

that we would be ready without further delay to start technical discussions" which would be "conditional upon M. Molotov abandoning his demand for simultaneous signature of the political and military Agreements."¹⁵²

Molotov met with Seeds and Naggier on July 17, when he was informed by the latter two that a definition of indirect aggression could be published in Article I if it did not stipulate cases where a threat of force was not involved; the previous Soviet definition of indirect aggression was rejected. Molotov immediately termed the new definition unacceptable because it was too vague and restricted. Indeed, the British refusal to accept a definition of indirect aggression other than one involving a threat of force must have appeared as a delaying tactic to the Russians. The British guarantee to Poland spoke only of a threat to Poland's independence and made no qualification that the threat need involve mention of the use of force. Now the Moscow negotiations were virtually concluded on the matter of Article I, yet the British threatened to snag any further agreement by refusing to accept a condition for which they themselves had provided in their guarantee to Poland. At one point in the July 17 conversations, Seeds argued that Molotov drop his request for simultaneous signing of the political and military agreements. Molotov remained firm; there would be only "a single Politico-Military Agreement. The political part would have no existence without the military agreement. The Soviet Government wished to have military obligations and contributions on each side clearly settled." Unless Britain and France could agree to this, "there was no point in pursuing the present conversations." Molotov then bluntly asked "whether or not His Majesty's Government and French Government were really willing to open military conversations." Naggier felt that France would be ready to begin

military negotiations without waiting for signature of the political agreement. Seeds equivocated that the political agreement should first be reached, but not necessarily signed. Molotov concluded by requesting that each Ambassador obtain a definite answer from his government.¹⁵³

Why did Russia press for military talks now? The international situation was such that Moscow could no longer be content to wait until the British Foreign Office slowly came around to her terms, introducing new complications, from the Soviet point of view, with each professed "concession." The Germans had presented a more detailed version of their views to Mikoyan on July 10. The Russians recalled their trade representative in Berlin, Babarin, for detailed instructions and on June 18, the day after Molotov requested a definite answer from Britain and France on military negotiations, Babarin called on Schnurre and stated that he was authorized to discuss mutual concessions and, if possible, to conclude and sign a trade agreement in Berlin. On July 21 Schnurre agreed to the negotiations.¹⁵⁴ Now the Germans began cautiously sounding out the Russians on the prospects for a political pact. On July 26, Schnurre dined with Astakhov and Babarin and brought up political matters, including the suggestion of a non-aggression pact. Astakhov seemed skeptical and indicated that Russian and German vital interests in the Balkans and Rumania were in conflict. On July 29, Weizsacker informed Schulenburg of Schnurre's conversation and instructed the ambassador to sound out Molotov's reaction if he saw "an opportunity of arranging a further conversation."¹⁵⁵ On August 2, Schnurre wrote Schulenburg that "Politically, the problem of Russia is being dealt with here with extreme urgency."¹⁵⁶ Astakhov was contacted by Ribbentrop on the evening of August 2 and by Schnurre on the afternoon of the 3rd. Astakhov told Schnurre that

the Soviet Government regarded an economic treaty as a first stage in achieving the goal of improved relations, but that Molotov still wanted a more specific expression of the wishes of the German Government.¹⁵⁷ Schulenburg met with Molotov on August 3 and reported his impression that while the Soviet Government was becoming more receptive to the idea of a rapprochement, "the old mistrust of Germany persists." "My general impression is that the Soviet Government are at present determined to conclude an agreement with Britain and France if they fulfill all Soviet wishes," the ambassador wrote to Ribbentrop. "It will, nevertheless, require considerable effort on our part to cause a reversal in the Soviet Government's course."¹⁵⁸ In the meantime, fighting with Japan had been renewed in May 1939 and was still raging on; the fighting was on a scale far greater than mere border clashes, involving battles with armor and aircraft, and Stalin was confronted with the serious threat that Japan, with Germany's aid, would declare war on Russia.¹⁵⁹

Stalin was still not willing to foreclose any option. With Britain and France so reluctant to agree to the final terms which Moscow felt essential for protection in the widest variety of foreseeable contingencies and war with Japan threatening in the East, Stalin could not risk being isolated in the event that Germany struck Poland, as she now seriously threatened to do. Churchill has pointed out Russia's "vital need", should Germany attack Poland, "to hold the deployment positions of the German armies as far to the west as possible so as to give the Russians more time for assembling their forces from all parts of their immense empire....They must be in occupation of the Baltic States and a large part of Poland by force or fraud before they were attacked."¹⁶⁰ As late as the middle of August,

Stalin was uncertain as to whether Hitler would agree to terms which would make it worthwhile for Russia to enter into a non-aggression pact with Germany. Hence, the alternative of an alliance with Britain and France was still a very important objective of Stalin's foreign policy, provided it could fulfill everything Moscow considered essential. Now was the time to find out how serious London and Paris were with respect to a military alliance with Moscow. Now, writes Ulam, the Russians "wanted to have the most precise information of what the West would and could do for them in case the German gambit failed and they found themselves in war."¹⁶¹

On July 21 Halifax responded to Seeds' request of three days earlier for further instructions in light of Molotov's insistence that Britain and France give official replies on the issue of a simultaneous political and military agreement. He stated that the British government was "prepared ...to agree to the simultaneous entry into force" of the two agreements, but that approval of immediate military conversations should be given only "in the last resort", after all efforts have failed to secure Russian approval of a version of Article I acceptable to the British. On the matter of indirect aggression, Halifax stated that the Soviet definition was still unacceptable because the British "may be placed in position of becoming accessories to interference in the internal affairs of other States."¹⁶²

