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# The Soviet Decision for a Pact with Nazi Germany

GEOFFREY ROBERTS

THIS ARTICLE SETS OUT to answer three questions.

- (1) When did the USSR decide to embark on political negotiations with Nazi Germany with a view to securing a German–Soviet *détente*?
- (2) How, from Moscow's point of view, did these negotiations progress from their general inception to the actual non-aggression treaty and spheres of influence agreement embodied in the Nazi–Soviet pact of 23 August 1939?
- (3) What was the nature of the Soviet foreign policy decision represented by the pact with Nazi Germany?

The article is based primarily on a new collection of diplomatic documents from Soviet foreign policy archives: *God krizisa, 1938–1939*.<sup>1</sup> These documents furnish a comprehensive (though not complete) diplomatic record of Soviet relations with the Nazi regime in 1939—reports of meetings with the Germans, instructions to Soviet diplomats, and the correspondence between Moscow and its Berlin embassy. For the first time it is possible to trace the evolution of Soviet policy towards Germany in 1939 through Moscow's eyes.

Before the publication of this new evidence historians were largely reliant on Berlin's record of Soviet–German relations for their interpretation of the Moscow origins of the Nazi–Soviet pact. While German documents supplied an invaluable record of formal diplomatic relations between the two states, their reliability as a source of Soviet attitudes was questionable. German reports and memoranda inevitably reflected German assessments of Soviet policy and German objectives in relation to the USSR. A few quotations from Moscow's archives were available in the writings of Soviet historians, mainly fragments from the despatches of the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires in Berlin, Georgei Astakhov. It was possible to construct from these an account of Soviet–German relations,<sup>2</sup> but it was one open to the objection that beyond the officially selected fragments there lay an entirely different story. Given the inadequacy of both these sets of sources, historical interpretation of the Soviet pact with Nazi Germany was, it seemed, destined to remain locked in a realm of speculation.

The publication in the wake of the *glasnost*' revolution of *God krizisa* marks the beginning of a new phase in the historiography of the Nazi–Soviet pact. A number of contentious issues concerning the timing and circumstances of the Soviet pact with Nazi Germany can now be settled. Contrary to the orthodoxy of most Western historians, it can now be shown, beyond reasonable doubt, that the Soviet

decision for a pact with Nazi Germany was taken later rather than sooner and that the pact was a consequence, not a cause, of the breakdown in August 1939 of the Anglo–Soviet–French triple alliance negotiations. Equally, the diplomatic documents in this collection do not provide definitive answers to all the questions about the pact that have vexed historians for the past 50 years. In particular, the absence of evidence from political sources on the internal deliberations of the Soviet leadership makes it difficult to reconstruct, except by inference, the precise motivations and calculations of their policy towards Germany.

Perhaps more important than the settlement of longstanding disputes, however, are the indications in the new evidence of the need to shift the parameters of the historical debate. The overarching interpretation of the Soviet decision for a pact with the Nazis has been in terms of a cool and calculated foreign policy manoeuvre with definite objectives—a mirror-image, in fact, of the interpretation of the German decision for a pact with the USSR. Nazi Germany began its quest for a pact with the USSR in the spring of 1939 and from the outset pursued two clear goals: the prevention of an Anglo–Soviet–French alliance and Soviet neutrality in the event of a Polish–German war. In the case of the USSR the assumption has been that there was a commensurate process of policy shift and goal adoption. This article will seek to challenge that perception by emphasising the contingent and makeshift nature of the process that led to the pact. On the Soviet side the pact emerged from a process of short-term crisis management in which the Soviet leadership (primarily Stalin and Molotov) responded to the initiatives and actions of others. The picture that emerges from the new evidence is that the pact was more a product of accident than design, a result of policy drift rather than goal-oriented policy direction, the consequence not of strategic calculation but of a series of tactical shifts and adjustments. This picture is reinforced by evidence from Western sources and from a number of recently published Soviet secondary accounts which throw additional light on the questions addressed by this article.

#### *The decision to negotiate*

In a widely cited essay published in 1974 D. C. Watt identified three schools of thought among Western historians as to when Moscow initiated the negotiations which culminated in the Nazi–Soviet pact. These he dubbed the ‘Molotov’, ‘Potemkin’ and ‘Stalin speech’ hypotheses.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘Molotov’ hypothesis refers specifically to a conciliatory speech on Germany by the Soviet Premier to the Central Executive Committee of the Supreme Soviet in January 1936. More generally, it refers to a whole series of Soviet approaches to the Germans in 1935–36, most famously those by the Soviet trade representative in Berlin, David Kandelaki. Watt rejects this hypothesis on the grounds that it is ‘too general to explain the how and the why of the decisions which resulted in the Nazi–Soviet pact’ and considers that it ‘at best indicates an inclination among the Soviet leadership . . . to treat Nazi Germany as a possible associate’.

To Watt's objections to the Molotov hypothesis can be added the criticism that it involves a fundamental misinterpretation of Soviet policy towards Germany in 1935–36. Moscow's diplomatic soundings in Berlin at this time were, arguably, not aimed at securing an agreement with Nazi Germany *per se* but at developing a relationship with elements of a perceived opposition to Hitler's anti-Soviet foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

The 'Potemkin' hypothesis takes as its starting point the reported remark of the Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs to Robert Coulondre, the French Ambassador in Moscow, shortly after Munich: 'My poor friend, what have you done? For us I see no other way out than a fourth partition of Poland'. The authenticity of this particular statement by Potemkin (recorded by Coulondre in his memoirs published in 1950) is less important than the attendant interpretation that the apogee of Anglo–French appeasement at Munich marked both the final defeat of Litvinov's anti-German policy of collective security and the beginnings of Moscow's search for rapprochement with Berlin.

In favour of this interpretation is the fact that in December 1938 the USSR signed a new trade agreement with Germany and subsequently agreed to negotiations on a new credit agreement. It seems likely that Moscow had at least one eye on the political impact of these renewed economic contacts.<sup>5</sup> However, as Watt says, 'if the Soviet authorities had been intent on anything more than simply mending their fences with Germany, they would certainly have removed Litvinov from office'.

The 'Stalin speech' hypothesis is probably the best known account of the genesis of the Nazi–Soviet negotiations. Numerous writers have interpreted Stalin's attack on Western appeasement policies in a speech to the XVIII party congress in March 1939 as a signal to Berlin that Moscow was ready to do business with it.<sup>6</sup> Often cited in support of this hypothesis is Molotov's toast to Stalin on the occasion of the signature of the Nazi–Soviet pact that it was the Soviet leader's speech the previous March that had brought about a reversal in political relations.

However, as Watt indicates, the substance of Stalin's speech was a declaration of non-involvement in intercapitalist quarrels. Only with hindsight can the speech be read in any other way. Certainly, as Watt points out, if the speech was intended to foreshadow a German–Soviet agreement then most diplomats in Moscow missed the message. Moreover, the speech was delivered at the time of a peculiarly low ebb in Soviet–German relations. The credit negotiations between the two states begun earlier in the year had fizzled out and the Soviet side was still smarting from the very public cancellation of a special visit to Moscow by Karl Schnurre, the German Foreign Ministry official responsible for trade with the USSR. It seems unlikely, to say the least, that Moscow would have chosen such an unpropitious moment for a public political overture to Berlin.

Watt's own theory about the Soviet decision to open negotiations with the Nazis might be called the 'Merekalov/Litvinov' hypothesis. In his view the first sign that Moscow was interested in a serious political *détente* with Germany was the 'quasi-formal statement' by Aleksei Merekalov, the Soviet Ambassador in Berlin, that 'there was no reason why Soviet–German relations should not be put on a normal footing and "out of normal relations could grow increasingly improved relations"'.<sup>7</sup>

This statement was reputedly delivered at a meeting with Ernst Weizsäcker, State Secretary in the German Foreign Ministry, on 17 April 1939. There followed, in Watt's view, a series of German signals of goodwill, including Hitler's speech of 28 April which omitted any attack on the USSR. Watt also speculates that during that last fortnight of April there may have been secret Soviet–German contacts that we still do not know about. At any rate, on 4 May the Soviet Union issued a massive public signal of its intentions by replacing Litvinov with Molotov as People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs. Watt summarises:

Litvinov's dismissal and Molotov's accession were followed by a series of visits to the German Foreign Ministry by Georgi Astakhov [Soviet Chargé in Berlin] on 5 May and 9 May . . . and then again on 17 May . . . The Soviet decision had clearly been taken.<sup>7</sup>

However, had the Soviet decision been taken? Watt, like successive generations of historians of the Nazi–Soviet pact, was labouring under the handicap of access only to German documents on relations between the two states. His interpretation of Soviet policy was perforce based on essentially second-hand accounts—accounts tainted by German preoccupations, perceptions and policy objectives. It should come as no surprise that quite a different picture of Soviet policy towards Germany emerges from Moscow's own records of its relations with Berlin.

