

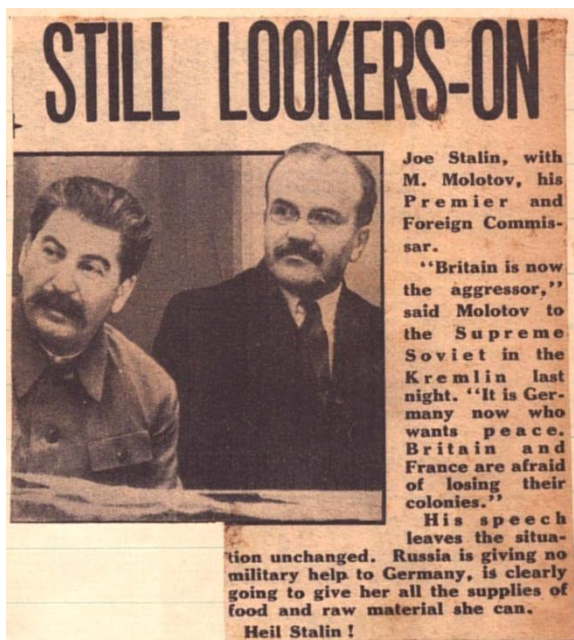
British/Soviet Relations in WWII – David Gray

I chose this as a subject for research in order to find out what was Britain's response to Russia when the following three incidents occurred during **WWII** and how did they differ, if at all:

1. The Russian invasion of Poland on 17th September 1939.
2. The Russia invasion of Finland on 30th November 1939.
3. The German invasion of Russia on 22nd June 1941.

1. The Russian invasion Poland on 17th September 1939.

The **Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact**, officially the **Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics**, was a non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, with a secret protocol establishing Soviet and German spheres of influence across Eastern Europe. The pact was signed in Moscow on 23rd August 1939 by Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop.



A Newspaper Report after Germany invaded Poland but before the Russian invasion.

Under the Secret Protocol, Poland was to be shared, while Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Bessarabia went to the Soviet Union. In the west, rumoured existence of the Secret Protocol was proven only when it was made public during the Nuremberg trials.

A week after signing the pact, on 1st September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. On 17th September, Stalin, stating concern for ethnic Ukrainians and Belarusians in Poland, ordered the Soviet invasion of Poland. After a short war ending in military defeat for Poland, Germany and the Soviet Union drew up a new border between them on the formerly Polish territory.

The military alliance between the United Kingdom and Poland was formalised by the **Anglo-Polish Agreement** which was signed on 25th August 1939, **for mutual assistance in case of a military invasion from Nazi Germany**, as specified in a secret protocol. Bearing in mind Britain's treaty

obligation to Poland, the British government's initial reaction to the Soviet invasion of Poland on 17th September 1939 was largely one of cautious diplomacy and delayed action, primarily focusing on Britain's guarantee to Poland against German aggression only, rather than a direct response to the Soviet invasion. While the Anglo-Polish Alliance obligated Britain to defend Poland against German attacks, it didn't explicitly address Soviet aggression.

I can't help wondering what the British Government thought they were doing in signing this agreement two days after the signing of the **Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact**. Did they have the best intentions for the security of Poland in mind? Surely not, they were only prepared to defend them against one country that two days before had been joined in treaty with another. Did they make this agreement as just a sign to Germany to "lay off" Poland? Did they not think they would have to back

it up? British resolve and its principles didn't extend to *any* foreign country that attempted to invade Polish soil, so why bother, especially as Chamberlain states below, the Soviet invasion was expected?

One indication of the veracity of Britain's determination to help out might be indicated by the British Chiefs of Staff at the time who noted that "we could give no direct help by land, sea or air."



