

Chapter 3

Between March 13 and 17, 1939, Hitler embarked on the final dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. On March 15, German troops occupied the Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, and Hitler, having arrived in Prague, proclaimed a German Protectorate over Czechoslovakia. The province of Slovakia declared its independence and the following day requested a protectorate from Germany. The Hungarians, with covert Polish aid, invaded the extreme eastern tip of Czechoslovakia, the Carpatho-Ukraine to which they had laid claim since Munich. Hitler reluctantly approved the Hungarian occupation.

The first response of the British and French was one of relief. In their view, Hitler had liquidated the ambiguous commitment they made to Central Europe at Munich.¹ On the evening of March 14, Halifax deplored violence but disclaimed on the part of his government "the desire to interfere unnecessarily in matters with which other Governments may be more directly concerned."² The same day Henderson assured German State Secretary Weizacker that "German interests were paramount in the Czech area."³ On March 15, the day Prague was invaded, the British Government expressed their relief. Halifax wrote his ambassador in Paris that "the only compensating advantage that I saw was that it had brought to a natural end the somewhat embarrassing commitment of a guarantee, in which we and the French had been involved."⁴ In the House of Commons, Chamberlain asserted that the British guarantee to Czechoslovakia was no longer valid. He reasoned that since Slovakia had declared its independence, it "put an end by internal disruption to the State whose frontiers we had proposed to guarantee, and His Majesty's Government cannot accordingly hold themselves bound by this

obligation."⁵ Chancellor of the Exchequer Simon told the Commons that it was impossible to fulfill a guarantee of a state which had ceased to exist.⁶

British public reaction to the German move was one of indignation. Chamberlain, who had since Munich been resisting pressure to broaden his Cabinet, realized that he would have to take a stronger stand if only to preserve his political position.⁷ In a speech at Birmingham on March 17 Chamberlain defended the Munich settlement and criticized Hitler for having broken his word. He said that for every German aggression up to this point "there was something to be said, whether on account of racial affinity or of just claims too long resisted." Now, Chamberlain asked if Hitler's new move was not "a step in the direction of an attempt to dominate the world by force?" He warned that even though he believed war "to be a senseless and cruel thing," England could not be counted on to withhold "the utmost of its power in resisting such a challenge if it ever were made."⁸

The days after March 17 were ominous indeed. On March 17 the Rumanian Minister in London, Tilea, informed Halifax that Bucharest was alarmed at the threatening attitude of Herr Wohlthat, head of the German economic mission negotiating a new trade agreement with Rumania. Tilea feared that Wohlthat would offer an ultimatum forcing Rumania into economic subservience to Germany. In addition, there were indications that Hungary was preparing for an attack on Rumania. Between March 20 and 23, Ribbentrop forced the Lithuanians to turn the port of Memel over to the Germans.

British policy in this period is difficult to assess. It is often asserted that the appeasement policy was laid to rest on March 17. No doubt, the German occupation of Czechoslovakia changed British policy. The essential question is, How? On March 15 Chamberlain expressed his bitterness at the

German move, but pleaded, "Do not let us on that account be deflected from our course."⁹ Indeed, there is no evidence that the basic aims of British policy changed after March 15; what underwent a radical change was the way in which those aims were pursued. Chamberlain still wanted peace, but he could no longer count on direct dealings or normal diplomacy with Hitler. When the Cabinet met on March 18, Chamberlain stated that "he had now come definitely to the conclusion that Herr Hitler's attitude made it impossible to continue to negotiate on the old basis with the Nazi regime. This did not mean that negotiations with the German people were impossible." He outlined the next step as being "to ascertain what friends we have who will join us in resisting aggression." The Cabinet agreed that in the event of war, it was vital that Germany be compelled to fight on two fronts. The key to the problem, thought Chamberlain, was Poland.¹⁰ "As soon as I had time to think," Chamberlain wrote on March 19, "I saw that it was impossible to deal with Hitler after he had thrown all his assurances to the winds."¹¹ In the same diary entry, he wrote, "As always, I want to gain time, for I never accept the view that war is inevitable."

