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## **Impossible Allies?**

### **Soviet Views of France and the German Question in the 1950s**

At the centre of the Soviet Union's strategy for the containment of Germany in the 1950s was courtship of France – a state that Moscow saw as sharing common interest in security from German militarism and aggression. Nowhere in Western Europe was Soviet political influence as great as in France. The French communist party (PCF) was a major force in the country and France was the bastion of a powerful, communist-led international peace movement. The movement's founding congress in Paris in April 1949 attracted more than 2000 delegates claiming to represent 600 million people, while the 1950 Stockholm Appeal calling for the prohibition of nuclear weapons garnered half a billion signatures worldwide, including 15 million in France. Among the movement's French luminaries were the scientist and Nobel laureate, Frédéric Joliot-Curie, President of the World Peace Council (WPC), the writer Jean Lafitte, who was WPC Secretary, and former Air Minister and radical deputy Pierre Cot. Ilya Ehrenburg, the leading Soviet representative on the WPC, spent almost as much time in Paris in the 1950s as he did in Moscow. The Soviet leadership followed events in France avidly and the Soviet embassy in Paris was a frequent channel of communication between Moscow and the leaders of the PCF and the peace movement.<sup>1</sup>

There was a long history of Soviet efforts to woo France. In the 1930s France was at the centre of the Soviet struggle for a collective security front against Hitler. During the Second World War Moscow established relations with de Gaulle's Free French Movement and in December 1944 the General travelled to Moscow to sign a mutual assistance pact between the USSR and liberated France. After the war Moscow remained highly interested in the Gaullist movement and cultivated contacts with its leaders. In the 1950s the Soviets followed closely the fortunes of the Gaullist splinter group, Les Républicains sociaux, headed by Jacques Chaban-Delmas and Gaston Palewski, a group seen striving for rapprochement between

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<sup>1</sup> On the peace movement in France: Y. Santamaria, *Le Parti de l'Ennemi? Le Parti Communiste Français dans la Lutte pour la Paix (1947-1958)*, Armand Colin: Paris 2006; A. Brogi, *Confronting America, The Cold War between the United States and the Communists in France and Italy*, UNC Press: Chapel Hill 2011; and P. Buton, "Le Mouvement des Partisans de la Paix" in S. Dockrill et al (eds), *L'Europe de l'Est et de l'Ouest dans la Guerre Froide, 1948-1953*, PUPS: Paris 2002.

France and the USSR. De Gaulle was also seen as sympathetic to the USSR and the Soviets noted with approval the General's statement in April 1954 that France should play an independent role in international affairs and work to facilitate co-existence and agreement between the two cold war blocs.

Central to Moscow's postwar perspectives was an alliance with France based on an assumed common antipathy to Germany. But this outlook was rendered redundant by Paris's embrace of western cold war policies. France joined NATO in 1949 and thereafter increasingly identified the Soviet Union as the main threat to French security.<sup>2</sup> In May 1952 France signed a treaty to establish a European Defence Community (EDC), including the rearmament of West Germany. In August 1954 the French parliament refused to ratify the EDC but German rearmament went ahead. Moscow retaliated by repudiating the 1944 pact and establishing the Warsaw Treaty Organisation as a counter to NATO.

The threads of these troubled relations were drawn together in an April 1956 briefing paper on the history of Franco-Soviet relations, prepared for Soviet leaders in advance of a visit to Moscow by a delegation of French Socialist Party leaders. The paper was sanguine about the future of Franco-Soviet relations. It pointed to the impact in France of recent Soviet peace initiatives, notably the Geneva summit of July 1955, which had swayed public opinion in favour of a rapprochement with the USSR. Crucially, the coming to power in February 1956 of a radical-socialist government headed by Guy Mollet augured the possibility of significant improvements in Franco-Soviet relations.<sup>3</sup>

Soviet policy towards France in the 1950s was akin to Romain Rolland's maxim: pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. The Soviets placed great hopes on enlisting Paris in a campaign for European collective security but saw French foreign policy as weak and without much influence relative to Britain and the United States. Soviet conversations with French diplomats and politicians were generally friendly but the anti-communism and anti-Sovietism of Fourth Republic leaders was self-evident, as was their strong commitment to an alliance with the United States.

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<sup>2</sup> See G-H. Soutou, "La perception de la menace Soviétique par les décideurs de l'Europe Occidentale: Le cas de la France" in Dockrill op.cit.

<sup>3</sup> "Spravka 1 Evropeiskogo Otdela MID SSSR Sekretaru TsK KPSS B.N. Ponomarevu o Franko-Sovetskikh Otnosheniyak, 20 Aprelya 1956", "Ot Atlantiki do Urala": *Sovetsko-Frantsuzskie Otnosheniya, 1956-1973* doc.3.

Viewed through Moscow's lens, the main obstacle to a Franco-Soviet alliance was a fundamental difference about the solution to the German question. While Moscow wanted to unify Germany as a peaceful and democratic state, the French preferred a divided and weak Germany, or so the Soviets believed. By 1956 French and Soviet policies on the German question had begun to converge. However, this incipient Franco-Soviet détente was blown away by the fallout from the Suez and Hungarian crises.

### **From the Stalin Notes to European Collective Security**

Soviet policy on the German question was framed by the so-called 'Stalin Notes' of March-April 1952 that proposed a peace treaty for Germany that would unify, neutralise and disarm the country. In response, western states, including France, called for all-German elections to elect a government that would then negotiate a peace treaty. The Soviets were willing to consider elections but with the precondition that a united Germany would remain unarmed and would not join either cold war bloc.<sup>4</sup>

When, in May 1952 the western powers established the EDC, Stalin lost interest in the proposals that bear his name. But Vyacheslav Molotov was the true author of the Stalin notes and when he became foreign minister again after Stalin's death he revived the peace treaty proposal a project he pursued doggedly until he was ousted from office by the new party leader, Nikita Khrushchev.

