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Source: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Jul., 1979), pp. 441-461

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260016>

Accessed: 09/11/2009 07:33

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Jonathan Haslam

The Soviet Union and the Czechoslovakian Crisis of 1938

What was Soviet policy towards Czechoslovakia in 1938? It has long been a matter of controversy. Two mutually exclusive interpretations have crystallized. The first, which accords with the Soviet explanation, is presented by Wheeler-Bennett, who has argued that 'the record of the Soviet Union throughout the crisis of 1938 was one of impeccable conduct and there is no clear reason to believe that she would not have honoured her promises to Czechoslovakia.'¹ In the conclusion to his history of the Munich crisis, he added: 'that Russia was prepared to fight at the time of Munich is more than a strong probability; it is only the effectiveness and capacity of her intervention which are in doubt.'² Ironically, Wheeler-Bennett's general analysis of events is accepted by Lord Butler, who as junior minister at the Foreign Office in 1938, came to believe it was all justified. But he contradicts Wheeler-Bennett on the issue of the Soviet Union. Butler remains convinced 'that Russia had no intention of coming to the help of the Czechs, even if the Czechs had wanted this, which they didn't...'³ He further claimed that 'France and Russia were no more inclined to move than we' (the British) on the eve of Munich.⁴ This view of events is largely shared by Keith Robbins. He expresses a certain caution in stating that 'no final settlement of

Soviet intentions is possible at this juncture.⁵ But he goes on to quote from an article in *Pravda* of 21 September 1938, casting doubt on the Soviet commitment to the defence of Czechoslovakia. John Erickson also identifies himself with this line of argument, in his massive study of the Soviet armed forces.⁶ Other historians, such as Max Beloff, have shown much greater caution. Indeed, Beloff debates the issue to the very end of the chapter on the subject, without, one feels, satisfying himself as to where matters really stood.⁷ The American historian of Soviet foreign policy, Adam Ulam, contents himself with expressing scepticism as to any of the extreme arguments on the subject.⁸ Both A. J. P. Taylor and Christopher Thorne in their treatments of the war's origins have carefully side-stepped the whole issue, perhaps wisely.⁹ My justification for raising the matter once again lies not only in the fact that the issue remains unresolved, but also in the availability of new Soviet documentation, which makes possible a clearer understanding of the whole affair.¹⁰

The Soviet Union's policy towards Czechoslovakia has to be seen in the context of its whole foreign policy in 1938, of which it came to form a vital part. At the beginning of the year, the Soviet Government resolved to adopt a tougher line with two of its neighbours — Japan and Poland. In the Far East, where British and American policies were impossible to predict, the growth of militarism within Japan had prevented any improvement in her relations with the USSR.¹¹ Moscow was, of course, giving massive military aid to Chinese forces in order to keep the Japanese tied down, thus devaluing their significance for Nazi Germany against the USSR.¹² The Soviets drew their increased confidence in dealing with Japan from the knowledge that here was a country facing increasing difficulties domestically (both political and economic), which, when added to increased resistance from the Chinese and international isolation, gave Tokyo considerable cause for concern.¹³

In Europe, Poland had precipitated a crisis with Lithuania, which still refused to re-establish diplomatic relations with Warsaw, eighteen years after the Polish seizure of Vilnius. The last time that Poland brought about such a crisis had been in 1927 and this threatened to cause a war with the USSR, which acted as Lithuania's protector. When in mid-March the Soviets learned that the Polish government had, once again, demanded that Kovno re-establish diplomatic relations, threatening military action if Lithuania failed to comply, Litvinov, commissar for Foreign Af-

fairs, called the Polish ambassador to the Narkomindel. Litvinov warned Grzybowski that if Poland used force to settle the dispute with Lithuania, this would 'create danger throughout the East of Europe.'¹⁴ Two days later, on 18 March, Litvinov added that in the situation that had arisen 'any misunderstanding can have fatal consequences.'¹⁵ These warnings had the desired effect. Poland backed down, amidst a flurry of denials that any ultimatum had ever been issued. The Soviet commitment to the status quo in Eastern Europe had thereby been underlined in the strongest possible terms. Had the Poles succeeded in their aims, they would have extended their influence in the Baltic at Soviet expense, and this would also have facilitated Warsaw's co-operation with Berlin.¹⁶ For the Soviet embassy in Berlin had been speculating on Hitler's next move after the *Anschluss* and had concluded that an exchange between Germany and Poland was a distinct possibility: Memel for Danzig.¹⁷ In addition, it was felt that if Poland had her way it would encourage further appeasement by the Powers, especially on the part of Britain.¹⁸

When the issue of Czechoslovakia first arose in March, the Czech ambassador, Firlinger, called on deputy commissar Potemkin to enquire whether the Soviet commitment under the 1935 treaty still held. Potemkin was somewhat irritated and retorted that the French were the ones to press as to whether they would live up to their obligations for no one could accuse the Soviets of failing to do so.¹⁹ This was said, one must remember, against the background of the Spanish civil war. In Prague, where Czech Foreign Minister Krofta approached polpred Alexandrovsky on the same subject, he elicited an equally acid response. Krofta spoke rather too confidently of the Red Army defending Czechoslovakia against the Germans, and Alexandrovsky told him of his impression that the Czechs were looking for excuses to avoid doing anything to defend themselves against possible attack, adding that the defence of Czechoslovakia's freedom and democracy was 'above all a matter for Czechoslovakia herself'. France and the USSR could '*aid* Czechoslovakia', but this had as its precondition that Czechoslovakia would defend herself. Alexandrovsky concluded from this that Czechoslovakia's leaders did not want to fight, even if the Czech population were willing.²⁰