The two immediate needs facing British policy makers after March 15 were these: (1) to adopt a policy flexible enough to deter war--yet strong enough to avoid alienating public opinion in England, and (2) to assure that, in the event Hitler decided to make war, he would be tied up in the east. A. J. P. Taylor has described Britain's policy in light of these two central needs. To appease the British public, the "emphasis", not the "direction" of policy was changed: "Previously the British government often warned Hitler in private, while pursuing appeasement in public. Now they warned him publicly and went on with appeasement in private."¹² Sir Samuel Hoare

wrote that "the lesson of Prague was not that further efforts for peace were futile, but rather that, without greater force behind them, negotiations and agreements with Hitler were of no permanent value."¹³ According to Taylor,

A general settlement with Hitler remained the British object; and they put obstacles in his way so that he would incline more readily to agreement. The British ministers did not fear defeat in war, though they naturally dreaded war for its own sake...What they feared, with some justification, was that Hitler would count on their standing aside. They therefore took steps to demonstrate that they might not do so. Compulsory military service of a limited kind was introduced at the end of April; guarantees were distributed to supposedly threatened states. These steps were not practical, effective preparations for a general war; they were warnings, designed to avoid such a war. (emphasis added)¹⁴

I would agree with Taylor in every respect except one; he underrates the British fear of war. Although their major concern was not defeat in war, they were quite fearful of the sacrifices they might have to make in a long war, and the possible consequences both at home and abroad. As early as March 20, 1938, Chamberlain wrote that he would not think of going to war with Germany "unless we had a reasonable prospect of being able to beat her to her knees in a reasonable time."¹⁵

The British and the French suffered the anxiety of not knowing where Hitler would strike next. "We have so many open doors in front of us," said one of Goebbels' lieutenants to Coulongre on March 18, "so many possibilities, that we don't know which way to turn."¹⁶ What the British Cabinet wanted to avoid most was a turn to the West by Hitler. Their policy was therefore to deter Hitler from making war by what they considered an adequate show of force; should this fail to deter Hitler, it was vital that he attack in the east and that he be sufficiently tied up there that he could not contemplate an attack in the West. Thus, the primary concern of the British and the French after the occupation of Prague was to erect a "peace front" in Eastern

Europe to guarantee that Hitlerite aggression in that area would be resisted. While there is no firm evidence that either government desired to turn Hitler loose on Soviet Russia specifically, the concern to keep Hitler occupied in the east inevitably had a profound affect on relations with Russia.

In order to understand Britain's "Peace Front" policy, one must examine British anxieties about Hitler in the period of the Munich winter. In spite of Chamberlain's optimism in mid-February that peace was at hand, the British had been receiving intelligence that Hitler was planning further aggression. In the immediate aftermath of Munich there were persuasive signs that Germany was laying the foundation for an attack on the Russian Ukraine.

During the Munich crisis, Hungary pressed her claims against Ruthenia, a Ukrainian province located at the extreme eastern tip of Czechoslovakia. Hungary received strong support from Poland's Foreign Minister Beck, who wished to bring about a common Polish-Hungarian frontier. The Czechs, with German encouragement, resisted Hungary's claims on Ruthenia (later called the Carpatho-Ukraine). The British understood why Hitler would not want to see Ruthenia absorbed by Hungary. As Oliver Harvey wrote in his diary on October 22, 1938:

Germany is believed to be opposed to the Beck plan as she is anxious to keep open the Ruthenian corridor towards the Ukraine for future eventualities....Czechoslovakia from having been a dagger pointed to the heart of Germany is now rapidly being organized as a dagger into Russian vitals.¹⁷

With German support and encouragement after Munich, Ruthenia "rapidly became the much publicized centre of the idea of a 'Great Ukraine'." The local Government, whose first action upon gaining autonomy on October 11, 1938

was to suppress the Communist Party, "talked more or less openly of the coming creation of a Great Ukraine and of the liberation of their kinsmen from the yoke of Poland and Russia."¹⁸ The British recognized that Hitler in his manipulation of Ukrainian nationalism was laying the foundation for an attack on Poland or Russia. On December 25 Harvey wrote that "the whole question is whether Hitler is going East to the Ukraine, or whether before going East he feels he must deal with the West first."¹⁹ When Chamberlain met with Mussolini on January 11, he immediately asked the Italian leader if he could give him any reassurance about the menacing German activities which seemed to indicate Hitler's intention to attack the Polish or Russian Ukraine and which had the whole of Europe in a state of nervous anticipation. Mussolini denied that Hitler had any aggressive intentions, but his explanations did not satisfy Chamberlain or Halifax.²⁰ Toward the end of January, there were indications from the Soviet-German trade talks that relations in that quarter were improving. On February 1 Alexander Cadogan minuted:

If we may believe that the Germans have found that their project for acquiring a dominating position in the Ukraine was not so realisable as they had thought, it may well be that they have turned their minds to obtaining a form of economic cooperation with, if not domination of, the Soviet....It seems to me that we shall have to watch very carefully the development of any tendency towards a rapprochement between Germany and the Soviet.²¹

A British reporter publicly warned at this time that "a dangerous day for Britain and France will come should the Nazis decide that the dream of colonizing the Ukraine...is a dream that can never become a reality."²²

British anxiety was so great by the end of January 1939 that an appeal was sent to Washington under Halifax's signature. In a lengthy letter, the British Foreign Office summarized their latest disturbing intelligence:

As early as November there were indications which gradually became more definite that Hitler was planning a further foreign adventure for the spring of 1939. At first it appeared--and this was confirmed by persons in Hitler's entourage--that he was thinking of expansion in the east and in December the prospect of establishing an independent Ukraine under German vassalage was freely spoken of in Germany.

Since then reports indicate that Hitler...is considering an attack on the Western Powers as a preliminary to subsequent action in the east.²³

Halifax presented this information to the Cabinet in a meeting on January 25. He concluded, "We have very definite indications that Herr Hitler may be contemplating an attack on the West during the coming spring." Halifax was careful to point out, respecting Chamberlain's belief that Hitler did not wish to make war, that "we have no proof that the Fuhrer has definitely committed himself to such action." The Foreign Secretary made one further observation which provides the key to Britain's foreign policy up to the outbreak of World War II:

All that can be said with practical certainty is that an "explosion" of Germany is likely to come in the comparatively near future and that it is necessary for us to take immediate measures to guard against the possibility of it being directed against us.²⁴

D. F. Fleming has suggested that the German consent to the Hungarian annexation of the Carpatho-Ukraine on March 16, 1939 sounded "an alarm bell" in London that Hitler "was not going to tangle with Russia" and might "clean up the West first."²⁵ Certainly, the German action signalled an end to any immediate plans to invade the Russian Ukraine.²⁶ However, it was during the two months prior to the March aggressions that the British Cabinet began to suffer the anxiety that Hitler might deal with the West before turning east. It is vital to recognize that it was during this period that the Cabinet reached the understanding, which was to become policy after March 15, that in order to save Britain and British interests in the West, Hitler's fury must be absorbed in the east.

Immediately after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, the most threatened nation seemed to be Rumania, and Britain frantically searched for a policy with the view of deterring Hitler from aggression against Rumania. The British idea was to have each of Rumania's neighbors issue a guarantee against unprovoked aggression. Toward this end, Halifax, on March 18, asked Soviet Ambassador Maisky what his government would do in the event of an unprovoked attack on Rumania.²⁷ The Soviet response, delivered the next day, proposed a conference to be convened immediately at Bucharest, at which the powers most directly concerned--Britain, France, Russia, Poland, Rumania, and Turkey--would consider the question of German aggression.²⁸ Halifax rejected this proposal as "premature." The same day Chamberlain wrote in his diary about a "pretty bold and startling" plan which he had devised and intended to put to the Cabinet the following day. The plan was designed to buy time, and Chamberlain was confident that "it won't bring us to an acute crisis."²⁹ On the evening of March 20 this plan went into effect. A proposal was sent to Moscow, Warsaw and Paris for a joint declaration that consultations would be held to decide on the steps necessary to resist "a threat to the political independence of any European State."³⁰ Litvinov replied on March 23 that Moscow was ready to sign the agreement as soon as France and Poland had promised to do so.³¹

