

Missed Opportunities: The Failed Anglo-Soviet Negotiations of 1939

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It is a testament to the precariousness and complexity of the British position as it stood on the eve of the Second World War that a standard policy of appeasement, and the subsequent catastrophes it spawned, still remains a topic full of debate nearly seventy years later. Despite the vast amount of scholarship on the subject, the inevitable issue at the heart of the matter continues to persist: “What could Chamberlain and his Conservative-dominated government have done differently?” One alternative that received serious consideration by Chamberlain’s contemporaries (and has since) was an alliance with the Soviet Union, the doomed negotiations for which were overwhelmingly accepted by the Cabinet in May 1939. Past historical analysis has tended to pinpoint the virulent anticommunism of the Prime Minister in the British aversion to the Soviet Union following Germany’s annexation of Prague. However, more recent scholarship, most likely due to the greater accessibility of archival evidence, suggests otherwise. Ultimately, the wariness that characterized the British government’s rapprochement with the Soviet Union in 1939 did not primarily stem from overriding fears of communism; it was a cautious approach based largely on political considerations, bolstered by secondary military, ideological and domestic concerns, and convoluted by a lack of “off-the-shelf contingency plans” that could be brought into play at a moment’s notice.¹

In assessing how and why the British approached negotiations with the Soviet Union, it is important to first understand the power dynamic that existed between Chamberlain and his Cabinet in the formulation of foreign policy.

¹ Christopher Hill, *Cabinet Decisions on Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19.

During Chamberlain's term in office from 1937 until 1940, foreign policy was monitored daily by the Prime Minister and the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Edward Halifax.² Occasionally referred to as the "foreign policy executive", the actual degree to which this partnership influenced British foreign policy in relation to the Cabinet was subject to high variability. In his analysis of six case studies, foreign policy analyst Christopher Hill pinpoints certain key factors that were crucial in determining the extent of control and leadership wielded by Chamberlain and Halifax. Such factors included how comprehensible and open-ended alternative solutions were (and thus how easy it was for non-specialist ministers to comprehend and dispute them), as well as whether or not a problem had been expected and could be settled by existing conventions.³ In other words, the lengthy deliberations of a large Cabinet were not conducive to a crisis situation requiring rapid decision; yet this was precisely the environment into which the British entered on 15 March 1939. On that date, the principle of ethnic unity that had been so successfully exploited at Munich, came to an abrupt end with the German occupation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and the seizure of Prague, Bohemia, and Moravia.

Three days after the Nazi aggression, and prompted by an unfounded rumour of a German ultimatum to Rumania over the control of Rumanian industry and export, a meeting of the British Chiefs of Staff was called on 18 March 1939.⁴ Two days later, on March 20, a Four-Power Declaration was proposed to the Cabinet, in which Britain, the Soviet Union, France, and Poland would jointly state their interest in safeguarding the independence of states in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.⁵ By 31 March 1939, the Four-Power Declaration was dead, and a unilateral and unconditional guarantee had been made to Poland, at the expense of Soviet exclusion from a bilateral or multinational commitment. During this period of rapid policy changes, the Cabinet did not play as significant a role in the drafting of policies as Chamberlain and Halifax did; both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary

² Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, xviii.

³ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁴ Robert Manne, "The British Decision for Alliance with Russia, May 1939," *Journal of Contemporary History* 9 (1974), 4.

⁵ Albert Reiss, "The Fall of Litvinov: Harbinger of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact," *Europe-Asia Studies* 52 (2000), 37.

represented Britain in talks with French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet, and both decided to place an emphasis on Polish support, deciding not to inform the Soviet Union of the abandonment of the Four-Power Declaration until March 29.⁶ Halifax argued that because of its ability to provide a Second Front, and Poland's refusal to allow the Soviets on Polish territory, "we [Britain] cannot have Russia in the forefront of the picture." The Anglo-Soviet alliance would thus not be of the utmost priority, although the Russians were not to be entirely excluded insofar as they could supply war materials and arms to the Polish.⁷ Militarily weak compared to Germany or the Soviet Union, Poland could hardly constitute a second front. As a speech from the former Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George noted, the Poles were in possession of "worse than mediocre armaments," a negligible air force, and a weak economy.⁸ While the Polish army was declared to be "well led and trained, tough, and of great endurance" (according to the British Military Attaché in Warsaw), what the Poles lacked were the material resources needed to wage a long war of attrition against the Nazis.⁹

