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**Maxim M. Litvinov and Soviet-American
Relations, 1918–1946
by Hugh Phillips**

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MAXIM M. LITVINOV AND SOVIET-AMERICAN RELATIONS, 1918–1946

When historians consider the history of Soviet-American relations and the Cold War generally, they understandably dwell on the hostility and opposing goals and tactics of both sides. Especially prominent is an emphasis on the ideologically-based hostility of Soviet leaders toward what they derisively called the “bourgeois West.” In a recent, fine study of the Cold War, R.C. Raack paints a convincing portrait of Stalin as rapaciously dedicated to fostering world revolution.¹ The recent “memoirs” of Stalin’s Foreign Minister, Viacheslav Molotov, also reveal a regime deeply dedicated to and driven by its Marxist world view.² Yet virtually forgotten in the generally dreary tale of conflict and antagonism is the story of Maxim Litvinov, a prominent Soviet diplomat who struggled mightily for years to achieve not only normal but even good relations with the West in general, and the United States, in particular. Indeed, Litvinov had a genuine affection for America and especially for Franklin Roosevelt,

whose portrait adorned Litvinov’s Kremlin office.³

Unlike his superiors, Litvinov possessed a diplomatic world view that was apparently unclouded by Marxism-Leninism and visions of world revolution. Early on, he realized the necessity of devising a traditional foreign policy designed to protect the new Soviet state. Litvinov certainly remained a Marxist and believed that socialism’s world-wide triumph was inevitable. But it was not an immediate prospect and Marxism was useless as a guide for foreign policy. Speaking with the American journalist Louis Fischer, Litvinov declared that the prospects for world revolution disappeared for him on 11 November 1918 with the end of the war.⁴ Even more to the point, no less than Josef Stalin remarked that “Litvinov does not see and is not interested in the revolutionary aspect of policy.”⁵ On another occasion, Stalin asserted that Litvinov was more “dangerous” to Soviet interests than even the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Henderson.⁶ Thus, at the outset of his diplomatic

- 1 R.C. Raack, *Stalin’s Drive to the West, 1938–1945: The Origins of the Cold War* (Stanford: 1995).
- 2 Albert Resis, ed., *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics. Conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago: 1993).
- 3 Jonathan Haslam, “Stalin and Litvinov,” in Gabriel Gorodetsky, ed., *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917–1991: A Retrospective* (London, 1994), 55.
- 4 Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics* (New York, 1941), p.127. As late as May 1922 Lenin was still harping on the “acceleration of the world revolutionary movement.” *Pravda*, 5 May 1922.
- 5 Letter from Josef Stalin to Viacheslav Molotov, 29 August 1929 in Lars T. Lih, et al., eds., *Stalin’s Letters to Molotov* (New Haven and London, 1995), 174.
- 6 Letter from Stalin to Molotov, 9 September 1929, in *Ibid.*, 177.

career Litvinov understood the international situation far better than Lenin and the other Bolshevik leaders. He embraced a policy of *realpolitik*, dedicated to the concrete interests of the government he served for so long.⁷ This sense of realism often led Litvinov to some unusual, albeit consistent, positions for a Soviet diplomat and, in particular, engendered conflicts with his long-time boss, Josef Stalin.

Litvinov frequently looked to the West for help and cooperation. In general, he hoped for aid and assistance in the interwar era from Britain; with World War II, his eyes turned to the United States.⁸ To be sure, he did not always agree with Western policies and he had his own demands vis-a-vis the West. Nevertheless, Litvinov ultimately saw relations with the West in a fundamentally different light than Stalin did. The Communist Party General Secretary had nothing but suspicion and hostility for the Western democracies, including the United States. How these two men managed to work together remains a mystery, but this article seeks to illuminate what advice and policies Litvinov suggested regarding Soviet policy toward the United States, in particular after World War II, when this relationship assumed global importance. It is hardly surprising that Litvinov faced quite formidable obstacles and suffered more than a

few failures. Stalin held little to no interest in Litvinov's ideas and when this fact became indisputably obvious, Litvinov broke with the "Great Leader" in a remarkably reckless way. Thus, he became the "first major postwar dissident."⁹ This article offers a brief account of Litvinov's heroic, if futile, effort to find a common ground with the United States, an effort that lasted from 1918 to 1946.