The French response to the Stalin Notes was, to use Georges-Henri Soutou's word, *méfiance* (mistrust)<sup>5</sup>. French officials viewed the notes as an attempt to disrupt western military integration and the proposed peace treaty as a device to enhance Soviet influence in Germany. But the French foreign minister, Robert Schuman, with an eye to the attractiveness of the Soviet proposals to German and French public opinion, favoured serious negotiations with the USSR about Germany, including the possibility of its reunification.

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<sup>4</sup> On the Stalin note: S. Bjornstad, *The Soviet Union and German Rearmament during Stalin's Last Years*, Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies: Oslo 1998; A.M. Filitov, *Germaniya v Sovetskoy Vneshnepoliticheskom Planirovanii 1941-1990*, Nauka: Moscow 2010 chap.3; and W. Loth, *Die Sowjetunion und die deutsche Frage*, V & R: Göttingen 2007 chap/6

<sup>5</sup> G. H. Soutou, "La France et les notes soviétiques de 1952 sur l'Allemagne", *Revue d'Allemagne*, vol.20, no.3, July-September 1988.

Schuman's inclination to negotiate with the Soviets was abandoned when Georges Bidault returned as foreign minister in January 1953. Unlike Schuman, Bidault shared his officials' view that the least bad solution to the German question was the country's continued division. In Bidault's diplomacy the demand for all-German elections became a tactic to preclude serious negotiations with the Soviets. Only when Bidault was replaced by Pierre Mendès France in June 1954 was there a partial return to the idea of real, albeit prudent, negotiations with the USSR.

Moscow's policy on the German question took a new turn when it began to agitate for European collective security. The launch-pad for the campaign was the Berlin conference of the foreign ministers of Britain, France, the Soviet Union and United States in January 1954.

On the eve of the conference Soviet foreign ministry analysts assessed the positions of the western powers and briefed that the official French stance would be no different from that of Britain and the United States. However, Soviet political and diplomatic contacts in France indicated a wide-range of opinion in favour of a more independent foreign policy and for collaboration with the USSR in relation to Germany. In November 1953 Palewski told the Soviet ambassador in Paris, S.A. Vinogradov, that "for the resolution of the German question a rapprochement between France and the USSR was necessary. In this connection our group considers it very important to conclusively settle the question of Germany's border along the Oder-Neisse line and for the four powers to guarantee this frontier." There were also reports from Soviet diplomatic sources that former prime minister - Édouard Daladier - and de Gaulle were hostile to the EDC and in favour of a rapprochement with the USSR.

Bidault, was pro-American, and favoured the EDC as a way of containing Germany, fearing that a united but neutral German state would come under Soviet influence. Bidault favoured participation in the four-power conference in Berlin only to demonstrate that it was not possible to reach agreement with the Soviet Union. Even more hostile to negotiations with the Soviet Union was Deputy Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, but he also believed a five-power conference (i.e. including China and the USSR) was necessary to end the war in Indochina.

On the basis of this somewhat contradictory picture the briefing concluded that France was more open to serious discussion with the Soviet Union about the German question than either

Britain or the United States. There was even the possibility of separate Soviet-French negotiations about Germany.<sup>6</sup>

Soviet proposals on the German question and European collective security were presented to the conference by Molotov. The essence of the Soviet position was that there should be a pan-European collective security agreement guaranteeing mutual assistance against aggression. Under the umbrella of European collective security there could be negotiations for a German peace treaty leading to the reunification of the country as a neutral and pacific state. The western alternative to this proposal, strongly backed by France, was the 'Eden Plan' – named after British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden - general elections in Germany whose government would then be free to decide its foreign policy – a proposal unacceptable to the Soviets who insisted on advance commitment Germany's disarmament and neutralisation.

Collective security was rejected by the west on grounds that the Soviet proposals were aimed at undermining NATO. Bidault and Eden badgered Molotov about this issue. Indeed, according to Alexei Filitov, it was Bidault "who most furiously attacked his Soviet counterpart".<sup>7</sup>

The Soviets had anticipated Bidault's question – was the proposed system of pan-European collective security compatible with NATO? Moscow's answer would be that while such a system was incompatible with the EDC, because it would divide Europe into opposing blocs, it was not necessarily incompatible with NATO.<sup>8</sup>

On 17 February Molotov told the conference that European collective security was an alternative to the EDC that "regarding the question of its compatibility with the North Atlantic Pact we are prepared to study this question. Don't forget that in relation to [NATO] there are different views. Eden has more than once emphasised that in his view it has a defensive character. Bidault also spoke about this. The Soviet government has a different

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<sup>6</sup> "Pozitsiya Frantsii po Voprosu o Predstoyashchem Soveshchanii Ministrov Inostrannykh Del Chetyrekh Derzhav", Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (AVPRF), F.6, Op.13-g, Pap.65, D.26, Ll.90-116.

<sup>7</sup> A. Filitov, "Germany as a European Problem in Soviet and French Views" in G-H. Soutou & E.R. Hivert (eds), *L'URSS et l'Europe de 1941 a 1957*, PUPS: Paris 2008 p.328.

<sup>8</sup> AVPRF, F.6, Op.13-g, Pap.65, D.25, Ll.10-11.

estimation... It is not to be excluded that [NATO] could be amended and the differences about the character of the pact eliminated.<sup>9</sup>

While the Soviets were disappointed by western rejection of their proposals they were not surprised, and neither were they disheartened. They were encouraged by reports of a positive public response to their European collective security idea, especially in France. Not long after his return from the conference Molotov wrote to the Soviet leadership:

“According to reports from Soviet embassies and missions and in the foreign press, the Soviet draft of a General European Agreement on Collective Security in Europe has provoked positive responses from quite wide public circles abroad, including such French press organs as *Le Monde*”

Among the opponents of the Soviet proposal, noted Molotov, were those who feared that European collective security was a device to dislodge the United States from Europe. Molotov cited a statement by Palewski to Vinogradov that the Soviet proposal was unacceptable because it excluded the USA. Another argument against the proposal was that it was designed to secure the liquidation of NATO.