The Poles were, however, in possession of a shared border with Germany, with an uneasy existence between the latter to the west and the Soviet Union to the east. It was, in fact, this proximity to the Soviets that had fueled Poland's rejection of the Four-Power Declaration proposed by the British. Under the leadership of the dictator Jozef Pilsudski, the Poles were situated precariously in the 1930s between the Soviet Union (which had recently lost territory to the Poles in the Russo-Polish War of 1920) and expansionist Germany. It was this delicate balance between two aggressor nations that had prompted Polish Foreign Minister Colonel Jozef Beck to conclude a pact of non-aggression with the Soviets in 1932, and a similar pact with the Nazis in 1934. Now, with the Four-Power Declaration so clearly placing Poland in the Soviet camp, Colonel Beck feared that a "mad-dog" attack by Germany on

⁶ Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, 33.

⁷ Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, 35.

⁸ Simon Newman, *March 1939: The British Guarantee to Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 206.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

Poland would not be far behind.¹⁰ In any case, the Poles were one of many peoples (including the Rumanians, the Estonians, the Latvians, and the Finns) who were not about to let the Russians plow through their territory for fear they would never leave, particularly when such territory had been so recently won from their “rescuers.”

On 24 March 1939, James Eric Drummond, the British Ambassador in Rome, made the following warning: “If Great Britain linked up with Soviet Russia in European security, she would be cutting her own throat, as this would automatically indispose a large number of countries, who [...] were violently anti-Soviet.”¹¹ One such country that happened to be “violently anti-Soviet” was Poland, the most powerful state in central Europe, and one that Chamberlain had pinpointed as the “key” to the Eastern Front. But why was Poland so important from the British Conservative perspective? Why did Britain, which had intended to provide Poland with a bilateral and conditional guarantee after the German takeover of Prague, end up providing the Poles with a unilateral and unconditional promise of aid along with a guarantee to Rumania on April 13? The importance ascribed to both Poland and Rumania in the mindset of the foreign policy executive is indicative of the extent to which Anglo-Soviet negotiations proceeded largely on the basis of political considerations; it is also useful in explaining why Britain would not seriously get involved in the Second World War until the Battle of France in 1940, despite Hitler’s aggression against the Poles in September 1939. When it was put forth on March 20, the guarantee to Poland was not intended to protect the Poles; its purpose was chiefly to salvage Britain’s international reputation as a Great Power and serve as a pretext for going to war with Germany.¹² As Halifax remarked on 27 March 1939, “There was probably no way in which France and ourselves could prevent Poland and Rumania from being overrun...if we did nothing this in itself would mean a great accession to Germany’s strength and a great loss to ourselves of sympathy and support in the United States, in the Balkan countries, and in other

¹⁰ G. Bruce Strang, “John Bull in Search of a Suitable Russia,” *Canadian Journal of History* 41 (2006): 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹² Strang, “John Bull in Search of a Suitable Russia,” 153.

parts of the world.”¹³ Alexander Cadogan would later confess to Ian Colvin, the American ambassador in Warsaw, “Of course our guarantee could give no possible protection to Poland in any imminent attack upon her. But it set up a signpost for [Chamberlain]...in the event of a German attack on Poland he would be spared the agonizing doubts and indecisions.”¹⁴

