



STALIN'S GAMBLE: THE SEARCH FOR ALLIES AGAINST HITLER, 1930–1936

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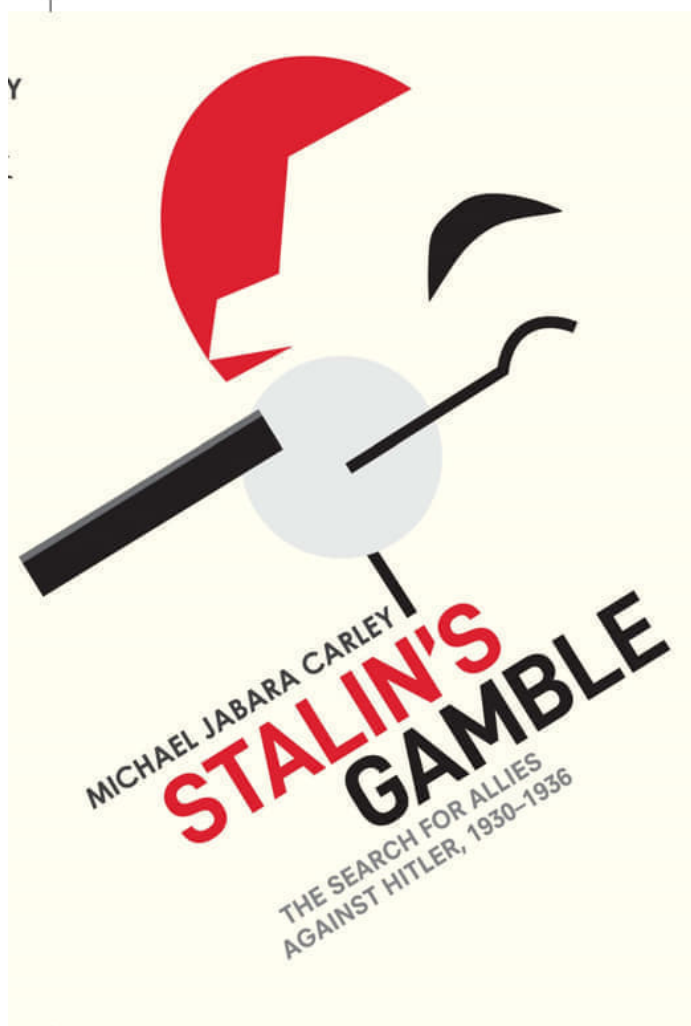
Michael Jabara Carley has just published *Stalin's Gamble. The Search for Allies against Hitler, 1930–1936*, which is the first volume of his tour de force trilogy on Soviet-Western relations during the 1930s. This work will be an indispensable text in Russian studies.

True to form, *Stalin's Gamble* is meticulously researched, lucidly written and prodigious in its many insights. The book has that rare quality in that it appeals both to the scholar and the general reader. We are pleased to bring you an excerpt, courtesy of the [University of Toronto Press](#).

This is a book well worth spending time with., Make sure to [pick up your copy](#).

Prologue to Crisis

On 1 January 1930, few Europeans worried about the outbreak of a Second World War. Parisian fortune tellers might have ventured such a sensational prediction on their advertising coupons. The French, of course, worried instinctively about a new war with a revanchist Germany. In fifteen years, predicted the French politician Edouard Herriot. That was in 1922, and he was not a fortune teller. The Soviet commissar, or *narkom* for foreign affairs, Maksim Maksimovich Litvinov, sometimes speculated about such possibilities. Marxist ideologues thought of world war as the inevitable result of capitalist and imperialist rivalries. Litvinov opined that with the possible exceptions of the Italian fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, and Jozef Piłsudski, the Polish generalissimo, no government in Europe wanted war. Sure, there was a “war scare” in the Soviet Union in 1927, but Litvinov did not make much of it. Apparently, many rank-and-file communists did not take the war scare too seriously either, considering it “a tool of social agitation,” which undoubtedly it was. Besides the Italian Duce Mussolini, another fascist leader was emerging in Germany. This was Adolf Hitler, who headed a fringe party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) or Nazi Party, who had ideas about a German renaissance of power relying on war as a means of achieving it. He even published a long book, *Mein Kampf*, in 1925, where he elaborated his plans for the future domination of Europe. It was hard to read *Mein Kampf* to the end, but you did not have to read every page to understand the message. The Nazi Party did not win a great many votes in the Reichstag elections during the 1920s, and thus did not appear to be a threat to European peace. In January 1930, it is unlikely that Litvinov or anyone else among the Soviet leadership worried much about Hitler.