To meet these objections Molotov proposed a radical response: Moscow would shelve its objections to American participation in European collective security and would consider the possibility of the Soviet Union joining NATO. Molotov was pessimistic that anything would come of these proposals but he did not exclude the possibility that NATO could change with the USSR becoming a member of the organisation in the context of a wider collective security framework.<sup>10</sup>

The Soviet proposals were published in March 1954 and, as expected, were rejected by the western powers but Moscow's campaign for European collective security continued.

## **The Geneva Conferences**

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<sup>9</sup> G. Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, Potomac Books: Dulles 2012 pp.146-147.

<sup>10</sup> See further: “Molotov's Proposal that the USSR Join NATO, March 1954, Cold War International History Project e-Dossier no.27, December 2011 <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/e-dossier-no-27-molotovs-proposal-the-ussr-join-nato-march-1954>.

After the Berlin conference the main topic of Franco-Soviet diplomatic conversations was Indochina. It had been agreed in Berlin to convene an international conference on Indochina and Korea. This internationalising of discussions on the war in Indochina was a significant success for French diplomacy. Paris strove to involve Moscow in extricating France from its military quagmire in Vietnam and the Soviets were happy to oblige, calculating that by playing a constructive role they would enhance the prospects for Franco-Soviet détente and collaboration on European problems.<sup>11</sup>

At the conference in Geneva (May-July 1954) France was initially represented by Bidault but following a governmental crisis in June 1954 Pierre Mendès France became Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. By the end of the third week of July there was agreement on peace in Indochina.<sup>12</sup> The Americans suspected that Molotov and Mendès France had concocted a deal for the French to sabotage the EDC in return for Soviet help in resolving the Indochina conflict. But this supposition is not supported by either the French or Soviet diplomatic records.<sup>13</sup>

At the end of the conference, on 21 July, Molotov and Mendès France did have a long conversation about the German question and European security but there was little agreement between the two men.

The French record of the meeting states that the conversation began at Molotov's suggestion.<sup>14</sup> According to the Soviet report, however, the discussion began with a declaration by Mendès France that now peace in Indochina had been achieved it was time to move to other questions. Molotov agreed and said that a rapprochement between French and Soviet views on European security and the German question was vital. When Mendès France interjected that other countries had an interest in these matters and that many ideas needed to be considered, Molotov responded that France and the USSR were especially interested in the

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<sup>11</sup> On Soviet preparation for Geneva see E.O. Obichkina, "SSSR v Uregulirovanii Indokitaiskogo Konflikta (1954 god)" in M.M. Narinsky & M. Vais (eds), *Sovetskii Souz, Frantsiya i Mezhdunarodnye Krizisy Pyatidesyatykh Godov XX Veka*, MGIMO: Moscow 2005.

<sup>12</sup> On Geneva: I.V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy towards the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press: Washington DC 2003 and M. Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-1964*, Routledge: London 2006.

<sup>13</sup> See K.C. Statler, "Alliance Politics after Stalin's Death: Franco-American Conflict in Europe and in Asia" in K. Larres & K. Osgood (eds), *The Cold War after Stalin's Death*, Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD 2006.

<sup>14</sup> *Entretiens des Ministère des Affaires étrangères concernant Les Problèmes Européens et échanges de messages ( Juin 1954-Janvier 1955)*, Ministère des Affaires étrangères: Paris 1955 p.27.

German question. Anglo-American proposals on Germany represented a serious threat to security in Europe, argued Molotov, and the division of the country would strengthen reactionary forces in West Germany. Molotov urged Mendès France to adopt a more independent foreign policy and asserted that a convergence in French and Soviet positions on the German question could prevent Germany's rearmament.

Mendès France replied that France was not a free agent. The British and Americans were intent on German rearmament and he urged Molotov to put forward "a new constructive proposal that would provide a basis for optimism on the part of the western powers." France was "in a difficult position" Mendès France told Molotov. "Of course France was independent but there was a reality to consider when taking decisions. It had to take into account the position of America and England on the German question." Molotov appreciated France's complex position but reiterated that France faced a choice: whether or not to act in the interests of peace.

During the conversation Mendès France suggested the USSR should launch a new initiative on nuclear disarmament and pointed out the importance of this question to French public opinion. But Molotov felt the more important issue was European collective security.<sup>15</sup>

Molotov's conversation with Mendès France was typical of the robust exchanges between French and Soviet officials about European security and the German question, "Le premier secrétaire du parti emploie un langage direct" (the First Secretary of the party uses a direct language), reported the French ambassador, Louis Joxe, after a bruising encounter with Khrushchev at a reception in Moscow in November 1954, "il n'est pas précisément brutal, il est rude" (it is not exactly brutal but it is rough). Khrushchev berated Joxe about the recently signed London-Paris agreements on the direct admission of West Germany into NATO, demanding to know against what threat the FRG was being rearmed. But the conversation

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<sup>15</sup> "Priem Predsedatelya Soveta Ministrov Frantsii Mendes-Fransa, 21 Iula 1954 goda", AVPRF, F.6, Op.13a, Pap.25, D8, LI.121-130. The French report is broadly similar. Mendès France later claimed he raised the Austrian question with Molotov, thus initiating the process leading to the Austrian State Treaty, but neither the Soviet nor the French reports mentions this. See further: T. Angerer, "Re-launching East-West Negotiations while Deciding West German Rearmament: France, the Paris Treaties and the Austrian State Treaty" in G. Mueller, G. Stourzh, A. Suppan (eds) *Der österreichische Staatsvertrag 1955: Internationale Strategie, rechtliche Relevanz, nationale Identität: The Austrian State Treaty: International Strategy, Legal Relevance, National Identity*, ÖAW: Vienna 2005.

concluded on a more diplomatic note: “together we Russians and French could do a lot for peace” Khrushchev told Joxe.<sup>16</sup>