The threat of Poland being “overrun” by the Germans was a danger that loomed in 1939, and one that was primarily due to Germany’s aggressive expansionism in the name of racial unity and Poland’s occupation of former German territory lost in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Within this newly-acquired Polish Corridor was the Free City of Danzig, which served as a Baltic Sea port for the Poles and also harbored an overwhelmingly German population. Following the events at Munich in September 1938, Hitler had approached the Poles for an alignment with Germany, in what German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop called a “general settlement.”¹⁵ Among several stipulations, the “general settlement” called for Danzig to be returned to the Third Reich, an extension of the German-Polish non-aggression pact of 1934 for another ten years, the construction of a German freeway and railroad linking Germany to Prussia via the Polish Corridor, and a guaranteed market for Polish goods in Danzig.¹⁶ Colonel Beck had been firm in his refusal to allow a German annexation of Danzig, but such staunchness did not prevent Britain from fearing the extent to which Poland was willing to take the negotiations with Germany. Such a fear was especially well-founded following the German annexations of Bohemia, Moravia and Lithuanian Memel that placed the German threat to Poland on three fronts.¹⁷ Matters were also not helped by the fact that Poland had appeared at times to be a revisionist (and pro-German) power in its recent disregard for the status quo. In September 1938, the Poles had joined the Germans in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, and had acquired from the Czechs the town of Teschen and regions in northern Slovakia in the process.¹⁸

¹³ Strang, “John Bull in Search of a Suitable Russia,” 153.

¹⁴ Alexander Cadogan, *The Cadogan Diaries, 1938-1945* (London: Cassell & Company, 1971), 167.

¹⁵ Newman, *March 1939*, 157.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁸ R.A.C Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 78.

Even more distressing from the British perspective were the rumors circulating the Foreign Office in February 1939 that Germany's next attack would not occur on the Eastern Front, as had long been expected, but would be launched against the West instead; Germany might well advance through the Netherlands and Belgium rather than satisfying its appetite in the East, providing the Nazis with bases across the English Channel from which to launch naval and air assaults against the British. If such rumors proved true, Britain would benefit from a second front to stave off the German onslaught that would buy much-needed time. A solid commitment from Poland, as the nation bordering the aggressor nation to the east, offered a chance (albeit a small one) of diverting German resources elsewhere.¹⁹ Further fueling the ambiguity surrounding Polish intentions was the reluctance of Beck and his colleagues to keep the British up-to-date on the state of their negotiations with Germany. In addition to the Polish willingness to spread misinformation, one particularly damning entanglement involved Polish Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Arciszewski, who told a British official on March 28 that the Germans had put forth no proposals, while revealing to the British Ambassador in Warsaw that three such proposals had been communicated since March 14.²⁰ If the Poles were truly serious about fighting for Danzig and the Polish Corridor, why were they being evasive about their negotiations with the Germans, and not exaggerating the enormity of the German threat to the British in the hopes of prompting British support?

It was in this atmosphere of uncertainty that British motive for negotiating with the Soviet Union was deterred; no one was sure of where the Germans would attack next, nor did they know the true intentions of the Poles. While rumors of a Western invasion were inundating the Foreign Office in January and February, other reports, such as the March 15 communication from the British representative in Danzig, suggested an imminent occupation of Danzig over the weekend by German forces. The Poles themselves were unaware of these "alarming" developments, and such dispatches foretelling Nazi invasions ultimately did turn out to be unfounded.²¹ In any case, the British perception of the Poles in 1939 was that, despite their determination to fight for

¹⁹ Newman, *March 1939*, 164.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

²¹ Newman, *March 1939*, 170.