The Poles threatened to wreck the British plan because they refused to sign any agreement with Russia. Foreign Minister Beck had long tried to balance his country between Russia and Germany, and now he argued to the British that Poland would provoke an attack by Germany if it entered into such an agreement with Russia. Bonnet and Halifax met in London on March 21 and 22 to discuss the proposed four-power declaration, and their conversation

was quite frank and revealing. The greatest concern of the Foreign Ministers was that Eastern Europe might offer no resistance to an attack by Hitler. Obviously, if that were the case, Hitler could consolidate his position in Central and Eastern Europe in no time and strike in the West.³² Thus, Halifax and Bonnet spoke strongly of the need to force Poland to announce her determination to resist aggression. "It was absolutely essential to get Poland in," Bonnet said. "Russian help would be effective only if Poland were collaborating...The strongest pressure must therefore be brought to bear upon Poland." The official record of the meeting quotes Halifax as "entirely of M. Bonnet's opinion." To assure Poland's cooperation, Halifax said, he recognized the "need for using very plain language to the Polish Government." Bonnet said "it was desirable, therefore, to go to the utmost limit, even to the extent of threats, to bring Poland in." Bonnet was quite candid: if no East European country offered resistance to aggression by Hitler, "France would be in a bad position. It was therefore necessary that the countries most interested should pronounce themselves, and the Poles were certainly interested..."³³ At another meeting of the Foreign Ministers attended by Chamberlain, Halifax made a suggestion with which Bonnet was in agreement:

In order to persuade Poland to commit herself to support Rumania, Great Britain and France would have to give Poland a private understanding that, if Poland came in, they would both come in also. Having reached this understanding with Poland, it might be suggested to both Poland and Rumania that they should not raise any objection to our doing our best, both in their interest and in our own, to secure Soviet participation.³⁴

At this point, the British had more faith in a Polish-Rumanian alliance than in any pact with Russia to resist German aggression. Apparently accepting Beck's delusions about Poland's strength and ignoring their own intelligence reports describing Poland's unpreparedness for war, the British Cabinet

felt, according to Sir Samuel Hoare, that "Poland was a more valuable ally than Russia."³⁵ On March 24 Halifax told Kennedy that, based on his information, the most that could be expected from Russia would be "some ammunition to Poland in the event of trouble", and that Poland was of more value as an ally of Rumania than Russia.³⁶ On March 26, Chamberlain wrote in his diary, "I must confess to the most profound distrust of Russia. I have no belief whatever in her ability to maintain an effective offensive, even if she wanted to. And I distrust her motives."³⁷ In early April when Beck told him "he was very anxious not to be tied up with Russia," Chamberlain wrote, "I confess I very much agree with him, for I regard Russia as a very unreliable friend."³⁸

On March 23, Beck sent a proposal to London which rejected the Four-Power declaration and asked if the British would not consider concluding immediately with Poland "a bilateral agreement in the spirit of the proposed declaration."³⁹ After this proposal was made, the Poles refused Hitler's demands with regard to Danzig, and storm signals went out that Poland might soon be the next victim of Nazi aggression. Regardless of the veracity of these signals, they apparently produced their effect on Chamberlain, who, on March 30, personally drafted a temporary unilateral guarantee to Poland pending further negotiations. The guarantee was communicated through the British Ambassador in Poland and Beck accepted it immediately.⁴⁰ The following day, Chamberlain announced the terms of the guarantee before the House of Commons:

In the event of any action which already threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power....I may add that the French Government have authorized me to make it plain that they stand in the same position as does His Majesty's Government.⁴¹

By any rational standards, Britain would not have made such a guarantee unless she thoroughly expected that Hitler would not attack Poland in the foreseeable future. The British sensed a bad situation and hoped this guarantee would steady things; the Cabinet was not so desperate as to leave the decision for war or peace "in the hands of a State ruled by an incompetent and purblind oligarchy who preferred government by junta rather than by parliament."⁴² Beck boasted to Kennedy that he was "more than happy to have England's support given in the way that it was, i.e., that Poland is the one to determine when England is to come to her rescue."⁴³ But Beck firmly believed that Hitler would not dare go to war over Danzig and he doubtlessly influenced the British Cabinet, to whom he was still lying about German diplomatic pressure on the Poles.⁴⁴