The most glaring example of this discrepancy between Soviet and German diplomatic records concerns that infamous meeting between Merekalov and Weizsäcker on 17 April 1939. Merekalov's report of the meeting makes it clear that the ostensible purpose of the meeting—to complain about the non-fulfilment of Soviet contracts with the Skoda arms factory in German-occupied Czechoslovakia—was the real one. He records no political remarks of his own, let alone the dramatic words attributed to him by Weizsäcker. Indeed, according to Merekalov's account it was Weizsäcker who did all the talking about politics, concluding with the 'quasi-formal statement' that 'Germany has differences of political principle with the USSR. All the same it wants to develop economic relations with it'.<sup>8</sup>

From Moscow's point of view, therefore, the signals for *détente* emanating from the Merekalov–Weizsäcker meeting were, if any, coming from the German side, not the Soviet. Did the Soviet side interpret Weizsäcker's remarks in that way? Was the absence of an anti-Bolshevik tirade in Hitler's speech on 28 April perhaps taken as a further sign of German overtures for rapprochement? Was the sacking of Litvinov on 4 May Moscow's reply?

That Moscow would interpret Weizsäcker's insipid comments in such a way is unlikely, to say the least. The omission of an anti-communist attack by Hitler was unusual, but it was not unique. Moreover, the Nazi dictator's ire on this occasion was directed elsewhere: against Poland in his denunciation of the 1934 German–Polish non-aggression agreement, and against Roosevelt, who a fortnight earlier had had the temerity to ask Hitler if he planned to attack any other countries, following the German occupation of Prague in March 1939.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to Litvinov the full story of his dismissal has yet to emerge. However, there is a good case for reading his departure from office as the result of a combination of internal politics and a desire by the USSR to signal to the British and French, who were dragging their feet over Soviet proposals for an

anti-German coalition, that Moscow should be taken more seriously.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, it is clear that whatever the reasons for Litvinov's dismissal it heralded no immediate change in Soviet policy towards Germany. As we shall see, that policy change did not occur until the end of July 1939 at the very earliest. Until then Moscow remained both sceptical and impassive in the face of numerous attempts by the Germans to initiate discussions about improving political relations between the two countries—and thereby drive a wedge between the USSR and the Western powers, who they knew were engaged in negotiations about an anti-Hitler coalition.

German efforts to woo the USSR away from its projected alliance with Britain and France began, from the Soviet point of view, on 5 May when Schnurre informed Astakhov that Soviet contracts with Skoda would be honoured.<sup>11</sup> Four days later Astakhov—in charge of the Soviet embassy in Berlin following Merekalov's recall to Moscow in April<sup>12</sup>—met Baron von Stumm, deputy head of the German Foreign Ministry's press department. The occasion was the introduction of the new Tass representative in Berlin but, according to Astakhov's report of the meeting, Stumm took the opportunity to raise the question of improving German–Soviet relations, pointing out that the Germans had already made a number of efforts in this direction. Astakhov replied:

To all [Stumm's] arguments I made corresponding objections, pointing out that the German side openly and on its own initiative had caused the deterioration of German–Soviet relations, and that their improvement depended mainly on them. The Soviet side has never shunned an improvement in relations provided there was a basis for it. As regards the symptoms of improvement that [Stumm] spoke about, dismissing or at least doubting the majority of them, I noted that . . . we had not yet any grounds for taking them seriously, beyond the limits of a short-term tactical manoeuvre.<sup>13</sup>

Astakhov's stated scepticism about German policy—a stance he maintained for the next three months—was the public face of an attitude that in private verged on the scornful. In a letter to Potemkin on 12 May Astakhov offered the following assessment of the position in the wake of Litvinov's dismissal:

From my telegraph reports and diary notes you may have noticed that the Germans are striving to create the impression of an impending or even already achieved improvement in German–Soviet relations. Throwing aside all the absurd rumours fabricated by the Germans or by idle foreign correspondents, only one thing can be stated as certain fact—this is a noticeable change in the tone of the German press in relation to us . . . But while noting these instances, we cannot, of course, close our eyes to its exceptional superficiality, and to their non-committal nature . . . It is only too obvious what the motives behind this change in the German attitude towards us are, and for the present it does not warrant any serious consideration.

I think, therefore, that you will not object that in response to advances by the Germans and those close to them I replied that for the present we have no grounds for trusting the seriousness of this 'change', although we are always prepared to meet halfway when it comes to improving relations.<sup>14</sup>

On 15 May Astakhov met Schnurre to discuss changes in the legal status of the Soviet trade mission in Prague. In accordance with the sentiments he had

expressed in his letter to Potemkin a few days earlier Astakhov's response to Schnurre's enquiry about the prospects for improving Soviet–German relations was both restrained and low-key. Apart from a change in the tone of the German press towards the USSR there was no evidence of German desire for such an improvement, Astakhov told Schnurre. On the other hand, the USSR had never excluded the possibility of an improvement in relations with Germany, provided Berlin could demonstrate that that was what it wanted.

The above summary of the 15 May meeting is based on Astakhov's report to Moscow on his conversation with Schnurre.<sup>15</sup> Turning to Schnurre's report of the same meeting, however, we get a completely different picture of what transpired. There is no mention of the fact that (according to Astakhov) it was Schnurre who raised the question of improving Soviet–German relations, emphasising, too, the desirability of such a development. Moreover, according to Schnurre, Astakhov 'referred in great detail to the development of Soviet–German relations' and 'stated in detail that there were no conflicts in foreign policy between Germany and Soviet Russia, and that therefore there was no reason for any enmity between the two countries . . . To substantiate his opinion concerning the possibility of a change in German–Soviet relations, Astakhov repeatedly referred to Italy'.<sup>16</sup> None of this figures in Astakhov's report.

Which account of the meeting is more accurate is less important than the fact that if Astakhov did say the things attributed to him by Schnurre he could not be bothered to report them to Moscow. If Astakhov was expressing anything more than diplomatic niceties he was certainly not acting under instructions from Moscow. However, whatever the provenance and significance of Astakhov's reported remarks to Schnurre (at this and other meetings), he certainly impressed Berlin, which shortly launched a major diplomatic initiative to improve German–Soviet relations.

On 20 May Schulenburg, the German Ambassador, approached Molotov with a proposal that the negotiations for a new credit treaty should be resumed and that Schnurre should come to Moscow for that purpose. Molotov's reply was an unequivocal rejection of the proposal:

I told the Ambassador that this was not the first time we had heard about Schnurre's trip to Moscow. Schnurre was to leave for Moscow, but his train had been cancelled. Economic negotiations with Germany during the recent period had begun more than once without result. I further stated that we had gained the impression that the German government was playing some sort of game instead of conducting business-like economic negotiations; and that for such a game it should have looked for its partner in another country and not the government of the USSR. The USSR was not going to participate in such a game.

'Throughout the whole discussion', Molotov further noted in his report, 'it was evident that for the Ambassador my statement was most unexpected'.<sup>17</sup>

Berlin was dismayed by this response, but not for long. The Germans took heart from Schulenburg's report that Molotov had said that 'the Soviet Government could only agree to a resumption of the [economic] negotiations if the necessary

“political basis” for them had been constructed’.<sup>18</sup> Molotov’s own version of this remark makes it clear that this was not, as the Germans hoped, an invitation to political discussions but a harking back to the earlier experience of the cancelled Schnurre visit:

We had come to the conclusion that for the success of the economic negotiations it was necessary to create a corresponding political basis. Without such a basis, as shown by the experience of negotiations with Germany, it is not possible to settle economic questions.<sup>19</sup>

Berlin, nevertheless, resumed its approaches on 30 May when Weizsäcker invited Astakhov to his office for further discussions about improving Soviet–German relations. The basis for a normalisation of relations existed already, Weizsäcker told Astakhov. In the German shop there were many ‘goods’ for the Soviet Union to choose from.<sup>20</sup> To Moscow Astakhov reported that Weizsäcker’s aim in the meeting had been to explore ‘the possibility of talks about improving relations with us and to restrain our rapprochement with England. It is typical, however, that they refrained from committing themselves to any agreement’.<sup>21</sup>

The day after the Weizsäcker–Astakhov meeting Molotov made a keynote speech on the international situation to the Supreme Soviet. At the heart of the speech was an account of Soviet negotiations with Britain and France for a trilateral security pact, but Molotov also announced that credit negotiations with Germany might soon be resumed.<sup>22</sup> In fact more than six weeks were to pass before Moscow formally agreed to negotiate a new trade and credit agreement. In the interim economic discussions between the two states were confined to ‘talks about talks’.<sup>23</sup> On the political front the Soviet side was even more dilatory, responding not at all to further German suggestions about improving political relations.

