<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Preface** vii

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Crossroads to World Revolution, 1917–1920</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Europe at the Brink</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Subverting Great Britain and Its Empire</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Manchurian Fiasco, 1931</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Stalin's Gamble on German Nationalism</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 The Impact of Hitler</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Italy Breaks Out</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 The Paradox of the Popular Front</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Spain and the Schism of Europe</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 A United Front against Japan</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 The Appeasement of Germany, 1937–1939</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 War, 1939–1940</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13  The Invasion of the Soviet Union  

Conclusions  

Notes  387  
Bibliography  449  
Index  465
Introduction

It is, sometimes, these changes which are going on around us of which we are least aware.

—Maynard Keynes

Why should anyone believe that Communism played a crucial role in the origins of World War II? The word scarcely appears in the index of standard works on the subject.

Yet the threat of revolution posed by the Bolsheviks, as the Communists were once better known, proved critical to the emergence of fascism. It was also a central consideration in the failure of states menaced by Hitler’s Germany to unite against the immediate and very tangible threat he posed to their survival. Although brooding along the margins of Europe for more than two decades after the revolution with military power insufficient for offensive operations to endanger Central Europe, the Soviet Union nevertheless incarnated an impending threat to capitalism worldwide. Entire countries, including Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia, were all the more easily isolated, picked off one by one and then wiped off the map by Hitler because for each of them the dread of Communist rule ultimately proved greater than their fear of the Nazis. This makes more sense when it is borne in mind that whereas the menace from Eastern Europe—the Soviet Union—was well established by the mid-1930s, the scale and
depth of that looming from Central Europe—Nazi Germany—had yet to reveal itself in full.

The story therefore does not begin where it is usually assumed to, in the 1930s, though this is when it reaches its climax. It is also essential to understand its genesis from the 1920s. Indeed, the First World War (1914–18) had barely ended before the dangers pending for the postwar era became apparent. Delegates were already en route to Paris in January 1919 for the primary purpose of redrawing the maps of Europe and the Near East, when from London The Times issued an electrifying call to confront the “[d]anger of Bolshevist imperialism”. “Of all problems before the Peace Conference”, the leader page thundered, “none is quite so urgent as that of our relations with the new Imperialism of the Russian Bolsheviks. And in none is delay so dangerous or so injurious to the well-being of our friends. The idea is very prevalent in this country that however pestilent Bolshevism may be, only Russians are the sufferers, and we should be well advised not to meet its troubles. Whatever truth there may ever have been in that view has evaporated. The present Russian government—and an appreciation of this fact is crucial to an understanding of our problem—is the most Imperialistically minded in Europe.”

But how was it that the triumph of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia could so rapidly threaten to undercut plans for postwar Europe? The answer was not hard to see. The Bolshevik creed—or Marxism-Leninism, as we would call it today—offered the most immediate, drastic solution to the social and economic deprivation not just of the working classes of the world, but also of the impoverished peasant. Conditions were ripe by 1918 when revolutionary propaganda spread like wildfire across the globe. In Europe, as the Swiss ambassador to France reported, “Everywhere there are disturbances, riots and convulsions.” And wherever one looked, popular discontent varied only in the degree of severity. The scale and intensity of modern conflict accelerated by industrialisation had imposed an immense and, in places, intolerable strain on the societies caught up in the First World War. Contiguous, multinational Leviathans—the Russian, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires—imploded under relentless bombardment and the economic and social strain of total war.
By comparison the democracies were far better off in their capacity to forge a national consensus. Yet they too found it possible to sustain a titanic struggle for survival only through making extravagant empty promises of social reform—in Britain “homes fit for heroes” that were never built—and of more egalitarian income distribution, delaying the inevitable moment when these promissory notes would fall due in the likelihood that the means for delivering on them would be insufficient to meet pressing demand. Liberals were rapidly transforming themselves into socialists while socialists were rapidly abandoning reformist socialism for Marxism; and Marxism was being appropriated by the fanatical “Vladimir Ilyich” (Lenin). The prewar European states system that had emerged unscathed from the French revolutionary wars of the previous century now tottered and threatened to collapse as its central components succumbed to revolt.

First came the tumultuous “October Revolution” in which Lenin took the Russian Empire by surprise in November 1917. Then came Benito Mussolini’s triumphal “March on Rome” in October 1922. Though in principle a victor, Italy had suffered an unresolved political crisis for decades that was exacerbated rather than alleviated by joining Britain and France (the Entente) in war. On the right, deprived of territorial gains at the expense of fallen empires, pent-up nationalist sentiment amplified by dubious colonial conquest was never satiated. On the left, meanwhile, widespread social unrest—culminating in the occupation of the factories in 1920 and widespread disorder—was inspired by the inflammatory example of the October Revolution. Yet fascism rather than Communism triumphed. And by 1923 the fascists of the NSDAP (Nazi Party) had also gained a hold in Germany. Under the spell of the hitherto entirely unknown aspirant architect Adolf Hitler, they seized centre stage to the south, in Bavaria. From the outset in Munich, its capital, Hitler fixed upon the revolutionary menace of international Bolshevism as the central danger to the nation and indissolubly interconnected with Jews at home and abroad. Whatever Hitler’s other goals, his ultimate aim was to liquidate the Jews in Germany; his devoted followers, brutalised by war and humiliated by unexpected defeat, eagerly inhaled the intoxicating rhetoric. Simultaneously, far
beyond the boundaries of Europe, as hopes for revolution faded in Moscow, revolution in China became the order of the day—and its primary victim was Britain, the country’s financial overlord.

When from 1937 to 1939 the threat of yet another war appeared on the horizon, the lingering menace of revolution from Bolshevism explained in large part why Britain rejected co-operation with the Soviet Union to deter German aggression. The reasoning was simple, but for the most part concealed in the form of an unwritten assumption, certainly never fully articulated to the population at large: far rather buy off Hitler with timely territorial concessions, even at the cost of dismembering dependent states in Central and Eastern Europe, than risk ushering Communist power into the heart of the continent. Insufficiently understood is the undoubted fact that throughout the 1930s leading conservative politicians within the democracies not only welcomed fascism into power but thereafter also feared that, were fascism overthrown in Italy or Germany—and fascism was seen as only an interim solution—Communism would be almost certain to take its place. The events immediately following the Second World War certainly suggest that such fears were not entirely misplaced. Confidence in the sturdiness of the underlying capitalist system and its democratic legacy was at its nadir. The Great Depression had seen to that.

Thus beyond the spectre of war looming the more menacing spectre of revolution; a spectre that in the end hastened the advent of a war that from being a distant possibility grew into an immediate certainty. And this grim vision haunted the known world: from San Francisco to Shanghai, from Vladivostok through Berlin to London. Its persistence infinitely complicated the search for peace through collective security as envisaged in the Covenant of the League of Nations, which itself ultimately foundered on unrealistic liberal and socialist expectations. Rearmament was consistently rejected by the left. Pacifism predominated. Yet liberals and socialists sincerely believed in collective security, even though it could not be ensured without force of arms. This fundamental paradox was never resolved, ultimately rendering the reformist left utterly impotent and therefore to be discarded as irrelevant.
Revolution in the form of Communism/Bolshevism—“Workers of the world unite”—was not merely a Marxist idea or even merely a Leninist platform for the fundamental economic and social reconstruction of Soviet Russia. For the existing capitalist system it was also a lethal international contagion, as Lenin openly boasted; one for which no known antidote or vaccine then existed. It was People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgii Chicherin who, dapper in dress shirt and frockcoat, as late as August 1921 described Soviet Russia unequivocally as “the citadel of world revolution”.

But it fell to the Communist International (Comintern) to subvert the restoration of the established diplomatic values and practices of the prewar order. As “the headquarters of the world revolution” in Moscow, Comintern drew upon and gave purpose to the forces of blind frustration that had accumulated within Europe and the colonial world beyond. Anticipating an uprising in Germany that eventually had to be aborted, in November 1923 a secretary of the Bolshevik Party’s Central Committee, Vyacheslav Molotov, reminded all Communists that “the October revolution in Russia is the first blow against capitalism. The victorious proletarian revolution in Germany is a yet more powerful blow against it.” It followed that “the workers of all countries must help the German proletariat.”

And Comintern was central to that purpose, whereas the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel) was free to act without regard to any principle, Communist or otherwise. “Principles!” a senior Russian diplomat said to the startled Chinese ambassador, when asked what the general principles underlying Soviet diplomacy were. “In diplomacy there are no principles, only experience.”

Lenin was a genius at improvisation in relentless pursuit of world revolution. From the outset Communist parties were established across the globe and financed with vast sums of Russian money. Infiltration and subversion of the capitalist camp were the order of the day. “Comintern has dozens of ties and agents in every country,” Lenin boasted.

Trotsky, briefly people’s commissar for foreign affairs before building the Red Army, commented by letter in 1923 that “until the war . . . the political lines were far more defined. All international relations were
more stable and every ambassador worked within the framework of delineated treaties, relationships and traditions. If you like, diplomacy was one of position. These days every situation . . . has fundamentally altered. Diplomacy is a consummate war of movement, of which one flank is London, the other Beijing or Tokyo.”

