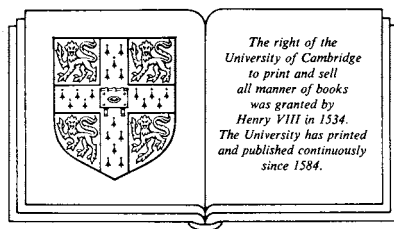


STAFFORD CRIPPS' MISSION TO MOSCOW, 1940-42



GABRIEL GORODETSKY

Senior Lecturer in History, Tel Aviv University



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ORIGINS OF THE MISSION

Early involvement

The outbreak of the Second World War marked a watershed in the political career of Stafford Cripps, who had just turned fifty. A decade of radical activity on the fringes of British politics was drawing to an end. In June 1939 Cripps' protracted campaign for a united front against fascism had provoked his expulsion from the Labour Party. Just as unsuccessful was his attempt to find a common cause with Tories opposed to Chamberlain, notably Churchill and Eden, during the negotiations with Russia in the summer of 1939.¹ Cripps' isolation was most conspicuous in the upsurge of national unity which followed Britain's declaration of war on Germany. As inactivity was foreign to his nature, Cripps' immediate impulse was to 'wipe out all discussions and get back and help in the Party'. Labour's condemnation of the Russian invasion of Poland on 16 September made him change his mind.²

Having clearly reached a dead end in domestic politics, Cripps decided to divert his energies and talents to the arena of international politics and toyed with the idea of embarking on an exploratory tour of Russia. The absence of a power base did not discourage him. A natural nonconformist, Cripps had often stood alone and the position of a lone warrior even seemed to appeal to him.³ In order to contribute his utmost to the war effort Cripps now made a long-due decision to wind up his exceedingly lucrative practice at the Bar. Throughout the 1930s Cripps, whose health was fragile probably as a result of gas poisoning in a munitions factory in the First World War, had combined a strenuous career as the leading patent lawyer in England with an intensive and time-consuming involvement in politics, both in Parliament and as a leader of the left wing of the Labour Party.

Stafford Cripps' mission to Moscow, 1940–42

Cripps' decision to seek an official post by no means signalled the abandonment of his revolutionary outlook but perhaps underlined his unique combination of idealistic vision and penetrating grip on reality. He certainly had a patriotic impulse to serve his country, especially in a war against fascism, but also believed that the war would prove a catalyst for change and an opportunity for implementing his own ideas. This may clearly be traced on the pages of *Tribune* and in letters written to his constituents. In a typical letter, which also explains his decision to offer his services to the government, Cripps expressed his belief that:

having been got into this intolerable mess by the Government we have got to help in some way or another, but this does not of course mean that I am relaxing one whit of my opposition to the Government or my attempts to turn it out of office. Indeed at the present time it is easier to work along these lines if one can get somewhere into the machine, as in war time it is difficult to break a machine of Government except from inside . . .

My own view is to Maximise the drive to get rid of the present Government in favour of anything that is better with the ultimate hope of breaking the power of capitalism before the war is ended.⁴

This dialectical approach is discernible in his attitude to international relations in general and Russia in particular, which displays the varied sources of influence on him. The choice of Russia was natural, since throughout the 1930s Cripps had been a staunch supporter of that country. In 1933, early in his political life, he defied popular feeling by defending the Soviet courts for their decision to convict British engineers employed in Russia by the Metro-Vickers company of spying and subversion. The Socialist League which he chaired, and *Tribune* which he founded, edited and largely financed, had been advocates of an alliance with Russia. This affinity with the Soviet Union was even more pronounced in the negotiations in 1939.⁵ Cripps' advocacy of the Soviet Union stemmed from his socialist convictions; these however owed more to the Bible and an assortment of other humanitarian and egalitarian considerations than to *Das Kapital*, which he had not ever pretended to have read. Moreover, Cripps had never belonged to the grass roots of the British Labour movement and he had little interest in its traditions and history. His convictions, in his own words, were the application of 'elementary truth . . . the tenets of our religion . . . in the

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complexities of our modern civilization'. The concepts of brotherhood, love, freedom, equality and the value of the human individual frequently appeared in his speeches, writings and private correspondence.⁶