Soviet Troops Invade Poland

As will be seen later, I have tried to illustrate this article using newspaper stories from the appropriate period in order to gauge the reaction of the press, the public and government, and present a slightly different point of view from anything that has been published elsewhere. Over the past few years I have been collecting scrapbooks compiled by British people during the war which cover every conceivable subject that interested them, distributed through thousands of pages. I have nearly sixty of these scrapbooks and looking through them I can find absolutely nothing that has been cut out and pasted in connected with the Soviet invasion of Poland. That does not necessarily indicate

that the news was not reported in the press, but it does indicate to me, the depth of interest that the subject generated within the civil population at the time. The earlier German invasion is covered however, and so we will see were those that followed.

A general breakdown of the reasons for Britain's rather muted reaction to the Soviet invasion from the east can be summarised as follows:

Condemnation but no Declaration of War:

While Britain condemned the Soviet invasion of Poland, it did not declare war on the USSR. This was a strategic choice, as Britain was also interested in maintaining trade with the Soviet Union and potentially forming an alliance against Nazi Germany.

Public Opinion and Political Considerations:

Public opinion in Britain was divided, with some expressing outrage at the invasion while others perceived the Soviet claims in the region as reasonable. The British government also considered the political implications of a declaration of war against the Soviet Union, including potential consequences for trade and the possibility of a future alliance.

France's Role:

France also had a guarantee to Poland but, like Britain, did not actively assist in Poland's defence or declare war on the USSR. France's leaders were wary of antagonizing the Soviet Union and considered the possibility of a fragile German-Soviet alliance.

The best indication of how the British Government reacted to the news of the Soviet invasion of Poland can be found in Hansard. Below is a short summary of the Prime Minister's speech in the House three days after the event and a surprising response from Baron Boothby, M.P. for Aberdeen and Kinkardine East:

Hansard - Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, 20th September 1939:

Summary: "On 17th September an event occurred which has inevitably had a decisive effect upon the war on the Eastern Front. On the morning of 17th September Russian troops crossed the Polish frontier at points along its whole length and advanced into Poland.

I cannot say that the action of the Soviet Government was unexpected (my italics). For some time past Soviet troops have been mobilised and concentrated on the western frontiers of the Soviet Union, and statements have appeared in the Soviet Press and wireless referring to the position of White Russians and Ukrainians in Poland, which bore the interpretation that the Soviet Government were preparing for intervention.

On 17th September a note was handed to the Polish Ambassador in Moscow to the effect that Warsaw as the capital of Poland no longer existed, that the Polish Government had disintegrated, and that the Polish State and its Government had ceased to exist. In the same way the agreements concluded between the Soviet Union and Poland had come to an end.

In this situation, His Majesty's Government authorised the issue of a statement on 18th September that this attack by the Soviet Government upon Poland (a country with whom she had a non-aggression pact) at a moment when Poland was prostrate in the face of overwhelming forces brought against her by Germany could not be justified by the arguments put forward and, that while the full implication of these events was not yet apparent, nothing which had occurred would make any difference to the determination of His Majesty's Government to fulfil their obligations to Poland and to prosecute the war with all energy until these obligations had been achieved."

Baron Boothby (Conservative):

"...Therefore, I think we, at any rate, ought not to take too tragic a view of this action, and above all not to take too moral a view of it. There is nothing this country likes better than to take a high moral attitude, prematurely, before it realises the full implications of a situation; and I must say that I was rather disappointed when I heard the Prime Minister refer to the "cynical" invasion of Poland by Russia, and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition go into some panegyrics about the immorality of the Russian action. In my view the Russians are now face to face with one of the most formidable military machines that the world has ever seen; and for my part, although I do not condone the Russo-German pact itself, I am thankful that Russian troops are now along the Polish-Rumanian frontier. I would rather have Russian troops there than German troops."

How easy it was for Baron Boothby to accept the Soviet attack on Poland considering Britain had just gone to war because of the German attack on the same country. Opinion in Britain soon began to change its attitude however when the next Soviet invasion took place.