Litvinov dedicated his early years to Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik Party, running guns and propaganda into the Russian Empire. This dangerous activity accomplished nothing and in 1908 he gave it up and emigrated to Britain. There he led a conventional bourgeois life, working for the publishing house of Williams and Norgate and giving Russian language lessons. He married an Englishwoman and even became a British citizen. With the October Revolution, however, Litvinov returned to his native country and entered the diplomatic service. He nevertheless quickly developed into a rather conventional diplomat and an astute observer of international relations. He soon advanced the point of view that Moscow should look clearly at the world as it existed and mold its policies in a non-revolutionary fashion. Such an approach would protect and promote Soviet domestic interests, which Litvinov knew the

7 For a more extended discussion of Litvinov's career, the reader may consult: Hugh Phillips, *Between the Revolution and the West: A Political Biography of Maxim M. Litvinov* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1992).

8 Interview with Tatiana Litvinov, 30–31 March 1981.

9 William Taubman, *Stalin's American Policy: From Entente to Detente to Cold War* (New York: 1982), 133.

first years of Bolshevism had delivered to the brink of unprecedented catastrophe.¹⁰

One of Litvinov's first specific diplomatic proposals underscored his understanding of the new importance of the United States in international affairs. In 1918, while serving as the Soviet representative in London, he requested a transfer to Washington after it became obvious that British officials would not negotiate seriously with him. Lenin approved this suggestion; however, the American government did not and Litvinov had to wait fifteen years before his first mission to America.¹¹

In the meantime, he continued to seek a normalization of relations. In the early phases of this effort, he apparently clashed (not for the last time) with his superior, Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Georgii Chicherin. In October 1918, the latter addressed a letter to President Woodrow Wilson that has been aptly described as "extremely caustic and insulting."¹² Chicherin even went so far as to denigrate directly Wilson's cherished vision of a League of Nations.¹³

Litvinov rushed to limit the diplomatic damage. Disgusted with a letter he thought "propagandistic

journalism... calculated to repel rather than conciliate,"¹⁴ Litvinov penned his own message to the president. He emphasized that Soviet and U.S. public proposals for a European settlement had much in common, although the Soviet concepts were "more extensive." Most important, however, was the need for peace. Foreign powers should withdraw from Russia; if the intervention continued, it might well lead to a restoration of the monarchy, which would only result in "interminable revolutions and upheavals" that would be in no one's interest. Instead the new Russia and the victorious powers should cooperate in the reconstruction of the former "for the benefit of all countries badly in need of foodstuffs and new materials." Litvinov concluded with the remark: "I venture to appeal to your sense of justice and humanity."¹⁵

Wilson and British Prime Minister Lloyd George were favorably impressed with this opening. They accordingly asked Litvinov formally to elaborate on his letter in a series of meetings with the American diplomat, William H. Buckler.

10 In 1921 Litvinov supervised the expenditure of millions of dollars of foreign currency to buy the machinery, grain, and medical supplies Soviet Russia desperately needed. Z.S. Sheinis, *Maksim Maksimovich Litvinov: revoliutsioner, diplomat, chelovek* (Moscow: 1989), 181.

11 Ivan Maisky, *Journey into the Past* (London: 1962), 67.

12 John Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace* (Princeton: 1966), 88.

13 Jane Degras, ed., *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy* (Oxford: 1951-1953), 3 vols., 1: 112-120.

14 Memo by William Buckler, undated, January 1919, William Buckler Papers, Yale University Archives, Box 6.

15 Degras, ed., *Soviet Documents*, 1: 130-131.

Meanwhile, Litvinov had apparently scored a triumph domestically. At the opening session with Buckler, he revealed a letter from none other than Chicherin confirming the conciliatory position laid out by Litvinov. In any case, the Soviet representative emphasized Soviet readiness to “compromise on all points, including the Russian foreign debt repudiated earlier, protection of existing foreign enterprises, and the granting of new trade concessions in Russia.” In return Soviet Russia wanted and desperately needed “expert assistance and advice, especially in technical and financial matters.”¹⁶ On the thorny issue of communist propaganda, Litvinov insisted that Germany, not the U.S., was Russia’s target and the goal was to fight the “militarist spirit of Germany.” Indeed the U.S. was not ready for socialist revolution and “no amount of propaganda can produce such conditions.”¹⁷

