

# German Ambassador Dirksen's "Conversation with People's Commissar Litvinov" (May 16, 1933)

## Abstract

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Eduard Willy Kurt Herbert von Dirksen (1882–1955) was a diplomat who served as German ambassador to several countries, including Great Britain, Japan, and the Soviet Union. Dirksen was an extremely pragmatic diplomat, credited by historians as someone who was typically very shrewd in his understanding of the political situation in the countries in which he served. He also believed in the ethnic and cultural superiority of Germans – particularly over the peoples of Poland and the Soviet Union. His 1950 memoir frequently wrote negatively about Poles and Poland and boasted of his pride in his “pure German blood.” Dirksen was serving as ambassador to Moscow at the time of the Nazi rise to power, and consequently bore witness to the deterioration of relations between Germany and the Soviet Union. The National Socialists’ increased instances of anti-Communist propaganda, the mass arrest of communists and socialists, and open assaults on democracy angered the Soviets, who had also observed a pattern of German diplomacy over the previous decade whereby Germany would threaten greater ties with the USSR simply to gain concessions out of France and Great Britain. In his report on his meeting with Soviet People’s Commissar Maxim Litvinov, Dirksen warns of the consequences of these tensions, including the rapidly deteriorating relationship with Moscow. The document provides an excellent example of how, only months after the Nazi takeover, the diplomatic situation was tense and rife with instability as diplomats tried to adjust to the new regime’s openly hostile attitudes towards its apparent allies.

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### Conversation with People’s Commissar Litvinov on May 16, 1933, on German-Russian Relations

During my conversation with M. Litvinov today I first brought up my misgivings regarding the attitude of the Soviet public toward Germany. I employed in general the same points of view as in my conversations with MM. Voroshilov, Krestinsky, Stern, and Bossonov, and developed them with particularly strong emphasis on the Radek article in *Pravda* as well as on today’s treatment in *Izvestia* of the Schacht interview on German bankruptcy. I furthermore placed great importance on the inadmissibility of the agitation against Rosenberg’s trip to London, pointing out that there were no indications of any sort that Rosenberg’s activity in London was anti-Soviet, that Rosenberg’s newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, had taken a decidedly pro-Soviet attitude, and that it was not admissible to bring up constantly anew, years later, statements of a politician out of the past. This general attitude of the Soviet press made me pessimistic about further development of German-Soviet relations. On the German side really everything had been done that could be asked for, and the complaints that we could bring forward many times exceeded those of the Soviets. I discussed this with particulars by citing a typical case among many hundreds, as, for example, the economic destruction of Reich German farmers in the Soviet Union through confiscatory taxation, called their nationality into question, etc.

M. Litvinov replied with lengthy statements during which he became increasingly excited. In so doing he repeated in large part the already familiar material in regard to the separate incidents (Derop, Soviet club in Hamburg, Bobrowitzer in the internment camp), trying to prove that the percentage of interference with the individual Soviet nationals in Germany was much greater than with the Reich Germans in the Soviet Union. He then went thoroughly into Rosenberg’s trip to England in particular and the attitude of the National Socialist leaders toward Bolshevism in general. In regard to Herr Rosenberg he stated that

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he simply was the head of the Aussenpolitisches Amt of the dominant party in Germany; that he himself came from the former Russia; that he had maintained and perhaps still did maintain close relations with Russian and in particular Ukrainians emigrants.

I refuted the statements of this sort made by the People's Commissar, stressed that Rosenberg's visit in England certainly had no relation to the German-Soviet relationship; that Rosenberg's paper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, had expressed itself in an entirely positive way in regard to the Soviet Union. If one considered Rosenberg to be an official person, the same must be true of Radek and the other Soviet publicists who were now writing against Germany.

M. Litvinov tried unsuccessfully to withdraw from this argumentation and to represent M. Radek as a private author who in this case had not even been able to get his article into *Izvestia* and had had to take refuge in *Pravda*. M. Litvinov contradicted himself, however, by emphasizing on the other hand that unity of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union was very well ensured because it was brought together in the Foreign Commissariat.

Whereas this part of M. Litvinov's statements was pure fencing, he said afterwards that Soviet public opinion was reserved in regard to the attitude of the National Socialist party toward the Soviet Union for the reason that it was not yet convinced that this policy would last. In party circles it was feared that after German-French and German-English relations had improved an anti-Soviet attitude would again prevail.

I contested this possibility and told M. Litvinov that he could after all not ask for anything more than that both the actions and deeds of the German Government and the language of the press were positive and pro-Soviet.

M. Litvinov closed his remarks with the words that the basic attitude of the Soviet Government toward Germany had remained entirely the same: that the Soviet Government was convinced that it could have just as friendly relations with a National Socialist Germany as a fascist Italy. The same was true of the other basic questions of German-Soviet policy: the relations with Poland and the fight against the Versailles Treaty. There were simply fluctuations now in public opinion in the Soviet Union, which are evident, for example, in Radek's article, too; these fluctuations were to be attributed to the uncertainty which still existed about German policy.

von Dirksen

Source: *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series C (1933-37, Third Reich, vol 1, June 30-Oct 14, 1933). Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1949, p. 449-50.

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