The customary forms of international relations were thus systematically overturned by Moscow’s messianic commitment to overturning the established international order at all costs and as soon as practicable. At the receiving end throughout Europe, the bureaucratic élite, dressed for the day in detachable collars and morning suits, sitting down to work despatching and receiving ciphered telegrams to and from the embassies of Europe, found their customary conduct of diplomacy repeatedly frustrated by Comintern subversion across the globe. The new régime in Moscow obviously had no respect for its bourgeois counterparts. The reaction was predictable: extravagant rhetoric and threats of war or economic blockade. Facing down retaliation required strong nerves in the Kremlin. And for men like Lenin and Stalin this was par for the course. The resulting indignation merely confirmed them in the belief that the threat they posed was effective. The British foreign secretary, a stickler for tradition, put the matter plaintively in 1927: “What we ask of them is not that they shall change their domestic institutions . . . but that they shall henceforth make their policy conform to the ordinary comity of nations, and abstain from the effort to promote world revolution and from all interference in our internal affairs.”

The Bolshevics, however, were not about to change their practices, especially their pursuit of world revolution, since that would require a change in their very nature. Nor were they about to miss any opportunity that arose from cultivating friction between the victor powers and the defeated: what they called “inter-imperialist contradictions”. Was this not how they had managed to slip through the cracks and seize power in the first place? For Lenin and those who succeeded him, gambling on potential revolutions was not merely a matter of belief but an urgent priority for survival. The initial advantage lay in the fact that the economies of Europe were prostrated by the wholesale destruction of capital infrastructure across the entire continent. War had impoverished
the leading trading states of Europe, a situation made all the worse as newly emergent, not least xenophobic and protectionist nation states—victors and vanquished alike—emerged from the wreck of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. These countries through no fault of their own found themselves faced with an insoluble dilemma. They were from the outset torn from within between the observation of two mutually exclusive principles: the search for ethnically homogeneous state boundaries on the one hand, and strategically defensible frontiers on the other. When confronted by the need to choose between the two at any given moment, they invariably decided upon whatever offered the greater amount of territory—a recipe for international conflict, and, of course, a godsend to a master tactician like Hitler, seeking to exacerbate relations between those whose lands he coveted.

War had also unstitched the seams that held society together. This was not just a matter of alienation from government. The state had always maintained its supremacy through the monopoly of force. But as a result of the 1914–18 war, millions of men aged eighteen or over had been brutalised in order to win against the enemy. Ex-combatants knew how to shoot and to use the bayonet to deadly effect. A gun was never hard to find, even in countries like Britain, where domestic possession was still legal. Immediately after the war, indeed for some years thereafter, Germany was not unique in multiple examples of random political assassination and violent public disorder. In Italy the demobilised were the main object of concern on the part of nervous liberal governments anxious for public order. Soldiers returning from war soon fell ready prey in 1919 as likely recruits to Mussolini’s *fasci di combattimento*. And acute social dislocation presented a unique opportunity for the expansion of Communism not just in Europe, but across the globe—a critical objective for those who believed that the traditional state was a thing of the past.

In spite of what has been asserted, the revolutionary objectives set by Lenin were sustained, albeit more cautiously, even under Stalin, as they were under his successors (whether they pursued them purposefully or not; some were manifestly indifferent). The system to which they answered was such that the only issue differentiating them was that of
degree and opportunity, not one of principle. The weight of the past was overwhelming. It towered over them. The priority given to international revolution thus varied from one leader to another, but was itself never extinguished even in the worst of times. It was in this sense an integral part of the structure; an inescapable legacy. Indeed, it was precisely these subversive ambitions that inspired Hitler’s vision of Götterdämmerung and critically undermined the trust of Britain and France in the Soviet Union as a potential ally in confronting Nazi Germany during the late 1930s.

Britain was, indeed, a case in point. By virtue of economic weight alone, it had to form the cornerstone of any alliance intended against the threat from Nazi Germany. Historians of British foreign policy, however, have tended to see everything with too much hindsight, through the eyes of post-imperial Britain. They have neglected the critical fact that interwar London also presided over a massive global empire, and that this empire had visibly begun disintegrating from its zenith in 1919. As a consequence, Britain was necessarily a distracted power, not only inclined to give way in Europe to meet more urgent, far-flung needs, but also shaping its European purposes with an eye fixed not only on domestic economic needs but also on pressing imperial priorities. When, for instance, it was reported that Prince Bismarck of the German embassy in London had told Hitler that “a very influential section of British public opinion strongly favours non-interference in European affairs”, the general reaction expressed in the Foreign Office was one of indignant surprise. Yet the wily and cynical realist Orme Sargent retorted, “But is not Bismarck unfortunately right?” Absolutely.

Foreign policy was first and foremost about imperial interests: defence, imperial defence. It was no accident that at the top of the armed forces sat the Committee of Imperial Defence. During this era of unparalleled colonial unrest, when even schoolboys in Cairo came out on strike against the British, overseas policy represented a desperate attempt to hold back the incoming tidal wave of change that inevitably exacerbated the intensity of domestic political debate. Thus to many, certainly in the British Conservative Party, the security of Western Europe was of course significant, but a commitment of only secondary
It was almost as though, with the First World War over, Britain had finished with Europe, and now was the time to return to purely domestic or imperial concerns.

In the end it all came down to money. Democratic governments rose and fell on the back of successful or failing economies, and increases in taxation were always unpopular. Empires had never appeared for any reason other than the accumulation of wealth and its secure protection. India was the largest market for British goods, including a very high proportion of manufactures. China came second. Conservative minister Neville Chamberlain, former lord mayor of Birmingham, was one who highlighted the fact that the evacuation of Shanghai and Hong Kong would destroy one of the greatest sources from which Britain drew trade. Here the clash with Communism, in the form of the first Chinese revolution (1925–27), was never a matter of doubt. Sir Cecil Clementi, governor of Hong Kong, announced in no uncertain terms that “[w]e are quite determined to have no Bolshevism in the Colony.”

The interwar era must be seen as one whole. By focusing almost exclusively on European developments, historians have overlooked the direct link between Comintern's subversion of the empire in the 1920s and attitudes to Russia in Europe through the 1930s. This oversight is encouraged by reading too much into Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union and the ascendancy of Stalin from 1929. Many, certainly in the Foreign Office, believed that world revolution had been dropped entirely—indeed some historians unfortunately still do; an assumption made plausible by the fact that Comintern's offensive ceased to be as effective as it had once been. And Britain's secret intelligence service MI6, on a tight budget that did not allow for setting priorities purely on the basis of sentiment, continued to see the Soviet Union as the main enemy through to the middle of the 1930s.

It was not for lack of effort from below that Comintern was relatively ineffective. Successful pursuit of the class war crucially depended upon more than the painful contraction of living standards. Ironically the collapse of the US stock market on Wall Street in 1929, the long-awaited
catalyst to revolution in the West, lent credence to the assumption that revolution was dead, because it failed to accelerate the revolutionary tide. In key parts of Europe, and to the surprise of many, reformist Social Democracy stepped in to prop up the existing socio-economic order. Where were the Communists, the sections of Comintern? They were, indeed, instructed to fight the social democrats at every turn, although—and this was critical—not to the point of seizing power. Meanwhile the Kremlin, urgently in need of reprieve, reined in Communist hotheads prematurely eager for revolutionary action as it bought time for the hasty modernisation of Russia from top to bottom. Yet this pause was not meant as anything more than an enforced tactical retreat. It was never intended as surrender and abandonment of the cause. The forces that drove Comintern from below within the Soviet Communist Party were marking time only reluctantly and not without complaint, as was evident in challenges to Stalin’s ascendancy during the year of crisis, 1932. Those who ruled Britain and had the most to lose fully understood that the relatively calm sea might prove to be only an ebb tide.

With over eight million Germans out of work, the Great Depression was enough to hand Hitler an unparalleled opportunity. In Germany as in Britain, Social Democracy dominated the working-class vote sufficiently to neutralise through timely palliatives the demands voiced loudly for truly revolutionary change. And those who were inclined to dismiss Hitler’s rabble-rousing about the threat from international Bolshevism, even as the Depression undermined living standards and starkly exposed the gulf between rulers and ruled, found to their horror that the tide of revolution unexpectedly rolled in again, engulfing France and Spain during the torrid summer of 1936. Liberal democracy was in peril once more. Mussolini summed up the dilemma of the democracies and their prevailing political beliefs: “Liberalism can be applied to a country where all the parties act within the boundaries of the state, but from the moment one party depends upon or permits itself to be inspired from abroad, liberalism becomes impracticable.”

This certainly happened in Spain. Here as in France social turbulence, already apparent in 1934, reached disturbing new heights. The Popular Front, innovated in France and adopted in Moscow primarily
to stem the spread of fascism, and duly condemned by Trotsky as a betrayal of the revolution, emerged instead as the revolution’s Trojan horse. And whereas in 1928 Comintern amounted to forty parties and 1.6 million members, by 1935 it had grown to sixty-one parties and 3.1 million members. More importantly, it had returned to Western Europe with a dynamic of its own and a broad appeal unseen in the 1920s. Spain was soon riven in two, while France teetered on the edge. All of a sudden Bolshevism re-emerged as a practical proposition in the heart of Europe and at the gateway to empire, decoupling Britain’s confidence in France and instantaneously unravelling French confidence in the Soviet Union. It was not long before the road to the East opened for Hitler to march through unimpeded.

