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INFAMOUS ENCOUNTER? THE MEREKALOV–WEIZSÄCKER MEETING OF 17 APRIL 1939

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ABSTRACT. *This article uses recently released documents from the Soviet diplomatic archives to examine the Merekalov–Weizsäcker meeting of April 1939. It argues that these documents show that western historians have been mistaken in assuming that this meeting was the occasion for Soviet signals of a desire for détente with Nazi Germany. The significance attached to the meeting in this respect is part of the cold war myth that the USSR's negotiations for a triple alliance with Great Britain and France in the spring and summer of 1939 were paralleled by secret Soviet–German discussions which eventually lead to the Nazi–Soviet pact of August 1939. The article seeks to demolish those elements of the myth that concern the Merekalov–Weizsäcker encounter and to present an alternative interpretation of the provenance and meaning of the so-called political overture by the Soviet ambassador at the meeting.*

The Merekalov–Weizsäcker meeting of 17 April 1939 is one of the most famous and notorious in diplomatic history. The infamy of this encounter between the Soviet ambassador in Berlin and the state secretary in the German foreign office stems from Weizsäcker's report of the meeting, which is the very first document printed in *Nazi–Soviet Relations 1939–1941*, published by the US department of state in 1948.

According to Weizsäcker, Merekalov's visit to him was the first since the Soviet ambassador had taken up his post in Berlin. The ostensible purpose of the visit was to discuss the fulfilment of Soviet orders with the Skoda arms factory in German-occupied Czechoslovakia, but, writes Weizsäcker, Merekalov seized the opportunity to raise political matters and led the conversation to the following concluding statement:

Russian policy had always moved in a straight line. Ideological differences of opinion had hardly influenced the Russian–Italian relationship, and they did not have to prove a stumbling block with regard to Germany either. Soviet Russia had not exploited the present friction between Germany and the Western democracies against us, nor did she wish to do so. There exists for Russia no reason why she should not live with us on a normal footing. And from normal, the relations might become better and better.¹

Merekalov's remarks have been widely interpreted by western historians as some kind of signal from Moscow to Berlin that the Kremlin was interested in a rapprochement

¹ R. J. Sontag and J. S. Beddie (eds.), *Nazi–Soviet relations 1939–1941* (New York, 1948), p. 2. A slightly different translation of Merekalov's statement will be found in *Documents on German foreign policy* (hereafter DGFP), series D, vol. 6, doc. 215.

– the beginning, in fact, of negotiations that eventually led to the Nazi–Soviet pact of August 1939.²

The Merekalov–Weizsäcker meeting in Berlin took place on the same day that Litvinov, the Soviet foreign minister, presented to the British ambassador in Moscow an eight-point plan for an Anglo–Soviet–French military and political alliance directed against Nazi Germany.³ The conjunction of these two events carries the obvious implication that mid-April 1939 marked the beginning of an elaborate Soviet double-game; a combination of secret discussions with the Germans and open negotiations with the British and the French. It also apparently gives the lie to the long-standing official Soviet line that Stalin's turn to a deal with Hitler on the eve of the Second World War was prompted by the effective breakdown of military and political talks with the western powers and that there were no approaches to the Germans, secret or otherwise, before August 1939.⁴

Some new light has been thrown on this controversial episode by the publication from the Soviet diplomatic archives of a number of documents relating to the meeting, including Merekalov's telegram to Moscow on 18 April 1939. Merekalov's report to Moscow presents a wholly different picture of the meeting from that of Weizsäcker:

I was received by Weizsäcker. I presented him with the note and made a statement about the breaking of the 'Skoda' agreements... The statement highlighted the abnormality in the position: the restriction, applying only in relation to orders made by Soviet organisations, was direct discrimination and contradicted the spirit of the Reichschancellor's declaration of 22 March which reaffirmed the validity of old agreements with Czechoslovakia. Parrying Weizsäcker's efforts to transfer the problem to the plane of business relations with the commercial representatives of Skoda, I cited the direct interference of the German military authorities and requested the speedy removal of these irregularities and the fulfilment of Skoda's accepted obligations. Saying he thought these measures temporary, Weizsäcker promised to study the matter and to reply, joking how is it possible to deal in arms when the question of an air pact [between Britain, France and the USSR] has arisen. Weizsäcker confirmed that three months of talks have been held with the Poles about the transfer of Danzig and the construction of an extra-territorial motorway across the Polish 'corridor', in return for a guarantee of Poland's western borders. Germany did not want to attack anybody. Everyone was mobilizing, even Holland, Belgium and Sweden. Germany had not called anyone up beyond the normal, although in this regard it could do a lot. England had created a tense atmosphere, issuing guarantees to small countries which did not want them. Lately the Soviet press had conducted itself noticeably more correctly than the English. Germany has differences of political principle with the USSR. All the same it wants to develop economic relations with it.⁵