Buckler thought Litvinov’s pro-Western sentiments were genuine but also believed that most Bolsheviks lacked such conciliatory feelings. He therefore urged a policy of rapprochement with the

new Russia to undermine the radicals within the regime.¹⁸

It is quite likely that Litvinov’s demarche was an important factor in Wilson’s acceptance of Lloyd George’s plan for a conference of all Russian political factions to be held on the island of Prinkipo.¹⁹ But this scheme collapsed due to French and British hostility to the Bolsheviks. Wilson, however, continued to seek ways to meet Litvinov halfway. Thus in March 1919 William C. Bullitt, a friend of Wilson’s close advisor Colonel Edward House, arrived in Moscow for direct talks with Litvinov and Chicherin. By 14 March the three men had hammered out an agreement.²⁰

This document provided for a ceasefire in Russia with all “existing de facto governments” to retain control of territories they controlled as of 11 November 1918. There would be a general political amnesty and all foreign troops would be withdrawn.²¹ Lenin used all his persuasive powers to gain acceptance of this proposal,²² but it came to nothing. Wilson was increasingly distracted by the problem of Germany, and French

16 Thompson, *Russia*, 90–91.

17 U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Russia, 1919*, 15–16. Hereafter cited as *FRUS*.

18 Buckler Papers, Box 6.

19 N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics* (Oxford and London: 1968), 206.

20 Valerii Shishkin, *V.I. Lenin i vneshneekonomicheskaiia politika Sovetskogo gosudarstva, 1917–1923 gg.* (Moscow: 1977), 160 and William C. Bullitt, *The Bullitt Mission to Russia*, (New York: 1919), 39.

21 Richard H. Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet Relations 1917–1921* (Princeton: 1961) 2 vols., 2:148–149.

22 Shishkin, *V.I. Lenin*, 160.

hostility to any deal with the Soviets was unbending.

As time passed and revolution failed to flourish elsewhere, the Soviet government publicly championed a policy of universal and complete disarmament. This impractical, if often popular, policy led to the Moscow Disarmament Conference of 1922. Like most interwar diplomatic meetings, it served only to highlight tensions and disputes, but in the midst of the conference Litvinov made another overture to the United States. The *New York Times* wrote that a "member of the Soviet delegation" (almost certainly Litvinov) asserted that the Russians understood that "America is the only power besides Russia genuinely willing—and able by virtue of her strong position—to advance the cause of world disarmament."²³ There is no evidence anyone in Washington paid any attention to this demarche.

Undeterred, Litvinov maintained the initiative. In 1923 he met in Moscow with the president of the New York Chamber of Commerce, a Mr. Bush. The two men reviewed the problems of Soviet confiscation of foreign properties, the refusal to pay Tsarist debts, and Comintern propaganda. Litvinov asserted that in the U.S. anti-Soviet forces were free to conduct propaganda, while sympathizers of Soviet Russia were harassed and stigmatized. More important, though, was his proposal on the debt

issue. Why not establish a "mixed commission to review the claims of both sides?" he suggested. Apparently Bush thought this a useful idea. At least he promised to pass along the idea to President Warren Harding.²⁴ Again the results were nil.

