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Geoffrey Roberts

The Fall of Litvinov: A Revisionist View

Why did Stalin dismiss Litvinov from his post of People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs in May 1939? The hitherto accepted view is summarized by Richard Overy and Andrew Wheatcroft in their textbook on *The Road to War*:

On 4 May Litvinov was sacked . . . In his place Stalin appointed Vyacheslav Molotov, Chairman of the Council of Commissars, a noted Soviet nationalist, whose sympathies had long been with a pro-German rather than pro-western foreign policy . . . One of Stalin's intimates, his appointment as Commissar for Foreign Affairs was a signal that the era of collective security was past. Berlin understood the implication. During May there were regular contacts between the two sides as they explored what each had to offer.¹

In line with this interpretation, for the majority of historians (including nowadays a number of 'Soviet' colleagues), Litvinov's fall is part and parcel of the story of the negotiations that four months later culminated in the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. Indeed, Litvinov's dismissal is seen as a pivotal event in the Soviet turn to rapprochement with Germany in spring 1939.

Notwithstanding its popularity, this orthodox account of events has always faced a major problem: Litvinov's replacement by Molotov was followed not by a change in Soviet foreign policy, not by a turn to Germany, but by the continued pursuit of a triple alliance with Great Britain and France. Moscow did not abandon the policy of collective security until August 1939. Only when the negotiations with the British and French failed to produce an outcome satisfactory to Stalin did Moscow turn to a deal with Berlin.²

The traditional riposte to the foregoing argument is that the triple alliance negotiations were not the only or even the main line of Soviet policy in 1939. Alongside the negotiations with the western powers

ran political contacts with the Germans, it is said, contacts which led finally to the Nazi–Soviet Pact of 23 August 1939.

Wholly based on German documentation, this interpretation of nazi–Soviet discussions in the pre-pact period has always been open to question on the grounds that it mistakes German wishful-thinking for Soviet intentions and policy. With the publication from the Soviet archives of Moscow's version of these discussions,³ the view that 'from May to July the Soviets negotiated openly with Britain and France and secretly with the Germans'⁴ has become untenable. The new Soviet evidence shows that until the end of July 1939 Moscow treated all approaches from the Germans with the utmost suspicion. Before that time there were no negotiations, secret or otherwise, between the Soviet Union and Germany. Far from auguring a turn to rapprochement with Germany, Litvinov's departure from office was followed by a period in Soviet–German relations characterized by the passivity and indecisiveness of Moscow's German policy, indeed by the Soviet leadership's neglect of this dimension of their foreign strategy and diplomacy.⁵

Perhaps the only thing that can be salvaged from the wreckage of the orthodox interpretation of Litvinov's dismissal is some notion that, by appointing Molotov foreign minister, Stalin was preparing for the contingency of a possible deal with Hitler. In view of Litvinov's Jewish heritage and his militant anti-nazism, that is not an unreasonable supposition. But it is a hypothesis for which there is as yet no evidence. Moreover, we shall see that what evidence there is suggests that Stalin's decision was determined by a quite different set of circumstances and calculations.

The inadequacy of the orthodox view of Litvinov's dismissal was apparent long before the publication from the Soviet archives of Moscow's account of its relations with Berlin. But what was the alternative to the signal-to-the-Germans hypothesis of the orthodox school of thought?

The answer was essentially an inversion of the orthodox interpretation: Litvinov's replacement by Molotov was not a signal to Berlin, but to the British and French. This alternative account of Litvinov's fall emphasizes the fact that it came at the end of a wretched fortnight for Soviet diplomacy during which London and Paris had responded in a desultory fashion to Moscow's triple alliance plan — a plan which was no more than a codification of a

series of Anglo-French suggestions, or so the Soviets believed.⁶ The last straw came on 3 May when Seeds, the British Ambassador in Moscow, informed Litvinov that London had still not formulated a reply to the Soviet triple alliance proposals of 17 April.⁷ 'It had now become blatantly obvious that, with Litvinov as Commissar, the British felt that they could treat Moscow as a pliant suitor rather than as an equal partner who had alternative options available', comments Jonathan Haslam.⁸ As Astakhov, the Soviet Chargé in Berlin, told Coulondre, the French Ambassador to Germany, Litvinov's dismissal was a sign of Moscow's displeasure with the western powers' response to Soviet collective security proposals.⁹

The strength of this alternative view of Litvinov's sacking is its consistency with the fact of continuity in Soviet foreign policy in the period immediately following Molotov's appointment. But it also begs an important question: why did Moscow's displeasure with the western powers take the form that it did? Why dismiss Litvinov rather than using some other means to send a strong signal to the British and French?

The answer to this query is on the surface a very powerful and compelling one: that the initial failure of the Soviet collective security proposals of 17 April was Litvinov's failure. The assumption here is that the main architect and advocate of the Soviet triple alliance initiative was Litvinov. Given Litvinov's role in the Soviet drive for collective security from 1933 onwards this is a highly plausible assumption. It becomes even more compelling when placed in the context of a further hypothesis that throughout the 1930s Litvinov was constantly battling against opponents of the policy of collective security within the Soviet leadership.¹⁰ The triple alliance proposals then take on the appearance of Litvinov's final gambit in the inner-leadership struggle around collective security. In Jonathan Haslam's dramatic words, the triple alliance plan 'was Litvinov's last throw'.¹¹ The failure of the plan to make any headway with the British and French (at least initially) weakened Litvinov's position within the Soviet leadership and paved the way for his replacement by Molotov — identified as one of the critics of collective security. Litvinov's fall did not result in an immediate abandonment of collective security, the argument concludes, because Stalin decided to let the negotiations with Paris and London first run their course.