Merekalov was accompanied to the Wilhelmstrasse by Georgei Astakhov, the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Berlin. He too wrote a report of the 17 April meeting. According

² For example, D. C. Watt's widely-cited article 'The initiation of the negotiations leading to the Nazi–Soviet pact' in C. Abramsky (ed.), *Essays in honour of E. H. Carr* (London, 1974).

³ *SSSR v borbe za mir nakanune vtoroi mirovoi voyny* (Moscow, 1971), doc. 239. For an English translation see *Soviet peace efforts on the eve of World War II* (Moscow, 1973).

⁴ This official interpretation is restated in the report of a special commission on the Nazi–Soviet pact set up by the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies in June 1989. The report was presented to the congress in December 1989. See 'Soobshcheniye komissii po politicheskoi i pravovoi otsenke sovetsko-germanskogo dogovora o nenapadenii ot 1939 goda', *Pravda*, 24 Dec. 1989 (English translation: *On the political and legal assessment of the Soviet–German non-aggression Treaty of 1939* (Moscow, 1990).

⁵ *God krizisa, 1938–1939: dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 1990), vol. 1, doc. 279. Merekalov's telegram in this collection is one of a number of documents which detail Soviet relations with Germany in 1939. These documents form the basis of the present author's detailed study of 'The Soviet decision for a pact with Nazi Germany', *Soviet Studies* (January 1992).

to Astakhov, Weizsäcker was unusually friendly and attentive at this meeting, being particularly keen on the exchange of political views. In these exchanges, records Astakhov, it was Weizsäcker who took the initiative. Merekalov asked about German demands on Poland. In reply Weizsäcker denied the possibility of a German–Polish border conflict. In response to a question from Merekalov about the tense situation in Europe Weizsäcker said that Germany could not understand this. To Merekalov's point that Germany had mobilized long ago Weizsäcker replied that the tension in Europe had been artificially created by Britain and France. Weizsäcker wanted to know whether the USSR felt threatened by Germany. Merekalov replied that the USSR was interested in removing the danger of war, and as to Germany he did not feel especially threatened. The meeting concluded with a question from Merekalov about Weizsäcker's perspectives on Soviet–German relations. 'Now they could not be better', Astakhov quotes Weizsäcker as saying. 'You know full well that between us there are contradictions of an ideological character. At the same time, however, we sincerely(!) want to develop economic ties with you.'⁶

As Merekalov's report makes clear, officially at least the meeting with Weizsäcker was convened to raise the Skoda problem. Indeed, we now know that Merekalov was acting on instructions telegraphed by Litvinov on 5 April 1939.⁷ Litvinov's telegram contains no mention of flying any kites about Soviet–German rapprochement, and according to the Soviet historian V.Ya. Sipols no further instructions were sent from Moscow during the period preceding the meeting with Weizsäcker.⁸

What is most striking about Merekalov's report is the absence of any reference to the political remarks attributed to him by Weizsäcker and the impression it gives that it was the German who did all the talking about politics. Astakhov's report conveys a slightly different impression: that, as one would expect, Merekalov asked some pointed political questions and made some political comments of his own – but there is no reference to any words remotely as significant or dramatic as those reported by Weizsäcker.

Bearing in mind D. C. Watt's point that Weizsäcker's memorandum was directed at German foreign minister Ribbentrop and 'was strongly slanted towards convincing his much-despised boss that the Soviet Union was ready to slide into a neutralist stance',⁹ it may be that Merekalov's infamous statement was pure invention or a wild exaggeration on Weizsäcker's part. However, it is highly likely that Merekalov did say something about improving Soviet–German relations for, at a subsequent meeting with Astakhov on 30 May, Weizsäcker repeated what he thought the Soviet ambassador had said about 'the possibility of a normalisation or even further improvement of German–Russian political relations'.¹⁰ Moreover, a review of the background to the

⁶ Astakhov's report on the 17 April meeting is summarized by the west German historian Ingeborg Fleischhauer in her *Pakt: Hitler, Stalin i Initsiativa Germanskoi Diplomatii, 1938–1939* (Moscow, 1991), pp. 126–7. See also *Documents Diplomatiques Français*, second series, vol. 16, doc. 119 in which Coulondre, the French ambassador in Berlin, reports that Astakhov told him that the meeting with Weizsäcker was strictly concerned with economic and financial matters arising out of the German occupation of Czechoslovakia.