2. The Russian Invasion of Finland on 30th November 1939.

Known as the **Winter War**, this was a war between the Soviet Union and Finland. It began with a Soviet invasion of Finland on 30 November 1939, three months after the outbreak of World War II, and ended three and a half months later with the Moscow Peace Treaty on 13th March 1940. The Soviet Union, particularly after the invasion and partitioning of Poland, wanted to push its border westward on the Karelian Isthmus to strengthen the defence of Leningrad, which was only 32 km (20 miles) from the Finnish border. They also demanded Finnish islands in the Gulf of Finland, and the establishment of a military base near Helsinki.

Despite the overwhelming odds, Finland resisted for three months with little outside assistance. However, it was only a matter of time before the balance of power tipped in the Soviet Union's

favour. By early February 1940 the Finnish Army was exhausted and their defensive lines eventually overrun. Outside help never materialised. Finland was forced to sign the Treaty of Moscow on 12th March 1940, which ceded 11 per cent of its territory to the Soviet Union.

Some headlines below showing the reaction of the British press to the Soviet invasion:

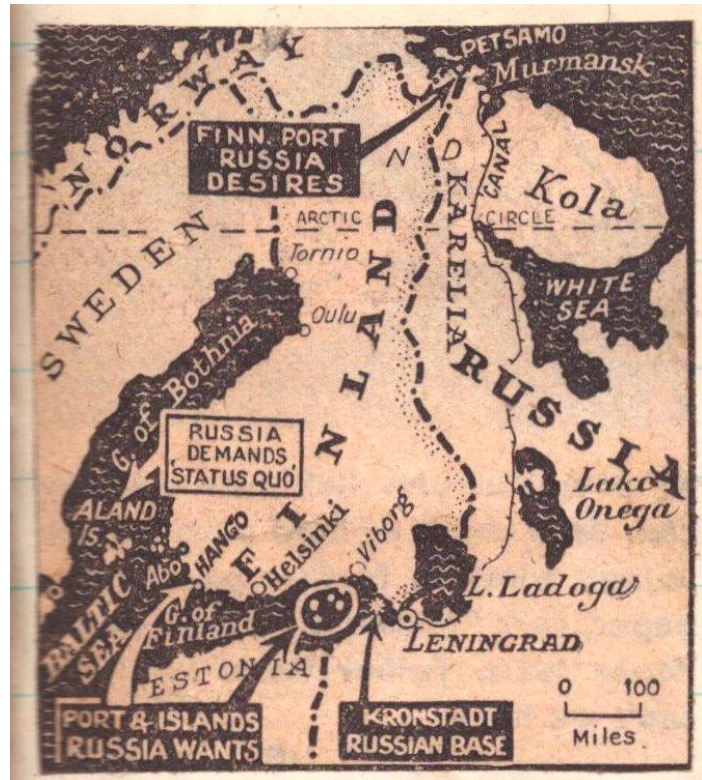
Finland Makes Offer

From RALPH HEWINS,
"Daily Mail" Special
Correspondent

HELSINKI, Tuesday
Morning.

FINLAND is ready to
withdraw her troops
from the Leningrad frontier
if the Soviet 'forces are also
moved back.

This is Helsinki's reply to
Russia's demand for the Finnish
withdrawal following Sunday's
frontier incident.



WEDNESDAY, The Daily Mail, DECEMBER 6, 1939.

RED ARMY HELD ON ALL FRONTS

From RALPH HEWINS, Daily Mail Correspondent

HELSINKI, Wednesday Morning.

TO-DAY is the 21st anniversary of Finland's
declaration of independence. Russia
boasted that Finland would not survive to
celebrate it, but instead the Soviet invasion
has been stemmed on all fronts and the Finns
remain supremely confident.

An Army communiqué issued last night claims
that 64 Russian tanks have been captured during
three days' fighting on the Karelian isthmus.

In one fight alone 2,000 Russians
were killed.

Another Soviet Dream Fades

FOR many years the Russians have
experimented at manoeuvres
(pictured above) with a parachute
army—men who land behind enemy
lines and attack from the rear.

