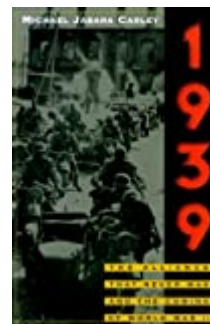


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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



Reviewed by William R. Keylor (Boston University)

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

When I first met Michael Carley several years ago in the foyer of the French Foreign Ministry in Paris, he was noticeably eager to get upstairs to the Salle des Archives and start work on the business at hand. When we prepared to depart at the end of a long day perusing dispatches and memoranda, he was the last to turn in his carton to the impatient bureaucrat on duty. In the course of subsequent conversations Carley has regaled me with tales of his ardent labors in the archives of the former Soviet Union in Moscow. The inelegant term "*rat des archives*," employed by Sally Marks to characterize the author of *1939: The Alliance that Never Was and the Coming of World War II*, strikes me as right on the mark. What many readers of this book may not realize is that Carley completed his exhaustive investigations in British, French, and Russian sources while occupying a full-time administrative position that did not afford the long sum-

mers and sabbaticals that academic historians depend on for this type of multi-archival research. Whatever judgment one may render on the interpretations and conclusions of this work, one must tip one's hat to the author for his shrewd and patient detective work in following the paper trail of diplomatic maneuvering in London, Paris, and Moscow as the governing elites in those three capitals and their representatives abroad labored in vain during the waning years of the 1930s to resurrect the old Triple Entente that had prevented a German-dominated Europe at the beginning of the last war.

Some may be tempted to ask whether there is anything new to say about the origins of the Second World War after the plethora of studies on that subject that have appeared in the past half century. The answer to that question must be a resounding "of course," for at least three reasons. First, successive generations of historians may develop valuable insights about historical events that had escaped or been ignored by their predecessors. Secondly, new archival evidence may prompt a reassessment of the reigning scholarly consensus concerning a particular historical development. Thirdly, the literary form of a historical work may command the attention of a readership beyond the small circle of scholarly specialists in the subject at hand, thereby helping to bridge the enormous and unfortunate gap between academic history and

the general public.

Carley's book qualifies as an important contribution to the historiography of the interwar period on all three counts. First, it offers a bold and vigorous challenge to the reigning scholarly judgments of the Western allies' failure to organize an effective coalition of states to deter or contain Nazi aggression in the 1930s. Most recent studies of appeasement, by focussing attention on the complex social, economic, military, and imperial challenges faced by the governing elites of Great Britain and France, have tended (at least by implication) to absolve Chamberlain, Daladier, and the other architects of appeasement of the terrible sins for which an earlier generation of historians had indicted them. Carley brushes aside most of the nuances, qualifications, and complications that other scholars have offered as extenuating circumstances that help to explain the Anglo-French propensity for seeking a diplomatic settlement with Hitler while rebuffing Soviet bids for an anti-German alliance. Instead, he applies Occam's razor to this old scholarly debate by offering a simple, straightforward, monocausal explanation focusing on ideological considerations: The fanatical anti-Communism that gripped the ruling elites of inter-war Britain and France prevented them from grasping the salient fact that only an alliance with Russia could prevent the total destruction of the 1919 peace settlement and the advent of a German hegemony in Europe.

Carley has little patience for the familiar explanations of Anglo-French policy that have made appeasement seem an almost over-determined outcome: the weakness of the Red army after Stalin's ruthless purge of the officer corps, which led Western observers to discount its military utility in a war against Germany; the Warsaw government's refusal to grant the Red Army transit rights across Polish territory, which rendered Soviet participation in a war against Germany problematical even if the purges had never occurred; the vivid memories of the Great War in France and the resulting obsession with avoiding a repetition of that national trauma, even at the price of treaty revision in Eastern Europe; the lingering guilt feelings in Great Britain about the territorial provisions of the Versailles settlement and its violation of the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination when applied to Germany, which Hitler skillfully exploited during the Rhineland, Austrian, Sudeten, and Danzig crises. For Carley, all of these circumstances recede into insignificance compared to what for him is the omnipresent and omnipotent force at work in the corridors of Whitehall and the Quai d'Orsay: the rabid anti-

Bolshevism among policymakers in London and Paris led them to fear not defeat but victory over Germany with Soviet assistance, for such a victory would lead to what they feared even more than a German-dominated Europe: a Europe fatally infected by the bacillus of Bolshevism.

