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Daniel Hucker. "Public Opinion, the Press and the Failed Anglo-Franco-Soviet Negotiations of 1939." *International History Review* 40:1 (2017): 65-85. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1309558>.

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Review by **G. Bruce Strang**, Brandon University

Daniel Hucker touches on important themes in the debates about the failure to prevent the Second World War in Europe. His examination of public opinion in Britain and France and its effects on the decisions of political elites extends our awareness of potential influences on policy-makers in Britain, France, and the Soviet Union.

The structure of Hucker's article is quite clear. It has a brief historiographical review that sets the stage for his inquiry. His thesis is clear. Hucker argues that public opinion in Britain and France, as reflected by the popular press, pushed the British and French governments toward a position where they had to accept Soviet demands for an alliance. Hucker presents his argument in three distinct sections. The first discusses the evolution of public opinion, as filtered through the perceptions of the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, and the French Premier, Édouard Daladier. Hucker argues that both leaders cared about press opinion. Daladier was particularly concerned about opinion on the moderate political left, which represented the greatest potential threat to his coalition. Chamberlain, with a weak and divided opposition, worried more about opinion from traditionally conservative papers. The second section covers the press, reflections of public opinion, and their effects on policy. In Hucker's view, from mid-April to early June, public opinion provided a powerful impetus to the British and French governments to accept Soviet terms for an alliance. After the formal negotiations began in late May, and as they seemed to hit major roadblocks, Hucker writes that public opinion became more ambivalent. Many press articles criticized the Soviet Union for delays. Hucker's third section seeks to assess the impact of public opinion on policy makers, including a section in which he asserts that Moscow took a high line in the negotiations because British and French public opinion would push their governments to agree to an alliance on something close to Moscow's terms. Hucker concludes that "most crucially, public opinion in both Britain and France was ready to accept an alliance even on terms dictated chiefly by Moscow" (79).

The strength of Hucker's article lies in its fair-minded reading of the sources and citation of some useful evidence. He has read closely newspapers, government archival sources, and diaries and letters. He is familiar

with the central literature on the subject. His discussion of public opinion examines the subject more deeply than previous writing.

Hucker's analysis, however, has some challenges. Politicians do not simply respond to public opinion; they often seek to shape it. Chamberlain, almost notoriously, sought to influence newspaper editors and to mould public opinion to his will. Richard Cockett, for example, detailed ways in which Chamberlain sought to co-opt lobby correspondents and later their press baron bosses to present views of the world in line with his policies.¹ It could have been useful for Hucker to have looked at any attempts by Chamberlain or the Foreign Office News Department to try to influence public opinion regarding an alliance with the Soviet Union in 1939.

It seems to me a bit odd that Hucker focusses on Chamberlain as the representative of Britain for this study. Yes, he was the Prime Minister, but he actually opposed the alliance in Cabinet. The Cabinet simply outvoted him during the 24 May meeting, and Chamberlain had to submit to its decision to save Cabinet unity and his own position. It seems strange, therefore, to base an article on public opinion changing politicians' minds when one of the politicians in question largely ignored public opinion on the subject and did not change his mind. Would it not have been better to assess the effect of public opinion on Viscount Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, who actually seemed much more attuned to public opinion than Chamberlain, the party leader? Or to look at Sir Samuel Hoare, who became a staunch supporter of the alliance?

