

# H-Net Reviews

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Michael Jabara Carley. *1939: The Alliance That Never Was and the Coming of World War II*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1999. xxvii + 325 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-252-2.

Reviewed by Igor Lukes (Boston University)

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Note: H-Diplo recently ran a roundtable discussion on Michael Carley's book *1939: The Alliance That Never Was and the Coming of World War II*. The participants were William Keylor, Boston University; Igor Lukes, Boston University; Sally Marks, Providence, Rhode Island; and Robert Young, University of Winnipeg. Each part of the roundtable will be posted to the Reviews website as an individual review, with Carley's comments linked to each individual contribution.

In the morning of 30 September 1938, Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier were getting ready to depart from Munich with freshly signed copies of the Four Power Act in their pockets. Neither of them could claim to know with complete confidence whether this diplomatic maneuver, which had brought them together with Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, had averted war or contributed to its outbreak. As it turned out, the Franco-British appeasement of the Third Reich was but a prelude to World War II.

The allies' policy of making deals with the Nazis has had its defenders then and now. But critics have been in the majority. They stress the troubling legal and moral dimensions of appeasement, focusing especially on the fact that France had broken its legal obligation to stand by its Czechoslovak ally, and they are in agreement that concessions to Hitler encouraged him to ask for more. Critics have also shown that the spectacle of Hitler's triumphant march from 1933, via the demilitarized Rhineland, Vienna, and the roundtable in Munich, to the gates of war in late August 1939 had emasculated domestic opponents of the Nazis, especially among the Wehrmacht officers and members of the diplomatic corps, perhaps more effectively than the Gestapo would have done.

Michael Jabara Carley's *1939: The Alliance that Never Was and the Coming of World War II* attacks not only appeasement, and the British and French politicians associated with this policy, but also critics of the Stalinist Soviet Union in London and Paris at the time. The author argues that the main cause of the allied failure to stop Hitler

was the blind and self-destructive anti-communism of the British and French political elites. Carley writes in the Preface that the only alternative to appeasement would have been an alliance with the Soviet Union. "And it was precisely this result that the politically dominant, anti-Communist conservatives of France and Britain wished at almost any cost to avoid" (xvii). He summarizes his work at the end by suggesting that the anti-Communism of the allied politicians was "an important cause of the Second World War." Though Carley concedes that there were other causes (he mentions three), he maintains that "the root of [the] failure of Anglo-Franco-Soviet cooperation against Nazism was anti-communism" (256). The book charges the French and British politicians with having been guided by their anti-Communist beliefs rather than the interests of their respective nations and the cause of peace in Europe as such (258).

Carley is not the first to propose anti-Communism as the leading explanation for the unchecked rise of Hitler and the failure of others in Europe to create a united front against him. This view was advanced already in 1937, when a Soviet diplomat complained that the French government had put "class over national interest" (27). *Izvestia* and *Journal de Moscou* said so while the 1938 Munich Conference was still in progress and in the months and years that followed. It also took root, of course, in the ranks of the Communist International: appeasement "was dictated by class interests, by the bourgeois fear of the forces of socialism. . . . It is linked with class fear and class hatred of the Soviet Union and socialism." And it used to be the *de rigueur* explanation of the crisis of the thirties in the official press of the Soviet bloc countries.

I am disinclined to believe that western European anti-Communism explains sufficiently the many complex phenomena that are discernible in the European crisis from 1933 to 1939. Nor am I entirely sure it is necessary to amass archival evidence, as Carley does, to prove that Chamberlain and others around him were anti-Communists. There is no doubt that they were. The

real question is whether Chamberlain and Daladier had failed to achieve a collective security arrangement with Stalin against Hitler only because of their shallow beliefs and selfish interests, as Carley alleges. The alternative, of course, is that it was the nature of the Soviet Union, the values it stood for, its domestic and international *modus operandi*, and the conduct of its leader, Joseph Stalin, that had rendered an alliance between Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union impossible.

We must carefully distinguish between what we know now about Stalin, and what was available to the Allies in the thirties. It is unlikely that they knew just how murderous Stalin was. What they did know, however, was bad enough: his regime unleashed an orgy of killing without many historical precedents. Prominent among them was the public purge of the old Bolsheviks and the Red Army officer corps. Both happened to coincide with the rise of Hitler and paralleled efforts to create an anti-Nazi security arrangement.

