



*The Maisky Diaries: Red Ambassador to the Court of St James's, 1932–1943* ed. Gabriel Gorodetsky.

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Although Ivan Maisky (1884–1975) was the Soviet ambassador to Great Britain from 1932 to 1943, his diary begins only in 1934. The lengthy work reviewed here contains only about 25 percent of the diary, but includes excellent commentary and introductory and closing sections by the editor, Gabriel Gorodetsky (Tel Aviv Univ.), a leading scholar on Soviet foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Yale University Press will soon publish the complete diary in three volumes along with a “vast referential apparatus” and “extensive commentary” by Gorodetsky (xli). (This explains the absence of a bibliography in the present abridged version of the *Diaries*.)

The editor introduces us to Maisky (like “Lenin” and “Stalin,” an assumed, not a birth name), his significance, and the context of his long life and career. He was not only a major diplomat and voluminous diarist, but the author of mainly nonfiction works and what Gorodetsky calls a “compelling novel” (xvi). He wrote poetry and enjoyed art and classical music. Being multilingual and possessing an affable personality, he was comfortable with people of noble background, like Winston Churchill and his foreign minister Anthony Eden, as well as members of other classes. His “extraordinary memory ... [and] penetrating psychological insight, powerful observation and insatiable curiosity, turned him into one of the most astute witnesses to the dramatic events and personalities of the 1930s” (xvi).

Maisky was at the center of world events as ambassador in Great Britain, a nation that appeased Adolf Hitler before becoming, under the wartime Churchill, the heart of opposition to him. Moreover, he represented a country that went from preaching collective security against Hitler to aiding him by its trade policies under the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (August 1939–June 1941) and, finally, to bearing the overwhelming brunt of German aggression for three long years.

But Maisky was up to the challenge. In chapter 2, “The Making of a Soviet Diplomat,” Gorodetsky tells us that Ivan grew up in the Siberian city of Omsk, where his Jewish-Polish father served as a medical officer whose passion was science. His house was full of books and exuded an “atheist atmosphere.” Ivan’s favorite author was the nineteenth-century German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, about whom he wrote (when he was sixteen), “Heine is humanity. He personifies it to perfection as nobody else has done. In him is reflected all the good and bad in humanity” (xxviii–xxix). Gorodetsky sums up the influence of Ivan’s home and personality:

The literary atmosphere at home refined Maisky’s acute powers of observation, which were enhanced by his rich imagination and his curiosity. It helped forge his complex personality, which, while romantic and artistic, was also governed by a belief in “reason, science, knowledge, and the right of man to be master of life on earth.” [Some of] the novels [he read] opened a window on Europe and awakened in

1. A former Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, he is also the author of *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1999), among other books.

Maisky a longing for travel and an interest in geography which would gradually shape his cosmopolitan outlook once in exile. (xxx)

While attending St. Petersburg University, he was arrested for revolutionary activity. He was exiled to Siberia and then abroad, mainly in Munich, where he earned a master's degree in economics, and then in London. Before leaving Russia he joined the Menshevik Marxists, rivals of the Bolsheviks. In London, Maisky became friendly with two men destined to play important roles in Soviet foreign policy—Georgy Chicherin and Maksim Litvinov, successive Soviet commissars for foreign affairs (foreign ministers) in the 1920s and 1930s.

Maisky returned to Russia during the revolutionary year of 1917 and for two years allied himself with opponents of the Bolsheviks, first the Mensheviks and then, during the civil war, other socialists. Only in 1919 did he attempt to “make it up with the Bolsheviks” (xxxvi). Although he was accepted into the Communist Party during the early 1920s and later held diplomatic posts in London, Tokyo, and Helsinki, his earlier opposition to the Bolsheviks, as well as his cosmopolitan demeanor, made him suspect to narrower, hardline Stalinists. Gorodetsky refers to his “ingrained pragmatism and humanistic outlook” (xxxv) and notes that British socialist Beatrice Webb, “Maisky's inspiration and most intimate friend in Britain,” once said, “Certainly Maisky is one of the most open minded of Marxists” (xxxviii).