Danzig, they were largely in danger of falling under the German sphere of influence, either by force or by negotiation, unless a firm commitment were given to secure their independence. If Britain did not commit its resources to Poland, or if Britain tried to cajole the Poles into permitting Soviet presence on Polish territory, the probable consequence would be Beck's guarantee of Polish neutrality to the Nazis in return for Germany receiving "less than 99% of her demands" regarding Danzig.²² This declaration of Polish neutrality would also create a buffer zone between Germany and Russia, effectively eliminating the possibility of a secondary Eastern front as a diversion of German resources from a Western offensive.²³ A guarantee provided to Poland, on the other hand, in complete disaccord with the Polish-German non-aggression pact of 1934, would likely result in German aggression against the Poles; while the Germans successfully overran Poland the British would have more time to mobilize, and the Germans would find themselves on the Soviet doorstep, a position which would likely require a fifty-division *Wehrmacht* defense by Halifax's calculations.²⁴ Chamberlain, ever the optimist for a negotiated peace settlement with Germany, was also averse to an Anglo-Soviet alliance largely because he feared that the "encirclement" of the aggressor nation would provoke a German attack. As he would write in a letter dated 29 April 1939, "Russia [is] a very unreliable friend...with an enormous irritative power on others...I can't believe that she has the same aims or objects as we have...the alliance would definitely be a lining up of opposing blocs", or a return to the alliance diplomacy that had sparked the First World War.²⁵

It was in this manner that the Polish guarantee was placed before the Cabinet by Chamberlain and Halifax on March 20. Dissenters, such as Minister of Health Walter Elliot, were unable to effectively counter the proposed course of action because a definite and specific alternative was lacking, and they only had a "general appreciation" of the situation. The papers of the chiefs of staff, proposed initially on March 18, had recommended that Germany be engaged on two fronts, and that "if the U.S.S.R. were on our side and Poland neutral, the

²² Newman, *March 1939*, 172.

²³ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁴ Strang, "John Bull in Search of a Suitable Russia," 59.

²⁵ Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, 59.

position would alter in our favour.” These papers were not shown to cabinet ministers until April 3. What *was* enumerated in the March 27 cabinet meeting, however, was the fact that German control of Rumania would give Germany access to Rumanian oil, effectively nullifying Britain’s key weapon since the eighteenth century economic blockade.²⁶ In a similar vein of selectivity, Soviet Ambassador in London Ivan Maisky had approached Halifax on March 19 for a five-power conference in Bucharest, but after a consultation with only the Prime Minister and two other colleagues, the conference was rejected.²⁷ Thus, on March 31 the primary involvement of the cabinet lay in rejecting or accepting the Polish guarantee, and there was strong pressure for acceptance. If the guarantee was rejected, the government would be left without a policy, the Poles would likely not be willing to accept anything less, and the Soviets would be even more wary in dealing with the evasive British.²⁸ Certainly from Munich until the 1941 Soviet entry into the war, and especially when disagreement arose, consensus was a major priority at 10 Downing Street. Hill has attributed this sentiment to the consideration within Parliament of itself as a team, but more so to the instinct for political survival, and the realization that with disagreement over key issues there would be resignations and the probable downfall of the Chamberlain government.²⁹

On May 16, 1939, Alexander Cadogan wrote, “Chiefs of Staff have now swung round to ‘whole-hog’ alliance with Soviet. P.M. annoyed.”³⁰ Two months prior, the British guarantee to Poland had effectively ignored the recommendation of the Chiefs of Staff for a Soviet rapprochement; had Chamberlain’s anticommunism been responsible for the March 1939 overruling, and what was now responsible for the volte-face of May 1939? Certainly no one within Chamberlain’s government (with the exception of the greatly marginalized Communist Party of Great Britain) was an outright proponent of communism, and there is no question that the Soviet ideology was a component of Chamberlain’s distrust of the Russians. However, the difficulties in approving

²⁶ Tor Egil Forland, “The History of Economic Warfare: International Law, Effectiveness, Strategies,” *Journal of Peace Research* 30 (1993), 160.

²⁷ Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xx.