That this alternative interpretation of Litvinov's dismissal has considerable coherence and plausibility is beyond question. However, there is a substantial body of evidence from Soviet sources that

can be deployed to cast doubt on its veracity. Firstly, there is some recent 'glasnost' writing and evidence which suggests that Litvinov's sacking was primarily, perhaps even exclusively, connected to Soviet internal politics rather than to foreign policy, and that the desire to send some diplomatic signals was at most a secondary feature of Stalin's calculations, more likely an afterthought. Even more surprising there is, secondly, a mountain of evidence, which has been staring historians in the face for over twenty years,¹² that, if anything, Litvinov was sacked because of his *lack* of enthusiasm for the Soviet triple alliance proposal of 17 April and not because he was the architect of a policy initiative that failed to bring results.

The evidence on the internal dimension of the Litvinov affair is still highly fragmentary. But some important new details emerged with the publication of Dmitrii Volkogonov's 'glasnost' biography of Stalin and that of Litvinov by Zinovii Sheinis. Their writings indicate that Litvinov's internal political position had been deteriorating for several months before his ousting. By spring 1939 it was not so much a question of would Litvinov go, but when.

Volkogonov describes this process from Stalin's angle.¹³ According to Volkogonov, from the beginning of 1939 the Soviet dictator's attention was increasingly focused on foreign policy questions. Regular and frequent discussions on the international situation were held in the politburo and in Stalin's inner circle. Litvinov was involved in many of these discussions, but Stalin came more and more to rely on Molotov for advice on foreign policy. Stalin's speech to the 18th congress of the Communist Party when the Soviet leader delivered his first major pronouncement on foreign policy in five years was, for example, heavily influenced by Molotov. As to Litvinov, Stalin, says Volkogonov, 'was not happy with the People's Commissar: too often he had opinions of his own.'¹⁴

Litvinov's estrangement from Stalin coincided with an event that may well have been a critical factor in his downfall: the rise to power of Lavrenti Beriya. Beriya succeeded Yezhov as effective head of the NKVD in autumn 1938. The early part of 1939 was a period of consolidation and extension of his new-found power and influence, including, as we shall see, within the Narkomindel.¹⁵

Beriya's active political role in Litvinov's downfall remains unclear, but he does seem to have played a prominent practical role. According to Volkogonov, Stalin ordered Beriya to keep an eye on

Litvinov. Litvinov's notes and diaries were read by the NKVD and his co-workers and friends were subjected to 'night discussions'. Around Litvinov there developed a political vacuum and all the signs of his impending arrest.

Litvinov's biographer, Sheinis, supplies some more details of the position Litvinov reputedly found himself in during the early part of 1939.¹⁶ He was not consulted about new staff appointments. Diplomats reported directly to Molotov rather than through Litvinov. Articles about foreign policy appeared in the Soviet press without his knowledge (including several by Potemkin, Litvinov's deputy). At one point, according to Sheinis, Litvinov wrote a letter of resignation but, after a struggle with his conscience (these were perilous times for the Soviet state), he did not send it.

These events had an extraordinary climax. On the night of 3–4 May, relates Sheinis, the Narkomindel's headquarters in Moscow were surrounded by NKVD troops. Arriving in the morning Molotov, Malenkov and Beriia informed Litvinov of his removal from office. By 10.00 am Litvinov was on his way to his dacha, where he was met by a platoon of NKVD security officers — there for his own protection, Beriia told Litvinov over the telephone.

Litvinov remained in exile until November 1941 when he was appointed Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to the United States. In 1943 he returned to the Soviet Union to work in the Narkomindel's central apparatus. He died in obscurity in 1951.

While very suggestive, these secondary, largely undocumented, accounts by Volkogonov and Sheinis should not be taken as definitive. Neither are as yet backed up by any hard evidence. However, their picture of Litvinov as essentially the victim of an internal political purge is consonant with the known circumstances and documentary evidence regarding his removal from office.

Litvinov's banishment from office appears to have formed part and parcel of the final stage in the Stalinist purge of the Narkomindel. This purge began in early 1939 and continued through the year and into 1940, particularly affecting the Narkomindel's central apparatus. Prominent victims included Gnedin (Press Officer), Korzhenko (Personnel Director), Barkov (Chief of Protocol), Nazarov (Litvinov's secretary), Alexandrovsky (Ambassador to Czechoslovakia at the time of the Munich crisis), Merekalov (Ambassador to Germany until April 1939) and Astakhov (the famous go-between of the Nazi–Soviet negotiations of August 1939). The lower ranks were

also devastated. According to one report, up to ninety per cent of Narkomindel officials were dismissed. Litvinov's house magazine, *Le Journal de Moscou*, was also abruptly shut down. One of the main instruments of this purge was Beriia's close associate, Vladimir Dekanozov. His appointment as Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs on 4 May 1939 was but one example (the young Andrei Gromyko was another) of the beginning of a wholesale change in the Narkomindel's diplomatic personnel, as the Chicherin and Litvinov appointees of the 1920s and 1930s (most of whom had by this time been executed, imprisoned, dismissed or demoted) were replaced.¹⁷

