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**Michael Jabara Carley. "Fiasco: The Anglo-Franco-Soviet Alliance That Never Was and the Unpublished British White Paper, 1939–1940." *International History Review* 41:4 (2019): 701-728.**

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In efforts to prevent war, and despite his aversion to flying, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain flew to meet the German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler twice in September 1938; he flew a third time that month to sign the Munich Agreement. In January 1939, he flew once more to Italy to meet Prime Minister Benito Mussolini; the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax went with him. Neither Chamberlain nor Halifax went to Moscow to negotiate an anti-Nazi alliance, when the invasion of Czechoslovakia obliterated (or at least should have) any remaining doubt that Hitler could be appeased. Not even a government minister was sent to talk to Soviet leaders at that late stage. It was instead at the suggestion of Sir Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs who was renowned for his anti-German views, that Robert Hudson, Secretary for Overseas Trade, was sent to Russia in March, with the stated aim to start improving trade relations, but without having authority to make political proposals. In June, Hudson was followed by William Strang, head of the Foreign Office's Central Department; he was followed in August by a military delegation which had no plenipotentiary powers and was instructed to drag the negotiations out. With the Anglo-French delegation present in the country, General Secretary Joseph Stalin and Vyacheslav Molotov, his Foreign Minister concluded a non-aggression pact with Germany instead.

Yet it was an alliance between Britain, France, and the Soviet Union that could have averted at least the start of the Second World War as we know it, something that is not merely assumed in hindsight but was becoming increasingly obvious to contemporaries, with the notable exception of Chamberlain. Who was to blame? Michael Jabara Carley has, through various combinations of sources and in previous writings, argued that it was the British and the French who were to blame.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the anti-Communism of the two governments was so entrenched that it kept them from dealing seriously with the Soviet Union in those crucial months preceding the invasion of Poland. In untangling the tripartite discussions once again, Carley offers more evidence in support of his previous conclusions. He demonstrates the deep mistrust that existed between the two sides, and that while the French were quicker to realise the urgency of an alliance, British attempts to steer away from Berlin often came from below the level of Prime Minister. The result was that efforts were made, but they were marked by delays and contradictions, justifiably offending and annoying the Soviet government in the process.

Who did the British government thought was to blame at the time? Going beyond the negotiations, Carley's article sheds new light on how, soon after war broke out, the UK government toyed with the idea of explaining to the public why the negotiations failed. It is this section of Carley's recent article that contains fresh arguments based on a small number of underutilised Foreign Office files. Looking at the discussions around the publication of a 'blue book' – a compilation of

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Jabara Carley, "End of the 'Low, Dishonest Decade': Failure of the Anglo-Franco-Soviet Alliance in 1939," *Europe-Asia Studies* 45:2 (1993), 303–341; Michael Jabara Carley, *1939: The alliance that never was and the coming of World War II* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1999).

diplomatic documents – on Anglo-Soviet relations, Carley discovered that the Foreign Office resisted public and parliamentary pressure to publish such a document in the autumn, when public opinion was still favourable towards the Soviet Union (as it had been during the negotiations). This changed in the winter of 1939, when the Soviet invasion of Finland cast an unfavourable light over the USSR’s capabilities and intentions, making it an opportune propaganda moment for the ‘blue book’ to “feed public animosity against the USSR and build support for Britain and France at war with Nazi Germany” (701). According to Carley, the “main line of attack was that the negotiations had failed owing to the British and French refusal to agree to Russian demands which would have endangered the integrity of the Baltic states and of Finland” (718). At that point, publication was backed not just by the Foreign Office but by the War Office and the Ministry of Information as well, indicating support from a military perspective and a propaganda one (the material Carley uses comes from the Foreign Office). A draft was prepared, with 100,000 copies ordered for printing.

Publication was, however, aborted after the French became anxious that the Anglo-Soviet correspondence would necessitate an equivalent publication – a ‘yellow book’ – on Franco-Soviet relations, telling their side of the story, and distancing themselves as much as possible from the way Britain handled the negotiations, an awkward thing to do amidst the war. The Polish government-in-exile also advised against publication, though not much detail is offered on its take. On top of French and Polish concerns was the risk of the Soviets publishing their own version of the story in response, and in fact preparations for such a step were made when Moscow got wind of the whole affair.