Three years later Litvinov was still at it. In February 1926, he told Khristian Rakovskii, the Soviet representative in Paris, that Moscow had received a letter from the U.S. politician and banker, James P. Goodrich, inquiring about the chance for Soviet-American talks using a U.S. ambassador as intermediary. The U.S. would extend diplomatic recognition on the basis of Soviet "recognition of the Kerenskii debts and restitution or compensation for confiscated American property." Soviet claims arising from U.S. intervention after the Revolution would also be on the table, as well as the issue of propaganda.²⁵

Litvinov leapt at this unofficial offer. He instructed Rakovskii to tell the U.S. ambassador in Paris that Moscow had all along wanted normal relations with the "great American people." At no point did Soviet-American interests clash, "neither in political nor economic areas." In fact, "in a whole series of international tasks and efforts the interests of both countries coincide." Litvinov gushingly wrote that the establishment of normal relations would "not only serve the interests of both countries but to a significant measure promote the reestablishment

23 *New York Times*, 4 December 1922, p. 3

24 *Ministerstvo Innostrannykh Del SSSR, Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR* (Moscow, 1957–), 6: 340–342. Hereafter cited as *D.V.P.*

25 *D.V.P.*, 9:720, note 30

of the whole European economy and a general disarmament." He was so anxious to open talks with America that Litvinov told Rakovskii that if the U.S. ambassador rejected the Goodrich formula perhaps "some other path" could be found, even if through unofficial channels.²⁶ The U.S. government remained unmoved.

What explains Litvinov's dogged pursuit of U.S. recognition through the 1920s? I regret to say that I was unable to obtain access to his personal papers, but clues are available. For one thing, a strenuous effort in 1922 to promote a rapprochement with Britain had failed. In an extensive 1922 memo to the Politburo, Litvinov, a deputy commissar for foreign affairs, bluntly stated that his government should orient itself toward London. This was not because of sentiment or because of the well-known fact that his wife was an English citizen. Rather, the British had the greatest potential to supply Russia with desperately needed credits and technology. He believed the English working class was favorably disposed toward the Soviet experiment and Litvinov understood that part of the electorate could exert significant pressure on the government. Finally, he noted that good relations with Britain could serve as a useful counterweight to the virulently anti-Soviet policies of

the French.²⁷ Neither the Politburo nor Downing Street cared for a Soviet-British rapprochement and so nothing came of Litvinov's suggestion. But Litvinov certainly must have reasoned that good relations with America would favorably influence London.

More generally, Louis Fischer, who knew Litvinov well, recalled that Litvinov "wanted Moscow to appear on the world stage" and participate fully in international relations.²⁸ More significantly, the American diplomat, John Wiley, noted that Litvinov sought to move Soviet diplomacy "from intrusion to participation."²⁹ Thus his courtship of Washington fits well into his broader conception of international events. The 1920s demonstrated that the global revolution would not soon save the new state; perhaps diplomacy could.

But there were limits and Secretary of State Henry Stimson crossed them in 1929. The secretary urged the Russians and Chinese to settle peacefully their dispute over the Russian-controlled Chinese Eastern Railroad in Manchuria. In reply Litvinov expressed "astonishment that the U.S., which, by its own will, does not entertain any relations with...the Soviet Union, should find it possible to address to the latter advice and recommendations."³⁰

26 Ibid., 9: 120-121.

27 Ibid., 188-190.

28 Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics*, 127-128.

29 Wiley to Hull, 17 November 1934, U.S. National Archives Microfilm Publication Number T 1249.

30 *F.R.U.S.*, 1929: 2: 350-351; *Ibid.*, 2: 405-406.

So matters rested until the election of Franklin Roosevelt. The new president quickly signaled his willingness to end the non-recognition policy and Litvinov came to Washington in late 1933. These discussions have long been the subject of close scrutiny and it is well known that a major stumbling block before genuinely improved relations was the unfortunate use of the word "loan" instead of "credit" in the final agreement.³¹ When it became clear that the U.S. would not support Soviet Russia against Japanese ambitions, Moscow simply insisted on an outright loan from America to be spent wherever the Russians pleased. Roosevelt and his advisors were aghast, insisting they had meant a credit to be spent in the U.S. under their supervision. So "no loan was ever granted, no debt was ever paid."³²

What is not so well known is that at least Litvinov knew that the whole "loan" versus "credit" imbroglio was a sham from the very beginning. The night before he signed the agreement, Litvinov told Walter Duranty that he "clearly understood that no 'loan' would be available in the United States but that the most that could be expected would be credits along the

lines of those available in Great Britain."³³ Litvinov never made such an acknowledgement to U.S. officials and the Soviets continued to insist on a "loan." It was not his finest hour, even if he "saved" the USSR the unpleasant task of paying the U.S. \$75 million in compensation for Soviet debt repudiation and nationalized properties.