In terms of documents relating to Litvinov's downfall, we have the following at our disposal. Firstly, at 11.00 pm on 3 May 1939, a message signed by Stalin was sent to all Soviet embassies. This read:

In view of a serious conflict between the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars comrade Molotov and the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs comrade Litvinov because of the disloyal attitude of comrade Litvinov towards the USSR Council of People's Commissars comrade Litvinov has asked the Central Committee to relieve him of his duties as People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs. The CC . . . has complied with Comrade Litvinov's request and has relieved him of the duties of People's Commissar. Comrade Molotov has been appointed to double as People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs.¹⁸

Secondly, there is the partial text of a confidential edict on Litvinov's dismissal which refers to his 'mistaken positions, especially in relation to the policy of England and France'.¹⁹

Thirdly, there are two statements by Molotov on Litvinov's dismissal made at internal Narkomindel meetings. The first was a meeting in July 1939:

Comrade Litvinov failed to ensure the pursuance of the party line, the line of the CPSU Central Committee in the People's Commissariat. It is wrong to say that before the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs was non-Bolshevik . . . but as regards the choice and training of the personnel, the commissariat was not quite Bolshevik, because comrade Litvinov was clinging to a number of people alien and hostile to the party and to the Soviet state, and he displayed a non-party attitude to the new people who had come to serve at the commissariat.²⁰

Molotov's second statement was ten years later at a meeting in January 1949:

The decision of the CC . . . in May 1939 was prompted by the need to bring the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs closer to the CC and to make it a more direct organ of the CC, in order to end the period when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was a refuge for the opposition and for all kinds of dubious semi-party elements. Accordingly, rotten workers or those with any such entanglements were removed.²¹

Fourthly, there is a text of a resolution passed at a staff meeting in the Narkomindel on 23 July 1939:

With the coming of the new leadership headed by Comrade Molotov a Bolshevik order began to be established at the People's Commissariat. Within this brief span of time immense work has been carried out to spare the People's Commissariat from unsuitable, dubious and hostile elements.²²

Finally, one should note the government line on Litvinov's replacement by Molotov disseminated by Soviet officials in diplomatic circles. This was to the effect that the appointment of Molotov as foreign minister, the number two in the Soviet leadership, reflected the new importance attached to foreign policy — a line that was repeated in an official booklet on the diplomatic prelude to the second world war published in 1948. Further, that Molotov's appointment signalled no change in foreign policy, which was decided by the Soviet Communist Party and state and not by individuals.²³

Taken as a whole, these fragments of evidence point to the following conclusion: Litvinov was the victim of an internal political purge whose objective was to extend the power and control of Stalin's inner circle in the field of foreign policy. Significantly, Stalin's disposal of the independent-minded Litvinov²⁴ and his placement in the PCFA of his own man, Molotov, marked the beginning of the Soviet dictator's active and extensive involvement in foreign affairs.²⁵ As war approached, Stalin was evidently determined that foreign policy should be firmly in his hands.

So, the supposition is that Litvinov's sacking was not a foreign policy move at all and that its conjunction with a particular moment in the Anglo-Soviet-French triple negotiations of 1939 was purely fortuitous. But can that really be true? Surely at the very least the *timing* of Litvinov's dismissal was connected to foreign policy matters? What about the hypothesis that it was the failure of Litvinov's last collective security initiative that sealed his fate? What was the nature of Litvinov's 'disloyalty' and of his clash with Molotov? What were his supposed mistaken positions in relation to British and French policy? As we shall see, the answers to these questions may turn out to be the most surprising of all.

This section of the article will attempt to show that the available evidence indicates the following.

Firstly, that Litvinov was certainly not the enthusiastic proponent of the triple alliance that his reputation would lead one to believe he was.

Secondly, that Litvinov was in all probability severely sceptical of the 17 April triple alliance plan and that it may even be the case that he opposed this most famous of all Soviet collective security initiatives.

Thirdly, that the likely inspiration behind the triple alliance proposal was Molotov and/or Stalin (or their underlings) — and that this explains the dogged pursuit of this objective after Litvinov's departure.

Fourthly, that if any foreign policy issue influenced Stalin's decision to get rid of Litvinov it was probably the latter's lukewarm attitude to the triple alliance project.

None of these contentions will sit very well with those for whom Litvinov is a saintly figure in a Soviet morality tale about the struggle for collective security at home and abroad. Yet their evidential starting-point is the same: the strength of Litvinov's commitment — which had no equal in the Soviet leadership — to the pursuit of collective security. This commitment, however, was dealt a severe blow by Munich. Litvinov's response to the Anglo-French 'betrayal' of Czechoslovakia was an intensification of his already severe suspicion, mistrust and hostility towards London and Paris. This is not to say that Litvinov abandoned the collective security policy after Munich. In formal terms he maintained his commitment to the policy he had pursued for the previous five years. But such was the depth of Litvinov's personal disillusionment in the aftermath of Munich (presumably not helped by his growing political isolation in the Soviet Union) that his assessment of the prospects for collective security bordered on total pessimism. Litvinov's state of mind in this respect can be amply documented by reference to his correspondence with the Soviet ambassadors in Britain and France during this period.

