off his political

opposition; he had confidence in Litvinov—to the degree that he had confidence in anyone—and permitted him to speak for the Soviet state. Until now, only a relatively few secret letters by Stalin on foreign policy have become available. We know however that Soviet foreign policy was highly centralised and that even minor matters went to the Politburo for approval. From Stalin's daily logs, we know that Litvinov met with Stalin on a regular though not frequent basis, and more often during periods of crisis. We have access to Politburo protocols on foreign policy. Litvinov himself believed in a hierarchical structure. Foreign policy could not be made on the fly, with ambassadors saying whatever they pleased in foreign capitals. The Soviet Union sought engagement in the 1930s to protect its security. Its policies were prudent in a hostile, dangerous environment. The Soviet Union did not seek "isolation"; Litvinov sought participation in an anti-Nazi grand alliance and he made serious offers to obtain it. Paradoxically, the two European powers so lacking in guns and gold and so in need of strong allies, declined offers from the one potential ally capable of changing the balance of forces against Nazi Germany.

At the beginning of 1938 on the eve of the Czechoslovak crisis, Litvinov's long efforts to engineer an anti-Nazi alliance had been a calamitous failure. One can understand the Soviet government's caution in dealing with London and Paris. Yet Moscow still held the door open, as Litvinov explained in a letter to Surits in January 1938. Litvinov took the initiative several times in 1938, in March, June, August, and September to protect Czechoslovak security.<sup>76</sup> There was no question of acting unilaterally—for this would have been a self-defeating policy, as Litvinov had often pointed out with regard to Spain. Effective collective security required an Anglo-French commitment which was never forthcoming. Yet the French and British governments—and many western historians and journalists thereafter—accused Moscow of bad-faith, of deception, of plotting to let France and Britain fight Hitler alone. This was the transgressors accusing the other side of their own transgressions. The French and British said the Red Army could not take the offensive, that the 1937 purges were a sign of Soviet collapse. In July and August 1938 the Red Army repulsed Japanese attacks at Lake Khasan in the Far East and in September it mobilized in ten days more divisions on its Romanian and Polish borders than France could mobilise in the west. Britain, of course, did not have an army to send to France, and the French had no intention of taking the offensive against Germany even though General Gamelin described its western defences as "marmalade."

Then there was the Polish factor. Poland was technically a French ally, but had concluded a non-aggression pact with Hitler. The Polish elite detested Russia and the Bolsheviks and were contemptuous of the Czechoslovaks. The Polish government claimed to pursue a policy of equilibrium between two dangerous neighbours, but in reality its policy leaned toward Nazi Germany. The French sometimes talked of abandoning the

Polish alliance, but they could never bring themselves to it, because of fear of pushing Poland entirely into the German camp. If then there was war over Czechoslovakia, the Red Army would attack Poland as a Nazi ally and, defeating it, spread Soviet influence into Europe. The French and British governments overlooked hostile Polish behaviour, in the hopes of avoiding the worst, at least for themselves. Their nightmares of the ghoulish twins of War and Bolshevik Revolution obstructed the defence of Czechoslovakia and indeed of Europe against Nazi Germany.

So where does responsibility lie for the collapse of Czechoslovakia? It was Laval who gutted the Franco–Soviet pact and Beneš who accepted narrow treaty obligations and dependence on France. Litvinov warned Beneš against a weak treaty, but Beneš would not get too close to the Soviet Union without France and France would not get close at all. The indispensable marriage of the “Bolsh” and Marianne was a failure from the outset in spite of Blum’s later efforts to revive it. Britain also had its part to play, for the Foreign Office accepted the Franco–Soviet pact only in its weakened form and only grudgingly. When the Soviet government pressed for staff talks, and Blum and his allies tried to advance them, Eden intervened to block the movement. And then Stalin turned on his high command: he thought perhaps that his homicidal domestic politics would not affect his foreign policy. If that was the case, Stalin erred for the purge of the Soviet high command offered a fine pretext for the French general staff to pull back from closer ties with Moscow which it had not wanted in any case.

