



# OF COLLECTIVE SECURITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL JABARA CARLEY

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Michael Jabara Carley is a specialist in 20th century international relations and the history of Russia and the Soviet Union. His research focuses on the Soviet Union's relations with Western Europe and the United States during the years 1917 and 1945. This research has come together in a three-volume study, first of which, entitled, *Stalin's Gamble: The Search for Allies against Hitler, 1930–1936*, will be published by the University of Toronto Press.

He is the author of [\*1939: The Alliance That Never Was and the Coming of World War II\*](#), [\*Silent Conflict: A Hidden History of Early Soviet-Western Relations\*](#), and [\*Une Guerre sourde: l'émergence de l'Union soviétique et les puissances occidentales\*](#).

Professor Carley has also written many essays on French intervention in the Russian Civil War (1917-1921), on Soviet relations with the Great Powers between the two world wars, on questions of "appeasement," the origins and conduct of the Second World War, and on major current issues. He is a Professor of history at the University of Montreal. It is a great pleasure and honor to discuss his work with him in this interview.



**The Postil (TP):** You have written a trilogy on the Great Patriotic War, that is the Second World War as experienced by Soviet Union. The first part of this magisterial study will be published soon. What is your overall aim?

**Michael Jabara Carley (MJC):** My trilogy, as I call it, deals with the origins and early conduct of the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War (*Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina*). The VOV is the name given to the war in Soviet and Russian history arising from the German invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941. My work runs from January 1930 to December 1941. My project was first entitled "A Near-run Thing: The Improbable Grand Alliance of World War II," supported by an "Insight" research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. My initial objective was to write a narrative history of how the USSR, Britain, and the United States, powers hostile to each other during the interwar years, became allies against Nazi Germany and the Axis. The work evolved from an envisioned single volume into three dealing with Soviet relations with the great and lesser European

powers and the United States.



*Michael J. Carley.*

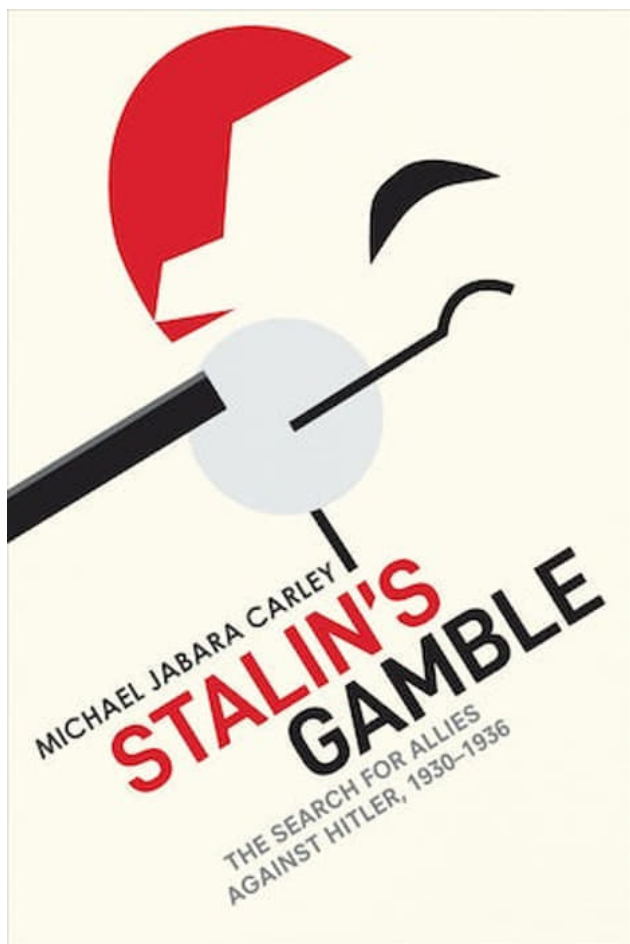
**TP:** Is there a difference between a Western historiography of WWII and a Russian one?