'The immediate future evidently belongs to Chamberlain, unless Hitler and Mussolini really go too far', Litvinov wrote to Maisky in London on 17 October 1938.

Indeed, if the English and French were able to previously offer resistance but did not want to, the question now is whether they, having lost their positions, will be able to oppose the onslaught of the aggressors even if they want to, and whether there really is any limit to their compliant attitude.²⁶

And two days later, Litvinov informed Suritz in Paris that 'there is no doubt that for the sake of reaching an agreement with Germany and Italy, Chamberlain and Daladier-Bonnet will go to any lengths'.²⁷

Such post-Munich laments about the compliant attitude of the appeasers in London and Paris continued to dominate Litvinov's assessment of the diplomatic situation. In February 1939, for example, he wrote to Maisky:

Your letter has not convinced me that Hitler and Mussolini may confront Chamberlain with the unavoidability of war already this year. I believe both Chamberlain and, still more so, the French have decided to avoid war, at least in the coming years, at all costs, and I would even say at any price. It is incorrect to think that the resources of concessions have run out or are running out.²⁸

In line with this pessimistic assessment was Litvinov's cautious response to the prospect of changes in Anglo-French foreign policy following the German occupation of Prague in March 1939:

The Czechoslovak events seem to have aroused public opinion in both England and France . . . Nonetheless, if in the immediate future Hitler does not commit any new acts of expansion and perhaps even makes a new peace gesture, Chamberlain and Daladier will again start defending the Munich line. They have by no means surrendered yet. The mood built up in governmental circles in favour of co-operation with the USSR cannot therefore be considered a lasting one . . .

For five years in the foreign policy field we have been making suggestions for the organization of peace and security, but the Powers have been ignoring them and acting in defiance of them. If England and France are really changing their line, let them either make known their own views on our previously advanced proposals or else make their own proposals. The initiative must be left to them.²⁹

These remarks of Litvinov are from a letter to Maisky on 19 March. Their context is an approach by the British to Maisky the day before to ask what the Soviet attitude would be in the event of a German attack on Rumania. Litvinov's response was to propose a conference of the USSR, Britain, France, Poland and Rumania. London countered with a proposal for a joint declaration on the territorial integrity and security of Eastern Europe. This was accepted by Litvinov but the British then dropped the idea and on 31 March Chamberlain announced in the Commons Britain's unilateral guarantee of the independence of Poland. During the course of these diplomatic exchanges it became apparent to Moscow that the idea of a joint declaration had been dropped because Beck, the Polish Foreign Minister, objected to entering any combination which included the USSR.³⁰

The British action in first attempting to involve and then excluding the USSR from the defence of Eastern Europe against German expansionism increased Litvinov's antipathy toward London and to any involvement in Anglo-French political manoeuvres. On 4 April he wrote to Maisky:

It is possible that by his unexpected readiness to come to the aid of Poland and Rumania Chamberlain is prompting Hitler to direct his aggression to the northeast. Chamberlain is counting on us to resist occupation of the Baltic area and expecting that this will lead to the Soviet-German clash he has been hoping for . . .

Of course we cannot be content with the explanations given by the English and their references to Poland [about the dropping of the joint declaration idea], for the legitimate question arises as to why England should be so considerate with regard to Beck's doubts and objections. So far it seems to be a question of assistance not to England but to Poland; so it is up to Chamberlain and Daladier, not Beck to have the last word. This is not the first time England is addressing to us proposals for co-operation and then taking them back . . . It is intolerable for us to be in the situation of the man who is invited to a party and then asked not to come because the other guests do not wish to meet him. We would prefer to be crossed off the list of guests altogether.³¹

On 7 and 10 April, Suritz in Paris was approached by Bonnet with suggestions about some kind of collective security agreement between the USSR and France in defence of Eastern Europe.³² Litvinov gave these short shrift too. On 11 April he wrote to Suritz:

Bonnet is no more inclined to assist Poland, Rumania or anyone else in Eastern Europe than he was inclined to help Czechoslovakia . . . It is therefore necessary to answer him in such a way that he would not be able . . . to refer to our replies in justification of his own passivity and his capitulation position. It does not follow from this, however, that we are obliged to respond to his vague hints with any concrete proposals or by disclosing our position. Indeed, in their discussions with us after the episode of the joint declaration, the British and French have not hinted at any kind of concrete proposal or any kind of treaty with us. If we analyse these discussions it becomes clear that what they want is to get some kind of binding promise from us without entering into any agreement with us and without undertaking any commitments in respect to us. We are to undertake before the whole world . . . to assist Poland and Rumania at their first request and in whatever forms they should indicate to us. But why should we undertake such unilateral commitments? We are told that it is in our interests to protect Poland and Rumania against Germany. But we shall always be aware of our own interests and will do whatever they require us to do. Why then should we commit ourselves in advance, without deriving any advantage from those commitments?³³

So, on 11 April Litvinov's stated position was to sit tight and await further developments, that in particular the USSR should not be

beguiled into any collective security commitments or initiative of its own. Less than a week later Moscow was to offer the British and French a full-blown treaty of mutual assistance and a joint guarantee of the whole of Eastern Europe. What explains this sudden and dramatic change in position? During the intervening period, did Litvinov rediscover his collective security zeal? Or perhaps it was the case that in proposing the triple alliance Litvinov was speaking with his own voice, whereas his previous statements were articulations of an official line determined elsewhere? An attempt to answer these questions will be made in the course of a continuation of the narrative of the Soviet path to the triple alliance negotiations with Britain and France. But before that, some general, contextual points are in order.