In spite of the disarray at home caused by the Stalinist purges, Soviet foreign policy continued to function in defence of Soviet national interests and the Red Army carried out a large partial mobilisation in September 1938. Would the Red Army actually have fought if France and Britain had gone to war to defend Czechoslovakia? The available evidence does not permit an answer, but the question is moot in any case. The Soviet Union would not act unilaterally, and the French and British would not act at all. Czechoslovakia could have broken the impasse by fighting alone at the outset, but Beneš was not the one to lead his country in that direction. Czechoslovakia did not have a more skilled ally than Litvinov. It was Britain and France, and Beneš himself, who shirked the fight. In this business at least, as Litvinov said, and as improbable as it may seem in the west, the Soviet Union had “clean hands.”

## NOTES

1. Litvinov to Maiskii, no. 5092/L, secret, 4 March 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 140, d. 26, ll. 10–13.
2. “Meeting with Coulondre, 11.III-1938,” Litvinov’s *dnevnik*, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 22, 172, d. 863, ll. 75–78; Coulondre, nos. 250–60, 13 Mar. 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, VIII, 772–74; and Coulondre, no. 288, 29 Nov. 1937, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, VII, 550–52.

3. "Conversation with the Czechoslovak envoy Fierlinger," Potemkin's *dnevnik*, no. 6165, secret, 15 March 1938, AVPRF, f. 0138, o. 19, 128, d. 1, ll. 13–15.
4. Surits to NKID, 15 March, *DVP*, XXI, 126–27; "Procès-verbal: Comité permanent de la Défense nationale," very secret, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, VIII, 824–31; and Constantin Cesianu, Romanian minister in Paris, to Romanian foreign ministry, no. 4773, 21 March 1938, AMAE, f. 71/France, vol. 3, ff. 27–29.
5. Litvinov to Maiskii, no. 5128/L, secret, 19 March 1938, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 2, d. 17, 11, ll. 29–28; and Litvinov to Surits, 20 Mar. 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 138.
6. Cadogan's minute, 17 March 1938, C1935/95/62, FO 371 21626.
7. Litvinov to Aleksandrovskii, no. 5147/L, secret, 26 March 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 149, d. 166, ll. 4–7; Litvinov to Surits, no. 5130/L, secret, 19 March 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 148, d. 158, ll. 15–19; and Aleksandrovskii (in Bucharest) to NKID, 14 April 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 196–97.
8. Litvinov to Surits, no. 5174/L, secret, 3 April 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 148, d. 158, ll. 20–23.
9. Litvinov to Surits, no. 5203/L, secret, 17 April 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 148, d. 158, ll. 36–34.
10. Potemkin to Surits, no. 6200, secret, 4 April 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 148, d. 158, ll. 25–30. There is a published version of this letter in *DIMS*, 80–83, but the last paragraphs on Poland are replaced by ellipses.
11. Litvinov to Maiskii, no. 5201/L, secret, 17 April 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 140, d. 26, ll. 22–24.
12. "Record of conversation . . . with Krofta," Aleksandrovskii, 30 March 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 161–64; and B. S. Stomoniakov, deputy commissar, NKID, to M. S. Shaprov, Soviet chargé d'affaires in Prague, no. 7256, 9 April 1938, AVPRF, f. 0138, o. 19, 128, d. 1, l. 23.