While it is unlikely that Molotov derived much hope from his conversation with Mendès France, the success of the Geneva conference did provide an opening for the Soviet collective security campaign. On 24 July 1954 the Soviets published a diplomatic note proposing an agreement on economic and political cooperation in Europe and the convening of an international conference to discuss collective security.<sup>17</sup>

The National Assembly’s rejection of the EDC plan by a large majority on 30 August 1954 was a considerable boost to the Soviet diplomatic campaign and Moscow welcomed “the collapse of this projected military bloc” and reiterated its proposals for European collective security and the reunification of Germany as a peaceful and democratic state.<sup>18</sup>

What the Soviets did not anticipate was the London-Paris agreements. In a briefing the foreign ministry informed the Soviet leadership that this was a worse outcome for Moscow than the EDC plan. Under the agreements the FRG would enter NATO as an equal member and would have much more control over its rearmament than it would have done within the EDC, including in relation to atomic weapons research. In negotiations with the British and Americans the French had tried, but failed, to place controls on German rearmament. The result was that France had received “no serious guarantees against a revival of German aggression.”<sup>19</sup>

This ominous development coincided with the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Franco-Soviet pact. Moscow used the anniversary to celebrate the treaty and to attack the London-Paris agreements as incompatible with its mutual assistance obligations. This was the start of what Joxe described as a violent propaganda campaign.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Documents Diplomatiques Français* (hereafter DDF) 1954 (21 Juillet-31 Decembre), Ministère des Affaires étrangères: Paris 1987 pp.671-672.

<sup>17</sup> *New Times* no.31 (1954), pp.4-8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* no.37 pp.2-5,

<sup>19</sup> “Londonskie i Parizhskie Soglasheniya Zapadnykh Derzhav i Sopostavlenie Plana Sozdaniya “Zapadnoevropeiskogo Souza” s Planon Sozdania “Evropeiskogo Oboronitel’nogo Soobshchestva”, 29 October 1954, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii (RGANI), F.5, Op.30, D.69, Ll.147-166.

<sup>20</sup> DDF 1954 op.cit pp.891-894, , 932-933, 940-941.

At a public meeting in Moscow on 10 December Ehrenburg was greeted with stormy applause when he said: “France must now make her choice. The pen that ratified the Paris agreements will strike out the Franco-Soviet treaty. Every French man must know: either alliance with the Soviet Union against the resurgence of German militarism or alliance with the German militarists.”<sup>21</sup> On 16 December the USSR issued a note to France stating that ratification of the London-Paris agreements would render the Franco-Soviet pact “null and void”.<sup>22</sup>

The process of ratifying the London-Paris agreements was completed on 5 May 1955. That same day Joxe met the Soviet premier, Nikolai Bulganin. His mission was to assure the Soviets the agreements were defensive and that France wanted to maintain friendly relations with the USSR. “The London-Paris agreements have opened the path to war and revanchism”, Bulganin told Joxe. While Bulganin was unimpressed by Joxe’s argument that West Germany’s admission to NATO was a means to control German rearmament, he was more receptive to the idea there should be a four-power summit.<sup>23</sup>

In the Soviet mind the London-Paris agreements were linked to another series of threatening developments: the Schuman Plan, the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the ongoing process of European economic integration. Moscow did not view European integration benignly. The ECSC, for example, was seen as a device to facilitate the revival of Germany’s industrial power as the basis for its rearmament. In France were to be found many prominent proponents of European federalism –advocates of an integrated West European political, economic and military bloc that Moscow saw as directed against the USSR.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Meeting of Representatives of the Soviet Public, Moscow, December 10, 1954”, *New Times*, no.50, December 1954 pp.5-22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* no.51, December 1954 pp.2-4.

<sup>23</sup> “Priem N.A. Bulganinym Frantsuzskogo Posla Lui Zhoksa 5 Maya 1955g”, RGANI, F.5, Op.30, D.116, LI53-60.

<sup>24</sup> “Spravka o Evropeiskom Ob’edinenii Uglya i Stali (“Plan Shymana)”, 20 January 1955; “Spravka o Planakh “Ob’edineniya Evropy”, 20 January 1955; “Spravka ob Organizatsii Evropeiskogo Ekonomicheskogo Sotrudnichestva”, 7 February 1955 RGANI, F.5, Op.30, D.114, LI.1-38, 42-65, 115-137. See further: M.A. Lipkin, *Sovetskii Souz i Evropeiskaya Integratsiya*, RAN/IVI: Moscow 2011 and the work of Marie-Pierre Rey: “L’Europe occidentale et les décideurs soviétiques entre 1953 et 1955, perceptions et pratiques diplomatiques”, in Soutou & Hivert op.cit and «Le retour à l’Europe ? Les décideurs soviétiques face à l’intégration ouest-européenne, 1957-1991 », *Journal of European Integration History*, 2005, volume n°11, n°1.

In 1955 Soviet policy turned towards creating a defensive glacis to counter the threat of a rearmed West Germany integrated into the western military bloc. When the Bonn parliament ratified the London-Paris agreements on West Germany's admission to NATO the Soviet Union and its communist allies met in the Polish capital and signed the collective security agreement that was the basis for the Warsaw Treaty Organisation.

Not long after the signature of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviets agreed with the western powers to convene a summit of heads of state in Geneva. The first item on the Soviet agenda for the meeting was European collective security.