On the ideological front Cripps could thus be heard defending the Soviet occupation of Poland as an assistance to the Polish peasants in the struggle against their landlords.⁷ And yet his approach to international relations and to Russia could be exceedingly sober, closely resembling the views held by the Union of Democratic Control and the Fabians.⁸ Despite his campaign in favour of a popular front and his extreme left-wing opinions, unlike other fellow-travellers of the 1930s he was by no means infatuated with the Soviet Union; this must have been recognized in Moscow too. In an open letter to a member of the British Communist Party, he fully supported Harry Pollitt's resignation from the Political Bureau of the party, over the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact, on the grounds that at such grave times the party should be 'controlled by the people in it and not by any ideas or actions of Foreign Government'. He even went on to admonish the party's leadership for being 'bad and confused'.⁹ Cripps himself was one of the few politicians who were not swayed by the anti-Soviet sentiments which overwhelmed Britons of all political persuasions after the conclusion of the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact. This, however, was not a result of external pressure but rather a realistic appreciation that had Russia 'come in on the side of the Allies [she] would be doing all the fighting in the East, and France and Britain would no more be able to assist her than they had been able, or willing, to assist Poland'.¹⁰

The ambiguity was also a product of his singular personality. Cripps' entire political career had been propelled by the rather naive notion that universal understanding and socialism could only be achieved through persuasion and personal contact. His overwhelming confidence in his mental superiority, his ability to digest vast amounts of material and extract the gist, his administrative ability – all acquired at the Bar – often contributed to his political effectiveness. His background, a wealthy family with deep roots in the rural gentry, ensured his social acceptability, despite his radical views and eccentricities. Moreover, his meteoric rise within the Labour Party was due to some extent to his father, Lord Parmoor, who had served in MacDonald's first Labour government.¹¹

However, Cripps lacked an overall view and tended to treat political

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issues as if they were court cases. For the same reason he tended to become fully absorbed in one or two causes at a time. No less of an impediment, and unexpected in a shrewd and successful lawyer, was his basic and uncritical faith in people which made him a poor judge of character and contributed to his political naivety. His invincibility in private discussions, his self-righteousness, though never aggressive, aggravated by his ascetic and spartan image, prevented him from becoming widely popular. This image was somewhat mistaken. His abstemiousness was to a great extent a result of poor health. Those who came in direct contact with him often attested to his warm personality and even his robust sense of humour.

The cross-roads in Cripps' public life now curiously coincided with a transformation in his appearance. It was wittily described by an astute observer:

In the middle 'thirties he had been black-haired and rather chubby. He wore round spectacles with rims. It was possible to think of him as a precocious schoolboy who had turned into a clever but immature lawyer. At the age of about 48 . . . he thinned down and assumed a more ascetic and formidable visage. He also became converted to a system of conscious bodily control which . . . gave him a peculiarly erect and detached but dedicated carriage. And the spectacles became smaller and rimless. The Cripps of his Chancellorship had assumed bodily shape.¹²

Cripps' hopes of redressing relations with Russia were not far-fetched. Having failed to achieve their security aims, the Russians had chosen out of sheer realism the lesser evil of concluding a neutrality pact with Germany.¹³ Their borders were momentarily secured but diplomatic manoeuvrability was lost. The Russians' miscalculation, however, was revealed by the crushing defeat of Poland without any British involvement in the fighting. It was seriously feared in Moscow that the war would turn against Russia after all. Hasty measures were taken to exploit the pact with Germany and achieve by military means what they had failed to do through diplomacy in the 1930s. The establishment of a buffer zone through the partition of Poland, and later the annexation of the Baltic States and the secession of Finnish territories to the Soviet Union, were defensive moves in keeping with the policy consistently executed between 1933 and 1939, and directed indiscriminately against any belligerent power.

Origins of the mission



1 Cripps strolling in Southport with his wife Isobel after being expelled from the Labour Party

Given the inherent suspicion of Russia prevailing in Britain and the indignation caused by the Ribbentrop–Molotov agreement, announced while the British and French military missions were still negotiating in Moscow, it is not surprising that the initial reaction in London was that Russia had thrown in her lot with Germany. The Russians therefore resorted to strenuous efforts to placate Britain and consolidate their own neutrality. This was reflected in numerous interviews conducted by Ivan Maisky,¹⁴ as well as the presentation of the invasion of Poland as a defensive move against Germany. Moreover, Stalin personally persuaded Ribbentrop to modify a proposed speech on the course of German–Soviet negotiations which might lead the West to assume his complicity with German military schemes. Nor did Germany's efforts to enlist Russia's political support and exploit the friendship clauses of the pact meet with much success. Molotov and Stalin repeatedly declined German invitations to visit Berlin. Count Werner von