As the new decade opened, it was more or less business as usual at the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs in Moscow, or the NKID. The principal objective was normalization of relations with the Western powers and the United States. A new world war was not an agenda item. In the autumn of 1929, the British government renewed diplomatic relations with the USSR, which it had broken off more than two years before on a wave of anti-communist hysteria. This was a victory for Soviet diplomacy. The NKID remained alert for Western attempts to organize an anti-Soviet bloc. Litvinov did not consider it a likely possibility, however, since capitalist political and economic rivalries would prevent the Western powers from ganging up on the USSR.

The Soviet Union and Weimar Germany had reasonably functional relations at the beginning of the 1930s. It certainly did not look in Moscow as if they would be at war a decade later. At the beginning of the 1920s Soviet Russia and Germany were pariahs, the one a proscribed revolutionary socialist state and the other condemned to take the blame for provoking the Great War, even though a democratic Weimar Republic had been established in November 1918. The Treaty of Versailles, concluded in June 1919, was supposed to settle the problem of German power, but did not do so. The German government passed the decade attempting to loosen the constraints of Versailles; and the Soviet government, to break out of its diplomatic isolation. What could have been more natural than these two pariah states joining together to escape isolation? In April 1922 they signed an agreement at Rapallo, Italy, to renounce prewar debts and obligations and to re-establish diplomatic and economic relations. The Entente Powers, France and Britain, were furious, realizing that the two outcasts had slipped out of their control. The pressure, both political and economic, would now be on the Entente Powers to come to terms with Weimar Germany and Soviet Russia.

The pattern of relations in Europe was thus set for the decade of the 1920s with attempts at rapprochement with Britain and France more successful on the German side than on the Soviet. If the Entente Powers succeeded in defeating Wilhelmine Germany during the Great War, they failed to overthrow Soviet power after the Bolshevik Revolution. They tried though as much as they dared. The West's *bête noire* in Moscow was the Communist International, or Comintern, established in 1919 not only to pursue the cause of world revolution, but also to defend Soviet Russia against foreign intervention. During the 1920s there were ups and downs in Soviet-Western relations, a crisis now and again, but no danger of another world war.

Western Europe appeared more or less stable and prosperous. It was the Roaring Twenties: the European bourgeoisie had money for leisure and conspicuous consumption. In capital cities like Paris and Berlin, men in tuxedos and women in sleek evening dresses rocked to the beat of big band music and American jazz at nightclubs and cabarets. The menus offered expensive cuisine that went down well with wine and champagne, while dancers perspired on the dance floor. Nor were the slick and well-to-do absent from the *terrasses* of popular cafes where they rubbed shoulders with American expats, painters, writers, and socialists. "It's class fraternization," a Marxist ideologue might have joked.

Politically, France and Britain were often at odds; in fact, their wartime alliance appeared to dissolve on 11 November 1918, the day the Great War ended. This allowed room for both Germany and the Soviet Union to manoeuvre. Germany had the better of the diplomacy. The Red Scare of the 1920s and

lingering Soviet revolutionary ambitions hampered efforts to normalize relations in the West. After the premature death in January 1924 of Soviet leader Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, a struggle for power erupted between Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin and Lev Davidovich Trotskii. Hatred is the first word that comes to mind in describing relations between these two Soviet leaders. This conflict had its effects on both Soviet domestic and foreign policy. At the end of the decade, the struggle for power was settled. Stalin established himself as the new, indisputable Soviet leader. Trotskii was sent into exile. Stalin calmed the Bolshevik itch to pursue world revolution and launched a five-year plan for industrialization and collectivization of agricultural lands. The troubles created by these domestic policies were an additional incentive to maintain correct relations with the Western powers.