After Gorodetsky's two opening chapters, come a few pages of prologue and then ten chapters of Maisky's annual diaries (1934–43). In this abridgement, the chapters for 1939–1941 are the longest, as much as three times longer those for 1934–37.

Maisky's most important revelations and insights concern the diplomatic dealings between the USSR and Great Britain, especially under Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill. For example, he recounts a private meeting with Churchill (23 Mar. 1938), then a prominent Conservative Member of Parliament, at which Churchill called Prime Minister Chamberlain “a complete ignoramus in matters of foreign policy” for appeasing Hitler and advocated “a ‘grand alliance’ ... to unite Great Britain, France, the Little Entente [Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania] and the USSR.” Maisky quotes Churchill as saying, “I believe that the time of the grand alliance will come.... Today, communism does not represent such a danger to the Empire. Today, the greatest menace to the British Empire is German Nazism, with its idea of Berlin's global hegemony. That is why at the present time, I spare no effort in the struggle against Hitler” (109–10). Maisky shared his desire for such an alliance, but the non-aggression pact of 1939 prevented British-Soviet cooperation until after the Germans attacked the USSR (June 1941).

As the United States became more involved in aiding Great Britain and eventually entered World War II, Maisky's diaries include entries about British and Soviet diplomatic dealings with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In November 1940, Maisky mentions that the American ambassador in London, Joseph Kennedy (JFK's father), paid him a “farewell visit.” Here is his assessment of the departing Kennedy:

Kennedy has not been up to the job at all. Roosevelt, Churchill and the English political world—all are dissatisfied with him. That is the cause of his dismissal.... At the bottom of it all lies the fact that Kennedy is a wealthy, orthodox Irish Catholic who has a mortal terror of revolution and would like to live in harmony with “fascist dictators.” That explains his dislike of the Soviet Union, his liking of Chamberlain, whom he has always supported, and his fear of a war which may, under certain circumstances, unleash revolutionary potentialities. (322)

Such observations are quite typical of the diaries. Reading them combines the pleasure of gaining new insights about momentous events and receiving juicy gossip about important people. Most en-

lightening and interesting are all Maisky's meetings with Eden and, less frequently, Churchill, sometimes both at once, before and during their time in office. Maisky's entries on these meetings, which occurred in both offices and homes, blend reports of diplomatic discussions with his observations about both men.

On 6 October 1939, not long after Chamberlain brought Churchill into the Cabinet as the First Lord of the Admiralty (he did not become prime minister until May 1940), Maisky was invited to see him at the Admiralty at 10:00 p.m. The ambassador sums up Churchill's "starting point" as a belief "that the basic interests of Britain and the USSR do not collide anywhere"; further, Churchill had no objection to Soviet policies in the Baltic States. Although these policies soon led to the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and most of Lithuania, as well as some Finnish territory, Churchill thought, in Maisky's words, that "If the Baltic countries have to lose their independence, it is better for them to be brought into the Soviet state system rather than the German one." Maisky adds, "We parted 'like friends.' Churchill asked me to keep in close touch and to turn to him without ceremony whenever the need arose" (232-33).

After the Germans invaded the USSR in June 1941, the Soviets strongly urged Britain (and, after December 1941, the United States) to open a "second front" against Germany. That such a front took three years to materialize—Stalin counted neither the Allied North African nor Italian campaigns as second fronts—made the Soviet leader doubt his Western allies. This profoundly affected negotiations regarding postwar settlements. In an editorial insertion, Gorodetsky quotes Stalin's telegram to Maisky (19 Oct. 1942), stating that Churchill's unwillingness to initiate a second front reflected a desire to see the USSR defeated "in order to then come to terms with the Germany of Hitler" (463). Less distrustful of Great Britain than was Stalin, Maisky found himself in the middle, constantly trying both to expedite the launching of a second front and to allay Stalin's misgivings about British intentions.

One diary entry (17 Feb. 1943) recounts an evening meeting with foreign minister Eden at Churchill's residence. Over whisky and sodas, they discussed the possibility of Britain and the United States opening a second front against Hitler; Eden was more amenable than Churchill to acting sooner rather than later. Gorodetsky comments, "It seems more than likely that he [Eden] and Maisky were again plotting behind their leaders' backs." But Maisky notes that "for all his merits, Eden is not a very strong person" (485-86), and a month later calls him "not a very strong or firm man" (498).