Despite all this, the centrality of the role of Communism in the interwar years has taken a long time to be accepted by historians of international relations. The Grand Alliance between Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States in World War II and their falling out in the Cold War that followed had a deadening effect, suppressing within the minds of an entire generation any awareness of the profound conflict over Communism that predated the Second World War and played its own part in generating that war. This suppression, conscious or not, of an awkward truth inadvertently opened a space to the right for polemists like Ernst Nolte to frame the rise of fascism as the inevitable consequence of the October Revolution. To say the least, this was dangerously simplistic; more importantly, it stifled further historical research as it opened the door to political polemic. For the majority of the academic centre-left, Nolte was sufficient reason to rule out Bolshevism as having played any role at all.

One distortion of history thus prompted another. It was customary in the 1960s to dismiss as of no consequence Hitler’s obsessive talk about the dangers from Bolshevism: to assert that it had no real foundations in fact, and to claim that it was entirely disingenuous, being merely a ruse to hoodwink the unsuspecting. A symptom of this approach was reliance upon one diary entry from Italian foreign minister Count Ciano to claim that the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 was “really clearly anti-British” (2 November 1937), while ignoring the subsequent entries in
which Ciano boasts of “the new, powerful anti-Communist system” (5 November 1937) and “our formidable anti-Russian system” (9 November 1937). And it is perhaps a typical weakness of the diplomatic historian to pay rather more attention to process than to purpose, assuming the motive springs to be known and unchanging as everything inexorably follows its usual geopolitical course. With respect to the interwar era historians and biographers have had no choice but to acknowledge that the personality of Hitler was wholly exceptional: a mind in the grip of an extremely abnormal psychosis. So what more need be said? But one does not have to rationalise Hitler’s diplomacy in the manner of A.J.P. Taylor to see that focusing excessively on Hitler’s personality can easily obscure perception of other important, underlying explanations for war. One man is not an army.

The larger role of international Communism has thus tended to be cast into the shadows, if no longer entirely discarded, within the traditional narrative explaining the tension between Nazi Germany and the rest of Europe. Moreover, it is of interest to note that this was not a matter of contention between right and left. The loud silence among more conservative historians was, ironically, echoed on the left. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, avoided almost any reference to the Communist International in *The Age of Extremes*. He explicitly rejected the idea that the rise of fascism was in any way a reaction to the Communist movement, no doubt for fear of justifying it: “the Right-wing backlash responded not against Bolshevism as such, but against all movements, and notably the organized working-class, which threatened the existing order of society or could be blamed for its breakdown.” Yet there was no way Social Democracy “threatened the existing order of society”, as Hobsbawm put it, in the interwar period. On the contrary, socialists notoriously propped it up. The Labour Party in Britain under the famously deferential Ramsay MacDonald was a prime example. The greater fear was of a Communist revolution. That is why Comintern at one notorious stage beginning in 1928 stigmatised social democrats indiscriminately as “social fascists”. Only Bolshevism red in tooth and claw actually threatened to overturn capitalism. That was why it appeared in the first place, and why the Third International was created to supplant
the Second International; this Hobsbawm surely well understood, as a Communist Party member until the very end.

In depicting the eve of the Second World War, historians have more often than not grudgingly conceded Communism a bit-part only, wandering on and off stage while the audience’s attention has been intentionally directed to the familiar interplay between the more reputable actors, as the conventional script of diplomatic history prescribes. Communism deserves, however, to be reinstated in its true role. This is in part what Arno Mayer, writing in 1967, was referring to: “The analytic framework of conventional diplomatic history simply must be enlarged to accommodate the complexities of international relations in an age of mass and crisis politics, in an age of international civil war.”

The purpose of this work is thus to reach beyond diplomacy and to return international Communism to where it actually was at the time: never far from centre stage, as an enduring if at times unspoken threat to those in charge of government on both sides of the Rhine; to return it, indeed, to the spotlight in accounting for the drama that unfolded between 1919 and 1941. My larger intention, which connects this work with my history of Russia’s Cold War, has been to underscore the intimate connection between the role Bolshevism played before the war and the role it played from 1947, after the brief interval of wartime collaboration had misleadingly suggested that deep ideological differences could be indefinitely suppressed. History has hitherto been excessively compartmentalised, if not chopped into pieces, not least separating the realm of ideas from the world of events. And with respect to periods, the interconnective tissue between the interwar era and the Cold War needs patching back together, to allow us at last to view them as an integral whole.
Abetz, Otto, 355
Abyssinia. See Ethiopia
Abyssinian war (1935), 167
Afghanistan, 16, 63
Agnelli, Giovanni, 42, 43
Alba (duke of), 265–66, 297–98
Alexander (king, Yugoslavia), 143
Alexandrovsky, 278, 292–93
Alfonso XIII (king, Spain), 206, 216, 275
Aloisi, Pompeo, 139, 170
American Relief Administration, 26
Amery, Leo, 173–74, 421n87; on Chamberlain, 259, 263–64, 299, 310, 352; on Kristallnacht, 298; on League of Nations, 167; on Spain, 222–23
anarchists: in Catalonian militia, 215; Paris Commune orchestrated by, 16; in Soviet military intelligence, 240; in Spanish trade unions, 16, 215
Anglo–German Naval Agreement (1935), 158, 161
Anti-Comintern Pact (1936), 11
anti-Communism: of Catholic Church, 133–35; of Conservative Party, 264–65; Franco’s, 216–20; Hitler’s, 151; Mussolini’s, 119. See also Bolshevism and Bolsheviks anti-Semitism, 56–57, 59; in France, 203;
in Germany, 128–29; in Italy, 172; of Kristallnacht, 297–98
Antonov-Ovseenko, Vladimir, 227
Arciszewski, Mirosław, 300–301
Arita Hachirō, 371
Artuzov, Artur, 234
Assarasson, Vilhelm, 342–43
Astakhov, 306, 314, 317, 319, 324
Attlee, Clement, 353
Attolico, Bernardo, 168
Austria, 161; fascism in, 182–84; German dominance over, 171–72; invaded by Germany, 275–76, 278–79
Azana, Manuel, 209, 210, 212–13
Badoglio, Pietro, 166
Baldwin, Stanley, 65, 77, 160; on British alliance with Germany, 198; on Front populaire, 197; on German occupation of Rhineland, 173; replaced as prime minister by Chamberlain, 259; on sanctions against Italy, 165; on Spanish Civil War, 222, 266
Balfour, Arthur, 38
Ball, Joseph, 268, 269
Barnett, Charles, 318
Barrington-Ward, Robin, 276, 277, 325
Bartholdy, Albrecht Mendelssohn, 258
Barthou, Louis, 143, 149
Bauer, Otto, 182
Beck, Józef, 140, 142, 146–48, 302–3, 326
Belgium, 353
Beneš, Edvard, 278, 292–94, 296, 327
Bennett, Richard, 401n2
Berg, Pavel, 22
Berle, Adolf, 288
Berzin, Jan, 123
Bingham, Robert, 158
Bismarck (prince), 8
Bismarck, Otto von, 31
Bleszinski (colonel), 146
Bloch, Eduard, 56
Blomberg, Werner von, 123
Blum, Léon, 192, 202; backlash against, 203; Churchill on, 223–24; Communist Party support for, 204; falls from office, 267; after Popular Front election, 195, 196; during Spanish Civil War, 217, 230, 237–38, 242; strikes settled by, 200
Blyukher, Vasilii, 256
Bocchini, Arturo, 171
Bogomolov, Dmitrii, 251, 256
Boheman, Erik, 344
Bohle, Ernst, 374
Bokken, Charles, 322
Bolshevism and Bolsheviks, 2, 3; British fears of, 198; Chamberlain on, 261; in Europe, 93; Göring on fear of, 258; Hitler on, 56–58, 378–79; Italian and German police collaboration on, 170–71; Japanese fear of, 245, 246; during Russian Revolution, 15, 17; as “World Force,” 19. See also Communism
Bonnet, Georges, 288, 303, 433n123
Bont, Florimond, 281
Borah, William, 38
Bordiga, Amadeo, 23
Boris (king, Bulgaria), 364, 365
Bormann, Martin, 374
Borodin, Mikhail, 72, 78
Bowers, Claude, 291
Brandler, Heinrich, 35, 36, 51, 52
Bresciani-Turroni, C., 392n25
Brest-Litovsk, Treaty of (1918), 17
Briand, Aristide, 106, 109, 115
British Empire: China in, 69–70, 72, 75–76, 80; as target of Comintern, 61–64, 69, 395n1
Brockdorff-Rantzau, Ulrich von, 37, 48, 53
Brocket (lord), “Ronnie,” 331, 356
Browder, Earl, 227
Brüning, Heinrich, 106, 110, 111, 114
Bryant, Arthur, 345
Buchan, John, 281
Buchanan, George, 43
Buda, 279
Bukharin, Nikolai, 21; Mein Kampf quoted from by, 133; on revolution in Italy, 40
Bulgaria, 364–66
Bullitt, William: on League of Nations, 346; as US ambassador to France, 204, 239, 262, 301
Bülow, Bernhard von, 170, 171
Burgess, Guy, 312
Butler, Richard (“Rab”), 292, 300; at League of Nations, 346; on negotiations with Soviet Union, 303; on peace with Germany, 298, 345; pro-German sentiments of, 354–55; Prytz meets with, 356, 357, 444n113
Caballero, Francisco Largo, 207, 230
Cachin, Marcel, 201, 238
Cadogan, Alexander: as British ambassador in China, 252; on British foreign policy, 126; on British guarantee to Poland, 301; on British-Soviet alliance, 310; on Butler, 354–55; on Chamberlain, 260; on fears of Bolshevism, 61; on Hitler, 294; on Spain, 274; on Vansittart, 430n60; Vansittart replaced by, 271–72; on Versailles Treaty, 130
Cairncross, John, 350
Canaris, Wilhelm, 231, 236
Caporetto, Battle of, 161
Caracciolo, Mario, 161
Carlson, Evans, 247
Carlo (king, Romania), 279, 302
Carr, E. H., 130, 144, 173, 389n21
Cartland, Ronald, 263
Catholic Church: anti-Communism of, 133–35; in Austria, 279; Chamberlain on anti-Communism of, 311; in Spain, 208, 211
Centre Party (Germany), 117, 120
Cerruti, Vittorio, 196, 217
Chamberlain, Annie, 311
Chamberlain, Austen, 65, 67, 80, 81
Chamberlain, Ivy, 282
Chamberlain, Neville: appeasement of Germany by, 262–69, 281–83; appeasement of Italy by, 162; appeasement of Japan by, 252–54; becomes prime minister, 259–62;
INDEX 467