In the 1930s Litvinov's attention turned almost entirely toward the Nazi threat, while the United States grappled with the Great Depression. Litvinov, however, started moving Russia away from its strong German orientation even before Hitler's ascension to power. Thus in 1930, when he took over the Foreign Commissariat from Chicherin, he actively sought better relations with France and Britain.³⁴ Hitler's appointment as chancellor gave a mighty boost to Litvinov's pro-Western policy. In December 1933, the Politburo approved Litvinov's proposals for a collective security system in Europe to contain Nazi aggression.³⁵ When collective security failed, Litvinov and French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou worked out a straight-forward defensive alliance that was signed in 1935.

31 See Beatrice Farnsworth, *William C. Bullitt and the Soviet Union* (Bloomington and London: 1967).

32 Louis Fischer, *Russia's Road from Peace to War, 1917-1941* (New York: 1969), 218.

33 Wiley to Secretary of State, 10 December 1938. National Archives Microfilm Publication Number T 1241. It is not hard to imagine why the pro-Soviet Duranty sat on this information for five years.

34 See J.A. Large, "The Origins of the Soviet Collective Security Policy, 1930-1932," *Soviet Studies* 30 (1978): 212-236.

35 *D.V.P.*, 16:876, note 321. Interview with Professor Vladimir Trukhanovskii, Moscow, 19 October 1982.

On paper, at least, this pact appeared as the high point of Litvinov's attempt to guide Soviet foreign policy along traditional, non-revolutionary lines. For many reasons, however, nothing ever came of the alliance. Indeed, military staff talks did not occur until the summer of 1939, the very eve of the war.³⁶ By that time, Litvinov had "retired."

That no agreement of substance was achieved was hardly Litvinov's fault. Indeed, Stalin's Russian biographer, D.A. Volkogonov, asserts that the General Secretary actually became suspicious of Litvinov because the commissar "did not trust Hitler at all and was ready to do anything he (Litvinov) could to obtain treaties with the Western democracies."³⁷ By 1939, however, Stalin and Hitler were ready to do business. Litvinov believed that the appeasement policy of the West necessitated some type of arrangement with Hitler, but not of the sort that came about in August and helped launch World War II.³⁸ Litvinov, of Jewish birth, also understood that he had no place in negotiations with the Nazis. A student at the Diplomatic Academy of the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs asked Litvinov in 1946 about the pact. The former commissar replied simply "Was I the right

person to sign a pact with the Nazis?"³⁹

Litvinov's enforced retirement ended with the German invasion of June 1941 and he quickly returned to the center of Soviet-American relations. Astonished at the almost effortless rapidity of the German advance, he concluded that without substantial foreign aid the Soviet Union might well go under.⁴⁰ When American and British representatives met with Stalin in September 1941, Litvinov was present. Only after he realized that the West definitely intended to send the Soviet Union substantial supplies, did Litvinov's gloom begin to dispel. Leaping to his feet at the end of a lengthy but cordial session, he exclaimed "Now we shall win the war!"⁴¹

Soon Stalin appointed Litvinov Soviet ambassador to the United States. He arrived in Washington, D.C. as Japanese bombs were falling on the American base at Pearl Harbor. His brief stay in America would be challenging and exciting, but ultimately frustrating. His chief assignment was to goad the West into opening a second front in Europe, but he also began to develop plans for a positive Soviet-American relationship after the war.

Although Litvinov did not press the issue, he believed that the West

36 Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*, 2nd ed. (New York: 1974), 224.