⁷ God Krizisa, doc. 252.

⁸ *Voprosy Istorii* (June 1989), p. 26.

⁹ D. C. Watt, *How war came: the immediate origins of the Second World War, 1938–1939* (London, 1989), p. 230.

¹⁰ Sontag and Beddie, *Nazi–Soviet relations*, p. 13. In his report of this meeting Astakhov makes no mention of this reference by Weizsäcker to Merekalov's earlier remarks. He does quote Weizsäcker as saying that Merekalov had said that economic relations could develop independently of political relations. In reply Astakhov pointed out that Merekalov had said

meeting also suggests that the Soviet ambassador probably did make some encouraging political noises. These noises convinced the Germans that it would be possible to deflect the Soviets from their projected alliance with the British and French. Merekalov's purpose in making these noises, however, was wholly different from the one assumed by the Germans.

Merekalov arrived in Berlin in summer 1938. One of his first meetings, on 6 July, was with Weizsäcker. The latter's presentation of the April 1939 meeting was, therefore, somewhat misleading ('The Russian Ambassador visited me today – for the first time since he took up his post here'). At this, their real first meeting, Weizsäcker expressed an interest in Soviet–German relations and wondered if Merekalov had plans to expand trade and credit arrangements between the two countries.¹¹

Weizsäcker's question may have been inspired by the fact that Merekalov's background was in the People's Commissariat for Foreign Trade. Indeed, for a brief period (October 1937–May 1938) before his posting to Berlin Merekalov was deputy people's commissar for foreign trade.¹²

In line with this pedigree Merekalov's main mission in Berlin appears to have been connected with Soviet–German economic relations. All the reports of his work in Berlin confirm that this was the case and there are no reports of his involvement in any significant politico-diplomatic activities.¹³

In January 1939 Merekalov's economic assignment took a new turn when he informed the Germans that Moscow was prepared to accept their proposal of a month earlier that credit negotiations broken off in March 1938 should be resumed. It was subsequently agreed that Karl Schnurre, a German economics specialist, would negotiate a new credit agreement in Moscow at the end of January. However, much to the embarrassment and anger of the Soviets, Schnurre's trip was very publicly cancelled by the Germans at the last moment. The projected negotiations quickly broke down.¹⁴

This background suggests that Merekalov may have had a broader objective in mind on 17 April 1939 than just securing the Skoda contracts: to start the economic negotiations between Germany and the USSR moving again. Hence the diplomatic sounding out of the prospects for improving Soviet–German relations, which was probably prompted by Weizsäcker's own friendly tone and encouraging remarks.

several times that 'economics was concentrated politics'. See God Krizisa, doc. 384. This discrepancy between the two reports can be explained either by the fact that Weizsäcker did not make the statement he says he did to Astakhov or by the fact that Astakhov did not note it or, if he did, did not consider it important enough to report to Moscow. But bearing in mind the argument of this article the most likely explanation is that Astakhov omitted Weizsäcker's statement from his report in order to cover up some injudicious remarks that Merekalov had indeed made on 17 April.

¹¹ *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. 21 (Moscow, 1977), doc. 251.

¹² R. W. Davies *et al.* (eds.), *Soviet government officials, 1922–1941* (Birmingham, 1989), p. 340.

¹³ See, for example, the report in *Documents on British foreign policy*, 3rd series, iv, 34. Regarding Merekalov's political activities in Berlin there has long been speculation about the contents of a private conversation he had with Hitler at a new-year reception in January 1939. Merekalov's report to Moscow on this conversation is published in God Krizisa, doc. 110. It records only a formal, diplomatic conversation and an exchange of pleasantries with the Nazi dictator.

¹⁴ On the economic negotiations see God Krizisa, docs. 101, 104, 109, 117, 124 and 126 and DGFP, series D, vol. 4, docs. 483, 485, 486, 487, 489, 490 and 491. On the cancelled Schnurre trip see Watt, *How war came*, p. 121 and J. Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the struggle for collective security in Europe, 1933–1939* (London, 1984), pp. 202–3.

There are two pieces of documentary evidence supporting this interpretation of Merekalov's 'infamous' statement.