When Molotov, Seeds and Naggier met next, on July 23, Seeds repeated his Government's agreement to the principle that the military and political agreements enter into force at the same time, and expressed his hope that the Soviet Government would recognize that the definition of indirect aggression "was a question of principle for us." This plea from a representative of the Government that, less than a year before, had forced a free country

to surrender its independence and submit to German demands must have been hard for Molotov to swallow. The British doubtlessly had legitimate fears, as often voiced by Halifax, that a guarantee against indirect aggression as defined by the Soviets might have the effect of driving many of the guaranteed States into closer relationships with Germany. At any rate, Molotov stated that he did not think the problem of a definition "would raise insuperable difficulties" and he was confident a satisfactory formula could be found. Naggier expressed his agreement with the British position, although in private he told Seeds that he felt the Soviet definition of indirect aggression "could be accepted."¹⁶³ Seeds himself seemed to have confidence in Molotov's assurance that a solution could be found, and he pointed out to Halifax that "it must be remembered in (Molotov's) favor that he dropped at once his original most objectionable formula ('coup d'etat and reversal of policy') when I objected to it under instructions on July 8."¹⁶⁴ However, at this point in the negotiations, the definition was a less important concern to the Russians than the immediate opening of military staff talks. Now Molotov repeated the question he had posed on July 17: would the British and French Governments consent to the start of military negotiations before the details of the political agreement had been thrashed out? As before, the two ambassadors said they would have to contact their governments before responding.¹⁶⁵

Halifax wired Seeds on July 25 that the British Government was prepared to agree to the "immediate initiation of military conversations at Moscow without waiting for the final agreement on Article I."¹⁶⁶ This position was conveyed to Molotov on July 27 by Seeds and Naggier.¹⁶⁷

I have already examined Soviet foreign policy through early August in the context of these negotiations. It is now necessary to examine British foreign policy in the same period to understand British objectives in negotiating an agreement with Russia.

British policy toward Germany after March 1939 cannot be properly described as an abandonment of appeasement. As I explained earlier in this chapter, the German aggressions of March 15-17 cast British appeasement policy into a new mold, and the events of the four months following March drew the British further along the basic lines adopted in March. A cornerstone of British policy was the acceleration of the armaments program, for the reasons that (1) the British public and Chamberlain's political opposition would tolerate nothing less now, (2) Britain could not afford to be in a position where it could not resist unreasonable demands from Hitler, and (3) the Chamberlain cabinet was finally truly convinced that force and power were what Hitler understood. Now Hitler was pressing his demands against Poland for the free city of Danzig; he followed the basic contours of his previous aggressions, justifying his policy on the basis of the repressed German minorities in the area and applying all forms of pressure and threats. The British and French were apparently determined, for a variety of reasons, to fight Hitler if he went to war over Danzig. However, at the heart of British policy was the inability to conceive of Hitler's going to war over Danzig; Chamberlain still held to his position, stated in March, that "I never accept the view that war is inevitable."¹⁶⁸ Now, as Chamberlain and his followers in the Government saw things, the best way to prevent war was to relentlessly make the price of war for Hitler higher and higher, and hold open the possibility that a peaceful settlement would be possible

if Hitler would give some demonstration of his intention not to make war. Of course, as Hitler pressed his demands, the chances that he would give evidence of peaceful intentions grew slimmer and slimmer. The British Government recognized this, but were always highly sensitive to any gesture or indication by Germany that a peaceful solution could be evolved.

It was on May 24, 1939 that Halifax told Ambassador Kennedy that the British and French Governments had decided on the necessity of meeting the Russians on their insistence on an agreement stipulating mutual obligations. During this conversation Halifax also informed Kennedy about a very interesting talk he had with the German Ambassador Dirksen, in private, "away from the Foreign Office." Dirksen told Halifax that Hitler would not make war if he had to fight France, England, Turkey, Poland, Russia, and possibly the United States. "Halifax thought it very strange that Dirksen should include Russia", because at the time the negotiations with Russia were going so poorly. Evidently, Dirksen was attempting to warn Halifax that Hitler might not be deterred from war unless the Anglo-French-Soviet negotiations resulted in an alliance. Halifax's subsequent actions indicated that the British were very much interested in keeping the negotiations going, although the evidence does not permit the assumption that they had an equal interest in bringing the negotiations to a successful conclusion. As Halifax told Kennedy in relating his meeting with the German Ambassador, he

suggested to Dirksen that word be got to Hitler that if he would make a speech or a gesture of some kind that he did not want war and that he was hoping for peace and that while Danzig was an irritant it could probably be worked out, regardless of what popular opinion in (Britain) might be, Halifax assured Dirksen that officially England would welcome the statement and would so reply.

Halifax in the meantime is preparing a speech which he is going to give before some organization, trying to hold the door open for economic discussion with Hitler and has suggested that

he will let Dirksen see the speech before he delivers it to see if any suggestions might be made.¹⁶⁹

A month later, Halifax had another conversation with Kennedy in which he indicated that Britain was anxious for some sign from Hitler, but frustrated that no response from Hitler was forthcoming. Kennedy wrote:

Halifax feels that the German situation is certainly very restless at the minute but believes that Danzig can be settled between Poland and Germany if Hitler wants it settled; they can get no assurances from him, however, that he wants to do anything with England.¹⁷⁰

Thus, concerned and perplexed that his private conversation with Dirksen had produced no results, Halifax attempted to push the door to cooperation with Hitler a bit farther open in a speech at Catham House on June 29. Halifax had told Kennedy of his intention to make such a speech more than a month before. Now, at Catham House, Halifax repeated in explicit terms his Government's determination to resist aggression, and he pointed to Britain's greatly expanded military strength. However, he had another point to stress:

British policy rests on twin foundations of purpose. One is determination to resist force. The other is our recognition of the world's desire to get on with the constructive work of building peace. If we could once be satisfied that the intentions of others were the same as our own, and that we all really wanted peaceful solutions--then, I say here definitely, we could discuss the problems that are today causing the world anxiety. In such a new atmosphere we could examine the colonial problem, the problem of raw materials, trade barriers, the issue of Lebensraum ("living space"), the limitation of armaments, and any other issue that affects the lives of all European citizens.