On 17 June Astakhov met Schulenburg, who was on leave in Berlin. Astakhov was told that the Germans were still awaiting a reply to Weizsäcker’s approach of 30 May.<sup>24</sup> On 28 June Schulenburg, back in Moscow, met Molotov to convey both Hitler’s and Ribbentrop’s desire for improved relations with the USSR. Schulenburg pointed to the recent non-aggression treaties with Latvia and Estonia as proof of Germany’s intentions towards the USSR. In reply, Molotov argued that these non-aggression treaties were concluded on Germany’s own account and not out of friendship towards the USSR. He also drew attention to Germany’s recent abrogation of its non-aggression pact with Poland, and to the Anti-Comintern Pact and to the Pact of Steel with Italy.

The best that could be said of Molotov’s response was that he was ready to hear what Schulenburg had to say. However, since the German Ambassador had no definite proposals to make the meeting ended on a generally negative note.<sup>25</sup>

Molotov’s rebuff of Schulenburg was followed by a month-long lull in German advances to the Soviet Union. As Astakhov noted in a letter to Molotov on 19 July, while the Germans continued to drop indirect hints of a willingness to change their policy towards the USSR they were afraid to continue their direct approaches of a few weeks earlier.<sup>26</sup> On 24 July, however, these approaches did resume. At a meeting with Astakhov, Schnurre proposed a three-stage programme

for the normalisation of Soviet–German relations: completion of the trade and credit talks; improvements in cultural relations; and political discussions.<sup>27</sup>

On 26 July Astakhov met Schnurre again. Insisting that he spoke for Ribbentrop and Hitler, Schnurre stated that Germany was serious about the normalisation and improvement of relations with the USSR. When Astakhov queried whether this was the case, Schnurre replied: ‘Tell me what proof you want? We are ready to demonstrate the possibility of reaching agreement on any question, to give any guarantees’. Later in the conversation Schnurre said that Germany had renounced any aspirations in the Ukraine and was prepared to treat the Baltic countries in the same way. At this point Astakhov began to feel the conversation was going too far and he decided to divert the discussion to more general themes—the current status of Hitler’s plans for eastern expansion outlined in *Mein Kampf* and issues connected to Polish–German, Anglo–German and German–Japanese relations. The meeting concluded with Astakhov promising to report home, but stating also that he was not sure that Moscow would take such novel ideas seriously.<sup>28</sup>

Moscow’s reply was transmitted to Astakhov in two stages. On 28 July Molotov telegraphed Astakhov that ‘in restricting yourself to hearing out Schnurre’s statements and promising to pass them on to Moscow you did the right thing’.<sup>29</sup> This one-line telegram was, apparently, the first political instruction that Molotov sent to Astakhov in the summer of 1939.<sup>30</sup> The next day, in a further telegram to Astakhov, Molotov stated Moscow’s position. The full text reads:

Political relations between the USSR and Germany may improve, of course, with an improvement in economic relations. In this regard Schnurre is, generally speaking, right. But only the Germans can say concretely how political relations should improve. Until recently the Germans did nothing but curse the USSR, did not want any improvement in political relations with it and refused to participate in any conferences where the USSR was represented. If the Germans are now sincerely changing course and really want to improve political relations with the USSR, they are obliged to state what this improvement represents in concrete terms. Not long ago I was with Schulenburg who also spoke about improving relations, but did not want to propose anything concrete or intelligible. Here the matter depends entirely on the Germans. We would, of course, welcome any improvement in political relations between the two countries.<sup>31</sup>

With this grudging response Moscow had finally opened the door to political *détente* with Berlin. It was not so much a decision to negotiate as the first real sign of a readiness to listen to and consider what the Germans had to say. However, why now, at the end of July rather than in May or June? The answer to this question remains unclear but it may have been connected to the triple alliance negotiations with the British and French.

All along Moscow had suspected that Berlin’s approaches were part of some kind of *petit jeu* aimed at disrupting the Anglo–Soviet–French triple alliance negotiations launched by Litvinov in April. By the end of July, however, the negotiations on the political part of the security pact the Soviet authorities wanted were more or less complete and the Western powers had also agreed to begin military talks.<sup>32</sup> With these commitments in the bag the danger of German mischief-making was minimal and Moscow could feel more confident about

playing the German card as part of its own pressure tactics in relation to London and Paris. Furthermore, the experience of negotiating with the British and French had not exactly been encouraging. From Moscow's point of view London and Paris had dragged their feet throughout the triple alliance negotiations. On 17 July, for example, Molotov described the Anglo–French negotiators as 'crooks and cheats' and expressed doubt that an acceptable agreement would be reached.<sup>33</sup> In this light the German offers of *détente* undoubtedly warranted more attention than previously, particularly when the evidence was accumulating that the crisis in German–Polish relations over Danzig was about to break.<sup>34</sup> With war on their doorstep perhaps only days away the Soviet leadership clearly felt the need to keep all their options open.

While calculations such as these may have been behind the adjustment in Soviet policy towards Germany at the end of July, too much should not be made of them. Molotov's statement of Soviet policy on 29 July indicates a lack of calculation and that Moscow did not really know what to do about Berlin's offer of political discussions.

At the root of Molotov's curiously passive response to Schnurre's hints of a Soviet–German condominium in Eastern Europe was uncertainty about Hitler's intentions and about the final outcome of the Polish crisis. Was Hitler's aim the total subjugation of Poland or a new 'Munich'? Would the British and French stand and fight alongside Poland? For how long and how successfully could Poland resist a German invasion? Above all, what would be the length and nature of the 'breathing space' that the Nazis seemed to be offering the Soviet state? Such questions continued to be a source of indecisiveness in Moscow's policy right up until the very eve of the Nazi–Soviet pact. Indeed, the lingering doubts that they generated persisted for some time after the pact.

There is also a rather more mundane factor to be taken into account when considering Soviet policy towards Germany in the summer of 1939. Molotov was a new foreign minister and for the first three months of his tenure in office he had his hands full negotiating a complex and contentious treaty of alliance with the British and French. He also headed an organisation that had been wracked by years of successive purges, most recently including a major assault on the personnel of its central apparatus in May 1939. In addition, Molotov retained his responsibilities as Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars. Quite simply, it is likely that Molotov had little spare time and energy to devote to tactics in relation to Berlin and, given the commitment to a triple alliance with Britain and France, not much inclination. This may help to explain why it was that between May and July 1939 Moscow pursued (or rather did not pursue) a 'non-policy'<sup>35</sup> towards Germany. This contention is borne out by evidence, presented below, that until the end of July 1939 Astakhov, Moscow's main point of contact with Berlin, was left largely to his own devices—with no instructions on how to respond to numerous attempts by the Germans to involve the USSR in discussions about political *détente*.

One result of Moscow's non-policy was that no decision to embark on negotiations for a political *détente* with Germany was ever taken; at least not a decision that can be clearly demarcated from the process that led to the

agreements embodied in the Nazi–Soviet pact. As we shall see in the next section, this was a process not so much of conscious political bargaining as of policy drift, which was in turn an effect of a stream of events, perceptions and pressures that buffeted Moscow along to the final outcome of the Nazi–Soviet pact.

*Towards the Nazi–Soviet pact*

While Moscow was dithering about what to do, Astakhov in Berlin was beginning to formulate a more definite game-plan. In a letter to Potemkin at the end of July he argued that German efforts at improving relations with the USSR had taken on a persistent character and that:

I have no doubt that if we wanted to we could involve the Germans in far-reaching negotiations and get from them assurances about the questions that interest us. Of course, what the value of these assurances would be is another question.