The attitude of Potemkin and Alexandrovsky reflected that side of Soviet foreign policy which took the narrowest interpretation of the USSR's international interests. This approach undoubtedly drew strength from French unwillingness to collaborate closely

with the Soviet Union against the Germans. From Paris Molotov reported his conversations with Blum on 15 March. 'From the entire discussion with Blum', he wrote, 'I drew the distinct impression that he has no programme of action at all. Without any special confidence he repeated his well-known thesis on the need for an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement, but, of course, understands that this is at best music of the very distant future, and the moment dictates immediate action.'²¹

The other side to Soviet foreign policy was expressed in Litvinov's statement to the press on 17 March. There he reasserted the Soviet Union's commitment to its obligations under the League Covenant and the pacts with France and Czechoslovakia, by which the USSR had to come to the aid of the Czechs should the French move to do so first. Litvinov then took the opportunity to call on other Powers to discuss collective action against aggression. 'Tomorrow might already be too late', he warned, 'but today the time for this has not yet passed, if all states, especially the Great Powers, adopt a firm, unambiguous position in relation to the problem of collectively saving peace.'²² Although he had 'no illusions at all' concerning such a conference, he did see it as useful to elicit some sort of declaration from Paul-Boncour or Blum on France's readiness to participate in the proposed discussion of current European problems.²³

The Soviet fear of facing Germany in the future, allied to Poland, and with Britain and France neutralized, was sufficient to impel the Politburo to pursue Litvinov's course on collective security. The discernible shift in British policy in the late spring of 1938 after Eden's resignation was seen as leading 'to the conclusion of an Anglo-German agreement.' It was clear to the Narkomindel that Britain was pushing Czechoslovakia towards making concessions to Germany. Reports of Anglo-French 'mediation' between Prague and Berlin had reached Moscow by mid-April and the Soviets had no doubts where this would lead. In France the situation was deteriorating rapidly. War-weariness and 'above all the fear of revolution on the right of the French bourgeoisie' as well as events in Spain (the fall of the Republic) were driving Paris into following the British lead in seeking 'a rapprochement with the aggressors.' In his review of recent events on 17 April, Stomonyakov gave a remarkable prediction of where it would all lead:

If nothing stops this evolution, the reactionary French bourgeoisie will bring France down to the position of a second-place Power, which will not only receive as one more neighbour a third aggressor from over the Pyrenees, but also lose all its ties in Europe, for it is certain that after she betrays Czechoslovakia no one in the future will conclude new treaties of alliance with her. The reactionary bourgeoisie of France exemplifies even more prominently than that of England the betrayal of the national interests of its country under pressure from a deeply rooted fear of revolution...

Poland was 'more and more openly appearing as an actual participant in the bloc of aggressors.' This pessimistic evaluation of the USSR's potential allies against Hitler represented the trend of events which the Soviets had to bring to a halt or divert onto more attractive paths. In the case of each of these states, there existed forces which the Soviets sought to nourish, which could alter the existing course of foreign policy. In the case of Poland, Beck's foreign policy 'ambitions' were restrained by domestic problems — inter-party disputes, the growth of class conflict, and above all the revolutionary unrest evident amongst the Polish peasantry. No country in Europe, according to Stomonykov (for long a specialist on Polish and Baltic questions), had such an unstable international situation as had Poland. Thus, he concluded, were Poland to be drawn into military 'adventures' this could lead to revolutionary uprisings and the collapse of the whole state.²⁴ Britain was not beyond redemption either. From the reports sent by polpred Ivan Maisky in London, the Soviets were well aware of Churchill's attachment to collective security and co-operation with the USSR.²⁵ In both Britain and France, Stomonyakov recognized that 'amongst all the opponents of aggression, and of these there are very many even in the bourgeois camp of England and France, consciousness is growing of the impossibility of offering real resistance to Germany, Italy and Japan without the active participation in this affair of the Soviet Union.'²⁶

Aware of these divisions within Western society, Moscow sought to encourage anti-appeasement elements not only within the bourgeoisie (such as Churchill), but also amongst the working class. In its declaration of 1 May the Comintern Executive Committee (IKKI) claimed that never before, since the end of the world war, was the international situation so tense. With events in Austria, Spain and China as illustration, it accused 'the reactionary circles' of the British Conservatives of responsibility for this state of affairs and of attempting to direct aggression eastwards towards

the Soviet Union. With respect to Spain, the Second International had acquitted itself as badly. The declaration went on to press for collective action against aggression, arguing that war was not to be avoided by allowing it to flourish, but by adopting 'a firm policy' to combat it. The governments of Britain, France and the USA were not too weak to stop the international fascist onslaught. What was required was that they accept the USSR's offer of 'joint action by all states interested in preserving peace.'²⁷ *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, the IKKI journal, presented an editorial in May on 'The Struggle for Peace and the League of Nations', reminding readers of their 'elementary duty' to strengthen the League and transform it into 'a real obstacle' to those inciting war. 'One thing alone', it argued, 'which is absent now would be sufficient to prevent the outbreak of a war prepared by Hitler and to guarantee the security of small nations, and that is the decision of the democratic Powers to defend the cause of peace together with the Soviet Union.' As regards Britain, events of the past months had shown that there existed a mass movement against Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, but 'the reactionary leaders of the English Labour movement: the Citrines, the Bevins, the Daltons — and their assistants are trying with every means to hinder the unification of the popular masses and the creation of an English front against fascism and war. This movement', the editorial continued, 'will create real possibilities for turning English foreign policy in the direction of supporting collective security and thus the salvation of the cause of peace...' British workers were told to overcome the 'sabotage' of the Citrines, Bevins and Daltons, and to 'attain a decisive influence over the foreign policy of the country, to attain the implementation of that policy which corresponds to the vital interests of popular masses and the maintenance of the general peace.'²⁸