I differ with Hucker's presentation of several issues. For example, Hucker asserts that the comparatively "tepid response of French newspapers" (73), helps to explain why the French government allowed Britain to take the initial lead in reacting to the Soviet alliance proposal. Hucker, however, does not provide any direct evidence to support this conclusion. Instead, it seems much more likely that the British government took the lead in developing a response to secure Soviet support for the Anglo-French Peace Front while avoiding a direct alliance because Chamberlain and many British officials were so strongly opposed to the Soviets' alliance concept until the Cabinet outvoted Chamberlain. In a similar vein, Hucker states that Britain formally rejected the Soviet alliance proposal on 18 April since an alliance would have foreclosed further acts of appeasement. That contention represents a misunderstanding of British policy. Viscount Halifax and senior Foreign Office officials sought an immediate Soviet declaration of support for the Peace Front. They feared that a full-blown alliance would be difficult and time-consuming to negotiate (quite rightly, in retrospect). They wanted a quick Soviet declaration of support for Britain's association of states seeking to deter German aggression, followed by the conclusion of formal mechanisms indicating more precise ties to be determined later. Hucker's claim here seems off the mark. Hucker also argues that support for the alliance from the British and French publics led the Soviet Union to take a strong line during the negotiations, as public pressure in the West would compel Anglo-French leaders to yield to Soviet demands. Hucker's article, however, lacks evidence to support this argument, as he has brought forward virtually no evidence from Soviet sources. It is much more likely, and much more consistent with the evidence, that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin intended that the Soviet Union should secure a reward for its assistance to the West. The strategic situation, where Britain and France had pledged themselves to defend Polish and Rumanian independence, meant that they needed Soviet support. Western strategic weakness, therefore, enabled Stalin and Foreign Minister

¹ Richard Cockett, *Twilight of Truth: Chamberlain, Appeasement, and the Manipulation of the Press* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

Vyacheslav Molotov to advance their extreme demands. Overall, Hucker's argument that public opinion played a crucial role is suggestive and inferential.

This last point raises the biggest difficulty with Hucker's argument—the nature of the evidence. We lack a proverbial smoking document, if one will allow me to mangle a metaphor. We have evidence that elements of the British and French press and parliamentary opinion strongly supported an alliance with the Soviet Union, and Hucker has done a good job discussing a reasonable selection of that evidence. We do not, however, have direct evidence that can show that politician x came to support an alliance because of press article y or owing to the clear drift of public opinion as represented by group of evidence z. We know that several British politicians changed their mind to accept the need for an alliance. They did so for their own reasons. Those reasons likely centered on the strategic imperatives that required Soviet support, but may well have included calculations that doing so would secure public approval. Hucker's argument, therefore, is based on inference. He is likely on to something, but the case is suggestive and far from proven.

In 2006, I published an article on British policy and the failure of the negotiations.² In my initial conception, subsequent research, and initial drafts of the article, I canvassed the available evidence on British public opinion and the impetus that it may have given to British politicians to decide in favour of accepting the Soviet alliance proposal. After considerable internal struggle, I decided to remove the section from the article and instead consigned it to a brief summary in a footnote; in my view, the evidence was merely suggestive rather than conclusive; it fell short of the standards of evidence that I had used for the rest of the research and argument. While the role of public opinion is likely important, the evidence was far from conclusive. Hucker's article reflects this problem. He has not been able to draw direct ties that demonstrate clearly that public opinion played a central role. A far more comprehensive body of evidence suggests that strategic requirements and assessments of the Soviet Union's leadership and military power and its potential effect to deter Nazi Germany drove British and French leaders to acquiesce in accepting Soviet demands for an alliance in the first place. Daniel Hucker faced a tough task in researching and writing this article. Evidence about public opinion in the 1930s is challenging to find and difficult to interpret. Identifying its effect on British and French politicians is an even more daunting task. Hucker has made very much the best of a wide search in the available evidence. Hucker's examination of the subject, and his work, have added complexity and nuance to our understanding of the possible influences on British and French decision-makers in 1939.

Bruce Strang holds a PhD in History from McMaster University. He is a Professor of History and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Brandon University. He is the author of *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War* (Praeger, 2003), and editor of *Collision of Empires: The Italian Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact* (Routledge, 2016). He is currently working on a monograph on Italian political reconstruction and foreign policy from 1948 to 1953. He also writes on British imperial strategic foreign policy before the Second World War.

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² G. Bruce Strang, "John Bull in Search of a Suitable Russia: British Foreign Policy and the Failure of the Anglo-French-Soviet Alliance Negotiations, 1939," *Canadian Journal of History* 41:1 (Spring-Summer 2006): 47-84, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjh.41.1.47>.