But this is not the position which we face today.¹⁷¹

Obviously, this speech was a plea that "the position...we face today" be changed, that is, that Germany do something to demonstrate its peaceful intentions--then Britain would be willing to negotiate a long range, comprehensive agreement. Halifax also said in this speech that the view of his Government was that "deeds, not words, are necessary" on Germany's part.

A week later, on July 5, Halifax told Kennedy that he "is of the belief that England's appearing stronger all the time is having an effect in Germany."¹⁷²

One of the first indications of Germany's receptiveness to a peaceful settlement of her claims came on July 6 when Dr. Erich Kordt, Ribbentrop's private secretary, requested a meeting with Adrian Holman, the British charge in Berlin. Kordt said that "it was absolutely necessary to find a solution" to the Danzig problem, but that it was also "unthinkable that a world war could be waged on such an issue." Kordt cautioned Holman

that we should not allow ourselves to be carried away by a fit of nerves, and that it was all-important that His Majesty's Government should, as they had a perfect right, put pressure on the Poles to take no offensive action against Danzig. If this could be achieved, he could assure me privately and confidentially that in six months' time there would be a completely altered situation in Germany, which would open the road to peace and understanding.¹⁷³

On July 10, Neville Henderson called on Bonnet in Paris, and discussed the issue of Danzig. Henderson felt "that the next two months would be decisive one way or the other," but that, in his opinion, the British "display of force had intimidated" Hitler as revealed by the fact that Hitler had failed to take decisive action against Danzig. Then, pointing out that "Mussolini's intervention (at Munich) had been the decisive factor for peace", Henderson said that Mussolini was the "one man in Europe who might play a decisive role if the (current) crisis became really acute." He thus "deplored" France's hesitation to begin conversations with the Italian Government.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, on July 12, Henderson wrote to Halifax that "if there is to be a change for the better, then we must try to get away from all this nervous tension. I am going to work to that end, in BerlinIn my opinion there has been enough talking about Danzig....I have no

chance of succeeding unless our Russian negotiations terminate one way or the other quickly."¹⁷⁵ What Henderson wanted was a quieting down of all the stormy voices in Britain threatening war if Germany took unilateral action in Danzig. The Germans knew the British position, Henderson argued; now the decision for war was up to them, and they would be inclined toward a peaceful solution only if Britain showed cool force and did not stir the air with endless threats of war.

Halifax wrote to Henderson on July 13 and expressed his agreement with each of the Ambassador's points. "I am very glad you had a good talk to Bonnet and said what you did. The P.M. is writing to Phipps today to arm him with something on which to approach Daladier as regards the possibility of Franco-Italian talks." In the same letter Halifax wrote, "I agree with you that the less said the better." Chamberlain, he wrote, had "exhorted members of the Cabinet yesterday to be as economical in their references to foreign affairs as the state of public opinion here would permit." Meanwhile, as a show of force, Chamberlain would announce "extended fleet exercises" which "may have a useful effect."¹⁷⁶

On the same day, as Halifax indicated, Chamberlain wrote to Daladier through Phipps. He asked that France "reconsider the Franco-Italian position." In his arguments, he virtually quoted from Henderson's advice:

Any step of this nature that you might feel able to take would probably increase the Italian ability or disposition to exercise a restraining influence in regard to the situation in Danzig which may otherwise at any time reach an acute stage. In this connection I feel that Mussolini is the one man who can influence Hitler to keep the peace.

In justifying this move, Chamberlain made reference to the current untenable state of affairs in Europe and the need to find a peaceful solution:

The commitments into which France and Great Britain have entered and the agreements which will embody them have created a situation in which some sort of precarious balance of power exists. But that position cannot be permanently maintained and if a real peace is to be established we must make some positive efforts of a constructive character to ease the tension and restore confidence in Europe.¹⁷⁷

By July 20, there had been numerous indications that Hitler might be willing to seek a peaceful solution to the Danzig problem, and these indications, attributed to Britain's show of force, were summarized in a Foreign Office memorandum of July 20.¹⁷⁸ On July 20 Chamberlain told Kennedy he "thinks England's movements, beginning with conscription and now the calling up of reserves in the navy, have made a definite impression on Hitler and may cause him to change his mind about taking a gamble on a world war. He is not joyful over the prospects."¹⁷⁹ On the same day, the British charge in Danzig wired Halifax that "it is important that atmosphere should not be prejudiced by violent newspaper comment and I therefore submit that a hint in this sense might be given to the British press."¹⁸⁰ Henderson immediately wrote Halifax strongly recommending the adoption of this "useful suggestion." "Our resolute determination to resist aggression by force is not weakened by expression of a desire to create an atmosphere in which negotiations may again become possible."¹⁸¹ On July 21, Halifax wired the British charge in Warsaw that

I am most anxious that this tentative move from the German side should not be compromised by publicity or by any disinclination on part of Polish Government to discuss in friendly and reasonable spirit (a settlement)....