on China as market for Britain, 9; during Czechoslovakian crisis, 287–88, 290–91, 294–97; on Finland, 344; on France, 274; guarantee to Poland by, 301–2; as Health Minister, 66; Hitler meets with, 291–92, 295; Joseph Kennedy on, 275; Maisky on, 314–15; on military talks with Soviets, 317, 318; on Molotov, 305; on possible war with Soviet Union, 350; on proposed British-Soviet alliance, 310–11, 315; in secret negotiations with Germany, 316; succeeded by Churchill, 356; on war in Scandinavia, 348

Chambrun, Charles de, 205

Chang Hsueh-liang, 91, 95, 247–49

Chang Tsso-lin, 74, 82

Channon, Henry, 266, 269, 299

Charles-Roux, François, 134, 167–68

Chattfield (lord), 243, 309, 310

Chautemps, Camille, 267, 270

Chiang Kai-shek, 75, 76, 81–82, 245–50, 252

Chicherin, Georgii, 49; on Britain, 78; on China, 72, 75, 76; on Comintern and Soviet government, 55; as Commissar for Foreign Affairs, 5, 20; on Mussolini, 47; on tensions in Europe, 60

Chilton, Henry, 213

China, 69–72; current economy of, 385–86; Japanese invasion of Manchuria in, 88–89, 94–96; Japanese occupation of Manchuria in, 92–94; Marco Polo Bridge incident in (1937), 251–52; as market for Britain, 9; revolution in (1925–26), 4, 73–76, 80–83; Soviet aid to, 257; Soviet interference in (1927), 78–79; Soviet intervention in (1937), 245–46

Chinese Communist Party (CCP), 70–72; consolidation of power by, 247–51; Guomindang and, 75; retreat from Chiang Kai-shek by, 245–47; Soviet Union and, 89–91

Chou En-lai, 248, 249, 251

Churchill, Winston: on Baldwin, 160; becomes prime minister, 352, 356–57; as Chancellor of the Exchequer, 77, 398n62; on Chinese Revolution, 82; Franco supported by, 222; on Hitler, 264–65; on Italian Communist Party, 84; Maisky meets with, 353–54; on Nazism, 110; Pius XI and, 67; on Spanish Civil War, 223–24, 232–33, 265–66; on war in Scandinavia, 348; warns Stalin of German invasion, 370–73

Chu Teh, 246

Ciano, Galeazzo, 11–12, 147–48, 172, 205, 275

on Spain, 215, 229

Citrine, Walter, 78

Clemenceau, Georges, 30, 84

Clément (Evžen Fried), 190, 193

Clementi, Cecil, 9

Clerk, George, 200

Codovilla, Vittorio (Codo): Marty on, 212; in Moscow, 214; during Spanish Civil War, 218–20, 243; on Spanish Communist Party, 239, 241

Cogniot, Georges, 237, 280

Cole (lieutenant colonel), 311

Collier, Laurence, 303

Colville, John, 357

Comintern (Communist International), 5; on aid to Chinese Communist Party, 248; anti-war movement of (1932), 101–3; Britain and British Empire as target of, 61–62, 395n1; on Bulgaria, 365; change in party line of, 332–36; in China, 70, 71, 74, 75; on collective security, 305; as Communist Party institution, 27; on election of Popular Front in France, 193–94; forged Zinoviev Letter and, 65–69; founding of, 20–23; after France’s fall to Germany, 355; on Franco-Soviet pact, 155–57; in French Indochina, 109; German Communist Party and, 112–14; German-Japanese pact against, 249–50; on German minority in Czechoslovakia, 284; on German occupation of France, 369; on German occupation of Rhineland, 174–77; on German threat, 278–79; in Germany, 34–36; Hitler on,
Comintern (Communist International)

(continued)

151; ineffectiveness of, 9–10; Italian Socialist Party in, 43; in Italy, 169–70; in Japan, 98; on Manchuria, 100–101; membership of (1933), 11; on Nazi-Soviet pact, 328–29; Popular Front strategy of, 178–79; on possible war between Soviet Union and Germany, 360; reversal on Social Democracy by, 185–86; on rise of Hitler, 131–32; second congress of (1920), 24; in Shanghai, 90; on social democrats, 12, 183; on Spain, 207–9, 211–15; during Spanish Civil War, 217–20, 224, 226–28, 230, 233, 235, 239–41; Stalin’s control over, 120, 335–36; in united front against fascism, 124–26, 187–90

Communism: among French workers, 201; in China, 70–71, 82; Hitler as alternative to, 129–30; Hitler on, 128; ignored by historians, 13; during interwar years, 11; Vatican’s obsession with, 210. See also Bolshevism and Bolsheviks

Communist parties, 5; change in party line for, 332; during Spanish Civil War, 226

Communist Party (Austria), 183, 279

Communist Party (Belgium), 355

Communist Party (Britain; CPGB), 175–76, 181, 268; on Chamberlain, 282–83; changes in party line of, 333; on compulsory military training, 312

Communist Party (Bulgaria), 364, 365

Communist Party (Czechoslovakia), 284


Communist Party (Germany; KPD), 29, 30, 48; attempted revolution by (1921), 34–36; attempted revolution by (1923), 50–52; dissent within, 112–14; in election of 1932, 117–18; German social democrats and, 103; Hitler on, 123; on Prussian plebiscite of 1931, 115–16; suppressed by Hitler, 124, 133

Communist Party (Italy; PCI), 43, 46, 84, 87, 168

Communist Party (Poland), 150, 229

Communist Party (Russia; Bolshevik), 15, 17

Communist Party (Spain; PCE), 208; during Civil War, 218–20, 239–41; in election of 1936, 209; in Popular Front, 211–14, 230

Communist Party (Vietnam), 108, 109

Conservative Party (Britain), 160, 165, 259; on Bolshevism, 198–99; distrust of Soviet Union by, 262–63; on Front populaire, 197; sympathy for Franco among, 222–26, 266

Conservative Research Association (Britain), 282

Cooper, Duff, 267, 288

Corradini, Enrico, 163, 164

Cot, Pierre, 136, 217, 238

COVID-19 (coronavirus), 384

Craigie, Robert, 253

Cranborne (viscount), 266

Cremet, Jean, 65, 108

Cripps, Stafford, 353, 370, 373, 375

Croce, Benedetto, 44

Cromwell, Oliver, 352

Cuban missile crisis, 382

Cuné, Wilhelm, 39

Curzon, George (earl), 19, 24, 40, 64

Curzon Line, 24

Czechoslovakia, 143, 159, 277–80, 284; alliance with Soviet Union, 154; capitulates to Germany (1938), 293–97; Comintern on German minority in, 284; crisis in, 287–93; under German control, 299–300; German invasion of (1939), 298; Great Britain on, 283; Soviet support for, 285–86; The Times on, 288–90

Daladier, Édouard, 136; Chamberlain and, 281–82; closes French border with Spain, 244; as Minister of War, 203–4; on popular front, 189; in talks with Politburo, 188