Yesterday, according to Exchange,
they made a large-scale attempt
against the Finns on the Karelian
Isthmus—and failed.

The parachutists landed at Vil-
mannstrand, 45 miles to the north-
west of Viborg. They were equipped
with machine-guns. Some surren-
dered. All were quickly disarmed.



Left, This article, published in The Times on 14th March 1940, and summarised below, gives a good indication of what the British Government thought of the Soviet Invasion of Finland. This is part of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's speech in the House of Commons after the Soviet-Finnish Treaty had been signed on Finland's final capitulation:

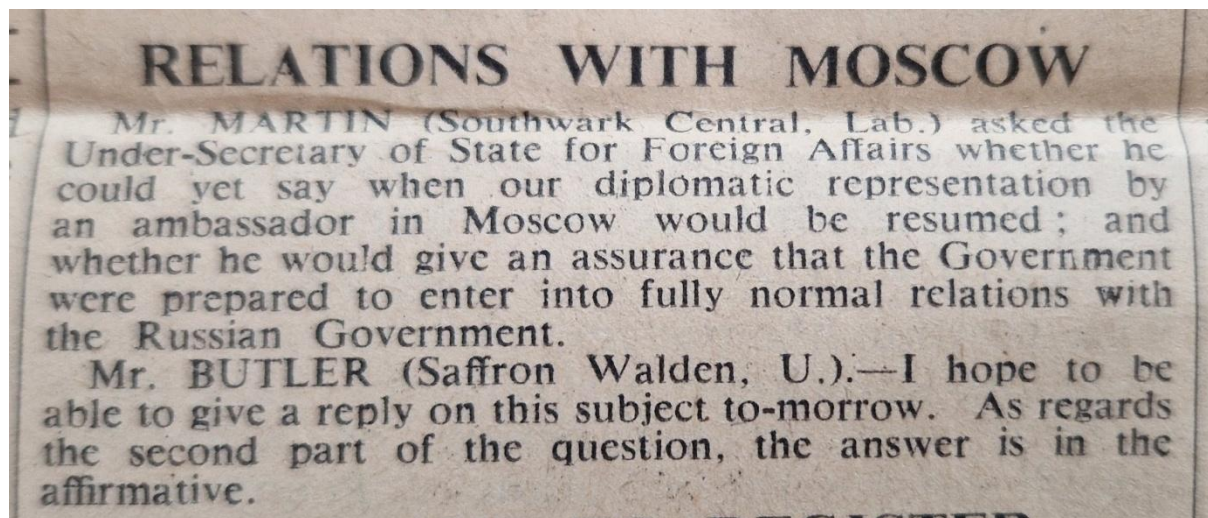
"...Throughout the Soviet-Finnish struggle his Majesty's Government, in concert with the French Government have furnished to the Finns large quantities of war material and supplies of all sorts, particulars of which have been made known as far as it was in the public interest to do so. His Majesty's Government have in fact made plain their readiness to give all possible help to the Finns in their gallant struggle against aggression, and, as I informed the House on Monday, we had made preparations to throw the full weight of our available resources into the scales on hearing that this would be in accordance with the desires of the Finnish Government. It has always been understood that it was for the Finnish Government to decide upon the course of action which they considered best suited to their interests, in the light of all available knowledge. In their decision they may be assured that the people of this country are united in sympathy for the situation in which they find themselves and in admiration for the courage with which they have maintained for so long the struggle against overwhelming odds. This epic story will ever be recounted in the chronicles of their own history, and will remain alive in the memory of all people."

The decision that the Finns were to make, as mentioned by

Chamberlain, was to accept an offer by Britain and France of an Expeditionary Force to be sent to fight alongside the Finnish forces. The problem being that Norway and Sweden were both neutral countries and although the Finns had pleaded with them both to allow a combined British and French Force to have passage through to get to Finland, both countries refused outright to allow it. There was no other route available as Finland had no ports large enough to facilitate such a force.