The architects of Soviet foreign policy in the 1920s were Georgii Vasilievich Chicherin, the narkom for foreign affairs, and his principal deputy, *zamnarkom* Litvinov.

These two were an odd couple, one descended from the Russian aristocracy, and the other from a rather peculiar middle-class Jewish family. They often differed among themselves, both because of personal rivalries and jealousies and because of differences in temperament. Historians have said they pursued conflicting policies, Chicherin being pro-German, and Litvinov, pro-British. This is untrue, they were not pro this or that Western government, they were pro-Soviet. They sought to protect what they defined as the national interests of the Soviet state. In the northwest that meant the Baltic frontiers; in the south, it meant the borders in Central Asia. On the big issues like Rapallo or better relations with other Western powers, or difficulties with the Comintern, they saw eye to eye. It was on tactics rather than on strategy that their personal rivalries played themselves out. If Chicherin argued white, Litvinov would argue black, and vice versa. This rivalry continued until 1928 when an ailing Chicherin went on leave, never to resume his duties. Litvinov became the acting and then formal narkom of the NKID.

Soviet foreign policy was a complicated business. The NKID had to cope not only with hostile Western governments but also with politics in Moscow where foreign policy was often a stake in the struggle for power between Stalin and Trotskii and then other rivals. There were many arenas where the struggle to succeed Lenin unfolded, but none more important than in the Politburo, which was in effect the cabinet of the Soviet government. In most cabinets, the minister of foreign affairs is a high-ranking member. In the Politburo, Chicherin was not a member. He and Litvinov were invited consultants when foreign policy was discussed. On the other hand, during the 1920s, the Comintern, the nemesis of the NKID as well as of the West, was represented in succession by two of Stalin's provisional allies, Grigorii Evseievich Zinoviev and Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin. These two Bolshevik politicians not only

represented the Comintern, but used it as a platform for influence and power in the Politburo where Stalin sometimes gave them leeway as he manoeuvred for power. Politburo members tended to think they knew more about foreign policy than the NKID, which exasperated Chicherin and Litvinov. Zinoviev and Bukharin, they complained, talked too much, did not think enough, and irritated Western governments for nothing. The NKID often played the unwanted roll of concierge cleaning up their messes. Litvinov let it slip from time to time with foreign diplomats that he was fed up with the Comintern. Of course Stalin could not say that.

A persistent idea survives that the Comintern conducted Soviet foreign policy during the interwar years, or that the priorities of world revolution dominated it. "National interest" was not a concept much in use in Moscow.³ Such assertions do not stand up well in a close examination of Soviet archives. After Stalin consolidated his power, the Comintern faded into the background. It still functioned, still sought to direct the business of foreign communist parties, and still annoyed the Western powers, though less than before. If there was local resistance to French or British colonialism, the Quai d'Orsay or Foreign Office blamed it on the Comintern. When Litvinov heard such complaints, his stock reply was that indigenous resistance to Western colonialism flourished without any help from the Comintern. What was the USSR supposed to do? Should it become an advocate of colonial empires? This question came up, as readers will see, when Italy invaded Abyssinia in October 1935. Even capitalists were getting used to the Comintern. It was, like a stone in your rubber boot, which you could not take off until you stepped out of the bog. Among the Western powers, the said and unsaid idea was that the Soviet Union should abandon socialism and embrace capitalism, thus behaving like every other state. Why should Stalin and his colleagues do that? Would capitalists ever abandon capitalism?

In the 1930s the Comintern, at times, played a role in support of Soviet national interests, in Spain, for example, during the civil war, although that was a point debated inside the NKID. There were sometimes residual tensions left over from the 1920s, but it was the NKID that formulated foreign policy most of the time and the Politburo (but in reality, Stalin) that approved or modified it.