This campaign would take time to produce results. In the meantime, Moscow was reluctant to over-extend its commitments. Chamberlain's rapprochement with Italy necessitated the abolition of League sanctions imposed during the war with Abyssinia, and the Soviets decided that this was not an issue upon which they were prepared to offer direct opposition. In Geneva, when the votes were cast, the Soviet delegation abstained. The Russians were in the same dilemma vis-à-vis the Italians as were the democracies. If Germany was the main threat, then Italy should not be pushed into her camp; on the other hand, by sanctioning aggression by Rome,

Berlin could take heart. The decision taken by the Politburo could not have pleased Litvinov. Whilst abstaining on the vote, he admitted that the Soviets had played no part in creating the Covenant, but attacked those who were destroying its value, pointing to its 'usefulness and necessity in the form of a weapon for the maintenance of the common peace.'²⁹ This decision was symptomatic of a certain retrenchment in Moscow, a retreat from the forward policy in the international arena, and was certainly a reaction to Western appeasement. Further signs were evident. Litvinov saw Bonnet in Geneva and recalled the lack of interest displayed by the French in establishing real co-operation under the Franco-Soviet and Czechoslovakian-Soviet pacts. He reminded Bonnet that the Soviet Union was not contiguous with Czechoslovakia and Germany, that the Baltic states, Poland and Rumania stood in between, and that 'our pressure on these countries is insufficient to allow us to offer co-operation to Czechoslovakia.' He told Bonnet what was needed: 'stronger diplomatic measures to exert pressure, to which other states must also be a party' (clearly a reference to Britain). When he saw Halifax, Litvinov openly criticised the British Government's policy in relation to Germany and, in particular, 'explained that England is making a big mistake in accepting Hitler's motives in the Spanish as in the Czechoslovakian question as valid tender'; it was, in fact, a question of annexing territory and attaining strategic and economic positions in Europe. The Soviets were also disturbed by the fact that Rumania was ignoring an invitation to attend talks along with the Czechs on the establishment of aviation links between Moscow and Prague. This appears to have resulted from pressure exerted by Warsaw on Bucarest.³⁰ In France, Daladier was busy offering excuses for his government's failure to maintain deliveries of arms supplies to the USSR. He blamed the communists and their achievement of a forty-hour week. 'Tell Stalin that in France they are disrupting the cause of military defence', he told Surits.³¹

In the Soviet Union this strengthened the arguments of those who favoured a form of isolationism. There can be no other convincing explanation for Litvinov's speech delivered in late June at an election meeting in Leningrad. Here he mustered arguments against the isolationists, who evidently asked why the Soviets should defend the post-war status quo which they had no part in creating, and that the aggression that was now taking place was its inevitable consequence. Litvinov attacked this notion:

Does this mean that the Soviet Union stands completely aside from these events, is entirely unaffected by them, and may be utterly indifferent in her attitude? Of course not. True, we take no part in the struggle of imperialist interests. The thought of seizing the territory of others is alien to us, and therefore it makes no difference to us that one Power rather than another will exploit this or that foreign market, subject to its rule this or that weak state. The point however, is this, that Germany is striving not only for the restoration of the rights trampled underfoot by the Versailles treaty, not only for the restoration of her pre-war boundaries, but is building her foreign policy on unlimited aggression, even going so far as to talk of subjecting to the so-called German race all other races and peoples. She is conducting an open, rabid, anti-Soviet policy, suspiciously recalling those times when the Teutonic Order held sway in the Baltic countries, and publicly abandons herself to dreams of conquering the Ukraine and even the Urals. And who knows what other dreams?...

Referring to the Soviet Government's role, Litvinov added:

Quite recently she reminded the peaceful Powers of the need for urgent collective measures to save mankind from the new sanguinary war that is approaching. This appeal was not heard, but the Soviet Government, at least, has relieved itself of the responsibility for the further development of events...³²

Europe was tense but still quiet. By mid-June Hitler had decided to act against Czechoslovakia if it was certain that France and Britain would not go to war.³³ The deadline had been fixed for 1 October, by which time he would move against Czechoslovakia if the West appeared quiescent. It must have been monitored by the Soviet intelligence services, for on 26 June the Chief Military Council (Glavny Voenny Sovet) of the Red Army took measures to re-form the Kiev and Byelorussian commands (those nearest Czechoslovakia) into a special military command. These measures were due for completion by 1 September.³⁴

But trouble came from the East, with the Soviet attempt to fortify the heights above Lake Khasan, on the border with Manchuria, on 11 July. Tension in the Soviet Union's relations with Japan had been rising since the Soviets decided upon a firmer line at the beginning of the year. After heated exchanges between Litvinov and Shigemitsu, the Japanese ambassador, Japanese forces launched an assault to take the heights on 29 July.³⁵ Fighting ended on 11 August with Soviet forces still in position. That very day Litvinov wrote to Soviet representatives the world over that 'the Japanese Government was extremely afraid that the conflict would develop

into a war', hence they brought the fighting to an end as soon as possible, despite opposition from the military, especially Shigemitsu. 'Japan has received a lesson, is assured of our firmness and will to resist, and also in the illusory nature of aid from Germany.'³⁶

The incident is important for what it illustrates. The Soviets were confident that it would not develop into war, evidently as a result of information gathered by Intelligence.³⁷ The Red Army had held off Japanese forces, but Voroshilov found that this engagement had revealed serious deficiencies on the Soviet side.³⁸ The victory was essentially a political one. The Soviets had succeeded in calling the bluff of the aggressor, and had shown that the supposed alliance between the Japanese and the Germans was not yet a reality.