It may be that not much more exists in the archive around the ‘blue book’ saga and hence the relatively limited space Carley dedicates on the issue. Yet Carley’s findings suggest there may be more to say still about what the draft included, as well as how it compared to the ‘blue book’ on Anglo-German relations, which was indeed published in 1939 and hit a nerve with the public – according to *The Observer*, it was selling at a rate of 1,000 copies an hour.<sup>2</sup> Comparative diplomatic post-mortems may also need to consider the Polish ‘white book’ on relations with Nazi Germany – in which the UK press found elements of “Russian duplicity” for dealing with Germany at the same time as with the others<sup>3</sup> – as well as the Finnish ‘blue book’ which contained “crude documentary proof of Soviet perfidy, perfidy so monstrous that the ordinary inclination is to wonder if it can possibly be true”.<sup>4</sup>

The present article nevertheless devotes much more space to the actual tripartite negotiations that the ‘blue book’ would have sought to explain, with the focus being mainly on how the Soviet side perceived developments rather than on how the British did. Given that the negotiations are a topic Carley has covered before, a more elaborate discussion around the material used here, how it differs from that used previously, and what questions remain based on the current state of Soviet sources would have made the archival significance of this new research clearer. The evidence comes mainly from sources of the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, but the reader is left to fill the gaps around how these interact with what is already known.

Through such sources, Carley offers more detail around Soviet perceptions, mainly at the ministerial and ambassadorial levels, of Anglo-French intentions during the negotiations, perceptions that were marked by “mistrust and cynicism” (704). As Carley demonstrates, the Munich Agreement of 1938 led the Commissariat to see France as subordinate to Britain, and the latter as pursuing “a policy of connivances” (703). The Soviet point of departure in March 1939 was therefore scepticism of “Anglo-French determination to resist Nazi aggression” (703).

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<sup>2</sup> “Queues to Buy Blue Book”, *The Observer*, 24 September 1939, 11.

<sup>3</sup> “Poland’s Foreign Policy before the War: The Last Exchanges with Soviet Russia”, *The Manchester Guardian*, 18 March 1940, 6.

<sup>4</sup> “The Soviet Self-Revealed: a Finnish Blue Book”, *The Observer*, 10 March 1940, 4.

That France had given up diplomatic power to Britain is an argument that research using French archives has nonetheless challenged, showing that the government's stance was more complex than mere surrender. France had its own independent policy in Munich (part of which was to make Britain take "the lion's share of responsibility") and beyond, and France was able to add pressure on Britain, including when it came to the need for negotiations with Moscow.<sup>5</sup> Yet the Soviet assumption was that the French, despite having a different sense of urgency over the issue of an alliance, would follow the British. Consequently, even when the French were open to Soviet proposals, the Soviet Ambassador in Paris was advising Maxim Litvinov, Commissar for Foreign Affairs that "we can't trust them" (709). And when Georges Bonnet, the French Foreign Minister, was trying to influence the speed with which the UK Foreign Office was treating matters, Litvinov remained unconvinced, with Carley acknowledging that Litvinov was "a little hard on Bonnet" (705). On another occasion, too, Carley finds that the Soviets were "a little hard on the French, but only a little" (714).

The mood in London was also changing by early 1939: both Cabinet members and the Chiefs of Staff spoke in favour of engaging with the Soviet Union against Nazi aggression, having realised following developments in Czechoslovakia that the main enemy was Hitler, not Stalin.<sup>6</sup> The Soviet Ambassador in London, Ivan Maisky saw signs of this change, but Litvinov remained "sceptical" (705). His scepticism was based on the correct reading of the fact that, unlike those around him, Chamberlain had no real change of heart. Still, Litvinov's blanket scepticism towards the 'Anglo-French' may have prevented him from more accurately appreciating the changing mood within British government – after all, the Foreign Office did propose a four-power declaration that spring, despite its Prime Minister's overall views. It was after Poland rejected the declaration – and the British delayed informing the Soviets of the fact – that the Soviets made a set of proposals for an alliance with Britain and France, from which they were unwilling to budge, in order "to pin down the British" (724).