When the guarantee to Poland was debated in Parliament on April 3, Lloyd George spoke for a disapproving minority. "I cannot understand why," he said, "before committing ourselves to this tremendous enterprise, we did not secure the adhesion of Russia." He asked how Britain could possibly make good on her pledge without Russia. "If war occurred tomorrow, you (or France) could not send a single battalion to Poland." Russia alone could reach the Poles. George pointed out the correct policy:

If Russia has not been brought into this matter because of certain feelings the Poles have that they do not want the Russians there, it is for us to declare the conditions, and unless they are prepared to accept the only conditions under which we can successfully help them, the responsibility must be theirs.⁴⁵

The method suggested by George was not at all unacceptable to the British Cabinet; in the Anglo-French conversations of March 21 and 22, Halifax and Chamberlain had agreed to use all forms of pressure to assure Polish cooperation with British aims, and Halifax himself had proposed threatening

the Poles with abandonment if they refused Russian aid. It was the object of George's suggestion that was so distasteful to the British leaders and which Chamberlain and Halifax were allowing the Poles to thwart--an agreement with Russia. In a meeting with Beck on April 5, Halifax "pressed Beck as to whether he would not want tanks, airplanes and ammunition, at least, from Russia if Poland were attacked, and, even with that as bait, Beck said no."⁴⁶ If the British found Beck's refusal unacceptable, they would have put the pressure on him; they did not because, as Chamberlain admitted, they agreed with Beck.⁴⁷ Although Beck would not hear of any closer ties between his country and Russia beyond their trading agreement, he let the British know that he would remain neutral should Britain desire closer cooperation with Russia in regard to guaranteeing Eastern Europe. While this might have served the interests of British foreign policy, it did little to fulfill the great needs of Soviet security.

What was Soviet policy after March 15? By all indications, Stalin became even more concerned about Soviet security, although he continued to maintain his cool. It was in his interest to encourage the countries along his Western border to resist Hitler, but with Hungary already on Hitler's side and Poland, Rumania and Finland inclining toward Hitler and hostile to political cooperation with Russia, this was not a realistic prospect, and Stalin could not base his foreign policy on so undependable a set of circumstances. As already mentioned, he proposed a conference of concerned nations to the British on March 19, a proposal which Halifax rejected. Around March 15 Maisky gave an unofficial assurance to the Rumanian Ambassador that Russia would make all possible aid available to Rumania in the event of an attack either by Germany or Hungary.⁴⁸ On March 28 Litvinov delivered identical

notes to the Latvian and Estonian Ministers in Moscow. These notes stipulated that any form of infringement on the independence and sovereignty of either state by a third state "would be recognized by the Soviet Government as insufferable":

This declaration is made...with the purpose of enhancing in (each nation) a feeling of security and confidence in the readiness of the Soviet Union to prove with deeds, in case of need, its interest in preserving in its entirety for (each nation) its sovereign existence as a state and its political and economic independence, as well as confidence in the inability of the Soviet Union to remain an idle bystander of open or masked attempts to destroy this sovereignty and independence.⁴⁹

Thus, in the case of these two small nations, Russia preserved her freedom of action and made a matter of record her determination to intervene under circumstances which she alone would define. Obviously, Stalin was not in a position to dictate such terms to Poland. However, he was quite anxious that the British guarantee of Poland be as strong as possible and that Moscow's approval of the pledge be publicly announced. Ulam has noted Halifax's "incredible blindness" in a conversation with Maisky on March 31 concerning the British pledge to Poland. Maisky, who had previously insisted on consulting with his government on matters of much less importance than this, gave his immediate approval to a declaration by Chamberlain that Moscow understood and appreciated the principles on which the British government acted. Writes Ulam: "To a man more perceptive than Lord Halifax, it would have been clear that Maisky must have been briefed for precisely such an occasion and that beneath his nonchalant and amiable behavior there was an obvious anxiety that the declaration be made and that it not be delayed by one day, one hour."⁵⁰