In any case this readiness of the Germans to talk to us about improving relations should be taken into account and, perhaps, we ought to give them some encouragement, in order to retain in our hands a trump card which we could use in the event of necessity. From this point of view it would, perhaps, be useful to say something, to pose them some questions, in order not to let go of the thread that they have placed in our hands and which, handled carefully, can hardly do us any harm.<sup>36</sup>

It is worth pausing briefly to consider the significance of this letter to Moscow from Astakhov—the man who has gone down in history as the go-between of the Nazi–Soviet negotiations of 1939. Two points emerge from the passage quoted above. Firstly, as late as the end of July 1939 Astakhov was evidently not even authorised to encourage Berlin’s soundings of him, let alone enter into negotiations with the Germans. Secondly, Astakhov was obviously keen to explore what the Germans had to offer. Over the next two weeks this inclination was to develop into a barely disguised enthusiasm for a deal with Berlin. As we shall see, Moscow was much more hesitant in its response to Berlin’s overtures than was Astakhov, but his increasingly positive reports about his discussions with the Germans must have had a considerable impact back home.

Astakhov’s immediate game-plan was to give the Germans some encouragement in order to keep going the thread of his discussions in Berlin. Before Moscow could respond to his proposal, however, the Germans once again took the initiative. On 2 August Ribbentrop himself told Astakhov that ‘we consider that there are no essential contradictions (*protivorechii*) between our countries from the Black Sea to the Baltic. On all problems it is possible to reach agreement; if the Soviet government shares these premises we can exchange views in more concrete terms’.<sup>37</sup>

The next day Schulenburg, in a meeting with Molotov, followed up this overture, proposing an improvement in relations in three stages: (a) the conclusions of an economic agreement; (b) better press relations; (c) the development of cultural and scientific cooperation. These would lay the basis for an improvement in political relations. Schulenburg stressed the new course in German foreign policy, in particular that there were no political contradictions between Germany

and the USSR in the Baltic and that Berlin had no plans that ran counter to Soviet interests in Poland.

Molotov's response was more positive than on previous occasions, but still guarded. On the one hand, he stated that 'the Soviet government has a favourable view of the German government's desire for an improvement in relations'. However, on the other hand, he continued to cast doubt on German policy towards the USSR, rehashing old arguments about the Anti-Comintern Pact, Germany's attitude to the USSR in international affairs, and so on.<sup>38</sup>

On 4 August Molotov telegraphed instructions to Astakhov to the effect that Soviet policy was to continue with the exchange of views in general terms but that more concrete discussions depend on the outcome of the trade-credit talks.<sup>39</sup> This non-committal position was one that Moscow maintained for the next two weeks—despite mounting diplomatic pressure by the Germans and a stream of reports from Astakhov that left no doubt about what Berlin had in mind.

Significantly, this period of continued wavering coincided with the arrival of the Anglo–French military delegation in Moscow (on 10 August), the beginning of joint discussions (on 12 August), and the effective breakdown of the talks (14–17 August) over the issue of Polish and Romanian consent to the passage of Soviet forces across their territory. The available evidence is that the Soviet side embarked on these negotiations intent on reaching agreement on a military convention to resist German expansionism. However, that agreement had to be a watertight one—which left no room for manoeuvre by the 'appeasers' in London and Paris and which secured for the USSR practical and worthwhile military support in the event of war with Germany. At the same time Moscow had serious doubts about the likelihood of success. The experience of political negotiations with London and Paris did not augur well nor did the dilatory behaviour of the Anglo–French military delegation which instead of flying to Moscow came by sea. Then there was the relatively low rank and status of the Anglo–French military negotiators and, it soon became obvious, the fact that they had no detailed strategic or operational plans for a joint war against Germany. It may also be that the Soviet authorities were privy to the secret instructions given to the British delegation that they were to spin out the negotiations for as long as possible.<sup>40</sup>

As Moscow's doubts about the triple alliance project grew, so the door to an agreement with Germany was opened wider. However, not until the moment of the final breakdown of the military negotiations with Britain and France were the Germans invited across the threshold.

On 5 August Astakhov telegraphed Moscow that Schnurre had suggested the idea of a 'secret protocol' attached to any credit agreement that might be signed.<sup>41</sup> Molotov replied on 7 August, stating that it was not appropriate to sign such a protocol under a trade treaty.<sup>42</sup> This was the first mention of some kind of *secret* Soviet–German deal.

In a letter to Molotov on 8 August Astakhov summed up the stage reached in the 'negotiations' between the two states. What the Germans were proposing, wrote Astakhov, was the updating of Rapallo and other German–Soviet political treaties by a new treaty or 'some protocol'. Discussions around this and related topics were not excluded even in the event of a successful conclusion of the Anglo–Soviet

–French negotiations. However, the real interest of the Germans was in the settlement of a number of territorial–political issues in Eastern Europe. In return for Soviet disinterestedness in the fate of Danzig and former ‘German Poland’, Berlin would renounce any aspirations in the Ukraine and, in effect, would give the USSR a free hand in ‘Russian Poland’, Bessarabia and the Baltic States (except for Lithuania). In conclusion Astakhov wrote:

It goes without saying that I am not in any way claiming that . . . the Germans would maintain a serious and long-term observation of the eventual commitments. I think only that in the immediate future they consider it conceivable to come to a certain understanding . . . in order to neutralise us in the event of war with Poland. As regards the future, then the matter would, of course, depend not on these obligations but on the new situation which would result and that I cannot foresee at the moment.<sup>43</sup>

Molotov replied to Astakhov on 11 August. Moscow was interested in the points made in his letter but such discussions required preparation and a period of transition from the trade and credit agreement to other problems.<sup>44</sup> This was the first sign that Moscow was seriously considering a wide-ranging deal with Berlin. However, a further week was to elapse before Moscow was ready to grasp the nettle of a pact with the Nazis. That week was the same one in which the triple alliance negotiations finally collapsed with the failure (from Moscow’s point of view) of the Anglo–Soviet–French military talks. However, in the meantime Moscow continued to hedge its bets.

From Berlin Astakhov continued to nudge Moscow towards a decisive move. On 12 August he wrote to Molotov that events were moving quickly and that in view of the coming conflict with Poland the Germans did not want to dwell on secondary issues; they wanted to discuss political–territorial problems. Astakhov’s peroration in this letter was his last contribution to the making of the Nazi–Soviet pact. The Germans, he reported, were:

obviously worried by our negotiations with the British and French military and they have become unsparing in their arguments and promises in order to prevent a military agreement. For the sake of this they are now ready, I believe, to make the kind of declarations and gestures that would have been inconceivable six months ago. The Baltic, Bessarabia, Eastern Poland (not to speak of the Ukraine)—at the present time this is the minimum they would give up without much discussion in order to secure a promise from us not to intervene in their conflict with Poland.<sup>45</sup>

Astakhov’s evident enthusiasm for a deal notwithstanding, Moscow continued to tread carefully. On 15 August Schulenburg met Molotov and proposed that Ribbentrop should visit Moscow for face to face negotiations. Molotov welcomed Schulenburg’s reaffirmation of previous German statements of political good will, but insisted that prior to a visit by Ribbentrop there would have to be clarification of a number of matters. One would have thought that the Germans could hardly have made their intentions clearer. Yet at this meeting Molotov chose a curiously indirect way to probe for the details of the kind of deal on offer. He referred to a despatch from the Soviet embassy in Rome at the end of June which reported the existence of a ‘Schulenburg Plan’ for improving Soviet–German relations. The

plan proposed German intercession in Soviet–Japanese conflicts in the Far East; a non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR and a joint guarantee of the Baltic states; and the conclusion of a wide-ranging economic agreement between the two countries. Molotov wanted to know whether the Schulenburg Plan represented the basis for further negotiations and, in particular, the German government's attitude to the idea of a non-aggression treaty.