In the diplomatic sphere the Soviet campaign for European collective security had been on the back foot since the London-Paris agreements. But politically the Soviet Union approached the Geneva summit in a far stronger position. By the middle of 1955 a plurality of western public opinion supported collective security arrangements in Europe while only a small minority favoured the retention of NATO. An analysis of public opinion polling data from several West European countries, including France, prepared for the Eisenhower administration concluded that the results "raise disquieting doubts about the future of NATO...NATO, in fact, appears highly vulnerable from the opinion point of view.... At the least, it appears the people of Western Europe are now willing to consider security arrangements alternative to NATO."<sup>25</sup>

The Soviet peace campaign also reached its peak in mid-1955. The World Assembly for Peace in Helsinki at the end of June was the most diverse and broadly based of all the WPCs international gatherings. The Helsinki Appeal called for international differences to be resolved by discussion and negotiation. In August, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the WPC organized a petition calling for the prohibition of weapons of mass destruction that secured an astonishing 665,963,811 signatures, including one-third of Japan's population.<sup>26</sup>

In its pre-Geneva briefing for the Soviet leadership the foreign ministry noted a strong tendency in French foreign policy toward an agreement with the USSR about Germany,

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<sup>25</sup> Eisenhower Papers, A. Whitman File, International Meetings Series, Box 2, Geneva Conference 1955 (4), Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

<sup>26</sup> G. Roberts, "Averting Armageddon: The Communist Peace Movement 1948-1956" in S. Smith (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of the History Communism*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2014.

together with a deal on collective security. However, the French did not really want a united Germany, argued the briefing; they preferred some kind of federal solution that would keep the country divided.<sup>27</sup> As it happened, similar sentiments had been expressed by French peace activists at the Helsinki Assembly who were not convinced that a united Germany was a good solution from the point of view of European security.

The directive to the Soviet delegation to the summit summarised Moscow's policy towards France: the USSR wanted to maintain and improve good relations with France but did not intend to damage France's relations with other countries. Moscow was prepared to replace the Franco-Soviet pact with a new agreement and would refrain from doing anything that would add to France's difficulties in North Africa.<sup>28</sup>

Another paper sent to the Soviet leadership around the same time dealt with French difficulties in North Africa and their likely impact on France's policy at the Geneva summit. Just as the crisis in Indochina had weakened the French position at the Berlin foreign ministers conference, so France's colonial problems in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia would undermine its influence at Geneva. These problems were also weakening the French position within the western bloc, especially since Paris was transferring French troops from Europe to North Africa. Internal political divisions within France were deepening and France's economic and strategic dependence on the United States was growing. The paper concluded that the French might seek Soviet help in resolving their problems in North Africa, the implication being that in those circumstances France might be more co-operative in relation to other matters.<sup>29</sup>

Very little of a concrete character resulted from the Geneva summit, except for an agreement to hold a foreign ministers' conference in the same venue. But the political atmosphere was good and there was much talk in the press about the "spirit of Geneva" – the hope the summit would lead to a prolonged Soviet-Western détente. Expectations were high that there could be a Soviet-Western agreement on the German question and European collective security.

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<sup>27</sup> "O Vozmozhnykh Pozitsiyakh Zapadnykh Derzhav po Osnovnym Mezhdunarodnym Voprosam na Predstoyashchem Soveshchanii Glav Pravitel'stv Chetyrekh Derzhav", 7 July 1955, Fond 89: The Soviet Communist Party of Trial, F.89, Op.7, D.7, Ll.79-84

<sup>28</sup> "Drektivny dlya Delegatsii SSSR na Soveshchanii Glav Pravutel'stv Chetyrekh Derzhav", AVPRF F.6, Op.14, Pap.3, D.43, Ll.155-156.

<sup>29</sup> "Obostrenie Polozheniya vo Frantsyuzkoi Severnoi Afrike i Vliyanie etogo Faktora na Vneshnepoliticheskii Kurs Frantsii pered Soveshchaniem Chetyrekh Derzhav", 28 June 1955, RGANI, F.5, Op.20, D.337, Ll.68-90.

In its pre-conference briefing on the Geneva foreign ministers' meeting the Soviet analysts noted that while the western powers were united on Germany, there were divisions in relation to collective security, with Britain, and especially France, more inclined than the United States to seek an agreement with the USSR. The French were expected to propose guarantees that would make the London-Paris agreements non-threatening towards the USSR, such as the inclusion of a united Germany in a pan-European collective security organisation. However, according to the Soviet analysts, the French did not really want a united Germany, France's official position notwithstanding. They preferred an agreement between the Soviet Union and West Germany as the basis for a *modus vivendi* in Europe that would include restrictions on the armed forces of the two German states.<sup>30</sup>

The Soviets approached the Geneva conference of November-December 1955 confident their proposals on Germany and European collective security would make some headway. To reach agreement they were prepared to compromise, including allowing a long transition to a full-blown system of European collective security. These expectations were met when the western powers presented proposals for a European Security Pact which, in effect, guaranteed the Soviets against a NATO attack. But this offer was linked to implementation of the Eden Plan i.e. all-German elections leading to a united Germany that was then expected to remain in NATO.

Halfway through the conference Molotov hosted a friendly and relaxed dinner for the French delegation. Towards the end of the evening the talk turned to politics. When Foreign Minister Pinay said there could be no stability in Europe while Germany remained divided it provoked a tirade from Molotov against Germany in general and the Federal Republic in particular. Do you really think you can keep the Germans in your bloc if they want to leave it? Do you really believe they won't try to dominate the alliance for their own purposes? We don't want a Germany governed by the Junkers. If the Germans ever decide to go to war again it would be a fight to the finish and we can't accept guarantees from a military grouping that includes Germany. Molotov insisted that the division of Germany would take time to overcome and required a gradual rapprochement of the two German states. He was, he stressed, a supporter

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<sup>30</sup> "O Vozmozhnykh Pozitsiyakh Trekh Zapadnykh Derzhav po Germanskomu Voprosu i Voprosu o Bezopasnosti v Evrope na Predstoyashchim Ministrov Inostrannykh Del SSSR, SShA, Anglii i Frantsii v Zheneve", 17 October 1955, RGANI, F.5, Op.30, D.114, Ll.191-217.

of elections in Germany but they could not be held in the immediate future. In response Pinay said that France shared Soviet preoccupations but the division of Germany was the principal cause of insecurity in Europe.<sup>31</sup>

Shortly after the meeting Molotov returned to Moscow to try to persuade the Soviet leadership to accept western proposals for all-German elections as a basis for negotiation. He was overruled by Khrushchev, who shared the French preference for a divided Germany, as long as the Soviet Union kept control of communist East Germany.