With regard to a possible rapprochement with Hitler, there is no reason to believe that during the first half of 1939 such an idea was anything more

for Stalin than an option he could not afford to foreclose. Western observers had little difficulty in discerning that an agreement with Hitler would have to remain one of Stalin's options, although Halifax and Chamberlain were confident that such a combination could never come about. As early as January 18, 1939, the U.S. Ambassador in Moscow, Joseph Davies, wrote that "The Chamberlain policy of throwing Italy, Poland and Hungary into the arms of Hitler may be completed by so disgusting the Soviets that it will drive Russia into an economic agreement and an ideological truce with Hitler."⁵¹ On April 13, the British Ambassador in Moscow, William Seeds, wrote to Halifax of the danger that in the event of war in the Balkins, Hitler might reach an agreement with Stalin.⁵² Stalin's speech of March 10 has often been interpreted as his first gesture toward Hitler. I agree with the historian of the period who has written that "no evidence supports such an idea."⁵³ Furthermore, as Ulam has pointed out, "On March 10 nothing indicated that a bargain with Hitler was a real possibility. Stalin had nothing to sell."⁵⁴

Although Stalin doubtlessly welcomed the British commitment to Poland and later to Rumania (on April 13), he could not help but regard the guarantee with a well-justified skepticism. The British had urged the French to break their treaty with Czechoslovakia and then weazled out of an ambiguous guarantee of Czechoslovakia's post-Munich borders. Indeed, how could anyone not regard the new pledges with skepticism when the British Government promised action which it had heretofore refused to take and now left the decision in the hands of another country? For Stalin in particular there was a special reason to be skeptical. The Soviet Union, the one nation in a position to render effective aid to Poland in the event of an attack, had not been con-

sulted by the British in connection with this guarantee; indeed, Maisky was not informed of the guarantee until after the Poles had accepted it.⁵⁵ On April 1, the day after Chamberlain announced the guarantee, Litvinov complained to Seeds that the Soviets were in the dark as to what the British were planning. He probed Seeds to discover the validity of the British commitment; as Seeds reported, Litvinov "expressed doubts whether we would regard attack on Danzig or Corridor as threatening Poland's independence."⁵⁶ On April 14, the day after the British guaranteed Rumania, Maisky met with Halifax to announce his government's readiness to aid Rumania and "to learn the views of His Majesty's Government as to the best methods by which such assistance could be given and as to the part the various Powers concerned could play in helping Rumania."⁵⁷

The response to Maisky's request made it clear that the British did not expect war and did not desire tangible Soviet assistance beyond a declaration to deter Hitler. Halifax proposed a unilateral Soviet declaration "that in the event of any act of aggression against any European neighbor of the Soviet Union which was resisted by the country concerned, the assistance of the Soviet Government would be available, if desired, and would be afforded in such a manner as would be found most convenient." In his instructions to Seeds, Halifax noted that such a statement would have a "steady-ing effect on the international situation."⁵⁸ There was not the slightest chance that Russia would make such a declaration. It would limit her freedom of action by making her aid dependent on the wishes of smaller nations; a major power whose vital interests were at stake simply could not adopt a policy based on the two premises of the British proposal: (1) that the countries involved would resist pressure from Hitler and, (2) if they did,

that they would "desire" help from Russia. Furthermore, as Chamberlain explained to the House of Commons, the proposed Soviet guarantee was to apply only "in the event of Great Britain and France being involved in hostilities in discharge of their own obligations."⁵⁹ Cadogan frankly admitted to the Cabinet on April 19 that the request for a unilateral Soviet declaration had been made "in order to placate our left wing in England, rather than to obtain any solid military advantage."⁶⁰

When Seeds presented the proposal to Litvinov on April 16, the latter replied that it was not a response to Maisky's inquiry. Litvinov repeated Russia's readiness "in principle" to aid Rumania, but asked again "how far Great Britain and other countries were prepared to go when it came to the point." The Foreign Commisar was blunt: "How do we know that Great Britain will declare war in case of armed aggression?" Moreover, as Seeds recognized, Litvinov feared that one of Britain's objectives might be to get the Soviet Union committed in a way by which Britain and France could unload the burden of their commitments to fight onto Russia, or, as Seeds put it, that Russia was being "manoeuvred into holding the baby."⁶¹