**MJC:** Oh yes, the difference is enormous. During the war, it was clear to all who had eyes to see that the Red Army played the key role in smashing the Nazi *Wehrmacht* and winning the war in Europe. The United States and Britain played supporting roles. After 1945 the war became an important object of propaganda in the Cold War. The new narrative was that the United States or Churchill single-handedly won the war in which the USSR was practically invisible.

In the western media, histories, iconography, Hollywood films, comic books, more recently video games, the Red Army is invisible. The key moment in the war was operation Overlord, the Normandy landings, when in fact, they were an anticlimax, grand to be sure, in a war whose outcome had already been determined by the Red Army. In the context of the Cold War, it was normal that the United States would seek in various ways to rub out the memories of the Soviet role in the war, for otherwise how could you portray the USSR as a menacing communist enemy.

**TP:** Would you tell us about the other two volumes in the trilogy?

**MJC:** Volume 1: *Stalin's Gamble: The Search for Allies against Hitler, 1930–1936*, explores the Soviet Union's efforts to organize a defensive alliance against Nazi Germany, in effect rebuilding the anti-German Entente of the First World War.



Volume 2: *Stalin's Failed Grand Alliance: The Struggle for Collective Security, 1936-1939* covers the period from May 1936 to August 1939. These were the last three years of peace in Europe during which occurred the great crises of the pre-war period (the Spanish civil war, *Anschluss* and the Munich sellout of Czechoslovakia) and the last Soviet efforts to organise an anti-Nazi alliance.

Volume 3: *Stalin's Great Game: War and Neutrality, 1939-1941* covers the first phase of the war in Europe, notably the disappearance of Poland, the Winter War between the USSR and Finland, the fall of France, the battle of Britain, and the Nazi build-up and invasion of the USSR. All this occurs within the broader framework of Soviet diplomacy and intelligence operations and Stalin's failures to interpret correctly the signs of Hitler's intention to destroy the Soviet Union.

**TP:** Your work has focused on Russian archival records. Were there any surprises, which made you

rethink your position(s)?

**MJC:** My work has focused on Russian archival sources *and* western archival sources (*inter alia* French, British, US, etc.). The Russian sources indicate—and this will be a surprise for some people—that Soviet foreign policy as conducted by the Commissariat for foreign affairs (NKID) functioned like that of any other foreign ministry. It sought to define and protect Soviet national interests, as perceived by the NKID, and promoted amongst the Soviet leadership, especially in the Politburo (in effect the Soviet cabinet), which over time became synonymous with a single person, Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. In the 1920s this meant seeking to improve political and economic relations with the main western powers. No country was too small to escape NKID attention and wooing. In the 1930s it meant seeking to build an anti-Nazi alliance to contain Hitlerite Germany or to defeat it in war if containment failed. The first generation of Soviet diplomats were well-educated (or self-taught), multilingual, sophisticated, and good at their jobs.

So? What is so surprising about these “discoveries?” Several generations of western historians have maintained that Soviet foreign policy was made by the Communist International or Comintern and intended to pursue world socialist revolution and not the protection of Soviet national interests. These did not exist. My previous book [Silent Conflict](#) deals with the complicated interaction of the NKID, Comintern, Stalin, and the Politburo in the 1920s. Suffice it to say that traditional western historiography requires revision based on the study of Russian archives. We now have histories *before* the opening of Soviet archives and histories *after* their opening.

**TP:** The Soviet era is largely dominated by Joseph Stalin. Are there aspects about him that are ignored or misconstrued by Western historians?

**MJC:** People have been writing books about Stalin since the interwar years. His recent biographer [Stephen Kotkin](#) reminds us that he was a “human being.” He was that, but of course human beings can also be serial killers. Stalin was what he was, amongst other things, crude, cynical, vengeful, murderous. He placed little value on human life and freely dispensed with it.

In the realm of foreign policy, he had a more or less normal relationship with the NKID and its leadership until the purges. In the 1930s his principal NKID interlocutor was Maksim M. Litvinov, the commissar or *narkom* for foreign affairs. Stalin's interactions with Litvinov were those of a head of government with his/her foreign minister. There was give and take on both sides, but most of the time

until 1939 Stalin supported Litvinov's policy recommendations. Not always but most of the time. It is a "normal" side of Stalin that we sometimes miss because of his ruthlessness and the purges.