In respect of policy towards Europe, this success undoubtedly reinforced the position of those within the Soviet Government who believed that a firm stand against the Germans would force the latter to back down. When Maisky saw Oliphant, Cadogan's deputy at the Foreign Office, on 10 August he attacked British policy on the question of Czechoslovakia, arguing that the Runciman mission was 'directed not at curbing the aggressor, but at curbing the victim of aggression.' He repeated this to Halifax a week later, adding strong criticism of the British attempt to capitulate over Article 16 of the League Covenant, and found both men unwilling to defend British policy.³⁹ The possibility of altering the course of the latter thus still appeared open. And when the German ambassador enquired of Litvinov what the Czechs and the French intended, he replied that the Czech people would fight, and France would inevitably come to their aid.⁴⁰

The British and French Governments were both acting as though German policy were determined independently of what the other Powers did. The assumption behind Soviet policy was exactly the opposite. Thus when the French chargé d'affaires Payer saw Potemkin on 29 August and expressed the hope that Hitler would not decide to launch a serious war over Czechoslovakia, the Deputy Commissar pointed out 'that the position of Hitler depends not only upon his feelings, but also on a realistic appreciation of the possibility of opposition to his aggressive plans on the part of Czechoslovakia herself and other countries interested in the defence of European peace.'⁴¹

This approach was also reflected in Comintern agitation. On 30 August the French Communist Party called on the people of France

to defend Czechoslovakia, 'the most peaceloving country in Central Europe, the last home of freedom, the last dam defending civilization from the wave of fascist barbarism.' It pointed out that there was still time to prevent world war prepared by Hitler. 'For this it is sufficient that France and all the remaining peaceloving states declare their readiness to hinder Hitler's criminal plans with all the means at their disposal', it continued. Citing Soviet resistance to the Japanese as an example, the declaration went on to stress that 'France must give aid to Czechoslovakia in the event of Hitlerite aggression', adding that if the fascists brought another conflagration to the world, they would be destroyed by 'an alliance uniting peaceloving forces.'⁴²

This was easier said than done. Both the British and the French were asking the Soviets what position they held on Czechoslovakia, without making clear what their own stance was. At the end of August, Maisky wrote to Litvinov for clarification and received the reply that the Soviet position remained the same as that enunciated by the commissar in his March interview with the press.⁴³ Then at the beginning of September, French enquiries elicited a similar response from Litvinov, who sensed that the French chargé d'affaires had hoped for a different answer.⁴⁴ To Payer, Litvinov also pointed out that in order to aid Czechoslovakia, Poland and Rumania would have to be involved, and suggested that their attitude on the whole matter (particularly that of Rumania) could change if the League took a decision concerning aggression. This had been originally envisaged in the Soviet-Czech pact. And, in view of the fact that the League apparatus would prove 'very slow' in acting, Litvinov argued for other 'necessary measures' under Article 11 of the Covenant. Even a majority decision could have immense moral significance, he argued. In terms of 'concrete aid' he suggested convening a conference of representatives of the Soviet, French and Czechoslovakian armed forces. In addition, he felt that at the present moment a conference involving Britain, France and the USSR producing a joint declaration, which Roosevelt would undoubtedly support, would have 'more chances of restraining Hitler for a military adventure than any other measures.' But action had to be taken quickly before Hitler finally committed himself.⁴⁵

Soviet efforts to draw Poland away from Germany and to encourage Rumania into a common front in support of Czechoslovakia included attempts by the Comintern to mobilize

opinion within these states in favour of collective action.⁴⁶ On 4 September the Central Committee of the Rumanian Communist Party called on the people to defend Czechoslovakia:

A decisive statement by Rumania in defence of collective security on the side of Czechoslovakia, France, England and the Soviet Union, a clear declaration of the government to the effect that in the event of aggression against Czechoslovakia Rumania will be an ally of the victim of aggression and will render Czechoslovakia immediate and decisive aid — this is what the moment demands.⁴⁷

Three days later both the French and German Communist Parties called on the German people to fight fascism and the threat of a new world war.⁴⁸ At communist instigation the trade unions of Paris telegraphed their solidarity to their Czech counterparts.⁴⁹

Soviet efforts were not entirely in vain where Rumania was concerned. The latter was unable to allow Soviet troops to pass through her territory, due to the objections of Poland, her major ally. But, according to Bonnet, the Rumanian Government would permit the Soviet air force to fly through its air space to aid the Czechs.⁵⁰ However, there appeared to be no prospect of the Rumanians making any public moves in common with the USSR, especially when the positions of the French and British Governments were so equivocal. By mid-September, Litvinov was in no doubt that 'Czechoslovakia will be betrayed.' The question was 'only whether Czechoslovakia will reconcile herself to this.'⁵¹ At the same time, the French were putting the word about that the Russians were unprepared to help the Czechs, evidently as a useful means for justifying their pressure on Prague to submit to German demands.⁵² The British appeared to have been doing the same.⁵³

The Soviets were attempting to prevent any compromise between the Powers at Czechoslovakia's expense and in doing so, bolstering the will of the Czechs to resist was crucial. The Soviets were acting in the knowledge that if Czech resistance held firm and Hitler launched a full-scale offensive, then France would be obliged to come to the aid of the Czechs.⁵⁴ It was also possible that should Czechoslovakia hold firm, then the anti-appeasement forces in both France and Britain would come to the fore and overturn the current line. From Prague, polpred Alexandrovsky reported that both he and communist leader Gottwald were in no doubt as to the attitude of the Czech people: 'The masses will not permit any

capitulation and will fight under any circumstances.' No one questioned the likelihood of Soviet aid.⁵⁵ Benes asked the Soviets if the USSR would take action under Articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant if the Czechs appealed to the League. From Moscow, on 20 September, Potemkin instructed Alexandrovsky to give a positive reply.⁵⁶ And in the League itself, Litvinov spoke on the following day, rejecting any weakening of the provisions under the Covenant. His argument had not changed. Speaking of the aggressor states, he pointed out that:

They are now still weaker than a possible bloc of peace-loving states, but the policy of non-resistance to evil and bartering with the aggressors, which the opponents of sanctions propose to us, can have no other result than further strengthening and increasing the forces of aggression, a further expansion of their field of action. And the moment might really arrive when their power has grown to such an extent that the League of Nations or what remains of it, will be in no condition to cope with them, even if it wants to... with the slightest attempt at actual perpetration of aggression, collective action as envisaged in article 16 must be brought into effect progressively in accordance with the possibilities of each League member. In other words, the programme envisaged in the Covenant of the League of Nations must be carried out against the aggressor, but decisively, resolutely and without any wavering.

Litvinov then went on to reject any attempt to dispose of Articles 10 and 16 of the Covenant and repeated the Soviet statement of commitment to Czechoslovakia and France.⁵⁷ The warning that appeared in *Pravda* on the day of Litvinov's speech, that Soviet interests were not directly threatened by events in Czechoslovakia, was then overshadowed by a further editorial, on 22 September, entitled 'The Forces of War and the Forces of Peace', which reiterated what Litvinov had said at the League of Nations, adding that this represented 'the unanimous opinion of the whole Soviet people'. From this it was clear that Moscow was not so 'unanimous' previously, but that now Litvinov's arguments had been accepted.

By 22 September the Soviets were worried that the Czechs were making no military preparations in case Hitler found the Anglo-French compromise insufficient, put forward new demands unacceptable to Prague and then took military action. Potemkin reminded the Czech ambassador that this was a matter of 'capital importance' to the USSR.⁵⁸ In Prague itself, where there were demonstrations against capitulation to the Powers, Alexandrovsky

assured a delegation that although rendering aid had been complicated by France's refusal, 'the USSR will seek the means and find them if Czechoslovakia is attacked and has to defend herself.'⁵⁹

The first concrete step the Soviets took was to respond to a Czech request to warn Poland against attacking.⁶⁰ On 23 September Moscow informed the Polish Government that the Soviets would denounce the Polish-Soviet non-aggression pact if the Poles attacked the Czechs.⁶¹ The Soviet armed forces had, in the meantime, been preparing for possible action, evidently against the Poles. And by 23 September these preparations were complete. Soviet forces had been brought forward and concentrated in regions bordering Poland from Minsk to Proskurov.⁶²

These moves were taken on the basis of a calculated risk — that the Poles would not be so rash as to precipitate a conflict with Moscow — and the Soviet position over Czechoslovakia had, by 23 September, become totally divorced from that of her potential allies in the West. This could not but raise doubts in Moscow as to the wisdom of the course being pursued by Litvinov, and there are indications that this was so. For on that day, he spoke at the League stressing the inter-relationship of the Soviet-Czech and Franco-Czech pacts, pointing out that 'the Soviet Government is free from any obligation to Czechoslovakia in the event of France adopting an attitude of indifference to an attack on her. In this sense the Soviet Government can come to the aid of Czechoslovakia only as the result of a voluntary decision or as the result of a League of Nations resolution, but no one has the right to demand aid as of right; and in actual fact, the Czechoslovakian Government has not raised the question of our aid independently of the French, in either formal or practical terms.'⁶³ This not only reflected the growing trend of isolationism in Moscow, but also served as a warning to all Powers, including the Czechs, that the continuation of current policies would leave the Soviets free to reconsider her position. The tone of Litvinov's telegram to Moscow on the same day also indicates that he was having to justify the maintenance of the policy hitherto supported by the leadership. 'Although Hitler has committed himself to such an extent that it is difficult for him to turn back', he wrote, 'I still think that he would turn back if he was certain beforehand of the possibility of joint Soviet-French-English action against him.' What he recommended was a policy of bluff which would deter Hitler. He wrote:

Believing that a European war in which we would be drawn is not in our interests and that we need to do everything necessary to prevent it, I pose the question: should we not declare even partial mobilisation and carry on such a campaign in the press that would force Hitler and Beck to believe in the possibility of a major war involving ourselves...⁶⁴

A further reflection of Litvinov's approach was evident in a 'letter from Berlin' entitled 'A Policy of Blackmail and Bluff', which appeared in *Pravda* on 27 September, under the name of A. Belkin (probably a pseudonym for Litvinov).⁶⁵ It boldly asserted that:

The annexationist plans of German fascism, according to the impression of observers who are at all objective, in no way correspond either to the military-political power of Germany or to the mood of the mass of German people. Never before was it so clear as now that Germany cannot contemplate a serious military struggle against a coalition of peaceful Powers. Even a struggle against Czechoslovakia alone would not be easy for her and would drag on for months.

The writer went on to criticize the state of the German armed forces and to emphasize the unpopularity of a long war in German public opinion. He cited opposition even amongst the new leaders of the Reichswehr and also economic circles. This was evident in Hitler's speech at Nuremberg earlier in the month. The worsening economic situation in Germany was working in the same direction.

Up to the very last moment, the Soviets were still working to draw together a common front against Hitler, based on Litvinov's judgment that this would force him to retreat. The same day that Chamberlain told the House of Commons that the Four Powers would meet at Munich (without the Russians), on 28 September, the French communists launched yet another appeal to all political parties in France:

How can peace be saved?

To save peace international fascism must be reminded that there is a limit to everything.

To leave Czechoslovakia without aid would mean not avoidance of war, but bringing it closer.

If the democratic countries show cowardice and apathy, war is inevitable.