Firstly, the above quotations from Litvinov's correspondence are not isolated instances of negativism and pessimism. The resistance and hostility to Anglo-French overtures for discussion and co-operation that they display are typical of *all* his letters, telegrams and reports in the period from Munich until his dismissal in May 1939.³⁴ If Litvinov was expressing anything other than his own views and feelings in this respect, then it is a performance that defies belief.

Secondly, it is important to note that Litvinov's obduracy in response to changes in British and French policy was not wholly shared by Maisky and Suritz. They agreed with Litvinov's diagnosis of the political and diplomatic manoeuvres of the Anglo-French appeasers but tended to think that there was more scope for positive Soviet initiatives in the space created by these manoeuvres. They were particularly mindful of the different forces at work in British and French politics and of the need for the USSR to engage tactically with the opponents of appeasement.³⁵ It is reasonable to assume that Suritz's and Maisky's views played some role in inner-Soviet discussions of strategy and tactics and may finally have influenced Litvinov himself.

Thirdly, it is necessary to bring Litvinov's attitude towards Poland into the picture. Poland's involvement in any projected collective security arrangements in Eastern Europe was crucial. However, Litvinov's hostility towards Poland was even greater than that in relation to Britain and France. 'Until Poland received a direct blow from Germany it would hardly be possible to change Beck's line', Litvinov told Payart, the French Chargé in Moscow, on 29 March.³⁶ Significantly, after Litvinov's departure from office, Soviet policy towards Poland changed course as Moscow attempted for a period to conciliate Warsaw into co-operation with its triple alliance plan.³⁷

Returning to the narrative of the Moscow origins of the triple alliance plan, the shift in the Soviet position began with an invitation from Halifax to Maisky to see him on 11 April. He informed the Soviet Ambassador that Britain was proposing to issue a guarantee of Greek security and possibly of Rumanian too. London was also prepared to offer Turkey a guarantee if that was what the Turks wanted. Halifax wanted to know what aid the Soviet Union could offer Rumania in the event of a German attack.³⁸ Litvinov relayed Moscow's response on 13 April: the USSR was not indifferent to Rumania's fate and would be prepared to take part in aiding Rumania but wanted to know what assistance Britain and other countries envisaged giving.³⁹ This was on the same day that Britain and France issued their guarantees to Greece and Rumania.⁴⁰ On 15 April, Seeds in Moscow followed up Halifax's enquiry and asked Litvinov whether or not the USSR was prepared to declare that it would aid any of its European neighbours that resisted acts of aggression against them and requested such aid.⁴¹ Meanwhile, on 14 April, Suritz had reported from Paris that Bonnet was proposing a Franco-Soviet mutual assistance agreement in defence of Rumania and Poland.⁴²

The moment of a decisive turn in Soviet policy had arrived and, according to the Soviet historian Mikhail Semiryaga, on 15 April Litvinov wrote a note to Stalin reporting on the British approach and setting out four conditions for co-operation with Britain and France.⁴³ Semiryaga gives no details of Litvinov's note but presumably one of the conditions concerned the precise commitments that were to be undertaken, for the next day Litvinov called in Seeds to ask what assistance to Rumania and other countries the British envisaged themselves and the Soviets giving.⁴⁴ In the event, Moscow did not wait for a reply from London. On 17 April, Litvinov summoned Seeds from the theatre and presented him with an eight-point plan for a triple alliance and for collective security in Eastern Europe.⁴⁵

What are we to make of this story? Are we to believe that Litvinov grasped the British and French proposals and used them to revive his collective security policy? Such a scenario is not implausible but it is very unlikely to be true. Firstly, as we have seen, the triple alliance proposal represented a complete reversal of Litvinov's stance that the initiative on concrete policy proposals should be left to the British and French. Secondly, in his two meetings with Seeds on 15 and 16 April, Litvinov betrayed no sign of seeking to exploit an opening for

collective security. At both meetings he gave the British ambassador a hard time and reported in commensurate terms. Thirdly, and this is the crucial point, there is the evidence of Litvinov's negative assessment of the prospects for the success of the Soviet proposals in the period immediately following their presentation to London and Paris. On 23 April he wrote to Suritz:

So far no reply has been received from the English to our proposal. They may again be waiting until Hitler's next speech on the 28th — just in case there is a hint of peace and an excuse to return to Munich conditions. I do not at all consider such a relapse on Chamberlain's and Bonnet's part to be impossible.⁴⁶

On 25 April, Suritz telegraphed the French draft of a mutual assistance agreement between the USSR, Britain and France in defence of Eastern Europe.⁴⁷ Litvinov's initial comment was that 'the wording of the draft is humiliating' and in what appears to be an internal assessment of the French proposal Litvinov wrote on 28 April:

Bonnet's modified proposal sounds almost like a mockery. If the original proposal was at least couched in such a way as to give a semblance of reciprocity and equality, and assistance to us was offered also in the event of our taking action on our own initiative, according to the new proposal we will receive assistance only in the event that Britain and France should, on their own initiative, take action leading to a conflict with Germany and in the event that they receive our assistance.⁴⁸

These words are hardly those of the architect of a major policy initiative — an initiative that had had no time in which to bear fruit. More likely, they were the words of a sceptic, of a reluctant drafter of a set of proposals with which he did not really agree and of someone who felt that his forebodings of their failure were being proved right.