37 D.S. Volkogonov, "The Drama of the Decisions of 1939," *Soviet Studies in History*, (Winter 1990-91): 13.

38 Interview with Tatiana Litvinov, 30-31 March 1981.

39 Interview with Viktor Israelian, 22 November 1991.

40 Interview with Tatiana Litvinov, 30-31 March 1981.

41 W. Averell Harriman and Eli Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941-1946* (New York, 1975), 94.

should recognize the Soviet borders of 1941. The ambassador questioned Franklin Roosevelt on this point at a meeting on 12 March 1942 at the White House. No record of the discussion had been found in United States archives.⁴² But according to Litvinov's dispatch to Moscow, Roosevelt quite clearly, if only verbally, accepted the 1941 borders.⁴³ His spirits high, Litvinov thought this concession would facilitate the necessary postwar cooperation and concluded his report on an uncharacteristically jocular note. Roosevelt had suggested that perhaps he could meet with Stalin "after the war somewhere on the Aleutian Islands. I jokingly said that the climate is better in Berlin."⁴⁴

Nevertheless, Litvinov emphasized that Roosevelt expected some sort of response from Stalin regarding Soviet territorial desires. The ambassador clearly felt that the president had made a significant concession that warranted Stalin's personal attention. One can easily imagine his disappointment, therefore, when a terse reply came from Molotov, which noted that the Soviet leader was indifferent to

America's attitude regarding the borders and that Roosevelt's remarks did not "require a response."⁴⁵ Several months later Litvinov observed to Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles that the only chance for a stable postwar order was "understanding and cooperation between Moscow and Washington."⁴⁶ If Stalin's attitude in March 1942 was any indicator of what the future held, Litvinov could not have been optimistic.

In May 1943 Litvinov returned to Moscow. Four months later he wrote to his wife, Ivy, that the Politburo had ordered him to remain in Moscow to "work on postwar problems."⁴⁷ Litvinov thought that the work might be interesting but also "a source of new frictions."⁴⁸ He was right. He confided to Ivy that his mood was "sometimes very gloomy and hopeless." He hoped her return to Russia might cheer him up.⁴⁹ Finally he reported a stoic, if complete, loss of hope for seeing his ideas implemented. Rebuffed at every turn, Litvinov consoled himself with the thought that "I had no illusions, and therefore no disappointments."⁵⁰

42 Warren F. Kimball, ed. *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence*, 3 vols. (Princeton, 1984), 1:420.

43 *Ministerstvo Innostrannykh Del SSSR, Sovetsko-amerikanskie otnosheniia vo vremia Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny, 1941-1945gg*, 2 vols. (Moscow: 1984), Litvinov to the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel), 12 (March 1942), 1: 115.

44 Ibid.

45 Molotov to Litvinov, 23 March 1942, Ibid., 158.

46 *F.R.U.S., 1943* (Washington, 1956), 3: 522-23.

47 Joseph Freeman Papers, Box 175, Hoover Institution Archives, Letter from Maxim to Ivy Litvinov, 5 August 1943.

48 Letter from Maxim to Ivy Litvinov, 19 August 1943, Ibid.

49 Letter from Maxim to Ivy Litvinov, 14 August 1943, Ibid.

It would have been uncharacteristic for Litvinov to have whined about his failure. (His daughter, Tatiana, said that during his dismissal as commissar in 1939 he had sat silently through a lengthy and vicious attack by Molotov on his policy of collective security, a reaction that caused Molotov to lose his composure entirely). But he certainly was disappointed despite the disclaimer to Ivy. What had he proposed and what had been the leadership's response? And, finally, whom did he blame for the advent of the Cold War after the collapse of both Nazi Germany and the Grand Coalition?

In 1944–45 Litvinov managed through a variety of means to elucidate his views on how international security should be established after the war. He published a number of articles under the pseudonym of "Malinin,"⁵¹ the most complete of which appeared in 1944 in the Leningrad journal *Zvezda*. Entitled "Regarding an International Security Organization," it was considered by the American diplomat George Kennan to be important enough for a full translation to be forwarded to the State Department. This wide-ranging piece traced the historical efforts to build international peace, but focused on the shortcomings of the League of Nations and the essentials needed for a successful postwar order.