But if France and England unflinchingly unite in the struggle against the aggressors, if they carry on talks to save peace, but not in a spirit of capitulation

before the instigators of war, they can, with the firm support of the Soviet Union and the USA, deliver the world from a new war and bring to life the stirring message of President Roosevelt.⁶⁶

Roosevelt's message, announced on 26 September, also elicited a statement of support from the Soviet Government itself, agreeing on the need for an international conference over Czechoslovakia.⁶⁷ But Chamberlain sought to reach an agreement with Germany to avoid war, and knowing the Soviet attitude endeavoured to exclude Moscow from any involvement; in this even American participation was seen as undesirable.

When Halifax saw Maisky on 29 September he still held open the possibility of an Anglo-French-Soviet conference, though in the circumstances this was highly misleading.⁶⁸ Maisky nevertheless took heart from the extent of opposition to Chamberlain, even within the Cabinet, and it was these continual reminders that the British Government and Conservative Party were by no means united behind the current line that gave Litvinov and others hope that a firm Soviet position would yield results.⁶⁹

In Moscow, as events continued to drift in the wrong direction, the awkward question as to what would happen if both Britain and France abandoned Czechoslovakia to her fate had to be faced. An article in *Pravda* on 'The Defence Capability of Czechoslovakia', evidently drawn from estimates by the Defence commissariat, was forced to accept:

It is impossible to deny the imbalance of forces between Czechoslovakia and Germany and to underestimate the military power of the latter. However, the world war has shown that a simple superiority of forces is insufficient to defeat an army occupying a defensive position and well armed. In order to achieve victory what is required is overwhelming superiority of forces. Does the German army have this overwhelming superiority? Czech military circles do not think so. In all caution and despite widely held opinion, one can draw the following conclusion: if Germany starts a war against Czechoslovakia, then this war could continue for an unforeseen period as did the war in Spain.⁷⁰

The Czechs had not yet, by 29 September, asked the Soviets what they would do in such circumstances. But on the following day, the moment of truth came. That day Alexandrovsky informed Moscow of Benes' question as to whether the USSR would support him if he chose war as an option (even without French and British backing)⁷¹ — an alternative to accepting the Anglo-French ultimatum. Before

the Soviets had time to reply another message from the polpred reached Moscow, on the same day, announcing that Benes had decided to capitulate and that no reply to the first telegram was required.⁷² Suspicions were aroused in Moscow. Potemkin telegraphed back to Prague asking Alexandrovsky whether Benes had used the interval between his request and the expected Soviet reply in order to claim to the rest of the Czech Cabinet that no Soviet reply had been received, as justification for capitulating to the Four Powers.⁷³ The polpred assured Potemkin that Benes had made no such claims.⁷⁴

The Soviets were deeply disturbed by the Munich settlement. When Litvinov arrived in Paris on 2 October, he avoided an invitation from Bonnet to visit him, because he did not want to betray just how worried he was. But Bonnet turned up at the Soviet embassy, and Litvinov launched into a lecture attacking him for unnecessary capitulation to Germany. 'Hitler who himself evidently feared war even more than Chamberlain and would probably have conceded, has been saved from such a retreat by the Munich conference'; he argued.⁷⁵

Such was Soviet policy in the Czechoslovakian crisis. Despite the doubts that arose in the Soviet leadership, Litvinov's line managed to hold sway in Moscow. This line was based on a crucial assumption: that forming a common front with the democracies against Germany and standing firm on the pact with Czechoslovakia and on commitments under the League Covenant, would force Hitler to back down. It is interesting that not even Churchill in Britain shared this assumption by the time of Munich. How it arose and why it came to be so firmly held is still difficult to say. The Western governments made the settlement at Munich in the belief that otherwise war would be inevitable. This was an assumption standing in complete contradiction to the bases of Soviet policy at the time. All the evidence shows that Moscow was determined to stand by its commitment to Czechoslovakia in the event of France acting first. This, despite the evident weakening of the Red Army as a result of the NKVD terror and despite the complications arising from Polish policy. For Moscow believed that this policy was the best means of avoiding a major war, rather than the means of precipitating one. Whether the Soviets would have come to the aid of the Czechs if the latter refused the Anglo-French ultimatum and stood alone, it is impossible to say. The indications are that Moscow could not have stood by, but that the limitations imposed

by geography would have resulted in aid on the scale supplied to Spain, facilitated by Rumanian willingness to ignore the use of their air space. In addition, Soviet forces were quite evidently intended to deter Poland from attacking the Czechs. The consequences of the Munich settlement for the development of Soviet foreign policy, particularly in relation to Poland, are crucial in that it strengthened the position of isolationist elements in the Soviet leadership. Stalin himself appears to have been content to see Litvinov's policy run its course and prove itself, before he came around to accepting the arguments for isolationism. But that had to await the spring of 1939 and forms another story.

Notes

1. J. Wheeler-Bennett, *Munich: Prologue to Tragedy* (London 1963), 106.
2. *Ibid.*, 437.
3. Lord Butler, *The Art of the Possible* (London 1971), 66.
4. *Ibid.*, 68.
5. K. Robbins, *Munich 1938* (London 1968), 335-36.
6. J. Erickson speaks of Litvinov washing his hands of responsibility for Czechoslovakia, on behalf of the Soviet Government, in a speech delivered in late June 1938. This is surely the most idiosyncratic of all interpretations yet offered. See J. Erickson, *The Soviet High Command* (London 1962), 503-04.
7. Beloff concludes his chapter thus:

It is therefore arguable, that the Soviet Union was certain from very early on that France and Great Britain would not fight for Czechoslovakia and that Czechoslovakia would not resist without their support. In these circumstances, Soviet diplomats could go to the limit in pledging their country's readiness to resist aggression...