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Schulenburg, the German ambassador to the USSR, informed his superiors in Berlin that Russia was 'determined to cling to neutrality and to avoid as much as possible anything which might involve it in a conflict with the Western Powers'.¹⁵ The 'rapidity' of the German conquest, as confessed by Maisky, had come as 'a great surprise' to the Russians, who by no means wished for a German victory. Andrew Rothstein, head of the Tass Agency in London, informed an official in the Foreign Office that the Russians did not 'contemplate with pleasure a future in which a powerful and victorious Germany should be her next door neighbour'.¹⁶

Further, the Russians were concerned by the failure of the British Expeditionary Force to intervene in Poland and the stagnation of the ensuing 'phoney war'. They feared that this left the door open for Chamberlain, whom they regarded with 'profound mistrust', to come to terms with Germany, which would in turn isolate the Soviet Union. Maisky openly admitted that a Cabinet led by Churchill and Eden with Labour representatives 'would be trusted by the Kremlin in a way which Chamberlain's would not'. His unwearied activity was clearly aimed at demonstrating Russia's strict neutrality and keeping a vigilant eye on Chamberlain rather than achieving a rapprochement with Britain. It was, as Maisky explained to Halifax, 'an uncertain world and . . . no friendship was very secure'; Russia had to be 'prepared for any eventuality'.¹⁷

When the first wave of indignation over the German-Soviet pact had subsided and the realities of war sank in, a vacuum became apparent in British policy-making with regard to future relations with Russia. Britain was obviously at a loss when attempting to evaluate Soviet aims. The military, not yet on a war footing, were still under the spell of out-moded concepts. In a report submitted to Cabinet, their non-committal observation was that the Russians had a dual policy: 'to spread world revolution' and improve their strategic situation. The old threat to the East was disproportionately prominent and the Cabinet was called upon to protect those areas 'likely to be infected by the Virus of Bolshevik doctrine'. Soviet military power was belittled and the possibility of a clash with England was estimated as remote. Nor did Soviet encroachment in the Baltic area pose any 'immediate threat to British interests'. The report was rejected by Cabinet, not only for its superficiality but because it did not consider, for instance, the political aspects of an

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improvement in Anglo-Soviet relations; this might sow dissent within the unstable Soviet-German alliance.¹⁸

The ambassador to Moscow was not much more forthcoming. Sir William Seeds, who had been recalled from his retirement to patch up the deteriorating relations with Russia after Munich, saw in the German-Soviet pact a personal blow; he was now a bitter man. The only evaluation he was prepared to make was that the chances of the Soviet Union joining forces with Germany against Britain were 'perhaps fifty-fifty'.¹⁹ The advice of the Foreign Office was equally unhelpful. The abrupt end of the negotiations with Russia was received there with considerable relief. It ended a protracted internal debate on the advisability of alliance with Russia in which the proponents had been steadily losing ground. The almost unequivocal recommendation now was to 'sit tight and avoid friction as far as possible'. The so-called 'reserve' policy had been consistently pursued since the consolidation of the Soviet régime in the 1920s. A strong emotional undercurrent, hitherto somewhat subdued, flowed under the apparent indifference and was now given a vent. It thus seemed inconceivable to Robert Vansittart, who in the mid-1930s had favoured rapprochement with Russia, 'to go traipsing off to Moscow at Soviet beck and call – after a line of other supplicants had already trod the same humiliating course'.²⁰ The 'frigid but unprovocative' attitude²¹ resulted in inattention to the increasing weight of the Soviet Union in the European war. It had hampered the participation of the Soviet Union in an effective arrangement of collective security and contributed to her emergence as the leading power in Europe during the course of the war.