The first is a letter from Litvinov to Merekalov dated 4 February 1939. In this letter Litvinov stated that the resumption of the credit negotiations following the cancellation of the Schnurre trip to Moscow must be on Berlin's initiative. At the same time he exhorted Merekalov to find out, indirectly, why the Schnurre mission had been cancelled.¹⁵ It may be, therefore, that Merekalov's political overture had a dual purpose: on the one hand, to encourage the Germans to take the initiative in reviving the credit negotiations and, on the other, to elicit the reasons for Berlin's cancellation of Schnurre's visit to Moscow.

The second piece of evidence is a *second* memorandum by Weizsäcker on his meeting with the Soviet ambassador in April 1939. For some reason this document was omitted by the editors of *Nazi-Soviet relations* and, even more inexplicably, has been ignored by historians ever since. In that memorandum Weizsäcker recorded that Merekalov emphasized his personal role in Soviet-German economic relations and how important the fulfilment of the Skoda contracts was for future relations. Weizsäcker also noted Merekalov's comment that he was leaving for Moscow in a few days and that it was important for him to receive a reply to his requests before then.¹⁶ Merekalov, it is reasonable to assume, was anxious to take back to Moscow some good news about Soviet-German economic relations – quite a feather for a young, returning diplomat (he was only 39) to wear in his cap.¹⁷

Merekalov returned to Moscow on 21 April. He never went back to Berlin. Repeated German inquiries as to his whereabouts elicited no response from Moscow and a replacement ambassador was not appointed until September. Merekalov's precise fate remains unknown but his disappearance from the diplomatic scene coincided with a period of renewed purges in the Soviet foreign ministry's central apparatus, including, in early May, Litvinov's dismissal as people's commissar for foreign affairs.¹⁸ It seems reasonable to suppose that Merekalov, like most of his predecessors as Soviet ambassador in Berlin, fell victim to a purge. It is an assumption reinforced by his absence from the postwar annals of Soviet diplomatic history – the typical fate of purge victims awaiting rehabilitation. Not until the late 1970s and early 1980s did Merekalov's name begin to appear in Soviet publications. Finally, in 1986 there appeared an oblique entry on him in the 4th edition of the *Diplomaticheskii Slovar* (Diplomatic Dictionary) which said that between 1940 and 1958 Merekalov was engaged in 'state and scientific work', after which he retired. He died in 1983.¹⁹

¹⁵ God Krizisa, doc. 137. See also doc. 141, a telegram from Merekalov to Litvinov on 6 Feb. where he reports that Wiehl, the head of the commercial policy division in the German foreign office, had told him that the Schnurre visit had been cancelled because the latter was busy and Berlin had decided to let its embassy staff in Moscow conduct the negotiations.

¹⁶ DGFP, series D, vol. 6, doc. 217.

¹⁷ Merekalov may have been encouraged in his endeavours by an earlier meeting with Wiehl, head of the commercial policy division of the German foreign office, and by an approach by Peter Kleist, a Ribbentrop aide, to Georgei Astakhov, the Soviet chargé in Berlin. See G. Roberts, *The unholy alliance: Stalin's pact with Hitler* (London, 1989), pp. 125–6.

¹⁸ On the purge of Litvinov see the present author's 'The fall of Litvinov: a revisionist view', *Journal of Contemporary History* (Oct. 1992).

¹⁹ *Diplomaticheskii Slovar* (Moscow, 1986), III, 619. As far as I can tell Merekalov began to re-emerge in the annals of Soviet diplomatic history with the publication in 1977 of the 21st volume in the series *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*. This was followed by the publication of I. F. Maksimychev's *Diplomatiya mira protiv diplomatii voyny: ocherk Sovetsko-Germanskikh diplomaticheskikh*

The view that the Merekalov–Weizsäcker meeting marked the beginning of determined Soviet efforts to secure a political détente with Nazi Germany was born of a cold war polemic designed to demonstrate Soviet double-dealing and skullduggery during the diplomatic prelude to the Second World War. It is fitting that the opening of Soviet archives in the post-cold war era should finally enable this historical myth to be laid to rest.

otnoshenii v 1933–1939 godakh (Moscow, 1981). This contained the first account by a Soviet historian of the Merekalov–Weizsäcker meeting (pp. 238–41). In 1985 *Novaya i Noveishaya Istoriya* carried an article by M. I. Pankrashova which referred to Merekalov's report, in the Soviet foreign policy archives, on his meeting with Weizsäcker (no. 5, p. 116) – the first time that the existence of such a report had been revealed. Finally, in Nov. 1989 *Voprosy Istorii* published the text of Merekalov's report on his meeting with Weizsäcker.