He clearly implies thereby that Soviet policy was merely designed to display international probity, though leaves this as being 'arguable' — Max Beloff, *The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia 1929-1941*, Vol. II 1936-1941 (London 1949), 166.

8. A. Ulam, *Expansion and Co-Existence* (London 1968), 252.
9. In his work, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Penguin edn., London 1964), Taylor writes that it was obviously in Soviet interests 'to stiffen Czechoslovakia's resistance, whether they meant to support her or no. What they would have done if called upon is a hypothetical question which can never be answered' — 204. Similarly, Thorne, in *The Approach to War 1938-1939* (London 1967), merely refers to the USSR's 'assurances which were never tested since France did not act', 75.

10. The most important material published on this issue in the USSR include V. Ya. Sipols, *Sovetskii Soyuz v Bor'be za Mir i Bezopasnost' 1933-1939* (Moscow 1974), 189-285, and the collective work *Istoriya Vtoroi Mirovoi Voiny 1939-1945*, Vol. 2, edited by G. A. Deborin et al. (Moscow 1974), 104-08. In addition there are some insights to be gained from the biography of Defence commissar Voroshilov, written by a former aide: V. Akshinsky, *Kliment Efremovich Voroshilov* (Moscow 1974), 195-202. The documentation which has now been released by the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides the most important accretions to our knowledge of events: G. K. Deev et al., eds., *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki SSSR*, Vol. XXI (Moscow 1977).

11. Deputy commissar Boris Stomonyakov to Slavutsky, polpred in Japan, 7 January 1938: *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki SSSR*, Vol. XXI, doc. 7.

12. Stomonyakov wrote that 'in various German circles dissatisfaction is growing due to the protracted character of Japan's war with China... the continuation of the war is weakening Japan as a potential ally against the USSR...' — Stomonyakov to Luganets-Orel'sky, polpred in China, 24 January 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 23.

13. Stomonyakov to Luganets-Orel'sky, 1 February 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 34.

14. Litvinov's record of the meeting with Grzybowski, which took place on 16 March, and was relayed to polpreds in London, Prague and Warsaw, on the following day; *ibid.*, doc. 83. The content of the Polish ultimatum was released by TASS and published in *Izvestiya* on 18 March.

15. Litvinov's record of the discussion, 18 March 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 87.

16. Deputy commissar Vladimir Potemkin to polpreds in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and the chargé d'affaires in Poland, 26 March 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 104.

17. Letter from Astakhov, chargé d'affaires ad interim (Berlin), to the Narkomindel, 26 February 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 54.

18. As 16.

19. Potemkin's record of the discussion, 15 March 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 79.

20. Alexandrovsky's record of the discussion, 21 March 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 98.

21. Surits to the Narkomindel, 15 March 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 80.

22. *Izvestiya*, 18 March 1938.

23. Litvinov to Surits, 20 March 1938; DVP SSSR, op. cit., doc. 94.

24. Stomonyakov to Luganets-Orel'sky, 17 April 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 135.

25. From London, Maisky had reported Churchill's anxiety as to the effects of the NKVD terror on the state of the armed forces in the USSR, adding that Churchill's manner left no doubts as to his genuine concern — Maisky to the Narkomindel, 24 March 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 103. Maisky considered that 'Churchill will take power when the critical moment in England's fate arrives. Does the leadership of the Conservative party, in particular Chamberlain, consider that such a moment has already arrived? I doubt it... time will tell' — Maisky to the Narkomindel, 31 March 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 111. In a further report to Moscow, Maisky explained (evidently to doubters) that 'in evaluating Churchill's political line one must bear in mind that its departing point is the defence of the integrity of the British Empire and that now the main danger for the latter he sees as being Germany... Thanks to the struggle with Germany Churchill is prepared to overcome his class hatred for "the Red Government" in the USSR' — Maisky to the Narkomindel, 8 April 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 121.

26. As 24.

27. This declaration has been reprinted in G. A. Belov et al., eds., *Iz Istoriï Mezhdunarodnoi Proletarskoi Solidarnosti: Dokumenty i Materialy*, sbornik VI — *Mezhdunarodnaya Soldarnost' Trudyashchikhsya v Bor'be za Mir i Natsional'noe Osvobozhdenie Protiv Fashistskoi Agressii, za Polnoe Unichtozhenie Fashizma v Evrope i Azii (1938-1945)* (Moscow 1962), doc. 27.

28. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, 5, 1938.

29. Litvinov's speeches to the League Assembly on 12 May and 14 May; DVP SSSR, op. cit., doc. 173 and 181.

30. Litvinov to Alexandrovsky, 25 May 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 197.

31. Surits to the Narkomindel, 25 May 1938; *ibid.*, doc. 198.

32. The speech was delivered on 23 June. It was this that Erickson has taken as the departure point for his explanation of Soviet policy over Munich, ignoring what takes place in the ensuing months — see 6. Litvinov's speech was referred to in *Izvestiya* on 24 June, but no details were given and foreign policy was not mentioned. It was not published until 5 July, and then only in *Journal de Moscou* which had a foreign readership. A translation appears in J. Degras, *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy*, Vol. III, 1933-1941 (London 1953), 282-94.

33. A. J. P. Taylor, op. cit., 208.

34. *Istoriya Vtoroi Mirovoi Voiny* (hereafter IVMV), op. cit., 104.

35. The first interview of this nature was between Stomonyakov and Nisi, the Japanese chargé d'affaires ad interim, on 15 July; DVP SSSR, op. cit., doc. 260. In his meeting with Shigemitsu, on 20 July, Litvinov could scarcely restrain himself and suggested that 'the ambassador evidently considers the tactic of threats as a good method of diplomacy. Unfortunately', he continued, 'there are now a number of countries which give in to bullying and threats, but the ambassador should know that this method will not be successfully applied in Moscow. . . ' — *ibid.*, doc. 264.