Schulenburg was embarrassed, for the 'plan' that bore his name was a myth, the result, he said, of rumours emanating from conversations between himself and Rosso, the Italian Ambassador in Moscow. Schulenburg nevertheless promised to convey to Berlin Molotov's interest in the points of the so-called plan.<sup>46</sup>

Molotov's roundabout probing of German intentions can be interpreted purely and simply as a negotiating tactic: Moscow wanted Berlin to make its offer before revealing its own hand. However, there was also, perhaps, a deeper motive underlying Russian reluctance to embark on explicit negotiations about a Soviet–German condominium in Eastern Europe: Moscow still lacked a new strategic agenda for action. Hitherto the operational objectives of Soviet foreign policy had revolved around the project of a triple alliance with Britain and France. By 15 August that project was in the latter stages of its disintegration. However, Moscow had yet to formulate a new strategic–political agenda to take its place; and was not finally to do so until the eve of the Red Army's invasion of Eastern Poland on 17 September. The only clear goal of Soviet foreign policy from mid-August to mid-September 1939 was that of avoiding a war with Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe while Britain and France stood on the sidelines. A new policy of security through strategic–political expansion and cooperation with Hitler was foreshadowed in the Nazi–Soviet pact, but its actualisation was slow and hesitant, an effect of a series of *ad hoc* responses and reactions to the dynamic of events rather than the result of prior decision or planned policy.

Moscow's lack of a new strategy was certainly evident at Molotov's next meeting with Schulenburg on 17 August. At this meeting Molotov handed Schulenburg a formal written statement proposing a non-aggression pact between the two states (or a reaffirmation of the Soviet–German neutrality treaty of 1926), together with a 'special protocol' which would form an 'integral' part of that pact.

The moment of Stalin's decision to deal with Hitler rather than the British or French had finally arrived—but what kind of deal? Here the position remained unclear. Schulenburg had a formal statement to make too. Picking up on Molotov's earlier enquiries about the 'Schulenburg Plan', Berlin proposed a non-aggression treaty, a joint guarantee of the Baltic states, and German help in improving Soviet–Japanese relations. In response all Molotov would say was that the new German proposals would have to be studied. Schulenburg attempted to draw Molotov on what Moscow envisaged would be the content of this proposed 'special protocol'. However, all Molotov would say was that both sides had to think about what the content of the protocol should be. He resisted, too, all Schulenburg's representations that Ribbentrop should fly to Moscow immediately for direct negotiations.<sup>47</sup>

Molotov's reticence about the content of the proposed 'special protocol' and his refusal to set a date for Ribbentrop's arrival in Moscow were linked. At a further

meeting with Schulenburg on 19 August Molotov made it clear that before Ribbentrop came to Moscow it had to be certain that an agreement would be reached and this meant that the matter of the special protocol had to be clarified first. The matter of the protocol was a serious one, he told Schulenburg, and it was up to Berlin to think about its content.

Schulenburg's meeting with Molotov ended at about 3.00 p.m. However, the German Ambassador was summoned back to the Kremlin for a further meeting at 4.30 p.m. where he was told that the Soviet government agreed that Ribbentrop could come to Moscow on 26–27 August. No reasons were given for this change of policy and Schulenburg assumed, probably correctly, that Stalin had intervened.<sup>48</sup>

Presumably, the Soviet calculation was that during the coming week the matter of the 'special protocol' could be clarified. It is also possible that Stalin had not entirely given up on the British and French and agreed to Ribbentrop's visit with a view to strengthening his hand in those negotiations, which had not yet formally ended.<sup>49</sup> In any event this sudden change in tactics was illustrative of how in these critical days Soviet foreign policy was being made on the hoof. A further example of the reactive and makeshift nature of Soviet diplomacy on the eve of the pact with Nazi Germany was to occur two days later.

On 21 August Schulenburg presented Molotov with an urgent personal message from Hitler to Stalin. The substance of the message was an urgent plea that in view of the international situation (i.e. the Polish–German crisis over Danzig) Ribbentrop should visit Moscow in the next couple of days to sign a non-aggression pact and to negotiate the 'supplementary protocol'. Two hours later, in a letter to Hitler, Stalin replied personally, agreeing that Ribbentrop arrive in Moscow on 23 August.<sup>50</sup>

The Nazi–Soviet pact of non-aggression, together with its 'Secret Additional Protocol', was signed within a few hours of Ribbentrop's arrival in Moscow on 23 August 1939. The protocols dividing North Eastern Europe into Soviet and German spheres of influence constitute one of the most famous documents in diplomatic history:

1. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic states (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR . . .
2. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state the spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narew, Vistula and San.<sup>51</sup>

What remain mysterious, however, are the details of how the specifics of this notorious agreement were hammered out and the meaning attached to it by the two sides.

On the Soviet side, the last piece of documentary evidence is a postscript to a Soviet draft of the proposed non-aggression treaty handed to Schulenburg on 19 August:

The present pact shall only be valid if a special protocol is signed simultaneously, covering the points in which the contracting parties are interested in the field of foreign policy. The protocol shall be an integral part of the pact.<sup>52</sup>

We also know that the Russian originals of the secret protocols, together with associated documents, were transferred out of the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1946 and placed in the hands of one of Molotov's aides. They have not been found since. In retrospect at least, Stalin and Molotov were plainly embarrassed by the pact.<sup>53</sup> It also appears that the existence and content of the protocols was a secret officially known only by Stalin and Molotov. The other members of the Politbureau were not told about them.<sup>54</sup> Finally, it should be recalled that in all the official exchanges between Moscow and Berlin in the run-up to the pact the talk was of a 'special' or 'supplementary', not a secret protocol. It may be, therefore, that initially there was no intention, on the Soviet side, to have a secret part of the pact and that this idea evolved in the course of the face-to-face negotiations with Ribbentrop.<sup>55</sup>

On the German side there is also a dearth of documentation on the period from 21–23 August.<sup>56</sup> There is available some memoir material which provides some clues as to the nature of the deal struck in the Kremlin between Ribbentrop, Molotov and Stalin, but this evidence is fragmentary at best and has to be treated with some caution, particularly when dealing with the Soviet side of the equation. The only clear point that emerges from this evidence with regard to Soviet policy is that Stalin was keen on an explicit spheres of influence agreement in Eastern Europe.<sup>57</sup>

In truth we know very little about the precise motives and intentions of Stalin and Molotov and Hitler and Ribbentrop, save for the obvious fact that in return for staying neutral in the coming German–Polish war the USSR was promised a sphere of influence in the Baltic and in Eastern Poland.

This is not the generally accepted view of the Nazi–Soviet pact, which posits that on 23 August 1939 there was a definite agreement to partition Poland between Germany and the USSR and to allow Soviet subjugation of the Baltic states. The evidence for this view is quite simply that this is what subsequently happened. However, that fact is no proof of any prior commitment. The evidence, at least on the Soviet side, is that there was no such plan, agreement or definite intention. In signing the pact with Nazi Germany Stalin finally abandoned the policy of collective security and opted for safeguarding Soviet interests via neutrality and independent manoeuvring. Beyond that the new foreign policy embodied in the pact remained fluid. A strategy of territorial expansion into Eastern Europe was only one of the possibilities present at the moment of the signing of the pact; and whether or not it should be the chosen course of action would depend on the circumstances. After all, on 23 August 1939 nothing was certain. Would Hitler really attack Poland? Would the Poles fight back and how successful would they be? What would Britain and France do? What were the chances of another 'Munich'? What would be the consequences of any forward Soviet strategy in Eastern Europe? Until these and many other quandaries were resolved there could be no question of any precipitate action. In the meantime Soviet foreign strategy was kept in a state of abeyance. Only an analysis along these lines can explain the surprising ambiguity, hesitancy and uncertainty that characterised Soviet foreign policy in the days and weeks immediately following the conclusion of the pact with Nazi Germany.

*Soviet foreign policy and the pact*

With the conclusion of the Nazi–Soviet pact the USSR had executed the most stunning volte-face in diplomatic history. ‘The sinister news broke upon the world like an explosion’, Churchill wrote later.<sup>58</sup> Yet the immediate diplomatic fall-out from the pact, as far as Soviet foreign policy was concerned, was curiously muted. True, the pact had wrecked the Anglo–Soviet–French military negotiations and the USSR had nailed its colours to the mast of neutrality in the event of war, but apart from that (admittedly, very large matters) it was business as usual.