Again, as with Poland, Chamberlain offered Finland help he couldn't deliver. He must have known Norway and Sweden would never agree. But what if they had? Britain and France must have been prepared to send a force should the impossible happen. How would the war have played out then?

At least now we knew the Soviets were the bad guys, right? A short while later on the 5th June 1940, before the German invasion of Russia, the following snippet appeared in a British newspaper:



3. German Invasion of Russia on 22nd June 1941.

Relationships were to change drastically after an event of unbelievable cataclysmic dimensions occurred on 22nd June 1941. This was **Operation Barbarossa**, the incredibly bad judgement call of an insane mind to embark on an invasion of Russia. There can be no doubt that the Russian Steppe was the graveyard of the German Wehrmacht, and they didn't have too far to look for blame.

There is no need to go into the details of the German invasion of Russia; it is the thoughts of the British Government and Press that we are interested in.

The **Anglo-Russian Agreement** was signed on 12th July 1941. This was a declaration of mutual assistance between the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union during World War II. It committed both countries to support each other militarily in the war against Nazi Germany and pledged not to make a separate peace. This agreement was formalized into the Anglo-Soviet Treaty on 26th May 1942.

Clearly, my enemy's enemy is now my friend!

The world had changed again; Britain and Russia were now brothers-in-arms, helping each other to fight a common foe. Hitler had abandoned his thoughts of invading Britain and turned east instead. Finland was now fighting on the side of the Germans because they too had found a new friend.

**AN ANGLO-RUSSIAN
AGREEMENT**

**MUTUAL ASSISTANCE AGAINST
"HITLERITE GERMANY"**

NO SEPARATE PEACE OR ARMISTICE

**RAPID ESTABLISHMENT OF
COOPERATION**

The British and Soviet Governments have signed an agreement to give each other all assistance and support during the war "against Hitlerite Germany," and to conclude no armistice or treaty of peace except by mutual agreement. The Dominions, it is understood, have been consulted over the terms of the agreement and have expressed their entire approval.

Our Diplomatic Correspondent, commenting on the dispatch with which the fullest cooperation between Great Britain and Russia has been organized, says that the Russians are aware that they have met only the first attack against them. They are prepared to fight on, and have given proof of the strength of their resources and of the determination of their leaders and their men.

It would be useful, and not surprising, if the conclusion of this agreement were to give a fresh impetus to the negotiations proceeding in London between the SOVIET AMBASSADOR and the representatives of Poland. The geographical situation and the tragic history of Poland both teach the same plain lesson—that there can be no salvation for her in any policy which risks incurring the simultaneous enmity of Germany and Russia. Unless Poland were content to become the dependent of Germany—an unthinkable hypothesis whose implications have now been demonstrated beyond the possibility of misunderstanding—close cooperation and association with Russia are essential; and this is a matter of far more vital importance to her than any issue of disputed territorial claims. Russia on her side can afford to be generous if the needs of her security are fully met; and these needs can be met most effectively by whole-hearted and lasting Polish cooperation in the field of strategy and international relations. On this basis agreement should no longer be delayed.

Norway could no longer afford to be neutral as the Germans had invaded them just a month earlier; and Sweden would tread a fine line, getting dirty trying to stay neutral and helping the Nazis at the same time.

Everything, alliances, treaties, the world order, was thrown into the air and people shared strange bedfellows. Britain had never been prepared to stand alongside communists and support them. The following self-conscious extract from this news column alludes to it:

No doubt the German propagandists will make the most of the new agreement in the attempt to prove that the British have shaken hands with Bolshevism. America and Spain are likely to be flooded with this tale. But it will be believed only by those predisposed to be taken in by it. In facing the evils of the worst