When Molotov returned to Berlin he gave a speech that closed the door to elections and hence to an agreed settlement of the German question. With the Soviets now insisting on the de-linkage of European collective security and the German question (previously they had insisted the two were inextricably linked) the Geneva conference closed without agreement.<sup>32</sup>

Khrushchev's rejection of Molotov's policy on the German question signified that Moscow now accepted that two Germanys were better than one. Because the Soviet Union possessed nuclear weapons, Khrushchev was more sanguine than Molotov about German revanchism, but West Germany's potential military power threat to the Soviet Union could not be ignored. The campaign for European collective security continued, as did Soviet efforts to woo the French.

### **The Franco-Soviet Mini-Détente of mid-1956**

Even after the failure of the foreign ministers' conference and the dissipation of the spirit of Geneva, the Soviets remained optimistic about the future. A foreign ministry briefing paper of January 1956 emphasised the continuing popularity of Soviet proposals for collective security, especially in France.<sup>33</sup>

The outlook was particularly bright when it came to Franco-Soviet relations. The combative Joxe had been succeeded by Maurice Dejean in December 1955. While Dejean had "une

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<sup>31</sup> *Documents Diplomatiques Français 1955*, Ministère des Affaires étrangères: Paris 1988 pp.779-781.

<sup>32</sup> See G. Roberts, *A Chance for Peace? The Soviet Campaign to End the Cold War, 1953-1955*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper No.57, December 2008 pp.55-59.

<sup>33</sup> "Vyskazyvaniya v Politicheskikh Krugakh Zapadnykh Stran o Putyakh Resheniya Problemy Evropeiskoi Bezopasnosti posle Zhenevskogo Soveshchaniya Ministrov Inostrannykh Del", 31 January 1956, RGANI F5, Op.20, D384, LI.255-268.

attitude méfiante” towards the USSR he saw the possibilities for a political evolution of the Soviet regime and favoured a constructive dialogue with the Soviets.<sup>34</sup>

When Dejean called on Andrei Gromyko in January 1956 he told the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister that despite recent difficulties there had been progress in discussions on disarmament and European security. Gromyko responded that progress had been blocked by the western position on the German question, but Dejean ended this part of the conversation by saying that he didn't think there were fundamental differences between the west and the USSR with regard to Germany given the common interest in preventing a revival of German aggression. This was a short, protocol meeting with a new ambassador but Gromyko took the trouble to circulate his report to the Soviet leadership.<sup>35</sup>

The biggest beneficiary of the January 1956 elections in France was the PCF, which increased its parliamentary mandates to 150. In February a socialist government headed by Guy Mollet came to power, its parliamentary majority dependent on the communists, now the biggest party in the National Assembly.

In 1956 Moscow abandoned Molotov's complex multilateral diplomacy and pursued bilateral relations with western states.<sup>36</sup> This new strategy also served to cement Khrushchev's and Bulganin's control of Soviet foreign policy. In January 1956 Bulganin proposed a US-USSR treaty of friendship and co-operation. At the 20<sup>th</sup> party congress in February Khrushchev proposed non-aggression pacts and friendship treaties as a means to regulate relations between states. In spring 1956 the Soviets had a series of meetings with Scandinavian leaders aimed at loosening that region's ties with the western bloc. In April 1956 Bulganin and Khrushchev travelled to Britain on a battleship and conducted the first Anglo-Soviet summit since the war.

The culmination of this diplomatic offensive was the arrival in Moscow of a high-powered delegation headed by Mollet and foreign minister, Christian Pineau – the first such western government visit to the USSR since the end of the Second World War.

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<sup>34</sup> S. Davieau-Pousset, “Maurice Dejean, Diplomatie Atypique”, *Relations internationales*, 2015/2 no.162.

<sup>35</sup> “Priem Frantsuskogo Posla v Moskve M. Dezhana 23 Yanvarya1956g.”, AVP RF, F.022, Op.9, Pap.40, D.2, LL.91-12

<sup>36</sup> J. Van Oudenaren, *Détente in Europe: The Soviet Union and the West Since 1953*, Duke University Press 1991 pp.67-70.

Mollet's journey to Moscow in May 1955 followed an expansion of Soviet-French cultural, scientific, economic and political contacts that had begun even before Stalin's death in March 1953. At the Moscow International Economic Conference in April 1952 the largest delegation was from France, including many business leaders. The aim of the conference was to break the cold war economic blockade of the USSR and the most generous offer on trade relations was made to the French. Soviet-French trade grew from 77 million roubles in 1952 to 481 million in 1957.<sup>37</sup>

The Soviets were as keen on developing cultural ties. French culture was big in the USSR, especially the classics of French literature. In February 1952 fifteen hundred people attended a celebration in Moscow of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victor Hugo's birth. In 1954 the Comédie-Française toured the USSR.<sup>38</sup> More than 50 Soviet delegations travelled to France in 1955 and 30 French delegations to the USSR. French tourists were beginning to visit the USSR in large numbers and Soviet cultural initiatives in France – in film and dance, for example – had been well-received. In January 1957 there were nearly 123 million copies of translated books by French authors in circulation in the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup>

In April 1956 a French Socialist party delegation arrived in the USSR on a fact-finding mission. Invited by the Soviet communist party, the delegation proposed to conduct an independent investigation of political and economic conditions in post-Stalin Russia. The delegation included many prominent French socialists and its highly publicised tour took in visits to Moscow, Leningrad, and Tbilisi, as well as a labour/prison camp at Tula.<sup>40</sup> In May the Soviet peace committee received a French parliamentary delegation to the USSR which visited Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. That same month Moscow – and later Leningrad and Kiev - hosted an exhibition of French books by leading Parisian publishers. This was followed by an exhibition of French 19<sup>th</sup> century art in Moscow and Leningrad and broadcast by Soviet television of a history of French film. May also saw the publication of a new, bi-

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<sup>37</sup> M. Lipkin, "Avril 1952, la conférence économique de Moscou : changement de tactique ou innovation dans la politique extérieure stalinienne?", *Relations Internationales*, 2011/3 (n.147). An English version of this article may be found in O. Bange & P. Villaume (eds), *The Long Detente: Changing Concepts of Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1950s-1980s*, Central European University Press: Budapest 2017.