When the Chinese Ambassador met Lozovsky, Soviet Deputy People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, on 26 August he was told that the pact, like other non-aggression treaties signed by the USSR in the past, was a contribution to the struggle for peace. Moreover, that although the negotiations with Britain and France had been broken off they could be resumed and there was still a possibility of reaching agreement.<sup>59</sup>

Lozovsky, of course, was not privy to the Soviet–German discussions of 23 August nor to the content of the secret protocol. The same was true of Sharonov, the Soviet Ambassador in Warsaw, but presumably he was acting on instructions when he told Foreign Minister Beck on 26 August that the non-aggression treaty with Germany did not affect Polish–Soviet relations.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, Soviet Defense Commissar Voroshilov’s hint in a newspaper interview the next day that the USSR might be prepared to supply Poland with raw materials and military equipment in the event of a German attack<sup>61</sup> must have been cleared with Stalin and Molotov. The day after Poland was attacked Sharonov is reported to have asked Beck why no Polish request for such aid had been forthcoming.<sup>62</sup> These indications of goodwill continued at a friendly meeting between Molotov and the Polish Ambassador on 3 September.<sup>63</sup>

Moscow’s benign attitude towards Poland during this period was not dissimulation but a sign of the indecision that gripped Soviet foreign policy while Stalin waited to see how the international situation developed. A new, neutralist course for Soviet foreign policy had been charted by the pact with Nazi Germany, and this was publicly spelt out by Molotov in a speech to the Supreme Soviet on 31 August.<sup>64</sup> However, a neutralist stance was one thing, an active foreign policy strategy to secure Soviet interests was quite another. That would depend on the result of the coming German–Polish war.

A window on Stalin’s wait and see policy is also provided by the decisions and discussions of the Comintern during this period.<sup>65</sup> For the first two weeks after the pact the Comintern leadership in Moscow was left to its own devices in formulating policy for the communist movement in the new situation. The position they adopted was broadly similar to that spontaneously arrived at by the communist parties abroad, i.e. support for the Soviet diplomatic manoeuvre in signing the pact with Nazi Germany but a continuation of the anti-fascist struggle at home and abroad. Nazi Germany continued to be identified as the main enemy of the working class, no more so than after the invasion of Poland on 1 September.

This line was maintained until 7 September when Dimitrov, the Comintern leader, had a meeting with Stalin, Molotov and Zhdanov. At this meeting Stalin

reportedly told Dimitrov that ‘we would have preferred an agreement with the so-called democratic countries, hence we entered negotiations with them, but Britain and France wanted us to be their hired hand . . . and without pay’.<sup>66</sup> More importantly, Stalin set out a new line for the Comintern based on the idea that the war was an inter-imperialist one and there was no reason why the working class should side with Britain, France and Poland against Germany. In effect, Stalin decreed the end of the anti-fascist policy the Comintern had followed since its 7th World Congress in 1935. The new line was accepted by the Comintern’s leaders and adopted by the rest of the communist movement over the next month.

Stalin’s intervention in Comintern affairs in early September signalled a second, decisive turn in Soviet foreign policy. The essence of this shift in policy, which was at least on a par with that represented by the Nazi–Soviet pact, was, firstly, a decision to invade eastern Poland and to occupy militarily the sphere of influence allocated to it on 23 August and, secondly, a diplomatic and political realignment of the USSR alongside Germany.

Contrary to historical orthodoxy, this turn in Soviet policy was not a planned or automatic consequence of the pact with Nazi Germany. There was no specific agreement or intention on 23 August to partition Poland. This assertion cannot be definitively proven but there are a number of documentary clues which support it.

Firstly, there is the fact that the first clause of the secret additional protocol to the pact concerned not Poland but Soviet–German spheres of influence in the Baltic. This was a curious textual order of priorities for two states that had just decided to carve up between them another major state. It makes much more sense to posit that there was no such agreement and to assume that what was agreed on 23 August was an eastern limit of German military expansion into Poland.

Secondly, there is a whole series of messages from Berlin to its Moscow embassy during the last week in August concerning press reports that Red Army units had been withdrawn from the Soviet–Polish border. Schulenburg was urgently instructed to approach Molotov with a view to securing a public denial that this was the case.<sup>67</sup> On the eve of their planned attack on Poland, Berlin was concerned to keep up the pressure on the Poles. In none of this correspondence was there any hint of a Soviet–German partition agreement concluded on 23 August. Had there been such an agreement then surely Berlin’s response to these press reports and its representations in Moscow would have been much stronger?

The foregoing evidence can also be read as demonstrating German anxiety about whether the Soviet Union would keep to its side of the partition bargain. However, and this is the third documentary clue, on 3 September Ribbentrop telegraphed the following instruction to Schulenburg:

We definitely expect to have beaten the Polish army decisively in a few weeks. We would then keep the territory that was fixed at Moscow as a German sphere of interest under military occupation. We would naturally, however, for military reasons, also have to proceed further against such Polish military forces as are at that time located in the Polish area belonging to the Russian sphere of interest.

Please discuss this at once with Molotov and see if the Soviet Union does not consider it desirable for Russian forces to move at the proper time against Polish forces in the Russian sphere of interest and, for their part, to occupy this territory. In our estimation

this would not only be a relief for us, but also, in the sense of the Moscow agreements, in the Soviet interest as well.<sup>68</sup>

Clearer evidence that there was no explicit prior agreement to partition Poland militarily would be difficult to find. What other explanation can there be for Ribbentrop's evident need to interpret the 'sense' of the Moscow agreements of 23 August?

The partition of Poland in September 1939 was not the direct result of the Nazi–Soviet pact but of the unforeseen rapidity of the Polish military collapse. This was the circumstance in which Berlin offered and Moscow opportunistically accepted a share of the spoils of war.

The Soviet decision to invade eastern Poland, relayed to the Germans on 9 September,<sup>69</sup> was a fateful one. It marked the beginning of a new Soviet strategy of territorial and political expansion into Eastern Europe under the aegis of the pact with Nazi Germany. The Soviet invasion of Poland in September was followed in October by the enforced establishment of Soviet military bases in the Baltic states. At the end of November the USSR launched an attack on Finland with the aim of securing territorial concessions designed to enhance the defensive position of Leningrad. On the political–diplomatic front, Germany and the USSR signed a friendship treaty on 28 September (which included a secret agreement transferring Lithuania to the Soviet sphere of influence) and in October Stalin joined Hitler's so-called 'peace offensive' against the West.<sup>70</sup>

### *Conclusion*

For more than 50 years the historical interpretation of the Nazi–Soviet pact has been an ideological and political battleground on which two polarised versions of the truth have vied with each other. On the one side, there have been those historians who argued that the operational objective of Soviet foreign policy in 1939 was an alliance with the Western powers against Germany. Only at the last moment, when Moscow had failed, in its own terms, to achieve this goal did Stalin turn to a pact with Hitler. On the other side have been those who argued that a Soviet–Western alliance was, at best, a secondary goal of Moscow's foreign policy. From the spring of 1939 at the very latest the primary trajectory of Soviet foreign policy was towards a pact with the Nazis.

In terms of this debate, I have tried to show that the new documentary evidence from the Soviet archives demonstrates the untenability of the latter view. The Soviet turn to Germany did not begin until the end of July 1939 and only began to gather real momentum in the middle of August when the triple alliance negotiations with Britain and France finally broke down.

The other theme of the article has been Moscow's passivity and indecisiveness in the diplomatic prelude to World War II, not least in the critical days of August and September 1939. The argument has been that the Soviet decision for a pact with Nazi Germany can best be conceptualised in terms of a process of political and diplomatic policy drift. Within this conception the pact appears not so much a dazzlingly bold and cynical stroke but a more mundanely hesitant and ambiguous

step towards a strategy of security through cooperation with Nazi Germany. The great turning point in Soviet foreign policy was, arguably, not the pact but the decision in early September 1939 to join in the attack on Poland. With this decision the faltering process of realigning the USSR alongside Germany, which had begun at the end of July, was finally completed.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *God krizisa, 1938–1939: Dokumenty i Materialy*, 2 Vols. (Moscow 1990) (hereafter *God krizisa*). The collection consists of over 600 documents drawn from Soviet and foreign archives and published sources. 150 of the documents are newly published from Soviet archives. Of these, 50 documents concern Soviet–German relations in 1939. Extensive extracts from the documents in this collection dealing with Soviet–German relations in 1939 are quoted by V. Ya. Sipols, ‘Za neskol’ko mesyatshev do 23 Avgusta 1939 goda’, *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn*, May 1989 (English translation: ‘A Few Months Before August 23, 1939’, *International Affairs*, June 1989). A few of the documents are translated in full in ‘Around the Non-Aggression Pact (Documents of Soviet–German Relations in 1939)’, *International Affairs*, October 1989. According to Lev Bezymensky, *New Times*, 3 (1991), p. 13, the collection was assembled in 1988.

<sup>2</sup> For an interpretation based on this material see G. Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance: Stalin’s Pact with Hitler* (London, I. B. Tauris, 1989), chap. 8.