“The Red Army,” Carley writes, “was large and well supplied and the Soviet Union had immense resources. With Russia on their side, the Anglo-French would surely defeat Nazi Germany” [4]. Yet, Stalin’s assault on the Red Army and Navy devoured three out of five Soviet marshals, fifteen out of sixteen army commanders, sixty out of 67 corps commanders, and 136 out of 199 divisional commanders. Executed were all but five of the eighty members of the Soviet Supreme Military Council, and all eleven vice-commissars of war. Within only sixteen months, ninety percent of Red Army generals and eighty percent of colonels were purged. Altogether 36,761 officers were purged from the Army, more than 3,000 from the Navy. Consequently, only 7 percent of the Red Army officer corps had any higher military education in 1941; the percentage must have been even smaller in 1938-1939. Watching all this, it was surely not irrational for Chamberlain and Daladier to view the Red Army’s combat worthiness with skepticism.

Carley’s response to the Red Army purge? He suggests that the “Soviet government did not help itself” and admits, with a glorious understatement, that it had “decimated” the Red Army (26). He then turns around and takes the offensive: the Red Army purge was but “an ideal pretext” (26) to “the anti-communists who opposed closer relations with the Soviet Union,” and “even the weakened Red Army could play a crucial role.” In evidence, the author brings up the allegedly impressive Red Army performance in the Far East, but makes no mention of its fiasco against Finland (257). Carley’s overall view of the Stalinist purge of the armed forces is that those west-

ern Europeans who were troubled by its consequences for the Red Army’s value against the Wehrmacht were in reality expressing their “anti-communist animosity” (33). Undoubtedly, many Russia watchers in the thirties were anti-communists. I fail to see how this alone should make the destruction of the Red Army officer corps less of a blow to collective security.

It is against the background of the massive blood-letting in Stalin’s Soviet Union that we must read Chamberlain’s lament: “I confess to being deeply suspicious of [Russia]. I cannot believe that she has the same aims and objects that we have or any sympathy with democracy as such” (133). If Carley finds this view puzzling, or even reprehensible, he needs to engage it critically and show why Chamberlain was wrong. He might argue, for instance, that the Nazi threat was so imminent and overwhelming that Chamberlain, Daladier, and the Franco-British political and military apparatus were obligated to seek a mutually profitable arrangement with the Soviet Union in disregard of Stalin’s proclivity to murdering his political rivals, turning parts of the country that resisted his agricultural decrees into starvation zones, or making Red Army leaders publicly confess to implausible crimes. Indeed, one should not overplay the morality card. The allies were not always uncomfortable with tyrants in their colonial empires and the British in Ireland did not shy away from using famine as a policy tool. But it is precisely this sort of complex, multi-layered perspective that is lacking in this strangely one-dimensional book.

In addition to his focus on western anti-Communism, Carley seeks to tell us about Soviet foreign policy at the end of the thirties. His readers might walk away with the impression that it was formulated and implemented by Maksim Litvinov, whom Carley openly admires, and Viacheslav Molotov, for whom he has respect, despite calling him a “cold-blooded son of a bitch” (137). Those two, with a handful of others (Potemkin, Maiski, Surits, Merekalov), come out as the sole architects of Soviet behavior in the international arena. I should add that the author allows, via a quotation upon which he does not comment, that “Stalin would be taking a closer hand in Soviet foreign policy” with the departure of Litvinov and installation of Molotov, i.e., as of May 1939 (134).

It is worth remembering that repeated Soviet probings regarding the possibility of restoring the spirit of Rapallo between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union (at least since October 1934) took place under Litvinov’s watch. But a different issue is at stake here. Generations of western historians have concluded on the basis

of available data that Soviet foreign policy was in the late thirties set and guided primarily, and sometimes also exclusively, by Stalin, who was not just a strategist, but an involved tactician. The author offers intriguing, albeit indirect, insight into the power arrangements within the Soviet foreign policy apparatus by quoting the view of Sir Robert Vansittart of the British Foreign Office, who recalled feeling sorry for the Soviet Ambassador in London, Maiski, because "I thought he might be killed if he were not a success" (12). If such was the case with Maiski one wonders how much freedom of action Litvinov enjoyed in the Stalinist Soviet Union. Perhaps Carley has evidence that would allow him to overturn the established model that has Stalin as the foreign policy decision-maker in matters large and small. That would be interesting to see. This book, however, does not come close to presenting it.

Therefore, one of the fundamental assumptions of this book, viz., that the allies could have formed a collective security system with the kind of responsible and anti-Fascist Soviet Union that was presented by Litvinov at the League of Nations in Geneva, is hollow. Carley may be right when he suggests (e.g., 22-29) that Litvinov challenged the west to close ranks with the Soviet Union against Hitler. Alas, Litvinov was not in charge of the country. Stalin was, and he had his own objectives and means for achieving them. One cannot make alliances with fairy-tale kingdoms, and the reality of Stalin's Soviet Union had little in common with the image created by Stalin's foreign commissar for the benefit of his western opposite numbers.