Darwin, Charles, 58
INDEX 469

Davis, Norman, 136
Dawes Plan, 59
Dawson, Geoffrey, 166–67, 259, 289–90
De Bono, Emilio, 166
debts, public, 384–85
Debuchi Katsuji, 100
De Gaulle, Charles, 369
Degoutte, Jean, 39
Dekanozov, Vladimir, 359, 376
Delbos, Yvon, 217, 239, 269, 270
della Torretta, Pietro, 80
Denike, Yuri, 52
Denmark, 352
de Salis, John, 18
Diaz, José, 212, 217–19, 227
Dimitrov, Georgi, 419n27; on Bulgaria, 364, 365; on change in party line, 332, 333; on Comintern in Italy, 169; on defeat of fascism, 178; on election of Popular Front in France, 193–94; during German invasion of Soviet Union, 376; on German threat, 278–79; on possibility of revolution in Germany, 345–46; on Spain, 214, 218; during Spanish Civil War, 220, 237, 238; Stalin and, 184–88; on threat of war, 174–75
Dirksen, Herbert von, 127, 135, 316
Doihara Kenji, 251
Dollfuss, Engelbert, 134, 143, 182, 278
Doumenec, Joseph, 318
Doumercq, Gaston, 67, 188, 189
Dovgalevsky, Valerian, 109
Drax, Reginald Plunkett-Erne-Erle-, 317–18, 321
Dreieter, 255
Drtina, Prokop, 296
Duca, Francesco Borgolini, 57–58
Duclos, Jacques: after France’s fall to Germany, 355–56; on French military spending, 157, 203; in Front populaire, 192; during Spanish Civil War, 226, 230
Dunant, Alphonse, 267
Dunkirk (France), 353
Dzerzhinsky, Felix, 33
Eberlein, Hugo, 21
Ebert, Friedrich, 53
Eckart, Dietrich, 57
Eden, Anthony, 145, 272; on Chamberlain, 269; as foreign secretary, 377–78; on Germany, 198; on Hitler and Mussolini, 260–61; on League of Nations, 167; resigns as foreign minister, 273; during Spanish Civil War, 224, 239, 243; Stalin meets with, 151–52
Edward VIII (king, England), 223, 271, 357–58, 421n88
Ehrenburg, Ilya, 228, 231
Eisler, Gerhart, 89–90
Eisner, Kurt, 19
Elliot, Walter, 287
El’man, Boris, 234
Erkko, Eljas, 339–41
Estonia, 337, 347
Ethiopia (Abyssinia): invaded by Italy, 129, 165–67
Farrar, Philip, 266
fascism: in Austria, 182–84; British views of, 381; in France, 180, 238; gains power in Germany, 3, 118; international solidarity among, 206; in Italy, 40–49, 84, 161–63; Popular Front strategy against, 169, 176, 178–79; in Portugal, 231; in Spain, 221; support for in Germany, 131; united front against, 124–26; welcomed by conservative politicians, 4
Faulhaber, Michael von, 127–28, 134
Filow, Bogdan, 364
Finland, 336–52
Firebrace, Roy, 308
First World War. See World War I
Fischer, Ernst, 184–85
Fisher, Warren, 252, 260
Fitin, Pavel, 320, 376
Flandin, Auguste, 110, 152–53
Flandin, Étienne, 145
Florus the Epitomist, 68
Foisson, Robert, 355
Fontanel, Emile, 218–19
Ford, Henry, 57
Forwood, Dudley, 223
Four-Power Pact (1933), 139
Frachon, Benoît, 195
France, 31, 106–7; on aid to Spain, 220–22; alliance between Soviet Union and, 135–37, 153–59; in alliance with Poland, 280; British policy towards, 274; election of Popular Front in, 192–97; falls to Germany, 353, 355–56, 358; on German invasion of Austria, 275–76; Germany invaded by (1923), 39–40; impact of British unilaterism on, 270; Indochina under, 108–10; Japanese assurances to, 116; in Locarno Pact, 80; in military talks with Britain and Soviets, 319–21; mutual assistance with Soviet Union, 140–41; under Napoleon Bonaparte, 335; national unity government formed in (1938), 280–81; Popular Front in, 179–82, 267; reparations from Germany to, 53; Soviet criticisms of, 270–71; Soviet interference in empire of, 69; during Spanish Civil War, 206, 217, 222–25, 228–31, 237–39, 244; Weimar Republic and, 30
Franco, Francisco, 208; anti-Communism of, 216–20; Conservative Party sympathy for, 222–26, 266; Germany and Italy aids, 231–33; rebellion by, 215; during Spanish Civil War, 235
François-Poncet, André, 222
French Indochina, 108–10
Frente Popular (Popular Front; Spain), 209–12
Front populaire (Popular Front; France):
British fears of, 197–204, 267; in elections of 1936, 192–97; on Spanish Civil War, 224
Gafencu, Grigore, 302
Garvin, James, 261–62, 266
Gauche, Maurice, 149
Gavrilović, Milan, 366
geopolitics (Geopolitik), 58–59, 163–65
George II (king, Greece), 221
George V (king, England), 83
George VI (king, England), 267, 290–91, 330, 357
German National Socialist Workers’ Party (NSDAP), 54. See also Nazi Party
Germany: aids Franco in Spanish Civil War, 231–40; in anti-Comintern pact with Japan, 249; attempted revolution in (1919), 18–20; attempted revolution in (1921), 34–36; attempted revolution in (1923), 49–54; Austria invaded by, 275–76; Austria under, 171–72; beginnings of Nazi Party in, 54–60; British appeasement of, 143–45, 262–69; Churchill warns Stalin of invasion from, 370–73; Communist Party in, 112–14; Czechoslovakia capitulates to (1938), 293–97; Czechoslovakia invaded by (1939), 298; election of 1925 in, 106; elections of 1932 in, 117–18, 120–21; financial crisis in (1931), 114–16; Franco-Soviet alliance against, 153–59; Great Depression in, 87; Hess flies to Britain, 373–76; Hitler comes to power in, 122–23, 131; invaded by France (1923), 39–40; Kristallnacht in, 297–98; in Locarno Pact, 80; Molotov visits, 360–63; Nazis gain power in, 3; nonaggression treaty with Poland (1934), 140; pact between Soviet Union and, 142, 306–7, 314–15, 321–25, 326–28, 333–34; in peace negotiations with Britain, 359–60; plans to attack Poland, 310; plans to invade Soviet Union, 363–67; Poland invaded by, 326; in police collaboration with Italy, 170–71; political violence in (post-WWI), 7; at Rapallo Treaty negotiations, 37–39; rearmament of, 150–51; Rhineland occupied by (1936), 172–74; Russia invaded by (1917), 17; secret negotiations between Britain and, 315–16; Soviet Union and (1920s), 31–34; Soviet Union invaded by (1941), 368–69, 376–79; during Spanish Civil War, 221, 230; in Tripartite Pact with Italy and Japan, 360;
uprising in (1923), 5; as Weimar Republic, 28–31; Western Europe invaded by, 352–54; Yugoslavia invaded by, 367
Gerö, Ernő, 226, 228, 240
Gil Robles, José María, 207, 209, 215
Giolitti, Giovanni, 40, 43
Giral, José, 233
Goebbels, Joseph, 140, 146
Gorev, Vladimir, 227
Göring, Hermann: on actions against German Communist Party, 124; on alliance with Italy, 162; Chamberlain meets, 323; on fear of Bolshevism, 258; Germany spying under, 275–76; Halifax meets, 269; in Poland, 146
Graff, Johann Heinrich de, 419n27
Gramsci, Antonio, 42, 84, 168, 417n98
Grand Alliance (Britain, US, and Soviet Union), 11
Grandi, Dino, 100; Chamberlain and, 273; as Italian ambassador to Britain, 273; on Italian Communist Party, 87; as Italian foreign minister, 160, 164; removed as foreign minister, 181
Great Britain: in Anglo–German Naval Agreement, 158, 161; appeasement of Germany by, 143–45, 262–69; attempts to appease Japan by, 252–54; in Battle of Britain, 359–60; Chamberlain becomes prime minister of, 259–62; during Chinese Revolution, 82–83; Conservative Party sympathy for Franco in, 222–26; during Czechoslovakian crisis, 287–96; after Czechoslovakian crisis, 299–300; evacuation from Dunkirk of troops of, 353; fears of French Front populaire in, 197–204; forged Zinoviev Letter and, 64–69; general strike in (1926), 77–78; German rearmament and, 150–52; Great Depression in, 87; guarantees given to Poland by, 301–3; Hess flies to, 373–76; interwar military policy of, 8–9; on Italian invasion of Ethiopia, 166, 167; on Manchu-
Haushofer, Albrecht, 359–60
Haushofer, Karl, 58–59, 374
Hayes (lieutenant colonel), 245
Haywood (major general), 318
Heckert, Fritz, 126
Henderson, Arthur, 401n2
Henderson, Nevile, 287
Hepner, Erich, 126
Hernández, Jesús, 214
Herrick, Myron, 38
Herriot, Édouard, 192
Herwarth von Bittenfeld, Hans Heinrich, 111, 322
Hess, Alfred, 374
Hess, Rudolf, 57–59, 312–13; goes to Britain, 373–76
Heydrich, Reinhard, 171
Hilferding, Rudolf, 29
Himmler, Heinrich, 171
Hindenburg, Paul von, 106, 123, 130
Hirshfeld, 236
Hitler, Adolf, 327; on agreement with Soviet Union, 323; anti-Semitism of, 56–58; British appeasement of, 144; British Conservatives on, 198–99; British views of, 381; Chamberlain meets with, 291–92, 295–96; comes to power (1933), 122–23, 131; on Communism and Soviet Union, 128; Czechoslovakia capitulates to, 293–97; decides to invade Soviet Union, 359; early British attitude toward, 129–30; Edward VIII on, 223; on German invasion of Soviet Union, 378–79; German rearmament under, 150–52; good luck of, 368; Halifax meets, 269; on Hess going to Britain, 373; invades Western Europe, 352–54; on Japan, 371; Kemsley meets with, 310; Mein Kampf by, 59; on menace of Bolshevism, 3, 11, 261; Molotov visits, 360–63; Mussolini and, 162–63; in Nazi Party beginnings, 54–56; in pact with Stalin, 314; Pius XI on, 134; plans to attack Poland, 310; plans to invade Soviet Union, 363–67; united front against, 124–26; after World War I, 19
Hoare, Samuel, 268, 398; on future of Europe, 299; on German peace proposals, 330; Nazi Party underestimated by, 334; on proposed division of China, 252–53; on Spanish Civil War, 266
Hobbsawm, Eric, 12, 13
Ho Chi Minh (Nguyen Ai Quoc), 109
Hodža, Milan, 293
Hodgson, Ralph, 64
Holland, 353
Home, Alec Douglas, 291
Hong Kong (China), 69, 76, 80, 386
Hoover, Herbert, 26, 53, 93, 94
Hore-Belisha, Leslie, 349
Houghton, Alanson, 38
Hsu Hsiang-ch’ien, 246
Hudson, Robert, 315–16
Hugenberg, Alfred, 112, 113, 123, 127, 138
Hughes, Charles Evans, 54
Hull, Cordell, 363
Humbert-Droz, Jules, 47
Hutten-Czapski, Bogdan, 148