When it came to Poland – which determined to a great extent the course of negotiations by refusing to openly be associated with the Soviet Union – both the reports of the Commissariat and Litvinov's own writings led to the conclusion that Poland was trying to get closer to Germany. Research using Polish archives has reached similar conclusions, with the Polish Foreign Minister's manoeuvres towards Germany having been made in the over-optimistic belief that they were the only way to prevent, or at least postpone war, rendering futile Anglo-French pressure – and there was such pressure – to change stances towards the Soviets.<sup>7</sup>

Poland's refusal to engage with the USSR suited Chamberlain and, according to Carley, allowed him to use it "as a pretext for not concluding an alliance", maintaining this way his "policy of connivances" well beyond Munich (712, 714). The influence of Chamberlain over the course of events cannot be overstated. But, besides Chamberlain, there were other factors that influenced how reliable a partner the Soviet Union was seen as, and thus how slowly stances changed and obstacles overcome. A glaring example are Stalin's purges, including that of Jacob Suritz, the Jewish Soviet ambassador in Berlin, as well as of several anti-German Soviet commanders, which were seen as signalling support to Germany as well as compromising Soviet war potential.<sup>8</sup> Carley argues that the Soviets had recovered from the purges by 1939, and that the relevant Anglo-French ambassadors knew it. Yet the question at the time was not only whether they were a reliable partner in spite of those purges, but that the purges happened in the first place, amidst the Soviet Union's pursuit of 'collective security'. Even if Western perceptions ought to have moved on from 1937, given their own failures in the interim, there is

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-1940* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Louise Grace Shaw, *The British Political Elite and the Soviet Union* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> A.J. Prazmowska, "Poland's Foreign Policy: September 1938–September 1939," *The Historical Journal* 29:4 (1986): 853-73.

<sup>8</sup> Andrei P Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 108.

also the fact that British intelligence was underestimating Soviet strength, while also overestimating that of Germany, information that was shared with the military delegation sent to Moscow.<sup>9</sup>

Despite those factors affecting British attitudes in particular, an alliance was still seen as necessary and there were efforts to articulate a strategic foreign policy to that end as well as overcome major stumbling blocks, not all of which were within British control – including the stances of Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, as well as the threat of Japan – but these are underplayed in the analysis. In Lord Halifax's view halfway through the negotiations, "the Soviet Government had not budged a single inch and we had made all the advances and concessions".<sup>10</sup> He may have been referring to the fact that Britain eventually accepted the Soviet idea of a three-power treaty in May (instead of unilateral declarations to defend individual countries, which was the preferred British approach), they agreed to specify which countries would be protected under such treaty in June (despite the initial British preference not to name names<sup>11</sup>), and they agreed to having both political and military agreements come into force simultaneously (instead of a political agreement first, as was the British preference).<sup>12</sup> Responding to Halifax, Maisky said that it was perhaps "a mistake for the Soviet side to state an 'irreducible minimum' at the outset and not move off it" (715). In the absence of this fuller perspective, the impression may be left that while there was deep and mutual distrust, only that of the Soviets was justified; and that only the Soviets were serious about the negotiations, unlike what the British 'blue book' would have wanted the public to believe.

Put together, Carley's article offers new evidence around the Soviet thinking that shaped stances towards the 1939 negotiations. It is nevertheless a missed opportunity that this evidence is not placed more firmly within, and assessed against, the rich historiographical framework in which it belongs. We now know much about British, French, and Polish diplomacy in 1939 – as well as the policy-making processes each operated in – and so the evidence from the more elusive Soviet files can be put within a clearer interpretive framework, in order to assess how accurate and proportionate Soviet perceptions were. Importantly, Carley's article points to the fact that there remain some less explored dimensions surrounding the origins of the war, such as the ways the various governments decided to deal with the question of accountability, how they decided to justify their actions to their publics (or not), and what this tells us about how they understood what had happened.

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Kahn, "British Intelligence on Soviet War Potential in 1939: A Revised Picture and Some Implications (a Contribution to the 'Unending Debate')," *Intelligence and National Security* 28:5 (2013), 717-747.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 304.

<sup>11</sup> Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order*, 305.

<sup>12</sup> P.M.H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 300-305.