Stalin sometimes told the Comintern leadership, Georgi Dimitrov, for example, to develop policy without him. I was too busy, he would say: "Decide by yourselves." He never said that to Litvinov or his deputies in the NKID. Stalin's involvement in foreign policymaking began after Lenin took ill in 1922–3. The narkom proposed and most of the time the *vozhd'*, who was Stalin, approved. Occasionally there were clashes. A pervasive Western view holds that there were two Soviet foreign policies, Litvinov's, pro-Western, and Stalin's, pro-German, even after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. The German orientation

was Stalin's preference, but he let Litvinov "talk him into something" in abandoning Rapallo. One often hears the argument, yes, collective security was Litvinov's policy, but what about Stalin's real preferences? This view is widespread among Western historians, seeking to explain away Litvinov and the policy of collective security. The fact is there were no personal policies, no duality of policies, only one policy that was Soviet and, perforce, Stalin's.

It is widely believed in the West that Stalin was a confidence man just waiting for an opportunity to trick the Western powers and to return to the "old" Rapallo policy with Nazi Germany. In the meantime, he would string them along. Collective security and mutual assistance against Nazi Germany were a sham. Stalin was a would-be conqueror, a kind of red Genghis Khan, just waiting for opportunities to strike. The Soviet archival evidence upon which this narrative is based demonstrates that the Soviet leadership was serious about collective security and that Britain and France were not. In the case of France, one can make a partial exception for the period 1933–4. This revelation may come as a surprise to some readers, or others may simply not believe it, sticking to preconceived ideas. There is little evidence to substantiate Stalin's clandestine pro-German policy, risible in any case because composition with Hitler during 1930s was not a sin, or if it was, everyone was being sinful. Britain and France, not to mention Poland, led the way. Some historians in the West might argue that the Western states had their "liberal scruples" about dealing with "archenemies." The trouble was that for many European conservatives, Stalin was the arch-enemy, not Hitler.

Two could play at who loves me, who loves me not. Even the narkom Litvinov argued that a minimum of relations with Hitler, mostly economic, should be maintained in order to avoid a diplomatic rupture. Litvinov feared Soviet isolation, which could facilitate Anglo-French security arrangements with Hitler.

The view of Stalin as trickster, "Germanophile," and "ally" of Hitler has been around for a long time and originates in the anti-communism and Sovietphobia of the interwar years and the second stage of the Cold War after 1945. A.J.P. Taylor, the great British historian of the mid-twentieth century, commented in 1981 that detached study of Soviet foreign policy was unlikely in his lifetime. "Most of my historical colleagues," he said, "are so corrupted and blinded by their obsession with the Cold War that it is quite impossible for them to see clearly or to speak honestly about Soviet policies." The same was true of their Soviet counterparts. Taylor was trying to be "balanced." The Cold War ended in 1991 – at least many people hoped it had – after the dismemberment and disappearance of the Soviet Union. The immense Soviet archives began to open. It was the most extraordinary experience for historians to go to Moscow for the first time and hold in their hands freshly declassified dela, or files, that no one, apart

from archivists and a few Soviet historians, had ever before read, let alone explored. Maybe we should talk about "History BC," before the opening of the Soviet archives, and "History AD," after the opening. I would respectfully contend that historians cannot study the origins of the Second World War without reference to the Soviet archival sources. Now that we have those files, or a great many of them, it should be possible to get to the bottom of the big questions that divided Taylor's generation.

Yet here we are, and so far, it has not been possible. A new generation of English-language writers, seemingly disdainful of their predecessors, has resumed old habits. One evokes "memory" to justify not going to the archival records. Another goes to the files, cherry-picking evidence. He uses that part of the archival record which suits his strong ideological objectives and ignores that part which does not. It is dust in the eyes. Such *modi operandi*, writes one reviewer, "undermine confidence" in the author. Yet even when reviewers catch an author red-handed, it does not appear to bother either author or publisher. In the early 1980s, an untenured "Marxist historian" at Princeton University was drummed out of the profession for mistakes of documentation. Senior historians accused him "of systematically distorting evidence"; he was "called a 'liar' and a 'faker.'" Now, forty years later, those very words, but not the punishment, might apply to certain academics or politicians of a new generation. As politicians go, the prime minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, comes to mind, or delegates at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