As of April 1939, it is reasonably certain that the primary purpose of the proposed Soviet declaration, from the British point of view, was to produce a deterring effect on Hitler. Nevertheless, the British were asking the Russians to make a specific commitment in Eastern Europe, a commitment which would enable the British and French to shift the burden of fighting onto the Soviet Union in the event of war. They asked Russia to make this commitment on a unilateral basis, without any provision for reciprocity, and on conditions that would allow her policy to be dictated by states hostile toward her. One historian has concisely described the British position: "They

wanted to preserve a situation, not to change it. This meant that they were asking of the Soviet Union the promise of an enormous effort, quite nobly involving a war against Germany, in return for nothing."⁶² It was a unique blindness and prejudice which enabled the British and the French to attempt to deal with the Soviet Union on such a basis. Stalin was willing to commit himself in Eastern Europe, but only on his terms and in a manner which would permit him the freedom of action necessary to protect Russia's vital interests in all possible contingencies. In diplomatic terms, Stalin was offering to help Britain and France in commitments they had made entirely on their own, but he was asking a price for his help. There was nothing sinister in Stalin's position, and nothing less could have been expected of any other leader in defense of his country. A. J.P. Taylor has stated the issue well. He believes the Russians were reluctant to act; "but if they acted," he writes, "particularly if they went to war--it would not be to preserve the treaty settlements of Brest-Litovsk and Riga. They would return to world affairs only as a Great Power, the equal of Great Britain and paramount in Eastern Europe."⁶³ Arnold Toynbee stated the obvious when he wrote that "the geographical situation of the various states concerned meant, as the Russians perceived, that they (the Russians) would have to bear the brunt of giving direct and immediate help to any Eastern European state that might be the victim of aggression."⁶⁴ Another prominent historian of the period, L. B. Namier, has also pointed out that "the supposition that in case of war (Russia) would have had to bear the main burden was not unreasonable." Stalin's price for agreeing to bear this burden was that Russia should "hold the principal place in Eastern Europe, to which her size and power entitled her."⁶⁵

Perhaps as of early 1938 Stalin might have been more inclined to issue a declaration of the type desired by Britain. It was then conceivable that such a declaration would have helped contain Hitler, if backed by adequate force and a determination to use it. But in April 1939, after Hitler's war machine had gained precious time to expand and develop, after the valuable Skoda munitions factories of Czechoslovakia had fallen into German hands, and as the countries of the cordon sanitaire threatened to fall victim to open or covert Nazi aggression, Stalin's attitude was different. Now, as Taylor points out, the Russians "were not concerned to sustain Poland or to provide some moral display against Hitler. They wished to secure precise and rigid military backing from the Western powers in case Hitler attacked Russia--either through Poland or more directly."⁶⁶ This included the Baltic states, through which Hitler could conceivably have launched an attack on the vulnerable Leningrad. Previously, the Soviets had taken steps to assure their freedom to take action in Latvia and Estonia if Stalin deemed it necessary. Soviet efforts to prevent the possibility that Hitler might use Finnish territory to invade the U.S.S.R. were unsuccessful because of the hostile attitude of the Finnish Government.⁶⁷

With all of these considerations in mind, the Soviets on April 17 put forth to Britain and France a comprehensive proposal. This proposal initiated a series of negotiations to which the remainder of this chapter is devoted. In their proposal, the Soviets were forthright and candid; in effect, Stalin said to London and Paris, "We can help each other, but the circumstances are such that I must inevitably contribute more in the event of war than either of you could; here is what I am asking in return for my help." The significant elements of the Soviet proposal are these:

1. England, France and U.S.S.R. to conclude with one another an agreement for a period of five to ten years by which they would oblige themselves to render mutually forthwith all manner of assistance, including that of a military nature, in case of aggression in Europe against any one of the contracting Powers.

2. England, France and U.S.S.R. to undertake to render all manner of assistance, including that of a military nature, to Eastern European States situated between Baltic and Black Seas and bordering on U.S.S.R., in case of aggression against these States.

3. England, France and U.S.S.R. to undertake to discuss and to settle within shortest period of time extent and forms of military assistance to be rendered by each of these States in fulfillment of paragraphs 1 and 2....