But if Litvinov was not the inspiration behind the Soviet triple alliance plan, then who was? There is as yet no direct evidence that can help us answer this question. But there is evidence which suggests that the best guess is that their most likely sponsor was none other than Litvinov's successor, the much-maligned Molotov (and, probably, Stalin too).⁴⁹

The first set of clues concerning Molotov's involvement in framing the triple alliance proposal revolves around a telegram that the Soviet Premier sent to the President of Turkey on 15 April:

We believe that in connection with the new situation taking shape in the area of the Balkans and the Black Sea it would be expedient to have reciprocal consultations between representatives of Turkey and the USSR to map out possible measures of defence against aggression.⁵⁰

This intervention in foreign policy by Molotov — at the very moment when the triple alliance proposals were being formulated — represented a renewal of earlier Soviet approaches to Turkey at the time of the funeral of Turkish leader Kemal Atatürk in November 1938.⁵¹ The Soviet interlocutor on that occasion was Potemkin and, indeed, it was Potemkin who was despatched again at the end of April, this time on a diplomatic tour of Bulgaria, Rumania and Turkey. The aim of the trip was to explore the possibility of a Black Sea pact embracing these three countries and to sound out Ankara on a Soviet–Turkish mutual assistance agreement.⁵²

In assessing the significance of all this, three points should be borne in mind. Firstly, that point eight of the Soviet triple alliance plan concerned the need for joint negotiations with Turkey for a mutual assistance agreement — an issue that had hardly figured at all in pre-17 April discussions with the British and French. Secondly, that the shift in Soviet policy towards the triple alliance project appears to have been prompted by concerns about Rumanian security and that of south-eastern Europe (including Turkey) generally. Thirdly, it is likely that Potemkin was Molotov's man. Potemkin, you will recall, is mentioned by Sheinis as the author of foreign policy articles that Litvinov was not consulted about and Potemkin retained his position of Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs under Molotov (at least for a time).

What this first set of clues suggests then is that issues connected to Balkan security played a far larger part in inspiring the triple alliance initiative than has hitherto been noted and that Molotov was intimately involved in this dimension of Soviet foreign policy even before he became People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs.⁵³

The second set of clues relates to Molotov's behaviour after he replaced Litvinov. These suggest that far from being a reluctant inheritor of Litvinov's triple alliance policy Molotov was even more committed to it than his predecessor.

Molotov's reputation as Soviet foreign minister is that of a hard-headed and rude negotiator. But the tone and approach he adopted with the French and British on taking office was quite different. Compared to Litvinov, Molotov was moderate and conciliatory in his dealings with London and Paris, giving every sign of allowing the

triple alliance proposal a chance to succeed.⁵⁴ Of course, this was only initially the case. When London and Paris continued to drag their feet, Molotov reverted to his reputational type. But even then what is remarkable is the persistence with which Molotov pursued a triple alliance with Britain and France — despite mounting suspicion and hostility towards the western powers.

The same contrast between Litvinov's and Molotov's style and approach can be seen in their respective treatment of the Poles. Reading Litvinov's reports of his dealings with them it is plain that he thought there was no hope of collective security co-operation with Poland.⁵⁵ Molotov, on the other hand, concluded on 11 May that although 'Poland does not wish at the present to bind herself through any agreement with the USSR or to consent to the participation of the USSR in guaranteeing Poland . . . she does not exclude the latter in the future'.⁵⁶ And it was Molotov who instructed Potemkin to delay his departure from Warsaw on 10 May (he was returning from his Balkan tour) in order to meet Beck and suggest that the USSR would aid the Poles against Germany, if that was what they wanted.⁵⁷ This was the first in a series of Molotov overtures for a Soviet-Polish détente.

The final set of clues concerning the provenance of the Soviet triple alliance plan relates to the character of the proposals presented to the British and French. They were a radical set of demands: a five- to ten-year mutual assistance treaty backed up by a military convention; a comprehensive security guarantee of Eastern Europe from the Baltic to the Black Sea; demands that Germany be exclusively identified as the potential aggressor; and joint negotiations with Turkey. At the time they were presented there was nothing to suggest that Britain and France would be prepared to go so far — indeed all precedents suggested otherwise. The tabling of such grandiose and apparently impossible demands was not Litvinov's style at all; six years of difficult and ultimately fruitless collective security negotiations with the west had taught him caution if nothing else. On the other hand, the approach and style of the triple alliance plan — a series of sweeping and binding commitments disdainful of difficulties in implementation — was very much that of Stalin and Molotov who were party politicians rather than diplomats. The grand and inflexible aim of a triple alliance on Soviet terms was the very first foreign policy project pursued by Molotov and Stalin with their characteristic dogmatism but it was not to be the last.