There is some reason to think that German policy is now to work for a detente in the Danzig question. This, if confirmed, may be held to be first fruit of firm attitude adopted by His Majesty's Government and French and Polish Governments. It is nevertheless essential not to destroy possibility of better atmosphere at outset and I trust that more care than ever will be taken on Polish side to avoid provocation in any sphere and to restrain press.¹⁸²

On the same day, Halifax wrote Henderson in somewhat different terms. He admitted that he felt "pretty certain" that conditions for the peaceful settlement of the Danzig question "do not in fact prevail at this moment, and that we have to work for their re-creation." Furthermore:

I should like nothing better, if it were possible, than to restrict press polemics, but as you know that is not possible, and all we can with some assurance say to ourselves and the Germans is that if they could make a practical contribution to the lowering of the temperature, this question would gradually tend to settle itself....

It may be that if the Danzig situation can be developed favourably, this may open the door to other things, but in the meanwhile I think that our line must continue to be a stiff one, while letting it be known, on the lines of my Catham House speech, that whenever the German Government gave concrete evidence of their willingness to forswear force, we should be willing to meet them half-way.¹⁸³

At this time, the British made an unofficial feeler to the Germans for renewed negotiations leading toward a general settlement. As Dirksen wrote in the review of his Ambassadorship in London, "in the middle of July, Anglo-German relations became a little more tranquil" and the atmosphere in Danzig "calmer." Throughout the early summer of 1939 Dirksen had been informing his Government that the inflamed state of British public opinion did not mean that the country "is now irrevocably heading for war." On July 10 he wrote that "within the Cabinet, and in a small but influential group of politicians, efforts are being made to replace the negative policy of an encirclement front by a constructive policy towards Germany."¹⁸⁴ Two weeks later he wrote that "the few really decisive statesmen in Britain have considered and put into more concrete form the lines of thought" of a "constructive" policy toward Germany.¹⁸⁵ In this atmosphere, Dirksen later recalled, the "constructive trends in the British Government--which...sought to reach agreement with Germany by way of negotiation--began to shape into positive

action. For this purpose Staatsrat Wohlthat was applied to." Wohlthat, special economic commissioner for the Four Year Plan, was in London for whaling negotiations in July, and "had good relations with" Sir Horace Wilson, one of Chamberlain's closest advisers, and Sir R. S. Hudson, Secretary of the Department of Overseas Trade.¹⁸⁶ Wohlthat met with Wilson on July 18 and 21, and with Hudson on the 20th. Wohlthat's minutes of his meeting with these two men¹⁸⁷ differs from their version of the conversations¹⁸⁸ with respect to who initiated the talks and the extent of British negotiating offers expressed during the talks; also, Wilson does not recall having met with Wohlthat on July 21. It seems unlikely that Wohlthat would have fabricated many elements of what he reported to his government, including the text of a memorandum presented by Wilson containing the British position on possible concessions to be made to Germany in the event of negotiations. Likewise, it seems plausible that Wilson and Hudson might have been inclined to leave a record which would have enabled them to deny that such offers had been made to the Germans. Wilson himself indirectly confirmed the accuracy of Wohlthat's minute. Wilson met with Dirksen on August 3, at which time he was impressed by Dirksen's "knowledge...of Wohlthat's conversations here", the details of which Dirksen had learned from messages from Berlin based on Wohlthat's "written report."¹⁸⁹ Nevertheless, there are enough points of agreement between the written recollections of each side to enable the historian to get a good sense of what transpired in the discussions.

According to Wilson, Wohlthat brought up the point that negotiations between the two countries should be resumed:

He did not press this point, and I then asked him whether he had done anything to make up what, at the earlier conversation (in June), he called the 'frame-work' which, as he had said before, would have to be wide enough in scope to include a sufficient

number of topics to make it acceptable as whole to both countriesIt seemed to me that, if it was his view that anything could be done, it would be necessary for him to put the points down in simple language. I did not press him to do this, as I was most anxious to maintain the position that I had adopted in the June conversation, namely, that...the initiative must come from the German side. I said that he would find in the Prime Minister's speeches and in Lord Halifax's recent speech plenty of material to enable him to understand the British position. He would find, for example, that, while it had been made abundantly clear what preparations we had made to carry out our undertakings, there was still an opportunity for co-operation...so soon as conditions had been created that would make that co-operation feasible.¹⁹⁰

This was Wilson's way of saying that he had invited Germany to submit proposals for comprehensive negotiations, and that his government was ready to negotiate pending a concrete sign from Hitler that he did not intend to make war.

Wohlthat's minute of the conversation is similar to Wilson's in many respects, including mention of Wilson's warnings about the advanced state of British armaments and request "for a statement of points which, in the Fuhrer's view, should be discussed by both Governments." However, Wohlthat describes in minute detail an overture by Wilson never mentioned in Wilson's account. Wohlthat writes that Wilson had "prepared a memorandum" which contained an elaboration of the British view "of the points which would have to be dealt with between the German and British Governments." Perhaps open to suspicion is Wohlthat's apparent assumption that this memorandum was "approved by Neville Chamberlain." The memorandum contained proposals for a non-aggression pact by which Britain could rid herself of her newly assumed obligations in Eastern Europe, an agreement on the limitations of armaments, and a comprehensive economic agreement. Dirksen's report of a conversation with Wilson on August 3 provides some corroboration for Wohlthat's account of Wilson's offer to negotiate. Wohlthat noted Wilson's concern "that the

conversations must be held in secret."¹⁹¹ Dirksen, in his report of the August 3 conversation, describes Wilson's account to him of the meeting with Wohlthat and confirms Wilson's concern for secrecy: "Wilson expatiated at length on the great risk Chamberlain would incur by starting confidential negotiations with the German Government. If anything about them were to leak out there would be a great scandal, and Chamberlain would probably be forced to resign."¹⁹² Dirksen reports that Wilson felt the conversation with Wohlthat had "made known to the German Government (Britain's) readiness to negotiate." Wilson confirmed that this was "an official British feeler, to which a German reply was now expected."¹⁹³