The work under review does not offer stunning new revelations from hitherto hidden sources that might authorize the author to claim, as John Gaddis did after absorbing the torrent of monographs on the Cold War based on recently opened Soviet archives, "we now know" this or that about the Kremlin's real intentions. The Russian diplomatic records on which Carley relies have all been published, most long before the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. But few specialists in the history of appeasement have exploited them, at least in the systematic way that Carley has. His close reading of the correspondence between the Narkomindel and its embassies in London and Paris, supplemented by his analysis of the more familiar material found in the correspondence between the French and British foreign offices and their representatives in Moscow in the late 1930s, affords us a fascinating glimpse into the policymaking process of all three powers as they failed to forge "the alliance that never was."

Finally, a word must be said about the author's distinctive writing style. In his response to the criticism directed at his book by reviewers in this forum, Carley defiantly declares that it "is not a scholarly monograph, full of dull, impenetrable prose, loaded down with long commentaries in the endnotes, examining all the angles and variants of all the possible interpretations of the issues at hand. This is a story, a historical narrative, my narrative, as I see it, of key events leading up to World War II." I would submit that it is not merely a story. It is a morality tale, complete with a *dramatis personae* of heroes (Vansittart, Churchill, Mandel, Reynaud, Maiskii, and, above all, Litvinov) and villains (Chamberlain, Cadogan, Daladier, Bonnet, Beck) locked in an epic struggle to prevent Europe's descent into barbarism. Because this is history rather than imaginative literature, the reader knows in advance the bleak outcome of that story and that struggle: the war, the fall of France, the Holocaust, and the death, destruction, and despair caused by the imposition of the Nazi imperium on the continent. Viewed with the wisdom of hindsight, the choices facing British and French policymakers at every turn seem so clear cut in Carley's narrative scheme that those making the wrong decisions evoke only condemnation as well as the suspicion of ulterior motives. The reader experiences, as one

ought to in a finely crafted work of literature, a kind of emotional catharsis in observing the Anglo-French descent into disaster during what Carley calls (with his customary flair for sweeping judgments) this “low, dishonest decade.” The book’s fast-paced (at times almost breathless) recitation of unfolding events, its richly-textured characterizations of the main actors in the drama, the almost conversational tone of its pithy put-downs and sardonic asides, its air of pontifical certainty in dispensing definitive appraisals of people and policies, stands in sharp contrast to the meticulous scholarship that underpins the narrative offered by this *rat des archives*. General readers uninterested in arcane scholarly disputes will doubtless be charmed by the thoroughly engaging tale of heroism and perfidy Carley has to tell.

Like the three reviewers in this Forum, scholarly specialists will find this or that assertion in 1939 to challenge. In my view, the uniformly critical appraisal of Polish foreign policy betrays a lack of appreciation for the excruciating difficulties faced by a geographically cursed country sandwiched between Germany and Russia as it struggled to preserve its national independence. The observation that “Soviet foreign policy was approved by the Politburo and carried out by the Narkomindel” and that “Even the text of the [foreign] commissar’s interviews with the press were approved and sometimes revised by

the Politburo” leaves the impression of a consultative, bureaucratic system that strains credulity. Carley concedes that when working in Moscow he “saw correspondence to Stalin, but never from Stalin” and that the Soviet dictator “did most of his communicating by phone.” With memories of the murderous purges of the army, the bureaucracy, and the party still fresh in the minds of survivors in the Soviet apart, one must assume (in the absence of disconfirming evidence) that the sound of a thick Georgian accent over the phone lines must have prompted speedy “approval” by the Politburo and “execution” by the Foreign Ministry. The dismissive appraisal of the Kremlin’s approaches to Berlin long before the failure of the Anglo-French military mission to Moscow as mere “tactical probes or trade initiatives,” followed by the observation that London’s and Paris’s “interest in composition with Nazi Germany was greater than in Moscow,” requires a more systematic examination of the German records than Carley has given us in this robust reinterpretation of the origins of the Second World War, which is certain to entertain generalists and provoke controversy among specialists for years to come.

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