In the light of all these considerations it is possible to formulate the

following hypothesis: that the foreign policy factor in Litvinov's downfall was the desire of Stalin and Molotov to take charge of foreign relations in order to pursue *their* policy of a triple alliance with Britain and France — a policy whose utility Litvinov doubted and may even have opposed or obstructed. It was this source of policy difference — very likely connected to issues of who was in charge of foreign affairs — that triggered the final decision to remove Litvinov from office.

It is necessary to end this article with an important qualification about its conclusions. The revisionist interpretation it has presented is no more than guesswork based on the available evidence. That evidence, however, contains major gaps, not the least of which is documentation on the internal deliberations that led to Litvinov's dismissal. Nor is there any real proof of Litvinov's private thinking and calculations apart from that contained in his official correspondence and reports. It may be that this revision will have to be revised in the light of new evidence. However, it is hoped that this article has demonstrated, beyond reasonable doubt, that Litvinov's fall from grace was far from being the simple affair depicted in previous historical accounts.

Notes

1. R. Overy and A. Wheatcroft, *The Road to War* (London 1989), 210.
2. On the Soviet Union's alliance negotiations with Britain and France, see the documents published in *SSSR v Borbe za Mir Nakanune Vtoroi Mirovoi Voiny* (Moscow 1971) (translated as *Soviet Peace Efforts on the Eve of World War II* [hereafter *SPE*], 2 vols, Moscow 1973). These documents form the basis of the interpretation in G. Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance: Stalin's Pact with Hitler* (London 1989), espec. chap. 7.
3. These documents on Soviet–German relations in 1939 are published in *God Krizisa, 1938–1939: Dokumenty i Materialy*, 2 vols. (Moscow 1990) (hereafter *God Krizisa*).
4. The quotation is from D.C. Watt's article on the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi–Soviet Pact published in *The Independent*, 21 August 1989.
5. For a detailed analysis of Soviet–German relations in 1939 based on the documents published in *God Krizisa*, op. cit., see G. Roberts, 'The Soviet Decision for a Pact with Nazi Germany', *Soviet Studies*, January 1992. See also, G. Roberts,

'Infamous Encounter? The Merekalov–Weizsäcker Meeting of 17 April 1939', *The Historical Journal*, December 1992.

6. See *SPE*, docs. 238 and 239.

7. *Ibid.*, doc. 267.

8. J. Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe 1933–39* (London 1984), 213.

9. *Documents Diplomatiques Français*, 2nd series, vol. 16, doc. 71.

10. The two main protagonists of the view that there was a deep split between Litvinov and other elements of the Soviet leadership over the policy of collective security are Haslam, *op. cit.*, and P.D. Raymond, *Conflict and Consensus in Soviet Foreign Policy 1933–1939*, PhD thesis, Pennsylvania State University 1979. Their views are criticized in Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance*, 46–52.

11. Haslam, *op. cit.*, 212.

12. Among the guilty men are Roberts in *The Unholy Alliance*, espec. chap. 6.

13. D. Volkogonov, *Triumf i Tragediya* (Moscow 1989), book 2, part 1, 11–16.

14. *Ibid.*, 15.

15. *Ibid.*, book 1, part 2, 280–5 and D.C. Watt, *How War Came* (London 1989), 115–23.

16. Z. Sheinis, *Maksim Maksimovich Litvinov* (Moscow 1989), 360–70.

17. On the purge see *ibid.*; Haslam, *op. cit.*, 214, 282; *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Soviet Union 1933–39*, 770–3; T. Uldricks, *Diplomacy and Ideology* (London 1986), 176–81; E. Gnedin, *Katastrofa i Vtoroye Rozhdeniye* (Amsterdam 1977); 'Zhizn i Smert Diplomata', *Izvestiya*, 27 July 1989, and the Sokolov and Roshchin articles cited in notes 18 and 20 below.

18. Cited by V. Sokolov, 'Narkomindel Maksim Litvinov', *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn*, April 1991, 119.

19. Cited by Sheinis, *op. cit.*, 365.

20. Cited by A. Roshchin, 'People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs Before World War II', *International Affairs* (Moscow), May 1988, 113–14.

21. Cited by Sokolov, *op. cit.*, 120.

22. Cited by Roshchin, *loc. cit.* To be fair to the historical record, Roshchin also relates in his memoirs that 'in the CPSU Central Committee they were dissatisfied with the results of the policy oriented primarily on co-operation with Britain and France, on participation in the League of Nations. The idea of collective security in Europe had little effect due to the position adopted by London and Paris.' Roshchin's memoir can be interpreted to mean that a decision had been taken to abandon collective security and with it Litvinov. I hope to show in this article that this was not the case and that the dissatisfaction with collective security led not to its abandonment but to a harder-line pursuit of it.

23. See, for example, *British Foreign Policy*, 2nd series, vol. 5, 429, 453 and 472, and *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Soviet Union 1933–39*, 505; *Falsifiers of History* (Moscow 1948), 14.