Carley's *1939* is a book that employs the big power perspective, concentrating on events in London, Paris, Berlin, and Moscow. When the author ventures to deal with events on the margin of his power map, he is lost. This is best seen in his treatment of Poland. Without having reviewed Polish relations with Russia, and having said but the absolute minimum about the Russo-Polish war, the author repeatedly blames the Warsaw government for its failure to open its borders to a Soviet military transfer in 1938 and for its unwillingness to have the Soviet Union as a military ally the next year – with Red Army access to Polish territory. Although he touches upon complex problems in inter-war Polish history, the author has made no attempt to learn about them from the works of Piotr Wandycz; he has much to say about Jozef Beck, but has made no use of Anna Cienciala's monograph on the subject. He merely repeats what the Kremlin and its diplomats thought about them. This leads him to parrot the view that the failure of Czechoslovak-Polish relations had to do with the alleged Polish "crav-

ing" for Cieszyn/Tesin/Teschen [67]. In reality, this was a secondary issue that could have been solved over time. What bothered the Poles intensely was Prague's behavior at the height of the Bolshevik invasion, and Foreign Minister Benes's suggestions to foreign diplomats that Poland was bound to collapse sooner or later. I cannot help but think that Carley has a problem with Poland. When he gets to mentioning the Soviet invasion of 17 September 1939, he notes that "Poland was finished anyway," it had caused trouble to the Soviet Union, it was "an obstacle," and so the Red Army now came to recover territories it had lost previously (215). It seems to be a rather weak excuse for the Soviet aggression; hardly better than whatever Molotov was saying at the time. One hears nothing of the lists of names with which the NKVD marched into Polish villages and towns, and the arrests and deportations of hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens.

I have dealt with the Soviet Union's relationship with Czechoslovakia in 1938-1939 quite recently [in Lukes and Goldstein, eds., *The Munich Conference, 1938: Prelude to World War II* (London, 1999)], and it would be redundant to review here such issues as the so-called Red Army mobilization at the time of the 1938 crisis (Carley believes it was in preparation of Stalin's move to help fighting Czechoslovakia against the Third Reich, but has no convincing evidence for this whatsoever) (257). I would also invite interested colleagues to look at my treatment of the related allegation, namely, that the Soviet Union had rendered aerial assistance to Czechoslovakia, or was about to do so, as this touches upon the question of the Romanian "corridor" that Carley talks about [41]. Regarding Article II of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Agreement of 1935, which stipulated that Soviet military aid to Czechoslovakia was premised on a prior French action, I will say only that it was put into the text by the Czechs. They feared that, without it, they could be called upon to take part in any one of the conflicts involving the Red Army at the time, especially in the Far East. Carley writes that it was put into the text by Soviet diplomats who sought protection against France leaving Moscow "in the lurch" (17). Although he has no footnote for it, I am willing to speculate he picked it up in a Soviet source as a post factum construction. Finally, I confess to having no desire to review and analyze Carley's version of the developments leading up to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 1939. Carley embraces the obsolete view that, from the Kremlin's perspective, it was the only option that the treacherous British and French left to Soviet political strategists (258).

Carley has no patience for secondary sources. The

reader will search in vain for signs that he has critically dealt with works that do not share his perspective. Given the topic of this book, it is remarkable that the author has not found it necessary to address the work of Robert Tucker and others. Carley's failure to place his findings within the framework that had existed before he started his project makes it impossible for the reader to know what was well known before and which of his findings are new and surprising. Consulting secondary sources would have spared Carley several annoying small errors. He has the wrong date of the May 1938 Czechoslovak mobilization (44); he misspells the name of the Czechoslovak president, Edvard Benes, on each occasion he brings him up [41, 57, 64]); he claims erroneously that Sergei Aleksandrovsky was an ambassador [43], that Stefan Osusky

was a Czech (24, 43), and that Kamil Krofta was in a position to write to his "ambassadors" (53).

Michael Carley reports that, having concluded work on the book, he raised his "arms in celebration, feet dancing. Nunc est bibendum." That might be premature. Serious historians will appreciate his industry and passion for archival research. Yet, they are unlikely to share his conviction that Joseph Stalin could have become in 1938-1939 a reliable partner in an alliance against the Nazis. It is a claim that might have been advanced in the forties. It is now, I suspect, obsolete.

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