In the absence of an overall view the Cabinet aimed at short-range targets, often purely economic in nature, which fell in line with its general strategy of winning the war through stringent economic pressure. It concluded, for instance, a 'bargain' – a barter agreement by which British boats stranded in Soviet ports were loaded with timber. Even such a minor arrangement was accompanied by serious reservations which demonstrate the suspicion with which the Soviet Union was regarded. It was feared that the Russians might direct German submarines to sink the boats after they had left port.²²

The origins of Cripps' ambassadorship to Moscow go back to 16 September 1939. In a letter to Halifax, Cripps recalled his warning in

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July 1939 of an impending German–Soviet understanding if negotiations with Russia were allowed to lapse. To forestall a Soviet move into East Poland, which he believed was now imminent, he urged Halifax to send to Moscow ‘an all party delegation’ to arrange a non-aggression pact. Before the proposal reached the Foreign Secretary, however, the entry of Soviet troops into Poland had made it obsolete. Cripps, who continued to hold that Britain had ‘grossly mishandled’ the negotiations with Russia, was not deterred from offering to go ‘right away’ to Moscow. On the contrary, to prevent the consolidation of a Soviet–German military understanding he urged the government to ‘try and maintain Russia neutral’.²³

Both Cripps’ suggestions, to dispatch emissaries to Moscow and to conclude a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, were greeted with profound resentment in the Foreign Office. Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, was quick to point out that the term non-aggression ‘stinks somewhat’; an alliance with a country which had committed ‘even a more flagrant act of aggression than Germany’ was out of the question. The humiliation inflicted on the military mission, which was present in Moscow when the pact with Germany was signed, meant that nobody could go to Moscow ‘without appearing to go to Canossa’. A more substantial argument against any initiative was raised by Sir Robert Vansittart, former Permanent Under-Secretary and now nominally Chief Adviser to the Foreign Secretary, and was shared by no less a figure than Chamberlain. They expected the ‘alarm and discouragement’ that such a policy was likely to cause in Italy and Spain to outweigh its advantages. As for Cripps’ proposed mission, it was argued that notwithstanding his political affiliations he would ‘inevitably’ be regarded ‘as an Englishman’ and mistrusted. The sole consideration in favour of allowing him to go was that in view of ‘his past record and well known sympathies’ there was a mere possibility of ‘his gleaning something of interest’ in Moscow.

Support for Cripps came from an unexpected quarter. Halifax, who had declined a Soviet invitation to visit Moscow at a crucial stage of the 1939 negotiations and who had been singled out as responsible for their failure, now instructed the Foreign Office ‘to encourage’ Cripps and even proposed a personal discussion of such a mission with him.²⁴ Arrangements for the journey, however, did not proceed any further.

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The Russians, who throughout the 1939 negotiations had been handled by second-rank officials, were not enthusiastic. Maisky intimated on 20 September that a socialist delegation to Moscow at that moment was not propitious. A few days later, visiting his close friends the Webbs, he dismissed the 'frivolous and futile' plan of Cripps, who enjoyed 'no authority or personal standing' with the government and had 'very little knowledge of Soviet institutions'. Indeed, Cripps was soon forced to make the embarrassing admission to Halifax that he had been refused a visa.²⁵

The significance of this frustrating episode is that it saw the emergence of Cripps' idea of a mission to Moscow and his faith in his ability to effect a change in a major political issue. Equally clearly demonstrated is the subtle though distinct shift in Halifax's outlook in defiance of the Foreign Office's increased reluctance to approach Russia; this eventually made Cripps' mission possible.

Halifax, who had accepted with misgivings the post of Foreign Secretary after Eden's resignation in 1938, exercised little influence on the formulation of British policy before the war. He had scant knowledge of and little interest in European affairs. In office he lacked the vigour and enthusiasm which characterized Eden. A conciliator, Halifax often took the longer route to make 'a detour round the swamps', rendering his decision-making notoriously slow. R. A. Butler, his Parliamentary Secretary, has eloquently described him as 'always open to the last comer'; faced with new ideas, he would 'commune with himself, with his Maker, and with Alec [Cadogan]. So plenty of time elapsed before he took a decision.'²⁶ Consequently, senior Foreign Office officials were given unprecedented latitude. However, owing to their criticism of appeasement, the officials exercised little influence on policy-making, which was handled directly by Chamberlain and his private advisers. Halifax was thus not even invited by Chamberlain to attend the conference with Hitler in Bad Godesberg and Munich. His tacit support of appeasement stemmed more from personal loyalty to the Prime Minister and his poor grasp of foreign affairs than from conviction.²⁷ Faced by mounting criticism in the wake of Munich, Halifax was in fact drifting away from appeasement, and even advised Chamberlain to invite Churchill and Eden as well as Labour representatives to join the Cabinet. By summer 1939 he was 'reluctantly' forced