Iceland, 385
India, 9, 63
Indochina, 108–10
Inner Mongolia, 98
Inskip, Thomas, 266
International Brigades, 233, 235
Ioffe, Adol’f, 71
Iran, 383
Islamic fundamentalism, 383
Ismay, Hastings 317–18
Isogai, Rensuke, 251
Italian Socialist Party (PSI), 43
Italy: aids Franco in Spanish Civil War, 231–40; Communist Party in, 84; Ethiopia invaded by, 129, 166, 167; fascism in, 135, 160–63; on German dominance over Austria, 171–72; in police collaboration with Germany, 170–71; post–World War I, 7; rise of fascism in, 40–49; Soviet Union and, 168–70; during Spanish Civil War, 215–17, 220–21; in Tripartite Pact with Germany and Japan, 360

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Jagwitz, Eberhard von, 374
Japan: British attempts to appease, 252–54; Chinese Communists versus, 247–51; Chinese Revolution against, 72–74; League of Nations on Manchuria under control of, 99–100; Manchuria invaded by, 88–89, 94–96; Manchuria under control of, 92–94, 102; Marco Polo Bridge incident between China and, 251–52; threat of Bolshevism to, 245, 246; in Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, 360; in war with Soviet Union (1939), 348, 361, 370–72
Jebb, Gladwyn, 282; Bolshevism feared by, 174; on Germany, 277; on Italy, 206; on Nazi-Soviet pact, 322; on secret negotiations between Britain and Germany, 316
Jews: Ford on, 57; Hitler on, 56; Mussolini on, 58; as target of Kristallnacht, 297–98.
See also anti-Semitism
Jones, Tom, 197–98
Jouhaux, Léon, 155, 195
Kaganovich, Lazar, 228
Kallio, Kyösti, 339
Kaplan, Fanny, 27
Karakhan, Lev, 20, 73–74
Kato, Tomásaburō, 96
Kemsley (lord), 319
Kennedy, Joseph: on Czechoslovakia, 288; on Hitler, 330; as US ambassador to Britain, 275, 281, 327
Kennedy, Leo, 288–89, 301
Kerr, Philip (Lord Lothian), 150, 261, 262
Keynes, John Maynard, 1, 398
Khomeini, Ruhollah Musavi (ayatollah), 383
Khrushchev, Nikita, 321
Kindertransport, 298
Kirkpatrick, Ivone, 347
Kjellén, Rudolf, 58
Knatcherbull-Hugessen, Hugh, 253
Knickerbocker, Hubert, 354
Knorin, Vil’gel’m, 115, 120, 184; on Austria, 183; after German election of 1932, 118
Kolarov, Vasil, 364
Kollontai, Alexandra: on, 366; on Finland, 342–44; on German invasion of Soviet Union, 369; on Soviet demands on Finland, 350–52; on Sweden’s support for Finland, 347; on Yugoslavia, 366
Kol’tsov, Mikhail, 227–28, 286
Konev, Ivan, 361
Kopp, Viktor, 32, 33
KPD. See Communist Party (Germany; KPD)
Krasin, Leonid, 22, 37
Krestinsky, Nikolai, 37, 168, 169, 172
Krèvê-Mickevičius, Vincas, 359
Kristallnacht (Germany), 297–98
Kronstadt uprising (1920), 34–35
Krupp (firm), 33
Kun, Béla, 35–36, 189
Kutepov (general), 109
Kuusinen, Aino, 343
Kuusinen, Otto, 100–101, 115, 186, 343
Kuznetsov, Nikolai, 321
Kwantung Army (Japan), 89, 91
Labour Party (Britain): on British rearmament, 268; in by-election of 1933, 165; Comintern on, 175; Communist Party and, 178–79; in election of 1930, 104–5; under MacDonald, 12; Soviet subsidy to, 401
Laidoner, Johan, 347
Lampson, Miles, 81, 83
Latvia, 337
Laval, Pierre, 93, 115, 145, 188; after fall of France, 354; on Franco-Soviet pact, 155–57, 192; on Popular Front government, 197
League of Nations, 31, 88; collective security system of, 4, 83; during Czechoslovakian crisis, 293; on Italian invasion of Ethiopia, 129, 165, 167; on Japanese invasion of Manchuria, 92, 98–101; on Soviet invasion of Finland, 346; Soviet Union joins, 136, 141
Leeper, Reginald (Rex), 268, 379
Léger, Alexis, 140–41, 236
Leith-Ross, Frederick, 252, 253

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Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, 3, 5, 7; on Anglo-Soviet trade agreement, 64; death of, 26–27; at founding of Comintern, 21–22; on revolution in Italy, 40; on revolutions in Europe, 19; during Russian Revolution, 15–17; on trade with Britain, 68; on war with Poland, 24–26

Leningrad (Soviet Union): Finnish and Estonian borders near, 337, 340; Soviet defense industry in, 342; Stalin on security of, 338

Lepin, Edvard, 256

Lerroux, Alejandro, 207

Levi, Paul, 35

Li Dazhao, 89–90

Lindley, Francis, 85, 92, 274–75, 311

Lindsay, Ronald, 274

Liddell, Guy, 357, 375

Liebknecht, Karl, 30

Li Li-san, 89–90

Lindley, Francis, 85, 92, 274–75, 311

Lindsay, Ronald, 274

Lipski, Józef, 140

Lithuania, 139, 327, 337, 359

Litvinov, Maxim, 23, 101, 185, 198, 271, 283; on agreement with US, 102; on British guarantee to Poland, 301–2; collective security strategy of, 156; on German invasion of Czechoslovakia, 279–80; on German invasion of Soviet Union, 368–69, 377–78; on German minority in Czechoslovakia, 284–85; on German preparations, 286–87; at League of Nations, 132; on Molotov, 361, 445n136; on Nazis, 133; NKVD investigation of, 270; on Polish-German non-aggression pact, 145; resigns as Foreign Secretary, 303–9; Schleicher and, 121; during Spanish Civil War, 242

Litvinov, Tatyana, 445n136

Lloyd George, David, 18, 129

Locarno Pact (1925), 80, 152–54, 288; on Rhineland, 172

Loktionov, Aleksandr, 286

Lominadze, Vissario "Besso," 132

Londonderry (lord), 136, 199

Longo, Luigi, 226, 235

Loraine, Percy, 273, 275

Lothian (Lord; Philip Henry Kerr), 150, 261, 262

Lowe, Ivy, 23

Lozovsky, Solomon (Lozovskii), 90, 320, 359; Manuilsky on, 124; on Nazi-Soviet pact, 324; on Popular Front in France, 192

Łubieńska, Teresa, 146

Luciani, Georges, 271

Ludendorff, Erich, 14, 54

Ludwig III (king, Germany), 19

Lueger, Karl, 57

Łukasiewicz, Jan, 148

Luxemburg, Rosa, 21, 30

Lytton Commission (1932), 99

MacDonald, Ramsay, 12, 259, 401n2; elected prime minister, 105; Mussolini meets with, 126–27, 152–53

Maclean, Donald, 262, 373, 419n27

Maclean, Fitzroy, 372–73, 447n12

Magyar, Lajos, 101

Maisky, Ivan, 152, 261; on Chamberlain, 314–15; Churchill meets with, 353–54; on Communist revolutions during World War II, 336; Dawson meets with, 289–90; Eden meets with, 198, 260; in military talks between Britain and Soviets, 318–19; as Soviet ambassador to Britain, 266, 312, 349; at Stalin's meeting with Eden, 151

Makins, Roger, 357

Malenkov, Georgii, 304

Mallet, Victor, 351–52

Malthus, Thomas, 58


Mannheim, Carl, 339–41

Manuilsky, Dmitriy, 115, 184, 186; on fascism in Germany, 116, 131; on German Communist Party, 114; on Spain, 208–9; on
INDEX 475

united front against fascism, 124–26, 188–89; on war between Soviet Union and Germany, 360
Mao Tse-tung, 89, 246, 249, 250
Marco Polo Bridge incident (China; 1937), 251–52
Margach, James, 268
Marin, 70
Marty, André, 155–57, 194–96, 200; during Spanish Civil War, 226, 228, 239, 243
Mary (queen, England), 291, 433n134
Matsuoka Yōsuke, 99, 371–72
Mayer, Arno, 13
McDonald, Iverach, 299–300
Megaro, Gaudens, 162
Mein Kampf (Hitler), 56, 59; translated into Russian, 122–33
Mendras, Edmond, 135–36
Merekalov, Aleksei, 304
Meretskov, Kirill, 347
Merker, Paul, 112
Mermet (lieutenant colonel), 196
Márquez, Mario, 44
Montagnana, Mario, 44
Monteiro, Armindo, 231–32
Montgomery, Hugh, 167
Morel, Henri, 204
Moreno (captain), 215
Morgenthau, Henry, Jr, 354
Morocco, 215
Morton, Desmond, 232–33
Müller, Adam, 58
Munsters, Vilhelm, 140, 322
Münzenberg, Willi, 101, 184
Murray (lieutenant colonel), 334, 440–41n28
Mussolini, Benito, 3, 7, 38; anti-Communism of, 119; Chamberlain and, 264, 268; comes to power in Italy, 44–47; Ethiopia invaded by, 129, 166; on fascism in Austria, 182; fascism of, 84, 160–62; Franco aided by, 236–38; Hitler and, 57–58; international fascist solidarity promoted by, 206; on Italy-German police collaboration, 170, 171; on liberalism, 10; MacDonald meets, 126–27, 152–53; on political divisions in France, 180–81; during Spanish Civil War, 216, 217, 221
Namier, Lewis, 313
Napoleon Bonaparte, 335
national liberation fronts, 16
Nazi Party (Germany): beginnings of, 54–60; in election of 1930, 113; in elections of 1932, 117, 120; gains power in Germany, 3; underestimates of, 334
Nazi-Soviet pact (1939), 322–25, 326–28, 381; Comintern after, 328–29
Neumann, Heinz, 112–13, 115, 119, 120
Neurath, Konstantin von, 128, 133
Nicolson, Harold, 79–80, 260, 263, 266
Niemeier, Otto, 77
Nikitin, 329
Nikol’skii, 70
Nikonov, V., 427n28
Ninčić, Momčilo, 366
Nitti, Francesco, 40
Niukkanen, Juho, 340
Noël, Léon, 146
Nolte, Ernst, 11
Norman, Montagu, 106, 107
Norway, 352
Noske, Gustav, 30
nuclear deterrence, 382