For his part, Hudson readily admitted that he told Wohlthat "that, given the necessary preliminary of a solution of the political question, it ought not to be impossible to work out some form of economic and industrial collaboration between" England, Germany, and the United States. He said that his Government recognized southeastern Europe "as falling within the natural economic sphere of Germany and we had no objection to her developing her position in that market, provided we were assured of a reasonable share." Hudson also said, in what he described as a personal capacity, that "if Hitler was prepared to disarm and to accept adequate safeguards against rearming the possibility was opened up of establishing Germany on a strong economic basis....Wohlthat said he thoroughly agreed."¹⁹⁴

On July 23 and 24, the British press carried leaked stories about Wohlthat's conversation with Hudson, including mention of a "peace plan" offered by the British, providing for disarmament, a colonial settlement and a large loan to Germany. This news had a sensational affect all over Europe. German papers immediately gave "full publicity to and quoted large

excerpts from the stories which appeared in the British press.¹⁹⁵ In Italy, messages from London and Berlin gave "the greatest prominence" to the disclosure.¹⁹⁶ The Polish press "gives great prominence" to the allegations concerning the Hudson-Wohlthat meeting.¹⁹⁷ As of July 26, "the uneasiness caused in France by the conversations with Herr Wohlthat has by no means died down." Among French analysts the "general conclusion is that such conversations...must inevitably cause doubt as to Great Britain's attitude among her friends....there is an under-current of disturbance that such discussions...should have taken place in the capital of one of the members of the peace front without the previous knowledge of the Governments of France or the other participating countries."¹⁹⁸

One can imagine the reaction to this leak in the Kremlin! On the surface, one might say that all the Russians would be justified in asserting was that "two can play at the same game"--coming to terms with Germany by means of economic negotiations which could lead to further comprehensive agreements. This view, however, is not justified by the evidence, for there was a fundamental difference in the nature and aims of the British and the Soviet approaches to Hitler. The Russians recognized that they were threatened by Hitler's very existence as the leader of Germany; they sought an alliance with Britain and France to enable them to take strong and definite measures to contain Hitler, enhance their untenable defensive position against him, and assemble sufficient force to assure his defeat if he made war; but this was something on which they could not depend because of the attitudes of the British and French Governments. So, they kept open the door to an agreement with Hitler which would give them temporary protection against attack, a chance to consolidate their defensive position both militarily and

strategically, and the prospect that when they eventually fought Hitler, he would have been exhausted from war in the West. In their approaches to Hitler, they never deviated from the demand that all their terms be met. The British, on the other hand, entered into negotiations with Russia only because they desired a unilateral declaration to "steady" the European situation and make their long-sought goal of a permanent understanding with Hitler once more feasible. As the clouds over Europe grew darker the British attached more importance to an agreement with Russia not as an effective preparation for an actual war, but as a means of raising the stakes for Hitler, to deter him from making war. Although the British leaders certainly recognized the delicacy of the situation, at the heart of their policy, including that of negotiating with the Russians, was the belief that at some point they would have to come to terms with Hitler. They offered to meet Hitler "half way" if he would show some sign of peaceful intentions.

This basic element of British policy was very carefully outlined on July 26 in a letter from Henderson to Halifax. Henderson described his admiration for Hitler based on what the German leader had achieved, but he did not approve of Hitler's methods or "the gangsters and brigands who surround him." But Henderson attempted to be entirely realistic:

While regimes are not permanent, Germany is; and the reality of the new Great Germany has got to be understood and faced. It may be fated that Britain must again fight Germany, yet it is a consummation devoutly to be avoided if it can be humanly possible to do so. There can be no peace in Europe until Germany and Britain discover some basis of mutual existence. The sooner that basis can be found the better, since another war is far less likely to provide it....

So far as Britain is concerned an understanding with Germany must comprise two essential admissions: firstly, that of full and equal collaboration with Germany in settling world problems...; and secondly that of Germany's paramount economic importance in Central and Eastern Europe....

Peace is Britain's chief interest, and I cannot imagine that she would wish to deny a really peacefully inclined Germany these two preliminary and axiomatic admissions. The stumbling block is, of course, the exaggerated ambitions and enthusiasms of a Germany in the first flush of the Nazi revolution and of her unity and recovered national prestige. Excess is unfortunately and tragically inherent in revolutions....

It is not impossible that Hitler may consider it more prudent, having achieved so much, not to start a war for what remains. He may well regard it as preferable to obtain somewhat less than his full desiderata by negotiation rather than risk the whole of his winnings at one blow. Much may depend in this respect on the attitude of His Majesty's Government; and not only on their firmness, but also on their understanding of the reality of Great Germany. Both are essential.¹⁹⁹

The same sympathy was not to be found in regard to another great power, formed out of a revolution and ruled by an excessive dictator who had made great strides for his country and who had claims to stake in Europe. This dictator has not committed aggression in Europe but had opposed it; this dictator did not scorn an attempt to reach an agreement with Britain and France on an equal basis but rather invited such an agreement.