24. An interesting example of Litvinov's independence is reported by Sheinis (*op. cit.*, 362–3). At the end of April 1939, Maisky was in Moscow for consultations on the triple alliance negotiations. On the way to Moscow he had stopped off in Helsinki and talked to Erkkö, the Finnish Foreign Minister. At a meeting on 27 April Stalin demanded to know by what right Maisky had conducted this conversation. Litvinov explained that this was just a 'diplomatic conversation' arising from Maisky's stopover in Helsinki. But Stalin was not mollified. A Soviet review of Sheinis's book in *Novaya i*

Noveishaya Istoriya, no. 5, 1989, 203–6 suggests that differences over policy towards Finland may have been crucial to Litvinov's downfall. Apparently, Litvinov opposed what he saw as Stalin's and Molotov's exaggeration of difficulties in relation to Finland.

25. Jonathan Haslam suggests an interesting parallel between Stalin's appointment of Molotov in 1939 and that of Shevardnadze by Gorbachev in 1985. Both placed foreign policy in the hands of associates with little experience of foreign affairs — thus ensuring their own more direct control. See his *The Soviet Union and the Politics of Nuclear Weapons in Europe, 1969–87* (London 1989), 153.

26. *SPE*, doc. 22.

27. *Ibid.*, doc. 25.

28. *Ibid.*, doc. 128. This letter of Litvinov's of 19 February 1939 is in reply to a letter of Maisky's dated 10 February which is published in *God Krizisa*, doc. 150. The editors of both *SPE* and *God Krizisa* are mistaken in referring to a letter of Maisky's dated 10 January as the object of Litvinov's reply.

29. *Ibid.*, doc. 167.

30. On the joint-declaration episode see *ibid.*, docs 160, 161, 162, 164, 165, 169, 170, 176, 177, 182, 188, 194, 200, 201, 203, 204, 205, 210 and 211.

31. *Ibid.*, doc. 210.

32. *Ibid.*, doc. 215 and *God Krizisa*, doc. 260.

33. *SPE*, doc. 223. Note that a copy of this letter was also sent to Maisky. See doc. 224.

34. Citations concerning Litvinov's negative attitude to British and French policy could fill a whole book. Of particular interest and illustration, however, are the wholly negative tone and assessment of his reports on his meetings with British trade secretary, R. Hudson, who visited Moscow at the end of March. See *SPE*, doc. 186 and *God Krizisa*, docs 220, 225 and 230.

35. See, for example, Maisky's letter of 9 April 1939, *SPE*, doc. 218 and Suritz's letter of 11 April 1939, *SPE*, doc. 222.

36. *SPE*, doc. 195. Also, all Litvinov's reports of his meetings with the Poles in March/April 1939 in *SPE* and *God Krizisa*.

37. On the change in Soviet policy towards Poland after Molotov's appointment see Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance*, 131–2.

38. *SPE*, doc. 226.

39. *Ibid.*, doc. 230.

40. *Ibid.*, docs 228–9.

41. *Ibid.*, doc. 233.

42. *Ibid.*, doc. 232.

43. M. Semiryaga, 'Eshche Raz o "Krizisnom gode, 1939 ..."', *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya*, December 1989, 120.

44. *God Krizisa*, doc. 274.

45. *SPE*, docs 238–9.

46. *Ibid.*, doc. 249.

47. *Ibid.*, doc. 253.

48. *Ibid.*, doc. 255 and n. 106, 309.

49. Volkogonov, *op. cit.*, gives the impression that it was on Stalin's instructions that the triple alliance plan was drawn up, but there are no details and documentation.

50. *SPE*, doc. 234.

51. See *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki SSSR*, vol. 21 (Moscow 1977), docs 463, 464, 476 and 497.

52. On Potemkin's Balkan trip see *SPE*, docs 264, 265, 269, 270, 271, and 273 and *God Krizisa*, docs 297, 308, and 309. A short summary of this episode is given in Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance*, 167–8.

53. Of interest in connection with Molotov's involvement in Balkan security matters is that already on 3 May he was sending a telegram to Potemkin in Ankara about the importance of Turkish involvement in a Balkan front against German expansionism. See *God Krizisa*, n. 103, 392.

54. See Molotov's report on his meeting with the British ambassador on 8 May in *SPE* doc. 278 and his report on a meeting with Payart on 11 May in *God Krizisa*, doc. 337.

55. The following comment of Litvinov's on 13 April 1939 is typical of his attitude to Poland: 'Beck is deliberately trying to block all guarantees to Rumania so as to prod German aggression in that direction. As far back as 1934 Beck told me here in Moscow that Germany would use Rumania as a springboard for an offensive against the Ukraine, and Beck evinced no concern on that score. It could be understood that he had an agreement with Hitler on the subject' (*SPE*, n. 99, 308). These comments appear to come from an internal report by Litvinov and it could be that they indicate the kind of calculations that spurred Moscow (and, perhaps, Litvinov as well) to respond positively to British queries concerning the Soviet position on defending Rumania. As noted in the article, this was the first step to the triple alliance proposal.

56. *SPE*, doc. 289. The quote forms the conclusion of Molotov's report on a meeting with the Polish ambassador. See also Molotov's report of his meeting with the ambassador on 8 May, doc. 277.

57. *God Krizisa*, n. 111, 394. Potemkin's report on his meeting with Beck is in *SPE*, doc. 285.

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