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to the conclusion that Germany could be stopped only if 'met by force', though he did not feel strongly enough to force a significant rift within the Cabinet.²⁸

When war was declared the Foreign Secretary's authority in Cabinet was enhanced in relation to the disillusioned and ailing Prime Minister. The Cabinet, which was now absorbed with military affairs, once again entrusted the conduct of foreign policy to the Foreign Office. Halifax's vulnerability to varying influences from his senior officials encouraged the emergence of different and often contradictory policies. Relations with Russia, which gradually became of primary importance, are a case in point. Since taking office Halifax had maintained an attitude of suspicion bordering on hostility towards the Soviet Union. This did not originate in a class outlook, as is always suggested by Soviet historiography.²⁹ He followed the long Conservative tradition of seeing in Russia and later in the Soviet Union a threat to western civilization in general and the British empire in particular. In Stalin he saw a successor of Peter the Great rather than of Lenin. His experience as Viceroy of India in the 1920s must have contributed to this feeling. Halifax's early attraction to Hitler was based on the assumption that Nazi Germany could serve as a bulwark against Russia. 'An intelligent rabbit', he wrote in 1939, referring to the Polish refusal to accept Soviet help which torpedoed the tripartite negotiations, 'would hardly be expected to welcome the protection of an animal ten times its size, whom it credited with the habits of a boa-constrictor.'³⁰

At the outbreak of war Halifax, unlike Chamberlain, who remained bitterly anti-Soviet, and in contrast to the Foreign Office's officials who belittled the advantage of collaboration with Russia, displayed a more even-handed policy. Although he continued to share the commonly held view that the Soviet Union was the 'query mark' in Europe and admitted to lack of understanding of the 'strange Bolshevik mind', a break with the past was apparent. He grimly observed that England was living in 'strange days' and condoned rapprochement with the Soviet Union to drive a wedge between that country and Germany.³¹ In this he was supported even by the arch-appeaser John Simon, who recognized the Soviet potential for 'stopping the Drang-nach-Osten'. In Cabinet Halifax exercised a moderating influence. After Russia's invasion of Poland he rejected proposals to aid Poland by declaring war on Russia and even opposed Chamberlain's suggestion of a protest to Moscow.³²

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However, Halifax was 'particularly averse' to personal communication with the Soviet ambassador. He delegated the unpleasant task to Butler who, because of Halifax's seat in the House of Lords, also represented him in the Commons. Both Butler and Cadogan attended most Cabinet meetings which touched on foreign policy.³³ The formulation of policy towards Russia in the Foreign Office up to the emergence of Churchill as Prime Minister was to a great extent a result of the continuous clash between the shrewd, unbending and farsighted Butler and the civil servants in the Office, notably Cadogan. The diverging views in the Office coupled with Halifax's irresolution made it possible for an outsider like Cripps to leave his imprint.

The wave of indignation which followed the Soviet entrance into Poland increased after the conclusion of the Soviet-German trade agreement on 23 September and the Soviet mutual assistance pacts with the Baltic States at the end of the month. Hitler had just emerged with his 'peace offensive', which the Russians feared might lead to renewed appeasement. Soviet foreign policy, committed to strict neutrality, urgently sought to pacify Britain. The bait chosen was the trade negotiations proposed to Halifax by Maisky.³⁴

The impetus towards a review of relations came, however, from Churchill, an avowed enemy of the Soviet régime. Like Cripps, Churchill was quick to grasp the importance of not alienating Russia. 'In mortal war', he observed realistically, 'anger must be subordinated to defeating the main immediate enemy.' His arguments expounded in Cabinet undoubtedly influenced the wavering Halifax and apparently the Prime Minister himself.³⁵ Chamberlain, who continued to regard the Russians with deep hostility and suspicion, rarely intervened in the course of the negotiations. He simply failed to readjust to the changing circumstances. This was the result of his being on the defensive, emotionally preoccupied with the events leading to the war. Chamberlain reproached the Russians for treacherously concluding a pact with Hitler who, he still maintained, 'was led to this diplomatic blunder' by Ribbentrop. However, he was content to regard the negotiations as a punitive measure which 'would not be to the taste of Ribbentrop and Co.'. Hitler, who he believed had received 'a terrible shock' over Russia's demands to Finland, would have to 'pay terribly' for committing himself to the East.³⁶