On Good Friday evening, 23 April 1943, Maisky went to Churchill's country estate at Chartwell to deliver a message from Stalin regarding Poland. Over dinner and drinks, the prime minister and ambassador discussed Stalin's letter informing Churchill that the Soviet Union had severed relations with the Polish government in exile (in London), because it had falsely accused the USSR of the 1940 Katyn massacre of Polish officers. (In a footnote Gorodetsky states that the accusation was true and that Stalin was lying.) Maisky writes that Churchill told him that, even if the charges "were to prove true, my attitude towards you would not change. You are a brave people, Stalin is a great warrior, and at the moment I approach everything primarily as a soldier who is interested in defeating the common enemy as quickly as possible" (509). Maisky also mentions that a close advisor of Churchill indicated how sensitive the Polish accusation was for President Roosevelt because of all the Polish-Americans and Catholics in the United States.

Despite his pragmatic approach to diplomacy and good relations with many British politicians and public figures—Churchill, Eden, David Lloyd George, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Bernard Shaw, and H.G. Wells, among others—many of Maisky's diary entries reflect his Marxist view of society. In 1942, for example, he refers to "the top bourgeoisie, who rule England" (450). Moreover, the ambassador shared the utopian optimism of Marx and early Soviet communists that humanity's future would be

glorious. Writing in July 1942, as German armies were advancing on all fronts against Soviet troops, he admitted that

Sometimes I want to tear myself away from the blood-stained sea of the present and travel in thought to the distant future, when the brilliance of human genius will be expended not on the invention of the most sophisticated means of self-destruction, but on truly constructive, creative deeds.... In the 21st or 22nd century, when fully developed communism will be established everywhere, the problem of creating a unified humanity will come to the fore. It's not that national distinctions should be entirely eliminated—no, that would be difficult, and even perhaps undesirable. Let there be diversity in the world. (445)

Maisky's view of the proper role of an ambassador is evident in both his diary entries and the editorial comments and supplemental material provided by Gorodetsky, notably, a two-page citation from an April 1940 "lecture" on diplomacy that Maisky sent back to Fedor Gusev, a deputy of Vyacheslav Molotov, Litvinov's successor as foreign minister. This "lecture" stressed that cultivating personal contacts, including shared meals and home visits, with a wide variety of people was the most important job of an ambassador (268–69). Gorodetsky observes that Maisky

heralded a revolutionary style of diplomacy.... He certainly was the first ambassador to systematically manipulate and mould public opinion, mostly through the press.... A superb "public relations" man at a time when the concept hardly existed, Maisky did not shy away from aligning himself with opposition groups, backbenchers, newspaper editors, trade unionists, writers, artists and intellectuals.... Maisky cultivated a significant segment of the British press with consummate skill. He read the whole British press, practically without exception, daily and weekly. (xix)

One of the ambassador's closest contacts was the prominent newspaper owner, politician, and cabinet minister Lord Beaverbrook.

Although Maisky's many British friends and other contacts greatly increased his influence, they also made him more suspect to the highly distrustful Stalin, especially after the provincial Molotov became foreign minister in 1939, replacing the more cosmopolitan Litvinov, who was married to a British-born woman.

In the book's final two chapters, Gorodetsky describes how Molotov and Stalin's distrust of Maisky led to his recall in 1943 and summarizes his fate during the last three decades of his life, including his imprisonment (1953–55) for supposed involvement in a Zionist conspiracy and, after Stalin's death, for plotting with former political police chief Lavrentii Beria. Gorodetsky's editorial comments throughout the book underscore the dependence of Maisky's diplomatic career on political machinations in the Kremlin.

The forthcoming publication of the complete diaries of Ivan Maisky will provide scholars of prewar and World War II diplomacy with an invaluable primary source. Meanwhile, the present abridgement, with its many reproductions of photos from Maisky's personal albums, beautifully fulfills a primary goal of the publisher and editor to make Maisky's observations and insights "accessible to a wider audience" (vii), accompanied by Gabriel Gorodetsky's skilled contextualizing of them.