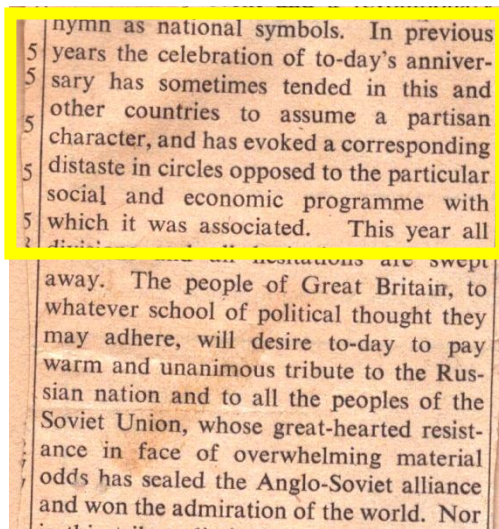
To continue the newspaper article, we see bottom left that The Times returns to the question of Poland. The writer seems free to make the comment that *"cooperation and association with Russia are essential; and this is a matter of far more vital importance to her [Poland] than any issue of disputed territorial claims. Russia on her side can afford to be generous..."* Did Britain not go to war because Poland's territorial integrity had been violated?

Even great men can alter their beliefs, square their consciences and throw away their principles if the tide of fortune changes.

Next, a column published in The Times on 7th November 1941, marking the 24th Anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Who would have thought a couple of years earlier, that The Times would be celebrating the birth of Bolshevism?

The newspaper began their sanitisation of communism by likening it to the French revolution, *"...for modern Russia follows the example of Republican France in taking a revolutionary event and a revolutionary hymn as national symbols."*

Linking Soviet Russia with France by the use of the word 'Republican' was another attempt to soften Russian Bolshevism and regain at least a little ground after the many years of vitriol which the Government had sent in Russia's direction because of Stalin's vicious philosophy. Britain now wanted to rehabilitate Russia.



The article continues *left*, in a breathtaking piece of understatement,

"...In previous years the *celebration* of to-day's anniversary has sometimes tended in this and other countries to assume a partisan character, and has evoked a corresponding distaste in circles opposed to the particular social and economic programme with which it is associated..."

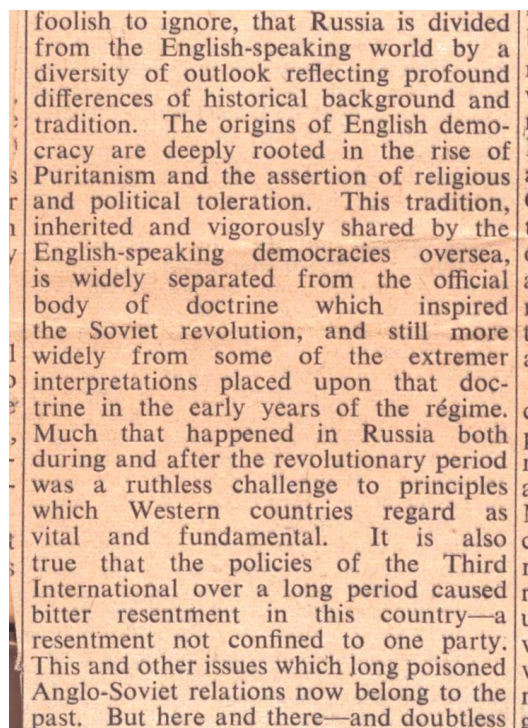
Note the use of the word 'celebration', (my italics).

Let's also look at that word, 'Programme'.

Or 'Pogroms' as the Soviets called them. Before World War II, Joseph Stalin's programs in the Soviet Union focused on rapid industrialization and forced

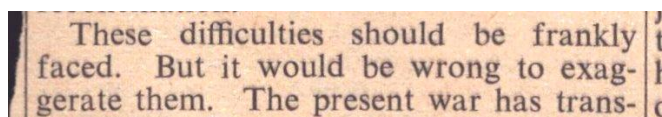
collectivization of agriculture, which were implemented through a series of five-year plans starting in 1928. These programs also included the Great Purge, which involved the persecution and execution of political opponents and other perceived threats to the state.

