



The Maisky Diaries review - Britain's high and mighty in conversation with Stalin's man

Ivan Maisky was Soviet ambassador to the Court of St James. His recently unearthed diaries featuring meetings with Churchill, HG Wells and others are of great historical importance

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For a man who once told his friend Beatrice Webb that he “disliked the profession of diplomacy”, Ivan Maisky was an unusually brilliant practitioner of the art of being an ambassador. Spending 11 years as Stalin’s representative in London, between 1932 and 1943, Maisky not only had his hands full in trying to follow the twists and turns of the political battles between Chamberlain and Churchill over appeasement, he also had to explain and justify Stalin’s U-turns in Soviet relations with Nazi Germany.

All along he also had to worry about his own survival, given the purges that destroyed the careers, and often the lives, of dozens of Soviet ambassadors and other senior officials in their

prime. Yet Maisky found time to sit down most evenings in the study of the Soviet embassy in Kensington and type up his impressions of the day's encounters. They were not just thumbnail *aides-mémoire* but wonderfully detailed accounts of confidential conversations with Britain's high and mighty, laced with wit and subtle observations of character. He also recorded public events with the skill of an accomplished sketch writer, including key debates in parliament as well as state occasions, such as the funeral of George V ("a right old mess") or bagpipes at a royal banquet ("semi-barbarian music. I like this music. There is something in it ... of man's primordial past").

Rarely has a foreign diplomat written such lively reports of his professional meetings in London. And what a world they cover. As well as meeting the top politicians of the day, from Halifax to Eden to Churchill, for regular *tete-a-tete* talks, Maisky made friends with figures such as David Lloyd George, by 1932 an elder statesman but still hugely influential. He also lunched with Lord Beaverbrook, the Astors and newspaper editors, as well as City tycoons and luminaries of the left, from HG Wells and George Bernard Shaw to John Maynard Keynes.



... and with David Lloyd George

The diary entries are always an entertaining read, but some, such as Maisky's account of wartime talks with Churchill, have unique historical value, since the prime minister's one-on-one conversations were not usually recorded by the Whitehall civil service. They reveal Churchill's supportive acquiescence to Stalin's pressure on Finland and the Soviet invasion of the Baltics and eastern Poland after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939: "Russia has every reason to be the dominant power in the Baltics and should be one. Better Russia than Germany. That's in our British interests."

In 1942 Maisky finds Churchill philosophical about India's future. "If we leave, there'll be civil war," the PM tells him. "Eventually, the Moslems will become masters because they are warriors while the Hindus are windbags. Yes, windbags ... When something must be decided on quickly, implemented and executed, they immediately reveal their internal flabbiness." Maisky comments in his diary afterwards: "I listened to him and couldn't help thinking: Of course, Churchill is a considerable man and a major statesman ... but something of the small boy lives on in him: Iran is a toy he likes while India is a toy he dislikes."

An obsession with preserving the empire runs through most of the conversations Maisky has with British policy-makers and the intellectual elite about wartime strategy, a reminder of how

enormously things have changed since then. The era he records is only 80 years ago, yet the publicly articulated racism, antisemitism and snobbery that he encountered seems medieval today. When Maisky informs Beatrice Webb that Churchill told him “Better Communism than Nazism”, she shrugs and says this attitude is not typical of the British elite, before adding: “Churchill is not a true Englishman, you know. He has negro blood. You can even tell from his appearance.”

Maisky’s fluent English, sharp political nous and undiplomatically forthright opinions earned him unprecedented access to the power brokers. He was helped, too, by the Soviet Union’s central role as a strategic player in the struggle against Hitler, travelling a long way from his origins as a son of teachers in the Siberian city of Omsk. His father was of Jewish Polish origin, a fact that Maisky tended to conceal. (Viktor Gollancz, the publisher, remembered that Maisky used to tell hilarious Jewish stories “which he called Armenian and loved listening to mine which he called Armenian, too”. But Chamberlain had a nose for detecting these things, once describing Maisky as a “clever little Jew”.)