³⁰ Cadogan, *The Diaries*, 180.

the Anglo-Soviet negotiations were not solely the result of irreconcilable ideological differences, whether on the home front or internationally, as has been suggested by some scholars. According to this school of thought, the socialist-minded Labour and Liberal Parties championed an Anglo-Soviet alliance in support of their ideological brethren in Russia, while the Conservative-dominated government chose the extreme right-wing of fascism and Nazism as the lesser of two evils, and directed their foreign policy accordingly.³¹ However, support for an Anglo-Soviet alliance had little to do with whether a British Party's inclination was anticommunist or not, as the history of Conservative minister, blatant anticommunist, and advocate of an Anglo-French-Soviet alliance Winston Churchill would suggest.³² The 1920s, for example, saw the Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald ban Communists from holding Labour Party membership, and follow the Liberal lead in championing social reforms in matters of unemployment, education, health, and housing. While neither the Liberals nor the Labourites were enamored with Communism, both parties had domestic reform at the heart of their platforms and desired improved political and commercial relations with the Soviets so as to revive depressed industries in Britain. As the Labour Party's campaign manifesto in 1928 stated, "[Russian] orders for machinery and manufactures, which would have found employment for thousands of British workers, have been lost to this country."³³

As R.A.C. Parker has observed, Chamberlain was always the "most hopeful" of British statesmen in reaching a peaceful settlement with Germany.³⁴ With increases in British rearmament and defense expenditures picking up speed in 1936, as well as an expressed willingness for discussion and peaceful resolution, the Prime Minister failed to see how rational Germans (perhaps even Hitler himself) could not be dissuaded from the warpath. Chamberlain's confidence in British rearmament was not shared by his chiefs of staff. In 1939, amongst the great powers, only the Americans were spending less on defense measures as a percentage of the national income than the British, who spent 5.7 percent as compared to the Soviets' 26.4 percent, France's 9.1 percent, and

³¹ Kevin Narizny, "The Political Economy of Alignment: Great Britain's Commitments to Europe, 1905-39," *International Security* 27 (2003): 187.

³² Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931-1945* (London: Muller, 1953), 249.

³³ Narizny, *The Political Economy*, 210.

³⁴ Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, 203.

Germany's 23.5 percent.³⁵ Chamberlain was most likely confident in Britain's rearmament measures because he still believed that war was preventable, and that Britain's harder line, when done "inoffensively" and "quietly," was forcing the Germans to reconsider their actions without seeming to encircle or provoke them. As Permanent Secretary of the Treasury Sir Horace Wilson argued on 21 March 1939, "It would have to be borne in mind that if we took a major step to accelerate our readiness for war, this would be certain to be interpreted as an earnest of our intentions to encircle Germany."³⁶

While Chamberlain's position stagnated, that of his colleagues in the Cabinet certainly had not. Less than three months after the Polish Guarantee, in May 1939, an overwhelming number of Cabinet members (including Home Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare, Minister for the Coordination of Defence Lord Chatfield, President of the Board of Trade Oliver Stanley, Walter Elliot, and Secretary of State for War Leslie Hore-Belisha) would show themselves strongly in support of opening Anglo-Soviet negotiations. Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir John Simon remained undecided, and only the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, W.S. Morrison, stood by the reluctance of Chamberlain and Halifax; the latter wavered on the issue.³⁷ Hill does not believe that the Service Chiefs' mention on May 16 of a Nazi-Soviet rapprochement was responsible for the Cabinet's acceptance of Anglo-Soviet negotiations; the possibility was breached, of course, but it was not one that seemed imminent, given the fanatical Nazi opposition to Jews and Communism. Instead, he attributes the acceptance of the Anglo-Soviet negotiations to the non-crisis atmosphere of May in which discussion, debate, written proposals, and disagreement with Chamberlain were allowed stronger representation in Cabinet meetings.³⁸ In addition to the greater atmosphere of deliberation, there were also a clear and limited number of choices available to the Cabinet: the Soviets were not willing to yield to anything less than the proposal Soviet Foreign Affairs Commissar Maxim Litvinov had submitted on April 18, that of a three-power military alliance between France, Britain, and the Soviet Union to "render each other and all Eastern European

³⁵ Martin Pugh, *State & Society* (London: Arnold, 1994), 246.

³⁶ Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, 208.

³⁷ Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, 248.