**TP:** In the years leading up to W/WII, how did the West view, or understand, Stalin and Soviet Russia? And, likewise, how did Stalin view the West?

**MJC:** The "west" did not have a uniform view of Stalin. There was the mainstream media view of him as bloodthirsty communist. In some government circles, in the British Foreign Office, for example, he was perceived as a ruthless "realist" looking to secure his own power. Western iconography, political posters, cartoons, etc., are rich in their portrayal of Stalin, amongst other roles, as a vampire feeding on the blood of innocents. This was a consistent view of him during the interwar years with some moderation in the 1930s when western realists—Winston Churchill is the best known of these people—recognised the need to cooperate with the USSR against Nazi Germany. The "realists" were always a minority amongst western governing elites and were never able to impose this policy in government until the Nazi invasion of the USSR. Of course, western communists were more disposed to recognise Stalin as the great leader of the USSR. They had to or were expelled from European parties or purged when Stalin got his hands on them. There were however exceptions to the rule when communists (in France for example) could initiate policy changes accepted in Moscow.

As for Stalin, he remained a communist, but he was willing to cooperate with the western powers against Hitler both in the 1930s and after June 1941. We operate under different social systems, he often said, but this should not prevent us from recognizing common interests and cooperating against common foes.

**TP:** Then, there is the notorious year, 1932, with its Great Famine, in which 5 to 7 million died. Was this famine "political strategy," ethnic cleansing (Holodomor), a natural disaster, or something else?

**MJC:** I only deal in passing with this issue in my work because the famine did not affect foreign policy, but the best recent treatment of the famine is in [the second volume](#) of Kotkin's biography of Stalin. Kotkin argues that the famine was the result of various factors, political, economic, weather, and insect infestations. It was *not* aimed at the Ukraine as a form of genocide or "ethnic cleansing." The famine affected the entire Soviet grain belt with Kazakhstan being the hardest hit.

**TP:** The next year, 1933, brought Adolf Hitler to power. How did Stalin and the Soviets view Hitler?

**MJC:** The initial Soviet reaction to Hitler's assumption of power in early 1933 was to try to maintain the "Rapallo" policy of tolerable relations with Germany. Nazi hostility to the USSR in 1933 was so intense that the maintenance of Rapallo became impossible and in December 1933 the Politburo approved a shift in policy to collective security against Nazi Germany. This meant in effect the rebuilding of the World War I Entente against Wilhelmine Germany. Litvinov became the great Soviet spokesperson for this policy, but it was not his personal policy, it was that of Stalin and the Soviet government. Stalin was the Soviet government. No policy, large or small, could pass without his approval.

**TP:** The years leading up to 1939 are complex and often little understood, especially in regards to the motivations and concerns of Soviet Russia. Did the Soviets see a war coming?

**MJC:** There is not the slightest doubt that the Soviet leadership saw war coming. Nazi Germany was the great danger to European peace and security. Litvinov and other Soviet diplomats liked to quote to their western counterparts *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's best-selling book, outlining his plans for European conquest. France and the USSR were identified as targets of German conquest. Germany needed *Lebensraum*, additional living space in the USSR. Slavs, Jews, Roma were lower species of human being good only for slavery or death.

**TP:** What was the role of Britain and France in this regard? Were they more suspicious of Hitler or of Stalin, or of both equally? And why could they not form an alliance with Stalin against Hitler?

**MJC:** The answer to this question is complicated and is the subject of Stalin's Gamble, vol. 1 of my trilogy. In France and Britain anti-communism was a driving force, though its intensity fluctuated from time to time during the interwar years. Political and economic elites were largely anti-communist, but not entirely, as I have noted above. This was especially true during the 1930s after Hitler became German chancellor. One Soviet diplomat noted that the great question of the 1930s was who was enemy no. 1, Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union? Western elites, with important exceptions, got the answer wrong to this question. Fascism was the great bulwark against communist or socialist revolution, the ideology arising from the crisis of capitalism during the interwar years. Remember, Germany was not the only fascist state, the *Duce* Benito Mussolini had taken power in Italy in 1922. In France and Britain there were tolerant attitudes toward Italian fascists. If only Hitler would soften the hard edges of Nazism and adopt the "softer" fascism of Mussolini, it would be easier to accept him. For



numerous European conservatives Hitlerite Germany was not an enemy but a potential ally against the left.

