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Introduction

Born when the Tsars ruled the Russia Empire, Molotov died in the Gorbachev era. A revolutionary and active politician in Lenin's time, Molotov became Stalin's first lieutenant but outlived him by more than thirty years, and was prominent during Khrushchev's rise to power. He was Stalin's head of government during the economic transformation of the USSR and Great Terror of the 1930s. As foreign minister, he negotiated with Hitler and Ribbentrop before the Second World War, with Roosevelt, Churchill and Eden during the war, and with Truman, Attlee and Bevin at the end of and after the war. Yet, because he was disgraced and became a 'non-person' in the Khrushchev era, Soviet scholars did not write about him and the material was not available for Western historians to study Molotov. The only memoirs he left were the controversial *One Hundred and Forty Conversations with Molotov*, tape recorded interviews with the Stalinist poet Felix Chuev, made between 1969 and 1986 but not published until 1994. That reliable sources were not available and archives were not accessible are the main reasons why the present volume can claim to be the first major historical biography of Molotov.

I begin my study by examining the origins and activities of a fiery extremist in the revolutionary era and the translation of Molotov – the change was too rapid to be called a transition – to bureaucrat and hard-nosed party functionary during the 1920s. The soubriquet Molotov can mean the 'hammer' to Stalin as 'man of steel'. It was also used more pejoratively and crudely to mean 'stone backside'. Both are appropriate descriptions of Molotov's role in the later 1920s. The first applies to his support for Stalin in his struggle with the oppositions and driving through his policies, particularly in agriculture. The second relates to his patient work as party secretary.

In December 1930, Stalin insisted that Molotov should become chairman of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), the nearest Soviet equivalent to 'prime minister'. He continued in this position until Stalin succeeded him immediately before the German invasion in 1941. Both versions of the soubriquet remain appropriate for Molotov as the Soviet government's chief executive. His conduct also gives him a claim to be called a statesman. At one time during the Great Terror of the 1930s, Molotov was in extreme danger of arrest and execution, but unlike many of his colleagues he survived. Indeed, evidence suggests that he

participated fully in the terror process, convinced that it was a correct and necessary policy. He played a major role in implementing the purges, and not merely to ensure his own survival.

In addition to his other duties, in May 1939, Molotov was appointed People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs and began a diplomatic career. He learned his craft in the abortive Triple Alliance negotiations with England and France, which, if successful, might have prevented or delayed the Second World War. When these failed he was the Soviet signatory of the Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty of August 1939 – the notorious 'Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact' – with its secret protocols in which part of Poland and a large part of the Baltic States were allocated to the Soviet 'sphere of interest'. This led to some of the most shameful behaviour in Molotov's diplomatic career, and I discuss the way in which he managed the take over of these territories for the USSR and negotiated prior to the Soviet invasion of Finland.

Molotov is popularly remembered mostly for the 'Molotov cocktail'. This makeshift weapon was evidence of the crisis in the USSR when Germany invaded in June 1941. The Great Patriotic War saw Molotov not only assisting Stalin in directing the military effort, but also continuing his bureaucratic role in domestic policy. But his main responsibility during the war was foreign policy, where there were two events in his diplomatic career in which he was particularly prominent. The first was his visit to Britain and the United States in 1942 as 'Mr. Brown', to negotiate a treaty of alliance and to try to establish a Second Front for the USSR. His correspondence with Stalin during this visit vividly demonstrates his relationship with the Soviet leader after the Terror. The second event, perhaps the peak of Molotov's diplomatic career, was the Moscow foreign ministers' conference of October 1943. Although his American and British counterparts found him more congenial than at any other time, he dominated the conference and in one famous exchange with Eden rendered the English foreign secretary speechless. Molotov was also present during Churchill's visit to Moscow when the British prime minister and Stalin notoriously agreed 'percentages' of influence on territory in post-war Eastern Europe. Indeed, it was Molotov and Eden who finalised the details of the agreement. Towards the end of the war, Molotov was instrumental in establishing the Council of Foreign Ministers, where, as the Cold War developed, he was to become notorious for implacably pursuing the interests of the Soviet Union, and he became known as 'Mr Nyet' amongst Western politicians. This book contains 'snapshots' of key moments in Molotov's foreign policy activities, selected to throw light on his political biography. I have written elsewhere about certain episodes in his career as foreign minister, which are referred to in the notes and bibliography, and other work is in progress.

After 1945, Molotov had to deal with the aging and increasingly capricious Stalin. He was dismissed as foreign minister in 1949, increasingly fell into disfavour, his wife was arrested, and he seems to have been in personal danger again at the end of Stalin's life. After Stalin's death he was restored to power, and led the struggle against what he saw as Khrushchev's betrayal of Bolshevik principles. His opposition to Khrushchev, and attempt to remove him in 1957, led to his downfall and expulsion from the Communist Party, although he was readmitted shortly before his death.

Obituaries of Molotov in English newspapers were far more detailed than the official notices in the Soviet press. Indeed, Molotov's career is full of paradoxes. Why after a brief resistance did a devoted family man accept the arrest and incarceration of his wife? How was the fiery revolutionary transformed into a bureaucrat? How could someone with statesmanlike qualities be particularly vituperative against former colleagues and support the Terror? Why did Molotov, quite unversed in diplomacy, become the Soviet Union's chief negotiator, first with Nazi Germany in 1939 and 1940, then with the Western allies during the Second World War? How was he then changed into the Cold War diplomat? Finally, if Molotov fell into disfavour during Stalin's last years, why did he remain an unrepentant Stalinist until his death in 1986? This study tries to explain these and other contradictions.

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