Churchill's views were made public in October. 'Russia', said

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Churchill, 'is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. But perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.' A powerful Germany encircling the Soviet Union was contrary to those interests.³⁷ The speech was not overlooked by Maisky, who had been desperately seeking the key to British policies. A week later Maisky set out for the Admiralty for a meeting with Churchill. There was a 'thick fog in the streets of London, one in which street lighting was quenched and the shades of night fell fast'. Inside the ponderous building, however, a cordial atmosphere reigned. Churchill regretted the missed opportunity of securing the 'community of very important interests existing between the countries'. More significant, however, was Churchill's disclosure that in Cabinet he had been defending Soviet moves to secure defensive positions in the Baltic and urging his colleagues to 'keep cool heads and follow the dictates of common sense'.³⁸

Churchill had paved the way for normalization both in Cabinet and with the Russians. He, however, was entirely absorbed in running the Admiralty. It was left to Cripps to serve not only as an intermediary but also as the architect of the change.³⁹ The close attention paid to Cripps rather than to the large number of prominent politicians in touch with Maisky is puzzling. Cripps continued his outspoken criticisms of the 'most reactionary government' for Britain's 'plight' and warned that it was bound 'to destroy the country by its continued ineptitudes and inefficiencies'. He maintained, even after the reshuffle of May 1940, that the government could never lead the country 'into anything but defeat and disgrace'.⁴⁰ However, the government's lack of initiative and Halifax's indecisiveness increased Cripps' influence. Halifax, a good listener and an admirer of those who 'could speak brilliantly', was favourably inclined towards Cripps. Despite the great political and ideological gulf separating them and the differences in their personality and way of life, the two had much in common. Both conducted straightforward and naive relationships and were devout churchmen and proponents of church unity. Their patriotism was sustained by the belief that it was their 'duty as Christians' to fight Nazism. A less well known characteristic of Halifax is that he was not opposed to the idea of social progress.⁴¹

After the outbreak of war, when Cripps spent most of his time in London, he often discussed politics with Halifax. At first these conver-

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sations centred on India. Cripps, who was a close friend of Nehru, tried to interest the former Viceroy in his plans for the independence of India.⁴² Russia, however, increasingly figured more prominently. Confused by the recent Soviet approaches, Halifax found in Cripps a source of valuable information and advice. On 13 October Cripps, who frequently met Maisky, conveyed to Halifax the Russians' wish to open trade negotiations. A day earlier Eden emerged from lunch with Maisky convinced that the recent Soviet moves were overtly directed against Germany. In his usual metaphorical style, Maisky had asserted that in a world 'where wild beasts were loose' Russia had to secure 'certain vital strategic points . . . for its own safety'.⁴³ Unlike Eden, however, Cripps was never really satisfied with either being an intermediary or playing second fiddle. His dealings with Halifax were a portent of the political traits which characterized his ambassadorship in Moscow. Having conveyed the Soviet hopes of embarking on negotiations, Cripps presented Halifax with an elaborate scheme which he thought the government should endorse. Once progress was made, he proposed that Oliver Stanley, the President of the Board of Trade, whom he had already sounded out,⁴⁴ should head the delegation. To himself he assigned the modest task of legal adviser to the delegation. The effect of this on Halifax was immediate. Early next morning Halifax, adopting many of Cripps' positions of the previous night, encouraged Stanley to accept the plan, to which he attached 'a good deal of political importance'. He appeared anxious to remedy 'the complete political deadlock and absence of political touch' with the Soviet Union.⁴⁵

At Cripps' suggestion Halifax also consented to meet Maisky, who reassured him that Russia's policy in the Baltic was to improve her strategic position against Germany. Maisky was faithfully conveying appraisals made in Moscow. In presenting territorial demands to a visiting Finnish delegation, Stalin used the same words to explain that although relations with Germany were good 'anything [might] change'. The interview was marked at that early stage by a strong undercurrent which both Halifax and his mentor Cripps seem to have overlooked. Maisky was trying to ascertain, as a result of his meeting with Churchill, the possibility of British connivance at Soviet defensive measures. At the same time he was sounding out whether Britain would consider further peace proposals by Hitler. Halifax, however, confined himself to the