When Soviet diplomats tried to warn of the Nazi danger, many western counterparts did not buy the argument that Hitler was the problem. This was especially so after the eruption of the Spanish civil war in July 1936. It looked to many conservatives that communism might take root in Spain and then spread to France. What a catastrophe! So, when Soviet diplomats warned of Hitlerite Germany, conservatives, the political right, but also spreading into the political centre and centre-left, saw this as a *ruse de guerre* to spread communism into Europe. Collective security and mutual assistance against the common foe, did not work as an argument, because European elites did not see or did not want to see Hitler as a common foe. The British Foreign Office was against collective security and against anti-fascism as arguments for unity. Anti-communism was a major impediment to an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance against Hitler, even in 1939 when war looked increasingly inevitable.

**TP:** Then there is Poland. How would you characterize the Polish view of Hitler, especially given that Poland was allied with Nazi Germany until 1939 (a little-known fact)? What were Poland's ambitions and motivations?

**MJC:** Yes, then there was Poland. I call it the skunk in the woodpile of collective security, but it was not the only one. A Polish state reappeared on the map of Europe in 1918 at the end of World War I. It was intensely nationalist. During 1919-1920 Poland sought to reestablish its frontiers of 1772, as a great European power. This led to war with Soviet Russia and a white peace, signed in early 1921 which satisfied neither side. Poland did not re-establish its 1772 frontiers, but obtained important Ukrainian and Byelorussian populated territories, which Soviet Russia saw as lost because of military weakness.

The Polish leadership saw itself situated between two potentially hostile great powers, and so explained its foreign policy as neither one or the other. But when push came to shove the Polish leadership always leaned toward Germany. In January 1934 Poland signed a non-aggression pact with Germany. Soviet offers of rapprochement were rejected. In following years Poland acted as a saboteur of collective security and worked against Soviet diplomacy. Everywhere in central and eastern Europe, diplomats warned that Poland was marching toward its ruin if it continued to pursue a pro-German, anti-Soviet policy. I would not say Poland was a Nazi "ally" but it was certainly an accomplice in 1938 when it cooperated with Germany to bring about the dismemberment of the Czechoslovak state. For its troubles Poland got a small portion of Czechoslovak territory. Incredibly, in 1939 it continued to

sabotage attempts to conclude an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance. It did so until the very day the Nazi *Wehrmacht* invaded Poland on 1 September 1939.

**TP:** Was the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 the Soviet attempt to thwart war, or was it a reaction to the Munich Conference of 1938, in which the West thought it had won “peace in our time?”

**MJC:** The Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact was not a Soviet attempt to thwart war, it was an attempt to stay out of the war and to remain neutral. Yes, in part, it was a reaction to the Munich accords, but it was more than that. It was the direct result of six years of failed Soviet attempts to construct an anti-Nazi grand alliance. One by one, the prospective members of this failed grand alliance fell away: the United States in the spring-summer 1934, France paradoxically in late 1934 (in a more complicated process), Italy, yes, fascist Italy in 1935, Britain in February 1936, and Romania in August 1936. One after the other they fell away; and Poland of course, the spoiler of collective security, the proverbial skunk in the woodpile, never contemplated an alliance with the USSR against Germany. Moscow was always the undesirable ally, the greater enemy, even though, paradoxically, it was Poland's only option for salvation.

The Soviet Union could not, on its own, organise mutual assistance against Nazi Germany. Collective security had to be a grand political coalition from left to centre-right, a World War I union sacrée, of all-in national defence of all political parties against a common foe. In the west no one wanted it; no one wanted the Soviet Union as an ally (with the exception of communists and “realists”; a Soviet ambassador called them “white crows”) in a potential war-fighting alliance, in a situation where there was no agreement on the common foe. Even Czechoslovakia, the most needy potential ally, would not go all-in with the USSR. No eastern European country would without France and Britain, but France would not march without Britain, and Britain would not march at all.