13. "Conversation with the Czechoslovak envoy Fierlinger, 27 April 1938," Potemkin's *dnevnik*, no. 6226, secret, AVPRF, f. 0138, o. 19, 128, d. 1, ll. 25–26; "Conversation with the Czechoslovak envoy Fierlinger, 13 May 1938," Potemkin's *dnevnik*, no. 6250, secret, *ibid.*, ll. 27–28; and Litvinov to Maiskii, no. 5247/L, secret, 4 May 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 140, d. 26, ll. 32–33.
14. William Bullitt, U.S. ambassador in Paris, to Cordell Hull, secretary of state, no. 733, 16 May 1938, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1938* [hereinafter *FRUS*], 5 vols., (Washington, 1955–56), I, 500–04. Cf., Chamberlain to his sister Ida, 20 March 1938, NC18/1/1042, University of Birmingham, N. Chamberlain Papers.
15. Herbert von Dirksen, German ambassador in London, to German foreign ministry, 6 May 1938, *DGFP*, D, II, 257–60; Bullitt, no. 739, 9 May 1938, *FRUS, 1938*, I, 493–95; Bullitt, no. 745, 11 May 1938, *ibid.*, 495; and Bullitt, no. 773, 16 May 1938, *ibid.*, 500–04.
16. Litvinov (Geneva) to NKID, immediate, 14 May 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 262–63; Litvinov to Aleksandrovskii, no. 5264/L, secret, 25 May 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 149, d. 166, ll. 11–13; Bullitt, no. 773, 16 May 1938, *FRUS, 1938*, I, 500–04: "Note du Ministre, Conversation avec M. Comnène . . ." 9 May 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, IX, 671–73; Comnen to King Carol, strictly confidential, no. 5, 12 May 1938, AMAE, f. 71/URSS, vol. 85, ff. 217–20.
17. Radu Crutzescu, Romanian minister in Prague, to Comnen, no. 1579, 16 June 1938, AMAE, f. 71/Romania, vol. 102, fol. 116; and Nicolae Dianu, Romanian minister in Moscow, to Comnen, no. 1318, 20 June 1938, *ibid.*, ff. 170–71. Cf., Ragsdale, *Munich Crisis*, 83–86, 148.
18. François-Poncet, French ambassador in Berlin, nos. 2173–74, 21 May 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, IX, 815–16; Bonnet to Victor de Lacroix, French minister in Prague, nos. 352–54, very urgent, *réserve*, 21 May 1938, *ibid.*, 825–26; and Litvinov to Aleksandrovskii, no. 5264/L secret, 25 May 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 149, d. 166, ll. 11–13.
19. Johannes Welczeck, German ambassador in Paris, to German foreign ministry, 23 May 1938, *DGFP*, D, II, 326–28.
20. Litvinov to E. V. Girshfel'd, Soviet chargé d'affaires in Paris, 5 June 1938, *DIMS*, 132; and Carley, 1939, 42–44.
21. Litvinov to G. A. Astakhov, Soviet chargé d'affaires in Berlin, no. 5278/L, secret, 2 June 1938, AVPRF, f. 0138, o. 19, 128, d. 1, ll. 33–34.
22. Litvinov to Aleksandrovskii, no. 5299/L, secret, 11 June 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 149, d. 166, ll. 16–18. Cf., Steiner, "Crisis," 758.
23. "Note du Ministre des Affaires étrangères, sur sa conversation du 20 juillet avec M. Osuský," *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, X, 437–38; and Surits to NKID, immediate, 24 July 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 387–89.
24. *Carnets secrets de Jean Zay* (Paris, nd, but 1942), entry of 19 Sept. 1938, 6.
25. Litvinov to Aleksandrovskii, no. 5420/L, secret, 11 Aug. 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 149, d. 166, ll. 24–27. Cf., Steiner, "Crisis," 759–60.