Halifax responded to Henderson's letter on July 28 with the apology that he did not have time to write at length. He repeated his determination to keep public speeches warning Germany at a minimum, because such speeches would weaken the impression of strength and make it "more difficult for reason to assert itself in other quarters." He concluded, "I cannot help feeling that the one essential thing to do, without provocation or advertisement, is to get it into Hitler's head that further forceful acts on his part will mean war. Once he has got this firmly in mind, may it not be that he might be willing to try and use other and more peaceful methods?"²⁰⁰

Chamberlain fully agreed with this policy. On July 30 he wrote that Britain must convince Germany

that the chances of winning a war without getting thoroughly exhausted in the process are too remote to make it worthwhile. But the corollary to that must be that she has a chance of getting fair and reasonable consideration from us and others, if she will give up the idea that she can force it from us, and convince us that she has given it up.

Chamberlain's biographer writes, "But the time for this, he added, had not yet come; nor, we may think, was it likely to be speeded by a break-down in the Anglo-Russian negotiation."²⁰¹

On August 2, Theo Kordt, charge at the German embassy in London, requested a meeting with "some authoritative person" before reporting to Berlin. At Chamberlain's instruction, a meeting between Kordt and Sir Horace Wilson was arranged for the following day. However, Kordt did not attend the meeting, and in his place the German ambassador, Dirksen, appeared.²⁰² Wilson's²⁰³ and Dirksen's²⁰⁴ accounts of their lengthy conversation are remarkably similar, with the major exception of their version of who initiated the meeting (each points to the other) and Wilson's omission of his explanation, recorded by Dirksen, of why Anglo-German negotiations must be conducted in secrecy. Wilson admits expressing his Government's readiness to negotiate on the condition that Hitler make some positive move, or at least refrain from taking any steps to worsen the situation. He also confirms something that Wohlthat reported him as saying on July 18, that "if it was once made clear by the German Government that there was henceforth to be no aggression on their part, the policy of guarantees to potential victims ipso facto became inoperative."²⁰⁵ Wilson, as both parties report, expressed a great interest in finding some gesture, to be made by Hitler and acceptable to both sides, to aid the "restoration of confidence." Dirksen quotes Wilson as saying that "it would be a severe disappointment to the British side if we did not take up the thread (spun by Wohlthat's visit). In that

case there would be nothing left but to drive to disaster."²⁰⁶ Wilson left Dirksen with three questions to ponder, the substance of which are recorded almost identically by both men: (1) What instructions has Hitler given us to the follow-up of the Wohlthat report, (2) will Hitler not aggravate the situation in the next few weeks, and (3) if an agenda for negotiations is worked out, what will Hitler do to create a suitable atmosphere in which the negotiations could proceed?²⁰⁷

On August 9, Dirksen, before going on leave, met with Halifax. The accounts of the meeting rendered by each participant are essentially the same, with the exception that Dirksen presents Halifax's views of possible negotiations with Germany in more detail. Halifax admits that he told the German Ambassador that the British public was not irreversibly committed to war, but rather that public opinion and the British Government awaited a gesture from Hitler which would help to restore the confidence that Hitler himself had shattered. The restoration "would necessarily take time," Halifax said, assuring Dirksen "as I had assured him in May, that, if Herr Hitler would make any real effort in this direction, we would certainly respond from this side and in this way, provided this was, in fact, his intention, we might look to an improvement in confidence being gradually effected."²⁰⁸ Dirksen adds that Halifax said "he was certain that once the ice were broken, the British side would go very far to reach an adjustment with Germany....it was...certain that a period of calm making for the pacification of public opinion would create an entirely different picture" than currently existed. "The British Government keenly desired that this should come about."²⁰⁹

These British efforts were to no avail. Rather than make the slightest

attempt to cool the situation, Hitler continued to press his demands and make military preparations for war.²¹⁰

Halifax had given his approval on July 25 to the immediate commencement of military staff talks in Moscow. In light of the above discussion of British policy, there would seem to be little doubt that the principal British concern in agreeing to start these talks was that they would prevent the negotiations from breaking down and provide Hitler with a further demonstration of the strength of the Anglo-French position and the imminence of an alliance with Russia. Indeed, in recommending approval of the military negotiations to Halifax, Seeds argued that "to begin with them now would give a healthy shock to the Axis Powers and a fillip to our friends while they might be prolonged sufficiently to tide over the next dangerous few months."²¹¹ Halifax was apparently in accord with the view that Britain should stall the military talks. In the top secret instructions to the British Military Mission to Moscow, headed by Admiral Drax, the Foreign Office wrote that the only reason Britain agreed to the talks was to prevent the breakdown of the political negotiations; however, the delegation was instructed as follows:

Until such time as the political agreement is concluded, the Delegation should therefore go very slowly with the conversations, watching the progress of the political negotiations and keeping in very close touch with His Majesty's Ambassador.²¹²

