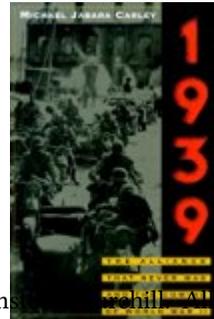


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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 Robert J. Young (University of Winnipeg)  
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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 of Boston University, Igor Lukes of Boston University, Sally Marks, and Robert Young. 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.

I have known Michael Carley for many years, and have been a beneficiary of his friendship. In testament to the latter, I acknowledge that it has withstood some measure of interpretive discord. United in our fascination with interwar France, and impatient with those too inclined to dismiss the Third Republic, we have combined a natural affinity of field with an apparently natural disposition to disagree on our reading of that troubled regime. Our personal history, then, includes a succession of civil protests, when one of us thinks the other has gone too far.

In his Preface to *1939*, Carley draws a line between himself and those of us who may have taken tolerance to excess. With his mind on the late 1930s, and on people like Edouard Daladier and Georges Bonnet, Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax, Carley thinks that recent historians have been far too soft in their judgements. By explaining it to death, by invoking every conceivable impediment to stiff action against Hitler's regime, they have excused away appeasement, overlooked the fact that it was, *tout simplement*, immoral.

Unsurprisingly, this book has no sympathy for the appeasers. After years of research in international archives, and years of reflection, Carley finds himself at ease with the earlier post-war notion of "guilty men" mired in a 'dishonest decade,' and an unabashed hero-worshipper of

people like Maxim Litvinov and Winston Churchill. If, as Carley argues, the Chamberlains and Daladiers, was to sell out one ally after another, the Czechs, the Poles, the Russians, in a cowardly as well as vain attempt to avoid war with Germany. Stupid, as well as cowardly, because their pathetic efforts to avert war only made it more likely, and in worsened circumstances. Such is at the core of this provocative book.

Improbable as it would be for me to abandon my practised role of Carley-critic, there are some other things that should be said at the outset. These include the assurance that *1939* is an exceptionally well researched book, a book which illustrates the connection between lucid prose and lucid interpretation. Rephrased, it benefits from extensive Anglo-French archival sources as well as, notably, a large collection of published Russian documents; its language is terse yet colourful; its argument is that ideological bias, namely anticommunism in western governing circles, undermined the potential for resisting fascism and therefore for averting war. The Cold War really began with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917; and it triggered a hot war in 1939 as soon as the British and French squandered the chance to secure a firm military alliance with the Soviet Union.

There is a link between that very strong, and very clear interpretive argument and another of this book's positive features. Carley gives us an unusual amount of material about, and from, the Russian side: the calculations of Foreign Commissars Litvinov and Molotov, the reflections of Ambassadors Potemkin (Paris) and Maiskii (London); the observations of Coulondre, Naggiar, Paryart, Palasse in the French embassy in Moscow, or those of Chilston and Seeds in the British embassy. It is a good and worthy thing to provide a better balance between the

perceptions of eastern and western Europe, and it is a service to lay bare the force and the resources of anticommunist circles in the British and French capitals. There may even be an argument for over-stating the case, magnifying the anti-Soviet influence as a way of ensuring that never again will it be ignored or tossed off as a factor of no account.

What concerns me, however, as I resume my accustomed role of friendly critic, is the sense that the ideological factor has been force-fed and all else under-nourished. Here there is no careful examination of western analysts' attempts to appraise their own current economic, fiscal and military resources vis-a-vis those of the Axis, or their projections of preparedness in the future, or the strength of each other's commitment to an effective military alliance, or the responsiveness of their own public opinions to an Anglo-French war against the Axis powers, or their conviction that neither Poles nor Roumanians regarded Russia as a saviour. While touched on, alluded to, all of this is so masterfully subdued that not even the most dull-witted could miss the tyrannical importance of ideology. The end result is a blindingly clear interpretation, which has its advantages. But so too does sight. Indeed, this spotlighting technique may have the same distorting effect as the "overdetermined" perspectives which Carley detects in the works of colleagues too impressed by the complexities of the 1930s, and whose respect for the power of "social forces" makes them shrink from the vocabulary of "villains" and "heroes".

Too bright in one respect, the book offers a darker ambiguity in another. When one has worked tirelessly to attribute blame to the foot-dragging of Western anti-Soviet ideologues, why would one start to distribute blame in August 1939 with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact? Having been encouraged at the outset of this book to give two cheers for the Soviets' pragmatic decision to sign with the Nazis (p.xix), why would the reader welcome the view that some measure of blame now had to be accepted by the USSR? "In the end", Carley writes, "neither side, Anglo-French or Soviet, was in a position to reproach the other for its appeasement of Nazi Germany or its hostility toward the other." (259) But guiltless for the better part of 240 pages, it is not clear what the Soviet regime had done to suddenly lose its innocence. Unless, that is, there really had been something behind the misgivings of even some of Carley's heroes: people like Vansittart who concluded Britain had been hoodwinked by 'Soviet duplicity' (246), or like Coulondre who, despite his support for alliance with Russia, had projected that a Nazi defeat would indeed lead to a Soviet crushing of

Poland and an extension of Soviet influence in central Europe - one of the scenarios most canvassed among the West's anti-communists. (46) So there is more doubt here than meets the eye, including that which arises around Carley's closing reflections on this pact. "It seems incredible", he writes, that after more than a decade-long, unwavering commitment to the principles of collective security and anti-fascism, the USSR could have "abandoned" that commitment "during a fortnight". But why "incredible"? Why, given Stalin's "easy shifts in domestic politics ...and his murderous elimination of rivals and innocents..."? (211-212) Is there not, in this characterization of the Soviet leader, a faint discordance with the carefully manicured argument about the Soviets' unwavering loyalty to the principles and ideals of collective security?

Too much clarity, and too much ambiguity, take me to my final concern, which is the equation of policy-making with foreign ministers and ambassadors alone. There is a wonderful amount of data here on Litvinov, Molotov, Potemkin, Maiskii and Surits, for which we should be grateful. There is very little on Stalin directly, the man who, we are led to believe, called all the shots in Russia. And this is no cavil, not in a world of moral judgments, for ultimately, it was not Litvinov, whose intentions and reliability had to be assessed by the contempt-covered Chamberlain or Bonnet. It was not Molotov either, even if, as Stalin's "henchman," he was a "ruthless, cold-blooded son of a bitch." (137) Rather it was Stalin, "ruthless, and unscrupulous" (159), a man who, perhaps on "simply a tyrant's whimsy" (106) spent the second half of the 1930s brutally purging the personnel of his Foreign Ministry and the officers of his armed forces, a man who caused the heroic anti-appeaser Litvinov to sleep with a pistol beneath his pillow, and the heroic anti-appeaser Maiskii eventually to be arrested. (9,13)

This is why the near-absence of evidence regarding Stalin's thinking or state of mind, the cursory references to his purges, the comparable paucity of data on Soviet policy-making beyond the level and confines of the Foreign Ministry, the downplaying of Comintern propaganda and its blurring effect on Russia's public declarations, all leave us with an interpretive chord which, to my ears, is played too vigorously and has too many sharps.

Little, if any, of the foregoing will come as a surprise to Michael Carley. He has tolerated my views long before now, including those accompanied by applause. The latter he has again inspired, for this is a important piece of scholarship, powerfully expressed. Misgivings, too, for

as he knows well, I am not much taken with the language of heroes and villains. Even less so, in this context, when I am left unsure of Stalin's place in this lexicon.

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