³⁸Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, 63.

states...bordering on USSR...all manner of assistance including that of a military nature.”³⁹ As Alexander Cadogan put it on May 19, 1939: “Soviet alliance (or pact of mutual assistance) and breakdown- with all consequences.”⁴⁰

In deciding to undertake negotiations for an Anglo-Soviet alliance, political matters proved not to be the only stumbling block. When Chamberlain chose to emphasize the recruitment of Poland in March 1939, one of the main factors that had confirmed his decision was the poor state of the Soviet military, though the Soviet Union was not without strategic potential and Poland was far from a military superpower. In a report published in April 1939, titled “Military Value of the USSR,” the British chiefs of staff countered any numerical advantages the Soviets might present with the overwhelming administrative and economic weaknesses that the British believed could largely negate them. Such drawbacks included: a beheaded Soviet military command in the wake of the Stalinist purges, a weak Soviet navy (with only thirty-eight submarines, as compared to Britain’s seventy-one), an out-of-date air force with no bases from which to launch an attack on Germany, and an inefficient transport system that would hinder the transfer of supplies to countries such as Poland.⁴¹ Regardless of Russian military ineptitude, however, it remained a fact that the Soviet Union was the only European country with enough manpower to launch a major war against Germany in 1939, with 1.3 million soldiers, as compared to Germany’s 1.5 million, France’s 700,000, and Britain’s 154,000; as acknowledged by the Chiefs of Staff, the only power which could give Poland direct support and thus deter Hitler, making a guarantee to Poland without the active help of the Soviets essentially a sacrifice of the former.⁴²

Aside from Poland, a potential increase in Japanese animosity in the wake of an Anglo-Soviet alliance provided another concern for the British, though the Japanese and Italian threats had been considered secondary to that of Germany ever since the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee Report of 1933.⁴³ Over the course of the twentieth century, a string of conflicts had

³⁹ Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, 51.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴¹ Frank McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement, and the British Road to War* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 82.

⁴² Pugh, *State & Society*, 246.

⁴³ Newman, *March 1939*, 141.

erupted between the Soviet Union and the Japanese over interests in Manchuria and Korea. Beginning in 1904 with the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese had attacked the Russian fleet at Port Arthur, defeated the Russians in the sea battle of Tsushima in 1905, and had occupied Russian-owned Northern Sakhalin in 1920 (an island which would ultimately be restored to the Soviets). They had also attempted to penetrate Soviet defences twice, first at Chankufeng in Eastern Manchuria in 1938, and then later at Nomonhan on the Manchurian-Mongolian border in 1939.⁴⁴ Mongolia had been a Soviet satellite ever since the establishment of a provisional Communist government in the region by the Mongolian Revolutionary Army and Soviet troops.⁴⁵ Soviet interests were also threatened by the Japanese in Manchuria, the northern region of which had been annexed by the Russians in 1900 following the Boxer Rebellion against the Chinese.⁴⁶ Matters were also not helped by the Japanese government's decision to sign the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936 with Germany, pledging cooperation against 'international Communism,' although, the pact was initially intended as political support only.⁴⁷ The Russians countered with a Sino-Soviet non-aggression treaty, concluded in 1937 between Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese National Government; by its terms, the agreement provided the political basis for loans to China for the purchase of Soviet military equipment, which was to be used against the Japanese in the Second Sino-Japanese War of that same year.⁴⁸ The Soviets would also lash out at the Japanese at the November 1937 Brussels Conference, during which Litvinov joined the Chinese in pressing for collective sanctions against Japan.⁴⁹ Needless to say, Russo-Japanese animosity was alive and well during the Anglo-Soviet negotiations, and the British government was concerned that any sign of support for Japan's enemies

⁴⁴ Peter Berton, "Soviet-Japanese Relations: Perceptions, Goals, Interactions," *Asian Survey* 26 (1986): 1260.

⁴⁵ Robert A. Smith, "Mongolia: In the Soviet Camp," *Asian Survey* 10 (1970): 25.

⁴⁶ Steven E. Lobell, "Second Image Reversed Politics: Britain's Choice of Freer Trade or Imperial Preferences, 1903-1906, 1917-1923, 1930-1932," *International Studies Quarterly* 45 (1999), 685.