This is a complicated story related in volumes 1 and 2 of my trilogy. In the great cover-up of the genuine history of the origins of World War II after 1945, it was the necessary corollary of Cold War propaganda to rub out the primary role of the Red Army in the destruction of the *Wehrmacht*. Early on, revisionist historians began to put the story together, starting with the “Guilty Men,” the appeasers, who prepared the way to catastrophe. It was the release of Soviet government papers in the 1990s, however, which has allowed the emergence of a more complex narrative, constructed with the assistance of Soviet eyes. In this narrative Stalin, the “human being,” understandably could not trust the British and French governments, conniving, manipulative, unwilling, to be all-in allies against Nazi

Germany even in August 1939.

As it was, the British and French left their ally Poland to blow in the wind when Germany invaded it. Stalin correctly assumed that France and Britain would sit on their hands while Germany and the USSR fought it out in the east. Would they have been more loyal to the USSR than they had been to Poland? Of course not, if you asked Stalin. However, war is full of the unexpected. The USSR ended up fighting a ground war practically alone against Nazi Germany from June 1941 to September 1943 and even after the Normandy landings still carried the main burden of fighting on the ground. That of course is another story.

**TP:** World War II, when it broke out, was the result of diplomatic failure on the part of Britain, France, and Poland. Is this a fair assessment?

**MJC:** I have answered this question in my above responses, but yes, Britain, France, and Poland bear a large responsibility for the failure to organize an early grand alliance in Europe against Hitler.

**TP:** Could the Allies have defeated Hitler without the Soviets?

**MJC:** No, and this is not a conclusion made in hindsight. The main argument of western "realists" was that without the USSR, France and Britain could not win a war against Nazi Germany and would certainly lose it. Britain had no army to speak of, two divisions could at once be sent to France in the event of war. The French army could not alone fight off a German invasion. On the other hand, the Red Army could at once mobilise 100 divisions, in fact, more, against Nazi Germany. Churchill and former prime minister David Lloyd George said it plainly in the House of Commons during the spring of 1939. Victory was impossible without an alliance with the USSR. Do the math of relative contributions to boots on the ground: Britain, two divisions; the USSR, 100. This is not to mention 35 Czechoslovak divisions prior to the Munich betrayal. The French and British governing elites liked to count every enemy twice over and potential allies not at all.

**TP:** In your book, *Silent Conflict: A Hidden History of Early Soviet-Western Relations*, you discuss Soviet relations with the West. How would you categorize these? And did these early years set the tone for the Cold War?

**MJC:** With the notable exception of Soviet-German relations and the conclusion of the treaty of Rapallo (spring 1922) which regularised Soviet relations with Weimar Germany, Soviet-western relations were poor. Anti-Communism was an insurmountable obstacle to better relations even though there were "realists," notably in France, who advocated rapprochement. The Comintern was active in China where a great revolutionary movement was underway. Britain especially had important commercial interests in China threatened by the revolutionary movement. I see this period as the early (or stage 1 of the) Cold War which ended in 1941. Western-Soviet hostility in the 1920s was an impediment to building an anti-Nazi alliance in the 1930s.

**TP:** The West has long had deep-seated Russophobia. What accounts for this?

**MJC:** Russophobia is not really a subject directly treated in my work. It is a form of western racism against Russia, motivated these days by the Russian threat to US world domination. This is a topic for another discussion.

**TP:** Are there other projects that you are researching?

**MJC:** I am getting on in years, and the publication of my trilogy will take up my time, *inshallah*, for the next couple of years. I see the trilogy as the capstone of my work as historian and author. After the trilogy is published, as I hope it will be, who knows?

**TP:** Professor Carley, thank you so much for your time.

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*Featured: "Europe will be Free!" Poster by Viktor Koretsky, 1944.*