<sup>3</sup> D. C. Watt, ‘The Initiation of the Negotiations Leading to the Nazi–Soviet Pact: A Historical Problem’, in C. Abramsky, ed., *Essays in Honour of E.H. Carr* (London, Macmillan, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> On Soviet policy towards Germany in 1935–36 see Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance*, chap. 5. Also: ‘Zapiska M.M. Litvinova I.V. Stalinu, 3 Dekabrya 1935g’, *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, 2 (1990), which provides some confirmation of the author’s hypothesis that Soviet policy during this period was tactical in nature, but also reveals that Litvinov disagreed with it.

<sup>5</sup> In connection with Soviet–German political relations in the early part of 1939 many historians have speculated about the significance and content of a discussion between Hitler and Merekalov, the Soviet ambassador, at a reception on 12 January 1939. However, according to Merekalov’s report of the discussion (*God krizisa*, vol. 1, doc. 110) an exchange of pleasantries was all that occurred. Further, Soviet reports of trade negotiations with the Germans (*God krizisa*, vol. 1, docs 101, 104, 109, 124 and 126) betray no evidence of any political game being played by Moscow. However, the political spin-off from enhancing trade relations with Germany was probably so obvious as not to merit explicit mention. Certainly, when the economic negotiations broke down at the end of January Moscow’s awareness of the negative political effects of this development was only too obvious.

<sup>6</sup> For a recent interpretation which traces the origins of the Nazi–Soviet pact to Stalin’s speech of 10 March 1939 see R.C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Watt, p. 164. In *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War* (London, Heinemann, 1989), Watt’s interpretation of the timing of the Soviet decision to negotiate with Nazi Germany is more guarded than in the earlier essay. See especially chapters 13 and 14.

<sup>8</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 1, doc. 279. Merekalov was acting on instructions telegraphed by Litvinov on 5 April 1939 (vol. 1 doc. 252). According to the Soviet historian V. Ya. Sipols this was the only instruction sent to Merekalov during the period preceding the meeting with Weizsäcker (‘Krugly stol; Vtoraya Mirovaya Voina—Istoki i prichiny’, *Voprosy istorii*, 6 (1989), p. 26). For Weizsäcker’s version of the discussion see *Nazi–Soviet Relations 1939–1941* (hereafter NSR) (New York, Didier 1948), pp. 1–2 and *Documents on German Foreign Policy* (hereafter DGFP), series D, vol. 6, doc. 217. The whole episode is examined in more detail in G. Roberts, ‘Infamous Encounter? The Merekalov–Weizsäcker Meeting of 17 April 1939’, *The Historical Journal*, December 1991.

<sup>9</sup> For Hitler’s speeches see N. H. Baynes, ed., *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler* (London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1942).

<sup>10</sup> On Litvinov’s dismissal see G. Roberts, ‘The Fall of Litvinov’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, forthcoming 1992.

<sup>11</sup> NSR, p. 3. Astakhov’s report on his 5 May meeting with the Germans has yet to be

published, although an extract from his report is contained in the notes to *God krizisa* (vol. 2, n. 98, p. 391).

<sup>12</sup> Merekalov returned to Moscow on 21 April and was subsequently a victim of the purge that engulfed the Narkomindel central apparatus around the time of Litvinov's sacking in early May. See Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance*, p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 1, doc. 329. Stumm's report of the meeting is in NSR, pp. 3–4. See also the memoirs of I. F. Filippov, *Zapiski o Tret'em Reikhe*, Moscow, 1966, pp. 30–31; Filippov was the Tass journalist being introduced by Astakhov.

<sup>14</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 1, doc. 341. Among the rumours Astakhov was referring to in this letter was an AP report of 8 May 1939 that a Russo–German pact was imminent. See *Documents Diplomatiques Francais*, 2nd series, vol. 16, doc. 105.

<sup>15</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 1, doc. 349.

<sup>16</sup> NSR, pp. 4–5. Schnurre dates the meeting as 17 rather than 15 May.

<sup>17</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 1, doc. 362. Schulenburg's account of the meeting is in NSR, pp. 5–9.

<sup>18</sup> NSR, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 1 pp. 482–483.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 384. For Weizsäcker's report see NSR, pp. 12–17.

<sup>21</sup> Cited by M. I. Pankrashova, 'V kanun vtoroi mirovoi voiny, 1939g', *Novaya i noveishaya istoriya*, 5 (1985), p. 118.

<sup>22</sup> J. Degras, ed., *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy*, vol. 3 (London, Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 332–340.

<sup>23</sup> On the German–Soviet economic negotiations see DGFP, series D, vol. 6 passim. Also *God krizisa*, vol. 2, docs 388 and 412.

<sup>24</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 413. Another meeting of Astakhov's around this time should be mentioned here. On 14 June Astakhov met Draganov, the Bulgarian ambassador in Berlin. The next day the Bulgarian spoke to Ernst Woermann, head of the political division of the German Foreign Office. According to Woermann's memorandum of his conversation with Draganov, Astakhov had told the Bulgarian that a 'rapprochement with Germany... was closest to the desires of the Soviet Union'. Further, that Astakhov had stated that 'if Germany would declare that she would not attack the Soviet Union or that she would conclude a non-aggression pact with her, the Soviet Union would probably refrain from concluding a treaty with England... Several circumstances also spoke for [continuing] to conduct the pact negotiations with England in a dilatory manner. In this case the Soviet Union would continue to have a free hand in any conflict which might break out'. (NSR, p. 21). Not surprisingly, those historians who argue that Moscow wanted a deal with Berlin all along—notwithstanding the triple alliance negotiations with Britain and France being conducted at this time—have seized on this report as evidence for their views. However, we now have Astakhov's version of his conversation with Draganov (*God krizisa*, Vol. 2, doc. 403). According to Astakhov's diary entry on the meeting the conversation went as follows. Draganov expressed the view that Germany would only start a war if a pact between the USSR and Britain were concluded, but that if there were no pact then the problem of Danzig and the Polish corridor would be resolved without war. Further, that if there were an Anglo–Soviet–French pact then the Poles would provoke a conflict. 'You would do better to spin out the negotiations', Astakhov quotes Draganov as saying, 'if you are worried about the appearance of Germans in the Baltic, Bessarabia, etc., you can make an agreement with the Germans who would readily enter into the broadest exchange of views on these questions'. Astakhov concluded his report with an aside that on this occasion Draganov was much more frankly an apologist for the German line than previously.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 442. Schulenburg's account of the meeting, which puts a more optimistic gloss on it than Molotov's, is in NSR, pp. 26–30.

<sup>26</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 485.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 494.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 503. Also present at the meeting was E. Babarin, Soviet trade representative in Berlin. For Schnurre's account, which appears to conflate the meetings on 24 and 26 July; see NSR, pp. 32–36.

<sup>29</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 510.

<sup>30</sup> See *1939 god: Uroki istorii* (Moscow, 1990), p. 447.

<sup>31</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 511.

<sup>32</sup> See Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance*, chapter 7. The Soviet documentation on the triple alliance talks with Britain and France was first published in *SSSR v borbe za mir nakanune vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow, 1971) (English translation: *Soviet Peace Efforts on the Eve of World War II*, 2 vols., Moscow 1973). Some additional documents are reproduced in *God krizisa*.

<sup>33</sup> *SSSR v borbe za mir...*, doc. 376. With regard to the triple alliance negotiations one should also bear in mind that Stalin and Molotov may have had intelligence information on Anglo–French foreign policy, including on London’s own confidential contacts with Berlin, which would have revealed the British and French private doubts and internal divisions about the triple alliance project. On this point see Alexander Yakovlev’s report from the special commission on the Nazi–Soviet pact set up by the Congress of People’s Deputies in June 1989. The report was published in *Pravda*, 24 December 1989. (Hereafter referred to as the Yakovlev Report). The nature and source of this information remains unclear, but one of the sources may have been a foreign office clerk, John Herbert King. See D. C. Watt, ‘[John] Herbert King: A Soviet Source in the Foreign Office’, *Intelligence and National Security*, October 1988.

<sup>34</sup> In this connection the Yakovlev Report refers to the Soviet leadership’s access to intelligence information that Germany planned to attack Poland in August/September. One of the sources was the reported remarks of Kleist, a Ribbentrop aide, in early May 1939. These were passed on to Stalin, who wrote a note on the report asking for the name of the source. See *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, 3 (1990), pp. 216–219.