36. For an account of the battles, see Erickson, op. cit., 494-99. For Litvinov's communication to polpreds all over the world — DVP SSSR, op. cit., doc. 298.

37. At the time of the confrontation over Khasan, the Soviet spy Richard Sorge in Tokyo reported that 'this incident will not lead to war between the Soviet Union and Japan'. This message is quoted by F. Volkov in 'Legendy i Deistvitel'nost' o Rikharde Zorge' in *Voenna-Istoricheskii Zhurnal* 12, 1966.

38. Voroshilov's statement as to the inadequacies revealed at Lake Khasan is quoted from the Ministry of Defence archives, in Akshinsky, op. cit., 198.

39. Maisky to the Narkomindel, 10 August 1938; DVP SSSR, op. cit., doc. 295; and Maisky to the Narkomindel, 17 August 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 300.

40. Litvinov saw Schulenberg on 22 August, when the latter called on him prior to his departure for Germany; Litvinov to Alexandrovsky and Merekalov, 22 August 1938 — *ibid.*, doc. 305; and Litvinov to Merekalov (giving further details), 27 August 1938 — *ibid.*, doc. 312.

41. Potemkin's record of the conversation, 29 August 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 317.

42. Published in *L'Humanité*, 30 August 1938, and reprinted in *Iz Istoriï*, op. cit., doc. 50.

43. Litvinov to Maisky, 30 August 1938; DVP SSSR, op. cit., 732.

44. 'It seemed to me that Payer was attempting to receive from us an evasive or negative reply, in order then to let the responsibility fall on us' — Litvinov to Surits, 2 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 325. This was confirmed by Surits in a communication from Paris. One section of the French Cabinet feared the effects contact with the Soviets would have on the British Government, which apparently was very frighten-

ed at the prospect of Soviet intervention in European affairs, opening the way to communism in Central Europe. Those in the French government favouring contacts had their way, but Bonnet appeared to have hoped that French approaches to the Soviets would be rebuffed — hence Payer's manner; Surits to the Narkomindel, 3 September 1938 — *ibid.*, doc. 330.

45. Litvinov to Alexandrovsky, 2 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 324.

46. The Polish communist leadership called on the Polish people to prevent their government from co-operating with the Germans in an assault on Czechoslovakia, in July 1938: *Iz Istorii*, op. cit., doc. 45.

47. *Ibid.*, doc. 52.

48. *Ibid.*, doc. 54.

49. The telegram was sent on 11 September, *ibid.*, doc. 55.

50. Litvinov to the Narkomindel, 11 September 1938; DVP SSSR, op. cit., doc. 343.

51. Litvinov to the Narkomindel, 15 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 348.

52. The Czech ambassador repeated these doubts, stemming from a version of the Bonnet-Litvinov meeting put about by French diplomats, to Potemkin. The latter denied their veracity and reasserted Soviet readiness to enter into talks with the French and the Czechs on military co-operation — Potemkin's record of the conversation, 15 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 349. This was reported to Litvinov on the same day — Potemkin to Litvinov, 15 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 350.

53. The Soviet chargé d'affaires in Berlin reported to Moscow that 'the English... are spreading the version that the position of the USSR in the event of war is unclear and even less decisive than the position of France' — Astakhov to the Narkomindel, 15 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 352.

54. Herriot told Litvinov this in confidence before he returned home from Geneva on 14 September — Litvinov to the Narkomindel, 15 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 348.

55. Alexandrovsky to the Narkomindel, 20 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 355.

56. Benes came to see the polpred on 19 September after the Anglo-French ultimatum for clarification of the Soviet position after this new turn in events — Alexandrovsky to the Narkomindel, 19 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 354. For the reply from Moscow — Potemkin to Alexandrovsky, 20 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 356.

57. *Ibid.*, doc. 357.

58. Potemkin's record of the discussion, 22 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 361.

59. Alexandrovsky to the Narkomindel, 22 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 364.

60. Alexandrovsky telephoned the request to Moscow on 22 September: *ibid.*, doc. 365.

61. I. A. Khrenov, T. Tseslyak et al., eds., *Dokumenty i Materialy po Istorii Sovetsko-Pol'skikh Otnoshenii*, T. VI, 1933-1938 (Moscow, 1969), doc. 257.

62. For details of these preparations and a map of troop movements drawn from the Soviet Ministry of Defence archives, see IVMV op. cit., 104-06.

63. DVP SSSR, op. cit., doc. 368.

64. Litvinov to the Narkomindel, 23 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 369.

65. In an autobiographical short story, entitled 'Call It Love', Litvinov's widow describes the genesis of her love affair with Maxim Maximovich, who is given the name 'Belkin' — Ivy Litvinov, *She Knew She Was Right* (London 1971).

66. Reprinted in *Iz Istorii*, op. cit., doc. 58.

67. DVP SSSR op. cit., doc. 382.
68. Maisky to the Narkomindel, 29 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 390.
69. This was after meeting with Churchill on the same day — Maisky to the Narkomindel, 29 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 391.
70. *Pravda*, 29 September 1938.
71. Alexandrovsky to the Narkomindel, 30 September 1938: DVP SSSR op. cit., doc. 393.
72. Alexandrovsky to the Narkomindel, 30 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 394.
73. Potemkin to Alexandrovsky, 30 September 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 395.
74. Alexandrovsky to the Narkomindel, 1 October 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 399.
75. Litvinov to the Narkomindel, 2 October 1938: *ibid.*, doc. 402.

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