7. An agreement on the above lines to be signed simultaneously with terms of convention which has been described above under paragraph 3.⁶⁸

From the point of view of Soviet needs and experience, these proposals were entirely reasonable. The revised British guarantee to Poland of April 6 and the guarantees to Rumania and Greece were bilateral and reciprocal; Britain and France promised to aid the guaranteed states in the event of an attack on them and those states in return promised to aid Britain and France should Hitler strike in the West. Yet, Britain and France asked Russia to promise her help with no provision for reciprocal aid should Russia be attacked. With their proposal, the Soviets merely asked for what the smaller powers of Eastern Europe had been readily granted: commitments for "mutual...assistance" from Britain and France. Furthermore, a commitment to aid only Poland and Rumania at their request such as the British wanted from the Soviets could not possibly serve the far greater needs of Soviet security. As Taylor points out, "There was no British commitment towards the Baltic States; here was the loophole for a German attack on Soviet Russia, while the Western Powers remained neutral."⁶⁹ Thus, said the Soviets in their proposal, if the British and the French wanted Russian help, they would have to agree to guarantee all states "bordering on the

U.S.S.R." against aggression, without any provision that such aid be rendered only if requested by the particular state. Stalin specifically avoided any language prohibiting a signatory from rendering aid independent of the other two; in other words, aid could be given on an individual basis by England, France or the U.S.S.R., although each would be committed to make some contribution. The provision that a military convention setting forth the "extent and forms of military assistance to be rendered by each of these States in fulfillment of" the agreement be signed simultaneously with the agreement itself was well justified after the experience of the Franco-Soviet and Czech-Soviet treaties. France had repeatedly refused to enter into staff talks to settle the military issues involved in the Soviet commitments to Czechoslovakia under these treaties; thus, when Czechoslovakia was threatened, the treaties proved meaningless. In principle, the French agreed with this aspect of the new Soviet proposal. In discussing the commitment to Poland with Halifax on March 21, 1939, Bonnet cited the failure of France to obtain permission from Poland or Rumania for the passage of Soviet troops to Czechoslovakia in 1938. "For this kind of reason," Bonnet said, "it was necessary for each party to say exactly what it would do-- what material it would send; how many guns; how many aircraft; what number of troops. All these questions must be cleared up."⁷⁰

Throughout the negotiations which lasted until the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact at the end of August 1939, the Russians were consistent in insisting on the fulfillment of these three basic terms: a reciprocal agreement to protect the U.S.S.R. from attack, a flexible guarantee for all states bordering on Russia in Europe, and a specific military convention to

accompany the political agreement. Many critics and historians have accused the Russians of raising or changing their demands as the negotiations proceeded. This is inaccurate. Where the Russians revised any of their proposals, it was necessitated as a response to a substantive change insisted upon by Britain and did not alter the basic Russian position. Although the Russians have been accused of insincerity and bad faith in these negotiations, I will argue and demonstrate that on the basis of their position throughout the negotiations the Russians cannot be reproached; there is nothing to indicate that until the last minute, when Hitler offered an immediate and highly appealing settlement to Stalin, the Russians were not ready and willing to sign an agreement with Britain and France if the latter two accepted the three terms deemed essential by Stalin.

Most accusations of Stalin's bad faith have been based on the fact that at the same time he was negotiating with the British and French for an alliance against Hitler, he was sending feelers to the German government for a general political settlement. Rather than indicating Stalin's bad faith, these tentative gestures toward Germany merely underscore Stalin's realism and pragmatism. He had every reason to believe that he could not count on the British or the French to provide the assurances necessary for a Soviet commitment in Eastern Europe; with this in mind he had to keep open the option of a time-buying agreement with Hitler. (It should also be pointed out, as I will later document, that during the negotiations the British also continued making political feelers to Germany.) On April 17, the day the Soviets made their proposal to Britain and France, the Russian Ambassador in Berlin called upon State Secretary Weizsacker and hinted that there were grounds to hope for improved relations "on a normal footing" between Germany and Russia.⁷¹ The Germans did not respond to this feeler and in