26. Litvinov to Aleksandrovskii, no. 5445/L, secret, 26 Aug. 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 149, d. 166, ll. 30–32; Lacroix, nos. 1396–1409, secret, *réserve*, 21 July 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, X, 445–48; Lacroix, nos. 1427–34, secret, *réserve*, 21 July 1938, *ibid.*, 450–51; and Aleksandrovskii to NKID, immediate, 24 July 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 402–05.
27. Surits to Litvinov, no. 137, secret, 26 March 1938, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 2, 17, d. 165, ll. 105–91.
28. “*Résumé d’un entretien avec le Président Benès, le 12 juillet 1938*,” General Eugène Faucher, head of the French military mission in Prague, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, X, 467–68.
29. Coulondre, no. 223, confidential, 27 July 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, X, 519–20.
30. Litvinov to Aleksandrovskii and to A. F. Merekalov, Soviet ambassador in Berlin, 22 August 1938, *DIMS*, 174–75; Bonnet to Coulondre, nos. 493–94, *réserve*, 27 Aug. 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, X, 843; and Payart, nos. 640–42, 30 Aug. 1938, *ibid.*, 874–75.
31. “*Note du Ministre des Affaires étrangères*,” 26 Aug. 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, X, 840.
32. Bonnet to Payart, nos. 498–502, secret, *réserve*, 31 Aug. 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, X, 899–900.
33. Ronald Campbell, British chargé d’affaires in Paris, to Halifax, no. 225, 31 Aug. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 194; and Sir Eric Phipps, British ambassador in Paris, to Halifax, no. 561 saving, 3 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 219–20.
34. Steiner, “Crisis,” 763; *Na prieme u Stalina*, 239; Litvinov to Aleksandrovskii, 2 Sept. 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 470–71; and Payart, nos. 653–59, 2 Sept. 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, X, 934–35.
35. Phipps, no. 573 saving, 6 Sept. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 255–56; Phipps, no. 579 saving, 8 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 269–70; Maiskii, *Dnevnik*, 20 Aug. & 8 Sept. 1938, I, 251 & 267–68; and Carley, 1939, 51–55.
36. Litvinov (Geneva) to NKID, immediate, 11 Sept. 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 487–88.
37. “Conversation with Fierlinger,” Potemkin’s *dnevnik*, no. 6430, secret, 15 September 1938, AVPRF, f. 0138, o. 19, 128, d. 1, ll. 45–46; and Fierlinger to Czechoslovak foreign ministry, 15 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 215.
38. Phipps to Halifax, nos. 243, 244 & 246, by telephone, 13 Sept. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 309–312; and Masaryk to Czechoslovak foreign ministry, 14 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 211–12.
39. Phipps to Halifax, no. 250, by telephone, 14 Sept. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 323.
40. Maiskii, *Dnevnik*, 14 Sept. 1938, I, 270–71; Crutzescu to Comnen, no. 3412, 15 Sept. 1938, AMAE, f. 71/Romania, vol. 103, fol. 124; Litvinov to NKID, 15 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 213–14; and Comnen to Romanian foreign ministry, no. 21, 15 Sept. 1938, AMAE, f. 71/Little Entente, vol. 29, fol. 28.
41. Osuský to Czechoslovak foreign ministry, 19 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 235–36; “*Compte rendu d’un Entretien de M. Georges Bonnet avec M. Osusky à 12h.30*,” 19 Sept. 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, XI, 347–48; Maiskii, *Dnevnik*, 19 Sept. 1938, I, 273–74; *Carnets secrets de Jean Zay*, 19–20 Sept. 1938, 3–7; Lacroix, nos. 2219–20, *réserve*, 20 Sept. 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, XI, 361; “*Note du Département*,” 21 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 394; “*Note du Ministre . . .*,” 21 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 397–98; and Krofta’s record of Beneš’s conversation with the French and British ministers in Prague, 21 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 244–45.
42. Maiskii, *Dnevnik*, 21 Sept. 1938, I, 275–76.
43. Phipps, no. 605 saving, 20 Sept. 1938, C10251/5302/18, FO 371 21777.
44. Aleksandrovskii to NKID, 19 Sept. 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 498–499; excerpt from Politburo protocol no. 64, 20 Sept. 1938, *Politbiuro TsK RKP(b)*, 363–364 & n. 1; Potemkin to Aleksandrovskii, 20 Sept. 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 500; and excerpt from Aleksandrovskii to NKID, 21 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 244.
45. Fierlinger to Czechoslovak foreign ministry, 20 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 240–41.
46. Maiskii, *Dnevnik*, 22 & 23 Sept. 1938, I, 276–80.
47. S. S. Aleksandrovskii, “Munich : Witness’s Account,” *International Affairs* (Moscow), no. 12 (1988): 119–32; and “Conversation with . . . Fierlinger, 22 Sept. 1938,” Potemkin’s *dnevnik*, no. 6449, secret, AVPRF, f. 0138, o. 19, 128, d. 1, ll. 69–70. For comment on the historiography of these events, see M. J. Carley, “Soviet Foreign Policy in the West, 1936–1941” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56, 7 (2004): 1081–92.
48. Aleksandrovskii to NKID, highest priority, transmitted by telephone, 22 Sept. 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 515–16; Surits to NKID, highest priority, 22 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 514; “Record of conversation . . . with the Polish chargé d’affaires [Tadeusz] Jankowski,” Potemkin, 23 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 516–17; Coulondre, nos. 713–16, 23 Sept. 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, XI, 486–87; and Bonnet to Lacroix, no. 881, very urgent, *réserve*, 24 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 501.
49. Herbrand Edward, Earl de la Warr, Lord Privy Seal (Geneva), no. 52, 15 Sept. 1938, C9953/5302/18, FO 371 21776; Crutzescu to Comnen, no. 2435, 18 Sept. 1938, AMAE, f. 71/Romania, vol. 103, ff. 152–53; Joseph Kennedy, U.S. ambassador in London, to Hull, no. 1018, 25 Sept. 1938,