Litvinov's attitude toward the League was surprisingly

ambivalent, considering his futile efforts before that body. As an organization its greatest shortcoming was an exaggerated importance given to the principle of unanimity. For example, all nations recognized the blatant nature of Italian aggression against Abyssinia, but not even economic sanctions could be applied owing to the objections of Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, and Albania.

But the "real cause" of the League's failures in the 1930s was neither structural nor organizational. Rather it was the result of the poor "mutual relations between the League of Nations and the great powers and in the relations of the great powers among themselves." Both giving a nod to Soviet public opinion and writing with conviction, Litvinov castigated the great powers and the League not only for ignoring the Soviet Union, but for actually being hostile to the new state. This was an issue guaranteed to produce more heat than light because the Soviet government from its beginning was hardly friendly toward the "capitalist" states or what its diplomats contemptuously and routinely referred to as the "so-called League of Nations."

Litvinov was on much firmer ground in putting great emphasis on the United States' refusal even to join, let alone actively participate, in the League. America's isolationism had been a crippling blow to the League. Any international arrangement for post-Hitler Europe

50 Letter from Maxim to Ivy Litvinov, Undated (1943), *Ibid.*

51 Interview with Tatiana Litvinov, 30–31 March 1981.

would clearly require an active American role. Another extra-organizational impediment to an effective League was the failure of Britain and France to coordinate fully their policies during the crises of the 1930s. Probably thinking mainly of the 1936 Rhineland crisis that struck a mortal blow to the Franco-Soviet pact, Litvinov lamented the fact that France and Britain failed to find harmony in dealing with aggression.⁵² Clearly, Litvinov was saying that Soviet-American relations should not follow the Franco-British prewar example.

Thus Litvinov painted a bleak picture, one obviously to be avoided in the future. To do this, he publicly placed the burden squarely on the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and China. "Only the great powers...are able to act effectively against a big aggressor...and they can not be replaced by any union of small states." The world must "turn away from the principle of false equality" and accept that the big four must play the "genuinely guiding and decisive role" in safeguarding the peace.⁵³ Thus he emphasized that this enormously important task must have its foundation not within the general context of the future United Nations, but "on the basis of treaties" concluded among the great powers. This treaty system, essentially outside any international organization, would indeed be

difficult to construct, with myriad "political, geographic, and strategic conditions" to be considered. But most important, the great powers' readiness to offer "mutual aid to one another in any action for safeguarding peace must be assumed in one degree or another." But privately, Litvinov reiterated what he had said to Welles: only Soviet-American cooperation could guarantee international stability.⁵⁴

Litvinov refused, however, to open the door to unilateral action by the victorious states. "Because in the tremendous responsibility which... falls to each great power, the decisions of the guiding powers on important questions cannot be taken otherwise than unanimously." With such close cooperation "even the most self-assured maniacs of the Hitler type," would be forced to think hard before risking a "decisive clash with such a bloc." Litvinov concluded with an outline of specific measures to meet aggression, ranging from a severance of diplomatic and commercial relations to the possibility of a "naval and aerial demonstration." He added that the "small nations" have a role to play, from cooperation with the great powers to the possibility of small states themselves crushing "small centers of aggression."⁵⁵

Litvinov thus drew upon his extensive prewar experience and advocated the big four as world

52 U.S. National Archives, Department of State Archives, Dispatch of George Kennan to the Secretary of State, 25 July 1944, Record Group 59, 500.CC/7-2544.

53 Ibid.

54 Interview with Tatiana Litvinov, 30-31 March 1981.

55 Ibid.

policemen, although the Soviet Union and the United States would possess supreme power. Only through their close cooperation could international peace be secured. There were, of course, as Litvinov recognized, numerous problems to his scheme, not the least of which was that Stalin wanted nothing to do with it.