In the flurry of such Western ideas, it goes against the grain to propose that Soviet foreign policy functioned more or less as it did in other states, I mean based on perceptions of national interest. In fact, in the Politburo there existed considerable animosity towards Germany and towards the Rapallo policy, though it continued with ups and downs throughout the 1920s and into the beginning of the 1930s. Germany was the only Western power with which the Soviet Union had tolerable relations. It was the only foothold in Europe and had to be protected lest the USSR risk dangerous isolation. All the better, Litvinov argued, if relations with other powers could be improved, but not at the risk of damaging Rapallo. Litvinov was under no illusions about the permanency of Rapallo. Eventually, Germany and the USSR would part company. Other options, therefore, had to be cultivated, but for the time being such options were "music of the future."

Western-Soviet tensions came and went like bad weather. Trade turnover rose and fell according to Soviet economic and political needs. Moscow used trade as bait to obtain better political relations, though this strategy never really worked except in Weimar Germany, and even there, bilateral relations were often strained. It was not trade per se but political calculations of national interest on both sides,

which kept Rapallo going.

By the end of the 1920s, the Soviet government managed to achieve prewar production levels. It was slow going, too slow for the Bolsheviks, for they were all industrializers and modernizers whatever the disagreements between them on how fast to proceed. The USSR was burdened with millions of peasant smallholdings, which produced only enough grain and other foodstuffs to sustain the peasant producers. Sometimes it did not, and the poorest peasants had to hire themselves out as labourers to the more prosperous so-called *kulaks*, to make ends meet. There was not enough agricultural surplus to feed the cities, at reasonable prices, in order to support industrialization or to sell in the West to obtain vital foreign exchange. Something had to be done. Having won the conflict to succeed Lenin, Stalin clenched his fists and smashed all the obstacles to industrialization by launching the First Five-Year Plan in 1928 and by forcing at the same time the collectivization of small peasant holdings, grouping them into large collective farms. Forced collectivization provoked a peasant “Luddite” rebellion (a turn of phrase coined by the late Isaac Deutscher), which along with drought and insect infestations, led in 1932–3 to a disastrous concatenation of circumstances, a famine in the Soviet wheat belt. These developments did not affect Soviet foreign policy or the Soviet need to trade. If anything, industrialization increased the need to buy capital goods and to sell agricultural products, lumber, oil, and manganese in the West.

In the 1930s the stakes in Soviet relations with the West changed rapidly. In October 1929, the stock market crashed in New York, setting off what became the Great Depression, which spread from the United States to Europe. The deceptive political and economic stability of the 1920s was shattered. Credit dried up, banks and businesses went broke, industrial production fell, international trade declined, commodity prices plummeted, and unemployment rose to calamitous levels.

The Roaring Twenties became a memory. One imagines that many prized tuxedos and evening gowns collected dust in the closet or ended up in secondhand shops. American expats still flocked to Paris, and jazz men still played the cabarets, but in reality, everything had changed. The music sounded the same, but people were not. The legions of unemployed worried about making ends meet. People were desperate and angry. The far-right leagues (or *ligues*) in France and the Nazi Brownshirts in Germany went out into the streets looking for trouble, fighting with communists and unionists. There were casualties. It was war, not all-out, but war all the same.

The Depression thus brought renewed political instability, especially in Germany, where the Nazi Party

under Hitler made impressive gains in federal elections in September 1930, rising from 12 seats in the Reichstag to 107. Hitler was no longer a fringe politician. Nazi power increased rapidly until Hitler became chancellor in January 1933. This should have set off alarm bells in European capitals and in Washington, and it should have led to changes in policy. Sometimes it did and sometimes not. It certainly did in Moscow. The threat of war, which had largely been a theoretical discussion, became a real, tangible danger. As a result, major changes in foreign policy and in relations with the Western powers took place in the Soviet Union as it turned to face the menace to European peace and security posed by Hitlerite Germany. Sooner or later, Litvinov had said in 1927, Germany and the USSR were bound to go their separate ways. That time had come.

Featured: *Joseph Stalin*, by Viktor Mikhailovich Oreshnikov; painted in 1948.