Estimates of the number of deaths attributable to the Soviet revolutionary and dictator Joseph Stalin vary widely, but after the Soviet Union dissolved, evidence from the Soviet archives was declassified and researchers were allowed to study it. This contained official records of 799,455 executions (1921–1953), around 1.5 to 1.7 million deaths in the Gulag, some 390,000 deaths during the forced resettlement, and up to 400,000 deaths of persons deported during the 1940s, with a total of about 3.3 million officially recorded victims in these categories. The deaths of at least 5.5 to 6.5 million persons in the Soviet famine of 1932–1933 are sometimes included with the victims of the Stalin era.



The article goes on *left*, to recognise that "Russia is divided from the English-speaking world by...profound differences." These differences of "tradition," "doctrine," "historical background," "religious and political toleration," "a ruthless challenge to principles which western countries regard as vital and fundamental," "policies that caused bitter resentment in this country," "other issues which long poisoned Anglo-Soviet relations now **belong to the past.**"

The statement below seems incredible bearing in mind the differences stated above.



ideals and doctrine. Above all, Russia is united with the English-speaking world in the belief that an ordered and peaceful international life must ultimately be achieved not through the military domination of a superior race or nation, but through the recognition of a common interest and a common loyalty capable of turning to the best use the diversity of peoples. These common aims must lay

Left, Does the writer of this article actually believe this? How can anyone be so naive as to think that Russia could change in this way? It would mean turning their backs on the very revolution that the article 'celebrates.' Surely this whole piece is just a smokescreen to convince the doubters, at least for the present period of the war, that the Soviets can be understood, become friends and even be rehabilitated. All this while the Cambridge

spies were working hard to send all of our secrets on to their Russian spymasters.

Finally, the writer comes clean regarding his belief that the Soviet way is the right way, or at least in his belief that he should project that image. There can be no other assumption made when confronted with the statement highlighted below:

sacrifice for a common purpose. There will be a desire on both sides to promote mutual sympathy and understanding, to broaden the scope of the common ground which already exists, and to discover how far ideals which appear at first sight antagonistic may not be in some measure complementary. If the English-speaking democracies justly pride themselves on the establishment of individual freedom and individual worth as the corner-stone of society, they have in recent years come to understand that the freedom of the individual can be made secure only by a measure of that collective planning for social ends which has been the proclaimed ideal of the Soviet order. If the English tradition

I have merely scratched the surface here regarding how Britain perceived the Soviets during WWII. Events changed rapidly during this period and Britain turned somersaults in her attempt to appear to be on the right side.

The British Government, press and even the public accepted that the obvious need to win the war justified any amount of hypocrisy, double-dealing, false promises, switching of allegiances and twisting of fundamental political and religious beliefs.

Finally, one article that I did come across relating to the period between the Soviet invasion of Poland and their later invasion of Finland was a column cut out of the Sunday Graphic, dated 29th October 1939 which focuses on faith. This presents us with a good example of the feeling of revulsion for the Russians that pervaded much of religious Britain despite the propaganda, and how

the Soviets were placed alongside the Nazis as equally evil. Indeed, they are put in first place ahead of the Nazis as being the enemy of God. Compare this to the 'self-serving' article above.



The War Against God

"...Communism and Nazism have a common objective. The human conscience has to be put to death. Human love must be replaced by giving oneself to the state. The right to worship according to ones faith must give way to the right to obey in all things. God must be ridiculed and Christ destroyed – or else the pagan State cannot survive. Never in history has there been such a war against God as

that first waged by Bolshevism and then taken up by the Nazis...We are fighting to determine the morality of the future. If murder, torture, robbery and lying are not evil things then we are wrong to fight against them. But if they are evil – and the human conscience knows that to be true – then our armed forces are taking their stand in what has literally become a war against God.”

This is just my take on the subject. You might disagree, if so, good! It's good to generate some debate. If you have a different opinion regarding anything that appears on the Research page then write it up and send it in. I will be happy to put it on.