<sup>38</sup> J. van Eerde, "The Comédie Française in the U. S. S. R.", *The French Review*, vol.29, no.2, December 1955.

<sup>39</sup> "Spravka o Sovetsko-Frantsuzskikh Kul'turnykh Svyazykh", F.1204, D.3427, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv [Literatury](#) i Iskusstva.

<sup>40</sup> See the account of the socialist delegation's visit on the website *Voyages en URSS* <http://chs.univ-paris1.fr/Voyages/index2.htm>.

weekly French-language publication devoted to foreign and internal political affairs – *Nouvelles de Moscou*.

As Mikhail Narinski reports, the Soviets prepared intensively for the Franco-Soviet summit, which took place in Moscow from 16-19 May. A foreign ministry briefing paper designated the summit a trust-building exercise that would help improve relations and develop co-operation with France. In relation to Germany, the directives stated that German reunification could only come about as a result of direct negotiations between the FRG and the GDR.<sup>41</sup>

The summit took the form of a series of wide-ranging discussions of international questions.<sup>42</sup> According to Pineau, he had “never taken part in an international conference where the discussions were so frank and blunt.”<sup>43</sup> Both sides agreed that allaying mutual suspicions was essential to a Franco-Soviet détente. In relation to Germany the French thought that an agreement on nuclear disarmament would facilitate German reunification. Such linkage was resisted by the Soviets, who wanted to keep the two issues separate. In their view the way forward was rapprochement between the two German states leading to eventual reunification.

The Franco-Soviet summit was the last major diplomatic duty performed by Molotov, who was sacked as Foreign Minister in June 1956. In one of his more forceful contributions to the discussion Molotov corrected Pineau’s characterisation of Soviet policy as being hostile to reunification: “We are not against it. But German rearmament, especially with nuclear arms, is as great a menace to France as it is to the USSR.”<sup>44</sup>

While there was no convergence of French and Soviet positions on the German question during the Moscow conversations, after the summit there was some movement in the Soviets’ position when, in July, they published proposals for a phased withdrawal of foreign armed forces from Germany as part of a process of European disarmament. In the same package were proposals for a non-aggression pact between NATO and the Warsaw Pact and an

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<sup>41</sup> M. Narinski, “La visite de la delegation française en URSS en 1956” in Soutou & Hivert op.cit. pp.456-457.

<sup>42</sup> The French record of the Franco-Soviet discussions may be found in DDF 1956, vol.1, Paris 2003 pp.791-822. The Soviet record is cited and referenced by Narinski in *ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> Open Society Archive, Budapest, 300-80-1-1085 (Reuters report in the file on French diplomatic relations, 1956-1964)

<sup>44</sup> DDF 1956 p.804.

agreement on the non-use of force by the two blocs.<sup>45</sup> Such suggestions were not novel but they did take the Soviets closer to the French emphasis on the importance of disarmament and arms control to the resolution of the German question.

Khrushchev was the main Soviet speaker at the summit and he harped on his favourite theme - why didn't the French play a more forceful role in international affairs? "The voice of France in international politics is weak...In Geneva I had an unpleasant experience: we almost couldn't hear the voice of France. Do not see what I say to you as interference in your affairs. If France spoke with full awareness of its power and prestige, it wouldn't be for our benefit, but for the cause of peace, and the balance of forces in the world would be quite different."<sup>46</sup>

At the end of the summit the two sides issued a joint communique which spoke of conversations that had taken place in an atmosphere of friendship, warm sincerity and mutual comprehension. Both governments pledged to work for a reduction of international tensions, for the improvement of Franco-Soviet relations and in support of peace and international security. There were also specific commitments on the improvement of trade, cultural, scientific, and sporting relations.<sup>47</sup>

The French delegation was welcomed with enthusiasm by the Moscow public. According to Reuters, Soviet and French leaders were mobbed by hundreds of cheering Russians when they emerged from an embassy reception. The summit was front-page news for days in the Soviet press. Reporters covered the French delegation's tourist activities as well as official functions such as a ceremony dedicating a plaque to 42 French pilots who had died fighting on the Soviet-German front.<sup>48</sup> After the French departed *Pravda* published a front-page editorial lauding the success of the summit and its positive impact on the international atmosphere.<sup>49</sup>

There was some discussion of Middle East issues at the summit but not about the crisis brewing in Egypt, which bubbled over when Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal Company in

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<sup>45</sup> AVP RF F.0536, Op.1, Pap.2, D.27, Ll.1-13.

<sup>46</sup> DDF 1956 p.802.

<sup>47</sup> "Le communique final temoigne d'une bonne volonte mutuelle", *Le Monde*, 22/5/56.

<sup>48</sup> "Otkrytie Memorial'noi Dosku v Pamyat' Frantsuzskikh Letchikov", *Pravda*, 19/5/56.

<sup>49</sup> "Pod Znamenem Mirnogo Sosushchestvovaniya", *Pravda*, 21/5/56.