Oliphant, Lancelot, 275
O’Malley, Owen, 81
Orsenigo, Cesare, 130–31
Osborne, D’Arcy, 210
Oshima Kenkichi, 249, 255

Paasikivi, Juho, 338–41, 343
Pacelli, Eugenio, 183, 217, 221–22, 242
Pantaleone, Maffeo, 44
Papen, Franz von, 123, 305–6; anti-Communism of, 120, 127–28; German coalition government under, 118; Pius XI on, 134; on Poland, 139–40
Pareto, Vilfredo, 44
Paris Commune (1870), 15
Pasquier, Pierre, 109
Peake, Charles, 355
Pedrazzi, Orazio, 215–16
Pelczyński, Tadeusz, 149–50, 285
Pétain, Philippe, 188, 353
Peter (king, Yugoslavia), 366
Phipps, Eric, 128, 131, 154
Picelli, Guido, 169
Pieck, Wilhelm, 52, 116, 131
Piétri, François, 109–10
Pikel’, 355
Pilsudski, Józef, 24, 137, 146, 303; death of, 147–48
Pintsch, Karl Heinz, 312
Pius XI (pope): anti-Communism of, 57–58, 167–68; on Austria, 183; Churchill meets with, 67; on Hitler, 134; in Poland, 148
Poincaré, Henri, 30, 38
Poland: in alliance with France, 280; attacked by Germany, 325, 326; British guarantees to, 301–3; after Czechoslovakia falls to Germany, 300–301; during Czechoslovakian crisis, 294; divided between Soviet Union and Germany, 327, 331, 335, 336; German plans to attack, 310; Soviet-German agreement on, 32–33; Soviet mistrust of, 145–50; Soviet Union and, 137–43; during Spanish Civil War, 229; in war with Russia, 24–26
Pollitt, Harry, 185, 422n108; on French united front, 181–82; on penetration of defence industries, 175–76; on Spanish Civil War, 233
Popov, Ivan, 364
Popular Front strategy, 169, 176, 381; British fears of, 197–204, 267; elected in France, 192–97; against fascism, 178–79; in France, 179–82, 186–92, 280, 307; in Spain, 204, 209–15
populism, 385
Portugal, 213, 231–32
Potemkin, Vladimir, 168, 257, 292
Pownall, Henry, 349
Prieto, Indalecio, 230
Prytz, Börn, 356, 357, 444n113
Puleston, William D., 354, 434n159
Pyatnitsky, Osip, 45, 112, 113, 184; Stalin meets with, 125–26
Racamond, Julien, 188
Raděk, Karl, 28; on British Empire, 63; as Comintern secretary, 23; on Manchuria, 97; Miedziński meets with, 138–39; on Mussolini, 46; on Poland’s war with Russia, 25; on revolution in Germany, 49–51; Schlageter line of, 112; in secret
negotiations with Germany, 37; on world revolution, 32
Radical Socialist Party (France): Comintern on, 189; French Communist Party and, 188, 192; Mussolini on, 192; in Popular Front election, 193
Rákosi, Mátyás, 35
Rakovsky, Christian, 37
Ramette, Arthur, 200
Ransome, Arthur, 21
Rapallo Treaty (1922), 37–39, 80, 110, 120–21, 136
Rathenau, Walther, 29, 37
Reich, Jakob, 36
Reith, John, 276
Remmele, Hermann, 112
Reynaud, Paul, 330
Rhineland, 157; Comintern’s reaction to German occupation of, 174–77; invaded by Germany, 172–74; as republic, 39
Ribbentrop, Joachim von, 229, 249–50, 317; as German ambassador to Britain, 276; on German intentions, 319–20; Molotov meets, 362–63; in pact with Soviet Union, 314, 323–24
Ricardo, David, 68
Ridsdale, William, 341–42
Roatta, Mario, 231
Rogeri (count), 170
Rogers, G. H., 157–58, 410n116
Rollin, Henri, 57
Roman Catholic Church. See Catholic Church
Romania, 147; during Czechoslovakian crisis, 293; France and, 159, 279–80; invaded by Germany, 360; Poland and, 302; Soviet Union and, 352
Roosevelt, Franklin D.: on Czechoslovakia, 295–96; Soviet Union recognized by US under, 102
Rosenberg, Alfred, 319, 321, 374
Rosselli, Carlo, 225–26
Rosso, Augusto, 365
Rothermere (lord), 191–92
Rothstein, Andrew, 337–38, 341–42
Rowse, A. L., 166–67
Rozenberg (ambassador), 241
Rucker, Arthur, 325, 336, 344
Rumbold, Horace, 30
Russia: end of empire of, 15; Revolution in, 2, 3, 15–18; in war with Poland (1920), 24–26. See also Soviet Union
Ryabkin, Boris, 338
Rydz-Śmigły, Edward, 148–49
Ryti, Risto, 351
Ryutin, Martemyan, 132
Sackett, Frederic, 111
Salazar, António Oliveira, 213, 231, 232
Salengro, Roger, 238
Samper, Ricardo, 207
Sánchez, Claudio, 232
Sargent, Orme, 8, 136–37, 269, 271; on Franco-Soviet alliance, 153–54; on Front populaire, 197, 199; on Hess’s visit to Britain, 375; on Hitler, 143–44; during Spanish Civil War, 228–29
Satō Naotake, 250
Savić, Dragutin, 366–67
Scheliha, Rudolf von, 74, 88, 92
Shidehara, Rudolf von, 309–10
Schlageter line, 112
Schleicher, Kurt von, 122, 130, 131; as German chancellor, 120–21; resigns as chancellor, 127
Schnurre, Karl, 317
Schulenburg, Friedrich-Werner Graf von, 310, 314; as German ambassador to Soviet Union, 308, 358; during German invasion of Soviet Union, 376; on pact with Germany, 321–22
Schuschnigg, Kurt, 278
Schweisguth, Victor-Henri, 196
Second International (Socialist International), 20, 102, 125; during Popular Front period, 180; during Spanish Civil War, 231
Seeckt, Hans von, 32, 37
Seeds, William, 303, 313, 317
Seipel, Ignaz, 183
Serrati, Giacinto, 43
INDEX

Service, John, 247
Shanghai (China): Britain in, 69–70; Chinese Communist Party in, 75, 90; Chinese Revolution in, 81–82; massacre in, 72; strike in, 73
Shaposhnikov, Boris, 314, 347
Shtein, Boris, 237
Shtrodakh, Aleksei, 51–52
Shute, John, 209
Sibilia, Enrico, 182
Silva, Espirito Santo, 357
Simić, Božin, 366–67
Simon, John, 145, 259; as chess player, 99; during Czechoslovakian crisis, 288; in Germany, 150–53; on Hitler, 198; on Japan, 254; on Mussolini, 166
Sinclair, “Quex,” 291, 318
Sirola, Yrjö, 21
Škirpa, Kazys, 336
Slavutsky, Mikhail, 256
Smith, Adam, 68
Smushkevich, Yakov, 286
Smuts, Jan, 167, 294
Snow, Edgar, 247
Snow, Thomas, 344–45
Social Democracy, 12; Comintern’s reversal on, 185–86; in united front against fascism, 124, 125, 183
Social Democratic Party (Germany; SPD), 29–30, 117, 180
social democrats, 183–85
social fascism, 112, 118, 191; end of, 183, 184
Socialist International. See Second International
Socialist Party (Austria), 182–83
Socialist Party (France; SFIO), 180, 181, 192; in Popular Front election, 193
Sorel, Georges, 15–16, 327
Sotelo, José Calvo, 215
Soviet Union: air power of, 284–88; alliance between France and, 135–37, 153–59, 225; anti-war movement of (1932), 101–3; armed forces of, under Stalin, 254–57; Baltic states and, 337; Britain prepares for war with, 348–52; British general strike and, 77–78; on British guarantee to Poland, 301–2; Chamberlain’s distrust of, 262–63; China and, 69–71; Chinese Communist Party and, 89–91; Chinese Revolution backed by (1925–26), 73–76, 80, 82–83; Churchill warns of German invasion, 370–73; collectivisation of agriculture in, 106–7; conflicts between Britain and, 79–80; in Cuban missile crisis, 382; during Czechoslovakian crisis, 290–94; after Czechoslovakian crisis, 297–301; diplomacy of (1920s), 6; expansion of (1940), 358–60; Finland invaded by, 337–48; 350–51; on German capture of Western Europe, 358; German invasion of (1941), 368–69, 376–79; German plans to invade, 363–67; Germany and (1920s), 31–34; intervention in China by (1937), 245–46; isolationism of, 94–98; Italian communists and, 42–43, 45–46; Italy and, 168–70; joins League of Nations, 141; Kronstadt uprising in, 34–35; on Manchuria, 100–101; military talks with Britain, 317–23; Nazi-Soviet pact (1939), 306–7, 314–15, 321–25, 326–28, 333–34; Poland and, 137–43; Poland mistrusted by, 145–50; in proposed alliance with Britain, 310–12; Rapallo Treaty between Germany, entente powers and, 37–39; recognized by Britain, 105; recognized by US, 102; recognized by western powers, 27; during Spanish Civil War, 227–33, 239, 241–44; Spanish Republic aided by, 233–36; trade agreement with Britain (1921), 63–64, 68; tripartite agreement offered by, 303. See also Comintern; Russia
Spain: attempted revolution in (1934), 207–9; Civil War in, 205–6, 215–20, 281; Comintern aid to Republic of, 226–27; French aid to, 220–22; Germany and Italy aid Franco in, 231–40; impact on Britain of