The British seemed to spare no effort to let the Russians know that they were not serious about the military negotiations. Within a period of a month during which the British knew that the Russians were awaiting an answer on the question of military negotiations, Seeds put off a settlement of the question on four occasions by claiming that he had to check back with his government for further instructions. Then, on July 24, in response

to a hint from Molotov that the British were stalling by making military negotiations dependent on the settlement of the entire political agreement, Seeds assured the Russians that the British Government "had no intention of wasting time."²¹³ Yet, the Anglo-French military delegations, dispatched on July 31, travelled by boat to Leningrad, and then by train to Moscow, taking a total of eleven days in travelling time. The first meeting of delegates took place on August 12. The Soviet and French delegates each produced a document from their respective governments authorizing them to negotiate a military agreement. The British, however, had no written credentials! Drax wired home for written authority to negotiate: "Please send by air mail."²¹⁴ Apparently airplanes were in short supply for dealings with the Russians; Drax's credentials arrived and were presented on August 18. Voroshilov, Soviet Commissar for Defense and head of the Russian delegation at the talks, had at once "suggested that the conversations should continue while waiting for the credentials."²¹⁵

On the following morning, August 13, Seeds wired Halifax with an apparent change of heart from his previous suggestion that the military talks be drawn out. Now, with the concurrence of Naggier, Seeds felt that the Russians "will probably evade coming to any agreement with us on these political points, until (they had) reason to believe that military talks have at least made very considerable progress." In this context, Seeds now feared that if the British military delegation followed its instruction to draw out the talks, "Russian fears that we are not in earnest" would tend to be confirmed. Thus Seeds requested immediate information as to whether his Government still wanted to stall the military talks pending agreement on the "indirect aggression" problem. He warned that "all indications so far go to show

that Soviet military negotiators are really out for business."²¹⁶ On August 15, Halifax agreed to reverse the instructions.

At the close of the first negotiating session on August 13, Voroshilov observed that before discussing Soviet military plans at the next meeting he would want to know what action the British and French staffs felt Russia should take in the event of a German attack because Soviet forces would have to be based on the territory of other States in order to fight Germany.²¹⁷ The following morning Voroshilov repeated his question and, in this connection, asked specifically if Russian troops could cross Polish and Rumanian territory to fight Germany. The British and French delegates tried to avoid any commitment, but Voroshilov insisted that without an unequivocal answer, further discussion would be useless. Drax, speaking for the British and French, offered to have the allied missions ask their governments to take the issue up with Warsaw and Bucharest. Voroshilov accepted the offer and submitted detailed written questions to be asked concerning the passage of troops. Although he maintained that "without a solution to this question...the Soviet Military Mission cannot recommend to its Government to take part in an enterprise so obviously doomed to failure", he still considered it possible for the negotiations to proceed pending an expedient reply.²¹⁸ During the discussions on August 17, Voroshilov announced that if an answer on the Polish and Rumanian question were not received by the next morning, the meetings would have to be suspended. At Drax's urging, Voroshilov agreed to postpone his deadline until August 21.²¹⁹ The following morning the talks were officially suspended pending a reply on the troop passage issue. Drax formally stated that the British and French could not take responsibility for the delay in the talks and implied that Moscow acted

in bad faith by inviting the missions while all along intending "to put to them at once difficult political questions...requir(ing) reference to our Governments." Voroshilov took the opposite view, stating that he could not imagine how Britain and France, in dispatching missions to arrange a military convention, "could not have given them some directives on such an elementary matter as the passage of Soviet armed forces against" German troops "on the territory of Poland and Roumania, with which countries France and Britain have corresponding military and political agreements."²²⁰

All other considerations aside, Voroshilov's point was quite valid. "Good sense was on the side of the Russians," writes Fontaine.²²¹ As another historian has commented, even if complete agreement between Russia and the Western Powers had been reached "the question would still remain what form her action should take while Poland and Rumania adhered to their refusal to allow her troops to enter their territory; and surely Russia, before undertaking to fight, was justified in asking where, how, and in what circumstances she would have to do so."²²² Furthermore, Seeds and Naggier agreed that "Soviet negotiators are justified in putting on Great Britain and France the onus of approaching those countries."²²³ However, Britain was determined to delay the whole issue. Ideally, Seeds and Halifax thought in terms of securing prior Soviet agreement that the contingency of an attack on Poland would be excluded from the military discussions.²²⁴ Halifax wired Seeds on July 25 that "imminence of military conversations makes it important that position of Poland should be cleared up", yet the only suggestions he could offer do not bespeak a serious approach toward the military talks. To Halifax, "clearing up" the Polish (and Rumanian) issue involved not preparing for contingencies of war, but rather how to evade the issue in negotiation:

"I shall be grateful to have your views as to whether it would be best now to tell M. Molotov frankly that we propose the contingency of Polish aggression should be excluded from scope of Staff conversations or when the time comes for our military representatives to say that they are not instructed to discuss this contingency."²²⁵ In his response of July 26, Seeds indicated that it would not be wise to raise the issue beforehand with Molotov, but that it would also be difficult to exclude the contingency from discussion at the staff meetings. Seeds tried to play down the matter as one of many issues that could cause a "hitch in military conversations."²²⁶ Finally, the British instructed their military delegation that "if the Russians propose that the British and French Governments should communicate to the Polish, Roumanian or Baltic States proposals involving co-operation with the Soviet Government for General Staff, the Delegation should not commit themselves but refer home."²²⁷

So, the British did indeed anticipate that the Russians would inevitably raise the issue of military actions with respect to Poland and Rumania and it was the British, not the Russians, who were guilty of bad faith in agreeing to the staff talks fully knowing that they were unprepared to negotiate on a central issue. On August 20 and 21 the French, with British approval, made a desperate, last-ditch effort to force Warsaw into accepting Soviet military assistance. On the 20th, Naggier and the head of the French Military Mission wired Paris that "M. Beck's objections should not be taken altogether literally, and that perhaps he merely wishes not to know anything about the matter"; they urged an affirmative reply to the principle of the right of passage of Soviet troops through Poland. On the 21st Bonnet approved this request, and Daladier sent instructions to the military mission to give