*FRUS*, 1938, I, 652–54; Comnen (Geneva) to Romanian foreign ministry, no. 5, 10 Sept. 1938, AMAE, f. 71/Romania, vol. 103, fol. 61.

50. Djuvara, no. 3893, 13 Sept. 1938, AMAE, f. 71/special files, vol. 343, fol. 12; Djuvara, no. 3898, 15 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, fol. 21; Djuvara, no. 38200, 16 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, fol. 24; Djuvara, no. 38206, 22 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, ff. 34–35.

51. Ragsdale, *Munich Crisis*, 111–26.

52. Fierlinger to Czechoslovak foreign ministry, 22 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 265; and Coulondre, nos. 710–12, 22 Sept. 1938, *DDF*, 2<sup>e</sup>, XI, 446–47.

53. “Conversation with . . . Fierlinger on 23 September 1938,” Potemkin’s *dnevnik*, no. 6451, secret, AVPRF, f. 0138, o. 19, 128, d. 1, ll. 71–72; and Fierlinger to Czechoslovak foreign ministry, 10 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 204–05.

54. Renaud Meltz, *Alexis Léger, dit Saint-John Perse* (Paris, 2008), 518–26; and *Carnets secrets de Jean Zay*, 21–22 Sept. 1938, 7–9.

55. Coulondre, nos. 718–19, 720, 724–27, 23, 24, & 27 Sept. 1938, MAÉ, *Bureau du chiffre, Télégrammes à l’arrivée de Moscou, janvier 1938–23 août 1939*, Bonnet to Coulondre, no. 555, 28 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*; Djuvara, no. 38206, 22 Sept. 1938, AMAE, f. 71/special files, vol. 343, ff. 36–38; and Phipps to Halifax, no. 286, 23 Sept. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 489.

56. Phipps to Halifax, 24 Sept. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 509–10; Aleksandrovskii to NKID, 21 Sept. 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 735, n. 149; and Potemkin to Aleksandrovskii, 21 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 510.

57. Masaryk to Czechoslovak foreign ministry, 24 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 284; and Maiskii, *Dnevnik*, 24 Sept. 1938, I, 280–83.

58. Phipps to Halifax, no. 292, by telephone, 24 Sept. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 510; Halifax to Phipps, no. 330, by telephone, 25 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 535; and Phipps to Halifax, no. 302, 26 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 543–44.