July 1956. Moscow was a staunch supporter of Egypt throughout the ensuing crisis, calling for a peaceful resolution of the Nasser's dispute with Britain and France. The Soviets listened politely to French representations but rebuffed any suggestion they should modify their policy. When Dejean met Dmitry Shepilov, on 7 August the new Soviet foreign minister reminded him that Mollet and Pineau had agreed to work with Moscow to reduce international tensions in the Near and Middle East. Yet now France and Great Britain were acting in opposition to that common goal.<sup>50</sup>

In September Gromyko met Dejean and Edgar Faure, the former Prime Minister, who was a Russian speaker and a noted Slavophile. Faure told Gromyko that while he didn't agree with military action against Egypt, Nasser's actions were wrong, dangerous and reminiscent of Hitler. The two Frenchmen argued that from a trade point of view the Soviet interest in a stable Suez Canal regime was as great as France's. They suggested the Soviet Union could be given guarantees about access to the canal. But Gromyko was unmoved and reiterated Soviet support for Egypt.<sup>51</sup>

When Britain, France and Israel attacked Egypt at the end of October the Soviet Union was forthright in its condemnation and rallied international support for the Nasser regime. On 4 November the Soviets made what Fursenko and Naftali describe as "a toothless call for a ceasefire".<sup>52</sup> The next day the Kremlin came out with a much stronger line in the form of messages from Bulganin to the British and French that famously threatened to use force and rocket attacks to stop the invasion of Egypt. The content of the two messages was broadly similar but there were some differences, indicating that Moscow was mindful of French public opinion and was trying not to burn all its bridges to Paris.

Bulganin's message to Mollet recalled that when they met in Moscow the French leader had spoken about his socialist ideas. "How can one reconcile socialist ideas", asked Bulganin, "with the treacherous attack by France against a country which only recently achieved independence and is not sufficiently armed to defend itself?". Bulganin's appeal for French

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<sup>50</sup> "Zapis' Besedy Ministera Inostrannykh Del SSSR D.T. Shepilova s Poslom Frantsii v SSSR M. Dezhanom", *Blizhnevostochnyi Konflikt, 1947-1946*, Demokratiya: Moscow 2003 doc.272.

<sup>51</sup> "Zapis' Besedy Pervogo Zamestitelya Ministera Inostrannykh Del SSSR A.A. Gromyko s Vyvshim Prem'er-Ministrom Frantsii E. Forom", 21 September 1956, *ibid* doc. 290.

<sup>52</sup> A. Fursenko & T. Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, Norton & Co.: New York 2006 p.132. Fursenko and Naftali cover the Suez crisis from the Soviet perspective and Maurice Weiss from the French point of view in "Frantsiya, Sovetskii Souz i Suetskii Krizis" in Vais and Narinsky op.cit.

restraint was more conciliatory than in his letter to the British: “There is still time to use prudence and to prevent bellicose forces from gaining the upper hand. We hope that at this decisive moment the French government will show soberness.”<sup>53</sup>

The Suez crisis was virtually over by the time Mollet replied to Bulganin on 8 November but that did not stop the French premier from attacking the Soviet Union’s bloody suppression of the popular revolt in Hungary.<sup>54</sup>

Soviet military action in Hungary provoked a highly negative reaction in France. There were massive popular demonstrations against the USSR and both the PCF and the peace movement were split by events in Budapest. When leaders of the peace movement met in Helsinki they were unable to agree a position on the Hungarian events. The best they could come up with was a neutral resolution that blamed the bloodshed on the cold war.<sup>55</sup>

The Mollet government had fallen by the time Franco-Soviet relations recovered from the twin crises of Suez and Hungary. There would be many more attempts to secure a Franco-Soviet détente, some more successful than others, but none that came close to the hopes entertained by Moscow in the mid-1950s.

## **Conclusion**

France presented an enticing political and diplomatic target for the Soviets but consistently failed to live up to expectations. At no point did the French break ranks with the British and Americans on European collective security and the German question. The Soviets wielded some influence within French politics but not enough to detach Paris from its united front with Britain and the United States.

It is tempting to conclude that a Franco-Soviet alliance was always an impossible one. But, as George-Henri Soutou has noted, neutrality was very fashionable in Europe in 1954-55 and Soviet policy of neutralising Germany within a collective security framework was not

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<sup>53</sup> “Poslanie Predsedatelya Soveta Ministrov SSSR N.A. Bulganina Predsedatelju Soveta Ministrov Frantsii Gi Molle”, [http://www.cvce.eu/en/education/unit-content/-/unit/dd10d6bf-e14d-40b5-9ee6-37f978c87a01/275e2979-2fd5-4e93-ac60-090e0d0048b9/Resources#55f243a1-de38-401d-9834-d279bf3874b3\\_en&overlay](http://www.cvce.eu/en/education/unit-content/-/unit/dd10d6bf-e14d-40b5-9ee6-37f978c87a01/275e2979-2fd5-4e93-ac60-090e0d0048b9/Resources#55f243a1-de38-401d-9834-d279bf3874b3_en&overlay).

<sup>54</sup> <http://web.stanford.edu/group/tomzgroup/pmwiki/uploads/200-1956-11-KS-f-LIZ.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> See Sabine Jansen, “Budapeshtskii Krizis i Franko-Sovetskie Otnosheniya” in Vais & Narinsky op.cit.

without its supporters in France.<sup>56</sup> In 1955 Molotov came quite close to securing a deal with the west on Germany and European collective security – an outcome that would have revolutionised the context of Soviet-French relations. The Franco-Soviet mini-détente of 1956 has been overlooked by historians but Moscow's near rapprochement with Mollet's government is not to be lightly dismissed. Without the intervention of the Egyptian and Hungarian events it is quite possible there would have developed a significant Franco-Soviet détente.

The Soviets thought that France and the USSR had many common interests and concerns in relation to the German question. The problem was that the French feared a Soviet influenced Germany more than united Germany. While Moscow saw pan-European collective security as a solution to its fears of a German revival, the French saw it as a device that could destabilise their security situation. For Paris the resolution of the German question was only one key to European security, the other was the containment of Soviet power.

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<sup>56</sup> G-H. Soutou, "Les Français et la Question d'une Eventuelle Politique Sovietique de 'Neutralite' en Europe, 1954-1955" in Soutou & Hivert op.cit