Poland's advance approval and sign the best agreement they could get. In 1946, Daladier recalled that on the morning of the 21st he summoned the Polish Ambassador in Paris to inform him that France intended to sign with Russia and that if Poland persisted in her negative attitude, "France would be compelled to reconsider her treaty of alliance." (The Polish Ambassador later denied that such an ultimatum was ever delivered.)²²⁸

These efforts were superfluous, for on August 23, Russia signed a non-aggression pact with Germany. The events directly leading to this agreement are worthy of consideration. I have already described the resumption of German-Soviet trade talks at the end of July and the corresponding eagerness in Berlin to reach an agreement with Russia. On August 5 Molotov sent word to Schnurre, in response to the latter's inquiries, that Moscow was prepared to continue the trade negotiations and considered the conclusion of a trade agreement as the first step in improving relations. However, when Schnurre met with Astakhov, he expressed his regret at Moscow's failure to put forth precise points of interest, thus inhibiting concrete discussion. Berlin, he indicated, was particularly interested in learning Soviet intentions toward Poland and the impending staff talks with England and France. Astakhov was noncommittal and stated that it was still too early to settle the problem of Poland.²²⁹ At this point, the Anglo-French military delegation had just arrived in Leningrad, on their way to Moscow. On the morning of August 12, after a delay which could not help but cast Anglo-French intentions in the worst light, the military delegations had their first meeting and the Russians learned that the British attitude toward the negotiations was such that they did not even give their delegation written credentials to negotiate. On the same day, Astakhov received new instructions from Moscow authorizing

him to tell Schnurre of the Soviet Government's interest in discussing the points raised by Schnurre two days before. Late on August 14, Ribbentrop instructed Schulenburg to press Moscow on the need for a non-aggression treaty "clarifying jointly territorial questions in Eastern Europe", and offered to travel to Moscow and meet with Stalin to secure the quickest possible settlement. On the morning of the 17th, Schulenburg presented Ribbentrop's message to Molotov, who responded that the trade agreement must first be signed, and that shortly thereafter a non-aggression pact with protocol defining the interests of each country could be concluded. The negotiations for the trade agreement were completed in Berlin on the evening of the 18th, and Stalin agreed to sign on the 19th. On the 20th Hitler urgently wired Stalin agreeing to Soviet terms for a non-aggression pact, with certain clarification; he insisted that Ribbentrop be received in Moscow within two days to conclude the treaty. On the 21st Stalin accepted Hitler's offer. Ribbentrop arrived in Moscow on the 23rd, where he was met by Molotov and Stalin. The negotiations went quickly and with ease, and a non-aggression pact was signed that day, including a special protocol granting Russia Bessarabia, Finland, Estonia, and part of Poland and Latvia. Now Hitler was free to go to war with Poland, which meant the start of World War II.

By all realistic standards, Stalin was justified in signing with Hitler as the best alternative at the time for the protection of Russia. What difference did it make to Stalin if this meant war for Britain and France? He was not interested in saving them from war, but rather in "diverting the conflagration away from Russia." Deutscher has written that to Stalin "the war was inevitable anyhow: if he had made no deal with Hitler, war would

still have broken out either now or somewhat later, under conditions incomparably less favourable to his country."²³⁰ It was Stalin who had consistently offered Russia's help to Britain and France in the event of war, and it was the Western Allies who rejected this help by refusing to agree to the terms on which it was offered, forcing Stalin to look elsewhere for protection and security. Britain's and France's conduct of every aspect of the negotiations in Moscow gave ample evidence that their real interest was not in securing a military alliance which could function in the event of war, but rather in gaining a greater measure of pressure in pursuit of an eventual agreement with Hitler which was anathema to all legitimate Soviet interests and needs. Fontaine writes that Stalin "had no confidence in the Allies' intention. Their behavior during the military negotiations justified these doubts. At the end of August, he still had reason to believe that France and England would yield to the Hitlerian diktat, as they had the previous year."²³¹ The argument that Stalin could have chosen to remain neutral and refuse an agreement with Hitler because of its consequences is preposterous from the viewpoint of a Soviet leader concerned with guaranteeing his country's security to the best degree allowed by external circumstances. Faced with the attitude evidenced by Britain and France, Stalin was justified in accepting Hitler's offer as the best alternative. "He could not leave himself in a position of complete isolation in the face of the German attack on Poland," writes George Kennan.²³² As Churchill later wrote, Stalin's decision was "at the moment realistic in a high degree."²³³ D. F. Fleming has summarized Russia's gains as a result of signing with Hitler:

(1) They got everything in the Baltic States which the Allies had refused them, and more....(2) They achieved freedom to correct their boundary with Finland and reclaim Bessarabia from Rumania. (3) Instead of incurring the full power of the Nazi war machine, while the West viewed their plight with satisfaction, they turned Hitler back upon the West. (4) They also acquired nearly two years of precious time in which to prepare for a German onslaught.²³⁴

There can be no doubt that it was in Russia's interests to gain time in preparing for the inevitable conflict with Hitler. In response to the argument that the non-aggression pact also gave Hitler time and actually enabled him to build the forces required for a massive invasion of Russia, it must be pointed out that as of August 23, 1939, it did not seem possible that Hitler would be able to increase his strength once involved in war with at least Britain, France and Poland. There is great validity in Churchill's assertion that "Stalin no doubt felt that Hitler would be a less deadly foe to Russia after a year of war with the Western Powers."²³⁵