59. Maiskii, *Dnevnik*, 25 Sept. 1938, I, 283–84; Djuvara to Comnen, no. 38202, 17 Sept. 1938, AMAE, f. 71/special files, vol. 343, fol. 27; Phipps to Halifax, no. 290, by telephone, 24 Sept. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 509–10; and Bullitt, no. 1509, 19 Sept. 1938, *FRUS*, 1938, I, 620–21.

60. Maiskii, *Dnevnik*, 26 Sept. 1938, I, 284–85. Cf., “Record of An Anglo–French Conversation . . .,” 25 & 26 Sept. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 520–41; and Halifax to Phipps, no. 342, 27 Sept. 1938, *ibid.*, 575–76 & n. 1.

61. Phipps to Halifax, no. 320, by telephone, 28 Sept. 1938, *DBFP*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, II, 588.

62. Aleksandrovskii to NKID, 29 Sept. 1938, *DIMS*, 326–37; Steiner, “Crisis,” 769; and Comnen to Crutzescu, no. 60886, 10 Oct. 1938, AMAE, f. 71/Little Entente, vol. 29, fol. 116.

63. Meltz, *Alexis Léger*, 525.

64. “The Crisis: The Four Power Conference,” *Pathé Gazette*, [www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=20737](http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=20737).

65. “Munich Agreement Signed . . .,” *Pathé Gazette*, [www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=50545](http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=50545).

66. Aleksandrovskii to NKID, 1 Oct. 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 552–53; and Maiskii, *Dnevnik*, 30 Sept. 1938, I, 289.

67. Litvinov (Paris) to NKID, immediate, 2 Oct. 1938, *DVP*, XXI, 555–56; Phipps, no. 645 saving, 1 Oct. 1938, C11379/5302/18, FO 371 21778; and “Berlin, Paris, Rome,” *Pathé Gazette*, <http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=20746>.

68. “Meeting with Coulondre, 19.X-1938,” Litvinov’s *dnevnik*, secret, AVPRF, f. 0136, o. 22, 172, d. 863, ll. 9–10.

69. Thanks to Professor Robert Johnson, University of Toronto, for pointing out to me this Soviet response.

70. Kenneth Young (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart, 1915–1946*, 2 vols. (London, 1973), I, entries of 4 & 17 Oct. 1938, 399, 402; Comnen to Richard Franasovici, Romanian minister in Warsaw, 8 Oct. 1938, AMAE, f. 71/Romania, vol. 259, ff. 96–100; and Bullitt to Hull, no. 1602, 26 Sept. 1938, *FRUS*, 1938, I, 667–69.

71. Surits to Litvinov, no. 347, secret, 12 Oct. 1938, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 2, 17, d. 165, ll. 201–192; Maiskii to Litvinov, no. 189/s, secret, 25 Oct. 1938, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 2, 11, d. 17, ll. 83–76; Litvinov to Surits, no. 5524/L, secret, 4 Nov. 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 148, d. 158, ll. 75–76; Litvinov to Surits, no. 5496/L, secret, 19 Oct. 1938, *ibid.*, l. 72; Surits to Litvinov, no. 362/s, secret, 11 Nov. 1938, AVPRF, f. 011, o. 2, 17, d. 165, ll. 229–222; and Surits to Litvinov, no. 410, secret, 27 Dec. 1938, *ibid.*, ll. 255–238.



72. Litvinov to Surits, no. 5631/L, secret, 19 Dec. 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 148, d. 158, ll. 88–90.
73. Litvinov to Surits, no. 5675/L, secret, 31 Dec. 1938, AVPRF, f. 05, o. 18, 148, d. 158, ll. 100–03.
74. Carley, *1939*, chap. 4.
75. O. V. Khlevniuk, *Master of the House: Stalin and His Inner Circle* (New Haven, 2009), 251.
76. *Na prieme u Stalina*, 228–39.