Maisky enrolled at St Petersburg University to read history and philology, but his student career ended when he was arrested and charged with revolutionary agitation. He joined the Mensheviks, and took part in the abortive 1905 uprising. Later sentenced to exile abroad, he moved to Switzerland and Germany before crossing to London in 1912. There he met fellow exiles Georgy Chicherin and Maxim Litvinov, who lived close to each other in Golders Green and were to become, in succession, Soviet commissars of foreign affairs after the Russian revolution of October 1917. Maisky had moved just as the first world war started, and on returning to Russia in 1917 he opposed the Bolsheviks during the civil war. When they emerged on top, he recanted his support for their enemies in a letter to Anatoly Lunacharsky, the commissar for education: “I now see that the Mensheviks were virtuous but talentless pupils of the past.” He was allowed into the Bolshevik party and craftily revived his links to Chicherin and Litvinov. This paid off when he was sent as a counsellor to the London embassy, where he later became ambassador.

Always fluent in words, he wrote several volumes of his autobiography in retirement, which Gabriel Gorodetsky, the Israeli scholar who has edited the *Maisky Diaries*, describes as contentious, misleading and coloured by hindsight and self-censorship. The volume under review does not stem from these books, but from Gorodetsky’s good fortune in the early 1990s. While conducting a research project on Soviet policy towards Palestine he was unexpectedly handed Maisky’s diaries by the Russian foreign ministry’s archivist. Running to more than half a million words, they make three volumes in Russian. But Gorodetsky has boiled them down in English to one thick volume, with fascinating photographs from Maisky’s private collection. Gorodetsky perhaps exaggerates the contrast between the diaries and the later autobiography. The diaries are equally self-serving, clearly written with an eye to posterity as well as to the Soviet security services who could confiscate them at any moment. Their value lies in their freshness and the perspicacity of Maisky’s comments about the English.

He was not always well-informed about Stalin’s thinking - for example, he had no advance knowledge of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact or the German-Soviet talks that preceded it. He sometimes failed to inform Moscow faithfully about British policy-makers’ thinking. Only at

the last minute did he tell his masters about Eden's warnings to him in June 1941 that Hitler was only days away from attacking the Soviet Union. Maisky was less concerned about the impending invasion than that he would be blamed for treating earlier British warnings as provocations designed to turn Russia against Germany and for not having alerted the Kremlin.

He occasionally went beyond his brief and took policy decisions himself, or presented his own views as though they came from British ministers. His pressure on Churchill to open a second front against the Germans in Europe, which included lobbying editors, finally irritated the prime minister. Molotov, Litvinov's successor as foreign minister, had never liked or trusted Maisky, and in 1943 he was recalled to Moscow. Though he tried to disguise the recall as a rebuke to the British for not opening a second front, the move was Molotov's revenge against the old school of Soviet diplomacy, fully backed by Stalin who feared Maisky had gone native in London.

From then on, Maisky's demise became increasingly humiliating. He was allowed to attend the Yalta conference in 1945 with Churchill and Roosevelt, but mostly as Stalin's interpreter rather than an adviser. He saved his dignity by joining the Academy of Sciences but was sacked from the Ministry and the Central Committee of the Communist party in 1947. During Stalin's final purge, the so-called anti-cosmopolitan campaign, Maisky was arrested and interrogated in the basement of the Lubyanka. True to his literary instincts, he wrote a poem to his wife from his cell. But he also quickly confessed to being a spy for Churchill and probably would have been executed for "high treason" had Stalin not died in March 1953.

Immediate freedom was not to come. Gorodetsky says the reasons are unclear, but it seems that Stalin's former police chief Lavrenti Beria, who wanted to achieve an accommodation with the west after the dictator's death, had wanted to replace foreign minister Molotov with Maisky. When the rival post-Stalin camp led by Khrushchev managed to oust Beria and had him put to death, Maisky was damned by association with Beria and released only in 1955.

It was a tribute to Maisky's strength of will and unflagging self-confidence that he lived another 20 years, reaching the age of 91. The history of Stalinism is replete with stories of outstandingly talented 20th-century Russians whose lives took them from prison to power and then back to prison. Few of these Soviet careers were more extraordinary than Ivan Mikhailovich Maisky's.

● *The Maisky Diaries* by Gabriel Gorodetsky, translated by Tatiana Sorokina and Oliver Ready (Yale, £25). To order a copy for £20, go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min. p&p of £1.99.

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