⁴⁷ John Garver, "The Soviet Union and the Xi'an Incident," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 26 (1991), 148.

⁴⁸ John Garver, "Chiang Kai-shek's Quest for Soviet Entry into the Sino-Japanese War," *Political Science Quarterly* 102 (1987), 300.

⁴⁹ Garver, "Chiang Kai-shek's Quest," 303.

would provoke Japan into signing a three-power military alliance with Germany and Italy, which by 1939 they had still refrained from doing. The Japanese military alliance with the Axis powers would be concluded a year later, in 1940.⁵⁰ However, not everyone within the Foreign Policy Committee meeting on 25 April 1939 agreed that an Anglo-Soviet alliance would provoke Japan: Lord Chatfield and Secretary of State for the Dominions Thomas Inskip argued that an Anglo-Soviet alliance might actually restrain Japanese aggression by guaranteeing the Soviet position in Europe and thus leaving the Russians free to intervene in Asia.⁵¹ However, given the *fait accompli* of the Polish Guarantee and the all-or-nothing April proposals of the Soviets, an Anglo-Soviet alliance was still not without serious misgivings, even for those such as Samuel Hoare who desired one: as the Home Secretary concluded on April 25, it would impair “a barrier against aggression in Eastern Europe on behalf of the States directly menaced by Germany.”⁵²

Although Chamberlain was by no means orchestrating foreign policy alone in 1939, he still believed after the German takeover of Prague that war was not inevitable, and that if Germany was willing to make overtures for a negotiated peace settlement, he would not be averse to discussing military, political, and economic arrangements. During the summer of 1939, the German Ambassador to London, Herbert von Dirksen, wrote several memorandums articulating the secret discussions which had taken place between Robert Hudson of the British Department of Overseas Trade, Sir Horace Wilson, and Helmuth Wohlthat, a prominent German economist.⁵³ Although not negotiations in themselves, the meetings resulted in a proposal from Wilson of a pact of non-aggression, as well as a pact of non-intervention delineating Anglo-German “spheres of interest”; where the non-aggression pact was concerned, the British proposal was that its conclusion within a treaty would entail mutual renunciations of unilateral actions, essentially freeing Britain of her commitment to Poland.⁵⁴ Dirksen would later comment that the significance of Wilson’s

⁵⁰ Cadogan, *The Diaries*, 159.

⁵¹ Garver, “Chiang Kai-shek’s Quest,” 311.

⁵² Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, 56.

⁵³ Herbert von Dirksen, *German Documents on the Eve of World War II, Vol. II* (Salisbury: Documentary Publications, 1978), 67.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

proposals was brought home by his invitation to Wohlthat to have them confirmed by Chamberlain personally.⁵⁵ It is doubtful that any substantial developments could have arisen out of these discussions, given the “inflamed” attitude towards Germany of public opinion (both domestic and international), as well as the general sentiment within the Cabinet that nothing short of outright warfare would deter Hitler from further European expansion. However, it is an indication of the degree to which the British (and to a large extent Chamberlain) pursued a “dual policy,” as Dirksen would refer to it: Britain was looking to strengthen her position with the acquisition of Eastern alliances and armaments, while political, strategic, economic, and ideological doubts in these very allies had prompted the British executive to continue seeking adjustments with Germany.⁵⁶

As a result of the deliberations from March to May of 1939, a total of fourteen long, drawn-out, and ultimately unsuccessful meetings on Anglo-Soviet relations would serve to characterize the months from June until the outbreak of war in September 1939. The British approach to the Soviet Union in the months leading to the negotiations could hardly be characterized as enthusiastic by even the alliance’s most ardent supporters. However, the decisions both for and against opening Anglo-Soviet discussion were based first and foremost on British political interests, the international consequences of a full alliance, strategic and military ramifications, ideological distrust, and the balance of power between Chamberlain and the British Cabinet.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Dirksen, *German Documents*, 184.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵⁷ Hill, *Cabinet Decisions*, 73.