Litvinov, however, was much closer to Stalin in his attitude toward Poland, a nation that unwillingly played such an important role in the origins of the Cold War. And on this issue, Litvinov violated his own dictum on great power unanimity. It is important to remember that Litvinov's experiences with Colonel Joseph Beck before the war still rankled. Under Beck, the Poles had tried to block Soviet membership in the League and had cooperated with the Nazis in sabotaging Litvinov's plans for a general collective security system.⁵⁶ Writing publicly in 1944, Litvinov hinted strongly that Poland must be brought to heel. He asserted that no one could possibly object "if the Soviet Union... desires to establish especially friendly relations with its nearest neighbors."⁵⁷ Of course he meant primarily Poland and it takes little imagination to understand just what Litvinov meant by "especially

friendly relations." Indeed, he wrote an article in the same year devoted entirely to the anti-Soviet attitudes and policies of interwar Poland, blasting in particular what he called Warsaw's "stupid dreams" regarding Pan-Poland.⁵⁸

Speaking privately with Roosevelt's close advisor on foreign affairs, W. Averell Harriman, Litvinov was even more direct. He asserted that it was "unreasonable to consider that the interests of thirty million Poles should be given equal weight with those of one hundred eighty million Russians. Where the interests of the Russians conflicted with those of the Poles, the Poles would have to give way."⁵⁹ Litvinov probably took a certain grim delight in asserting Russia's right to lord it over the Poles. But he surely was also trying to warn the United States as clearly and as soon as possible that the future of Poland was not a negotiating point.

Were Stalin and the Politburo aware of Litvinov's generally conciliatory policy suggestions toward the West? Litvinov himself complained directly to Moscow during the war that he was shut out of the policy-making process.⁶⁰ And of course Stalin showed no real interest in postwar cooperation with the West.⁶¹ But Litvinov told Edward

56 Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-1939* (New York, 1984), 42, 61.

57 N. Malinin, "K voprosu o sozdarii Mezhdunarodnoy organizatsii bezopasnosti" *Voina i rabochii klass*, 15 December 1944, p. 194.

58 N. Malinin, "Po povodu stat'i tov. N. Baltiyskogo," *Voina i rabochii klass*, 15 February 1944, pp. 13-16.

59 Department of State Archives, Harriman to Cordell Hull, 19 September 1944, Record Group 59, 500.CC/9-1944.

60 Litvinov to Molotov, 11 April 1942, *Sovetsko-amerikanskii otnosheniia*, 1: 159.

Carter, an American he and Ivy met during the war, that in a bizarre sense he was indeed consulted. After the war he said that Molotov had asked for his advice and then "he does the opposite."⁶²

It is clear that Litvinov occupied a somewhat ambivalent position. In general he certainly favored the principle of postwar cooperation with the United States. Yet he stood with Stalin on the issue of Soviet control over Poland after the war. Stalin saw security foremost in terms of territory and on this, he found Litvinov's support. It is little wonder then that Stalin felt no compunction in gobbling up Poland, with the support of the most outspoken Soviet advocate of postwar cooperation with the West.

But one wonders if Litvinov realized that the Soviet Union could not have it both ways. How was cooperation based on the principle of unanimity possible if, at the very outset, the USSR claimed an exception for itself, America's objections be damned? There is no evidence that Litvinov saw this

incongruity in his thinking, much less a way out of it. Nevertheless, Litvinov certainly deserves recognition as the lone voice in the Soviet wilderness crying for some way, however full of contradictions, to preserve at least the appearance of cooperation between the Bolshevik Revolution and the United States.

Soon Litvinov "retired" once and for all, as the Cold War deepened. By 1946 he looked upon the spectacle of Stalin's expansionist policies with nothing but disgust. In an interview with the American journalist, Richard C. Hottelet, Litvinov bluntly compared Stalin to Hitler, saying indirectly but unmistakably that both men believed in security through *lebensraum*.⁶³ By implication Litvinov had apparently modified his earlier position on Poland. But it was too late. His dream of a positive Soviet-American relationship died, not to be revived until the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev, and continued in the mid-1990s by Boris Yeltsin. Toward the end of his life, he told his daughter Tatiana, "We won the war but lost the peace."⁶⁴

61 John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, The Soviet Union, and the United States* (New York, 1978), 166.

62 "Destruction of a Memoir," 5 January 1946, Joseph Freeman Papers, Box 175.

63 *New York World and Telegraph*, 29 January 1953, p. 17.

64 Interview with Tatiana Litvinov, 30-31 March 1981.