<sup>35</sup> The use of the term ‘non-policy’ is inspired by G. Lundestad, *The American Non-Policy Towards Eastern Europe, 1943–1947* (New York, Humanities Press, 1975), but the meaning in the present context differs from that of Lundestad.

<sup>36</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 504. Astakhov’s letter to Potemkin is dated 27 July, but was not received in Moscow until 31 July.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, doc. 523. For Ribbentrop’s report of the meeting see NSR, pp. 37–39.

<sup>38</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 525. For Schulenburg’s report of the meeting see NSR, pp. 39–41, where he concludes that ‘my overall impression is that the Soviet Government is at present determined to sign with England and France if they fulfil all Soviet wishes’ and that it would ‘take a considerable effort on our part to cause the Soviet government to swing about’.

<sup>39</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 528.

<sup>40</sup> On the Anglo–Soviet–French military negotiations see Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance*, chapter 7 and p. 154. Dimitrii Volkogonov in his biography of Stalin (*Triumfi tragediya*, vol. 2, part 1 (Moscow, 1989), p. 20) refers to the written instructions given to Voroshilov, the head of the Soviet military delegation: ‘Considerations on the Negotiations with England and France’. This document apparently outlined the military options for an agreement between the three states—options which were subsequently presented to the British and French during the actual negotiations. Of interest too are the memoirs of Alexander Ponomarev (*New Times*, 34 (1989)), who acted as an interpreter at the talks. Finally, there is a telegram from Molotov to the Soviet ambassador in Turkey on 2 August (see *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 517). In this telegram Molotov informed the ambassador about the talks with the British and French and, in view of these, instructed him to approach the Turks about the possibility of a linked Soviet–Turkish mutual assistance treaty. On 2 August at least Moscow was still hoping for a successful outcome to the Anglo–Soviet–French negotiations.

<sup>41</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 529.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 532.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 534.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 540. According to the Yakovlev Report, 11 August was also the day of a Politbureau meeting which decided to enter into official discussions with Germany. Yakovlev does not give the source of this information, however. Bezymensky (see note 1) indicates that the source may be a report from the American embassy which was in turn based on confidential information passed to it by a contact in the German embassy in Moscow.

<sup>45</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 541. Astakhov was recalled to Moscow in September 1939. He was subsequently purged and died in a labour camp in 1942.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* doc. 556. For Schulenburg’s report of the meeting see NSR, pp. 52–57. The telegram from the Soviet embassy in Rome at the end of June reporting on the so-called ‘Schulenburg Plan’ is doc. 437 in *God krizisa*, vol. 2. The origin of these rumours concerning the Schulenburg Plan appears to have been Hans von Herwarth, Second Secretary of the German embassy in Moscow, who was passing confidential information about Soviet–German discussions to a contact in the Italian embassy. From there it found its way back to Rome and then, via the Soviet embassy, back to Moscow. See H. von Herwarth, *Against Two Evils* (London, Collins, 1981).

<sup>47</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 570. Schulenburg’s report is in NSR, pp. 59–61.

<sup>48</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 572. Schulenburg’s report is in NSR, pp. 64–65.

<sup>49</sup> The suggestion that Stalin initially invited Ribbentrop to Moscow with a view to forcing the British and French to come to terms is put forward by Alexander Yakovlev in his interview in *Pravda*, 18 August 1989. Yakovlev offers no evidence, however.

<sup>50</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, docs 582 and 583. For the German record of the Stalin–Hitler exchanges see NSR, pp. 66–69.

<sup>51</sup> NSR, p. 78. The Russian text of the secret protocols, reproduced from Soviet foreign policy archive copies of the original, is in *God krizisa*, vol. 2, doc. 603. According to Bezymensky (see note 1), the decision to include this text was only taken on the eve of publication in 1990.

<sup>52</sup> *God krizisa*, vol. 2, p. 278.

<sup>53</sup> See ‘Vnov’ o dogovore 1939 goda’, in *Vestnik Ministerstva Inostrannykh Del SSSR*, 28 February 1990, which reproduces a photocopy of the internal minute (p. 59) on the transfer of the originals of the secret protocols.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Alexander Yakovlev’s interview in *Pravda*, 18 August 1989 for one of many assertions in the Soviet media that only Stalin and Molotov knew about the secret protocol.

<sup>55</sup> This is the suggestion of the Yakovlev Report.

<sup>56</sup> The only extant German diplomatic document on the conversations of 23 August is a memorandum of a conversation between Stalin, Molotov and Ribbentrop immediately after the conclusion of the pact (see NSR, pp. 72–76). This reveals nothing about the negotiations that preceded the pact nor anything about the agreement the participants thought they had concluded.

<sup>57</sup> For a summary of the negotiations of 23 August based on the available German memoir material see A. Read & D. Fisher, *The Deadly Embrace: Hitler, Stalin and the Nazi–Soviet Pact 1939–1941* (London, Michael Joseph, 1988), chapter 23 and Watt, *How War Came*, chapter 24.

<sup>58</sup> W. S. Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (London, Cassell, 1964), p. 346.

<sup>59</sup> *SSSR v borbe za mir* . . . , doc. 445.

<sup>60</sup> Telegram from Beck to Grzybowski in W. Jedrzejewicz, ed., *Diplomat in Berlin 1933–1939* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1968). See also *Documents Diplomatiques Français*, 2nd series, vol. 18, doc. 374.

<sup>61</sup> Degras, pp. 361–362.

<sup>62</sup> See *Documents on Polish–Soviet Relations, 1939–1945*, vol. 1 (London, Heinemann, 1961), doc. 36; *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, 3rd series, vol. 7, doc. 694; and *Foreign Relations of the United States 1939*, vol. 1, pp. 348–349.

<sup>63</sup> *The Polish White Book: Official Documents Concerning Polish–German and Polish–Soviet Relations 1933–1939* (London, Hutchinson, 1940), p. 209.

<sup>64</sup> Degras, pp. 363–371.

<sup>65</sup> The treatment of Comintern policy is based on material from the Comintern archives reproduced in ‘Komintern i Sovetsko–Germanskii dogovor o nenapadenii’, *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, 12 (1989). See also the essay by the British scholar Monty Johnstone, who was given access to Comintern archives for the same period: ‘Introduction’ to F. King & G. Matthews, eds., *About Turn: The Communist Party and the Outbreak of the Second World War* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990).

<sup>66</sup> Cited by Alexander Yakovlev in this interview in *Pravda*, 18 August 1989.

<sup>67</sup> DGFP, series D, vol. 7 docs. 360, 382, 383, 387, 388, 413, 414, 424.

<sup>68</sup> NSR, p. 86. See also Ribbentrop’s telegram to Schulenburg on 15 September (NSR, pp. 93–94) and Schulenburg’s report of 20 September that ‘Molotov hinted that the original inclination entertained by the Soviet government and Stalin personally to permit the existence of a residual Poland had given way to the inclination to partition Poland’. (NSR, p. 101).

<sup>69</sup> NSR, pp. 90–91.

<sup>70</sup> On Soviet foreign policy after the pact see Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance*, chapters 9–15.

<sup>71</sup> On the question of the decision to partition Poland, the West German historian Ingeborg Fleischhauer has unearthed from the personal archives of Schulenburg, the German ambassador in Moscow from 1934–1941, some hitherto unknown transcripts of the Molotov–Ribbentrop–Stalin conversations in Moscow at the end of September 1939. The main interest of these documents lies in the light which they throw on Soviet policy towards the Baltic States in autumn 1939. However, one of the documents records the following statement from Ribbentrop which confirms the hypothesis that no decision on partitioning Poland was taken on 23 August 1939: ‘One question that remained unresolved during the Moscow negotiations of August 23, 1939 was that of creating an independent Poland. Since then the idea of a clear partition of Poland seemed to have become nearer to the Soviet government’s understanding as well. The German government had appreciated this point of view and decided on a clear delimitation’. (See *International Affairs (Moscow)*, August 1991, pp. 114–129, p. 119 for the quote.) Fleischhauer is also the author of a very important book on Soviet–German relations in 1939, recently published in Russian translation: *Pakt: Giter, Stalin i initsiativa germanskoi diplomatii, 1938–1939* (Moscow 1991). The book’s interpretations and conclusions on Soviet policy are broadly similar to those argued in the present article, and it provides by far the best account of the course of German foreign policy in the period leading up to the pact.