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Civil War in, 265–67; Lindley on, 274–75; monarchy overthrown in (1931), 163–64; Popular Front in, 10–11, 204, 209–12; Soviet Union during Civil War in, 227–31, 233–36, 243–44
Springhall, Douglas, 333
Stack, Lee, 66
Stalin, Josef, 103, 327; on aid to Chinese Communist Party, 248–49; on Blum, 237–38; on Britain, 62; on Britain's pro-German policies, 283; on building socialism in Russia, 104; on Bulgaria, 365; on China, 71–72, 80, 90, 91; on Chinese Revolution, 73, 74; Churchill warns of German invasion, 370–73; collectivisation of agriculture under, 106–7; Comintern under control of, 120, 132; differences between Trotsky and, 381; Dimitrov and, 184–88; Eden meets with, 151–52; on Finland, 339–42, 347–48, 350; on Franco-Soviet alliance, 155, 156; on French national unity government (1938), 280–81; on French strikes, 202; on German capture of Western Europe, 358; on German invasion of Austria, 279; on German invasion of Soviet Union, 368, 369, 376, 377; on Hess, 375; on Japanese invasion of Manchuria, 94–96; Litvinov replaced by Molotov by, 305, 307–8; on Molotov-Hitler meeting, 360–61; on Polish-Soviet military pact, 360–61; on revolution in Germany, 48–50; Soviet armed forces under, 254–57; on Soviet Far Eastern policies, 97–98; during Spanish Civil War, 227–32, 239; Spanish Republic aided by, 233–36; Trotsky's criticisms of, 157, 335; on tsars, 272
Stalingrad (Soviet Union), Battle of, 375
Steinhardt, Laurence, 343, 363
Stewart, Robert (Viscount Castlereagh), 29, 30, 181–82
Stilwell, Joseph, 247
Stimson, Henry, 87, 92–94, 100
Strang, William, 151, 313
Stresemann, Gustav, 33, 52–53, 106
Sun Yat-sen, 70–72
Surits, Yakov, 282, 303
Suvich, Fulvio, 172
Suzuki (lieutenant colonel), 98
Sweden, 342–44, 346–51, 356
Szembek, Jan, 229
Tagüeña Lacorte, M., 211, 360
Tanner, Väinö, 338–40, 343, 351
Tavistock, Marquess of (Duke of Bedford), 354, 359–60
Taylor, A.J.P., 12
Tedeschini (cardinal), 210
Terracini, Umberto, 45–46
Thälmann, Ernst, 101, 103; on German Communist Party, 111–15; on German election of 1932, 117–18
Third International, 12–13, 20. See also Comintern
Third World, 16
Thompson, Geoffrey, 291, 311
Thorez, Maurice, 116, 156, 175; on French strikes, 196; on French military budget, 203; on French national unity government (1938), 280–81; on Nazi-Soviet pact, 328; on Popular Front, 179, 186–87, 190, 191; on Spanish Civil War, 224, 227, 234, 237
Tiltman, John, 419n27
The Times (London), 166–67; on Czecho-Slovakia, 288–90; on German invasion of Austria, 276; on Russian government, 2
Togliatti, Palmiro, 84, 175; on dispute within French Communist Party, 186, 190, 191; on Nazi-Soviet pact, 328; during Spanish Civil War, 239, 241
Toynbee, Arnold, 258
Trades Union Congress (TUC; Britain), 77–78
Tran Phu, 402n11
Tréand, Maurice, 355
Trenchard, Hugh, 80
Trilisser, Mikhail, 76
Tripartite Pact (Germany, Italy and Japan), 360; Bulgaria joins, 366
Trotsky, Leon, 5–6, 9, 37–38, 83–84, 255; criticism of Soviet Union by, 157; in exile, 381; on expansion of Soviet Union, 335; on France strikes, 196; on India, 63; Popular Front condemned by, 11; on revolution in Germany, 48–50, 104; during Russian Revolution, 15; Stalin’s charges against, 427n28; Sun Yat-sen and, 71
Trotskyists, 240
Troyanovsky, Alexander, 96
Trump administration, 384
Turati, Filippo, 43
united front against fascism, 125–26; Comintern on, 186–90; Popular Front and, 178
United States, 386; on British appeasement policies, 274; isolationism policy of, 61, 91–94; on Japanese-Soviet dispute, 254; on Manchuria, 99–101; at Rapallo Treaty negotiations, 38; Soviet Union recognized by, 102; stock market crash and Great Depression in, 86–88
Unshlikht, Iosif, 33
Vaillant-Couturier, Paul, 238–39
Valéry, Paul, 14
Vansittart, Robert, 199, 200, 271, 272, 305; anti-German opinion of, 130; on Austria, 276; Cadogan on, 430n60; on Nazi-Soviet pact, 323–24; on Spanish Civil War, 225
Varga, Jenő, 334
Versailles Treaty (1919): British-Italian attempt at revision of, 116–27; Edward VIII on, 271; German rearmament under, 150–52, 158; German-Soviet secret deal under, 31–32; Lloyd George on, 129; Radek on, 138
Vietnam: as French Indochina, 108–10
Vietnam War, 388n2
Višoianu, Constantin, 147
Vitetti, Leonardo, 222–24
Vittorio Emanuele (king, Italy), 45
Voitinskii, Grigorii, 75, 76
Volkogonov, Dmitrii, 363
Vollard-Bockelberg, Alfred von, 135
Voltaire, 255
Voroshilov, Kliment, 83, 95, 308; on Czechoslovakia, 279; on Finland, 337, 348; on purges in Soviet military, 286; during Spanish Civil War, 227; in talks with Britain and France, 321
Vorovsky, Vatslav, 46–47
Vyshinsky, Andrei, 366, 367
Warner, Christopher, 375
Watt, Donald, 389n21
Webb, Beatrice, 104, 312, 325
Webb, Sidney, 104
Weil, Simone, 194
Weimar Republic (Germany), 30, 106, 127
Weinberg, Gerhard, 389n21
Weizsäcker, Ernst von, 304
Welles, Sumner, 274
Werth, Alexander, 379
Wigram, Ralph, 151, 199–200
Wilson, Henry, 19–20
Wilson, Horace, 260–61, 271; on appeasement, 281, 296; on Britain rearming, 297; on British guarantee to Poland, 301; on Czechoslovakia, 283, 295; on Halifax, 273; on proposed British-Soviet alliance, 312; in secret meetings with Germany, 315–16
Windt, Bruno, 227
Wingfield, Charles, 213
Winterton (earl), 287
Winther, Wilhelm, 344
Wohltat, Helmut, 315–16
Wood, Kingsley, 266
World War I, 14–15; debts from, 53–54; empires ended by, 2; Italy in, 40, 161
World War II: Britain prepares for war with
Soviet Union during, 348–52; change in party line during, 332–33; Comintern party line during, 332–36; Finland during, 336–48;
Germany invades Soviet Union, 368–79;
Germany invades Western Europe, 352–54;
invasion of Poland starts, 325, 329–31;
Soviet expansion during, 358–60
Xammar, Eugenio, 55–56, 394n80
Xiang Zhongfa, 89
Yagoda, Genrikh, 106, 255
Yang Hu-cheng, 247, 248
Yegorov, Aleksandr, 75
Yevdokimov, Yefim, 190–91
Yezhov, Nikolai, 150
Yugoslavia, 366–67
Yurenev, Konstantin, 47, 250, 255
Zetkin, Clara, 35
Zetland (marquess), 291
Zhdanov, Andrei, 270–71, 361
Zhemchuzhina, Polina, 342
Zhukov, Georgii, 347–48, 370–71
Zinoviev, Grigori: arrest of, 255; on British general strike, 77–78; as Comintern president, 21, 22; forged letter from, 64–69;
German communists and, 35; Kun and, 36;
Mein Kampf translated by, 132–33; on Mussolini, 45; on revolutionary wars, 26; on revolution in Germany, 48, 50, 51; on revolution in Italy, 40; Yevdokimov on, 190–91
Zinoviev, Lilina, 48