

The Nazi-Soviet Pact

August 23, 1939

The Soviet government tried to interest Britain and France in rejecting the German pressure on Czechoslovakia in 1938. Stalin declared his willingness to go to war to defend the threatened state, but instead Prime Minister Chamberlain and Premier Daladier went to Munich and capitulated to Hitler. Within months, both Britain and France signed declarations of non-aggression with Germany, and Stalin reasoned, mistakenly, that an anti-Soviet alliance was forming. A low-level Anglo-French military delegation came to Moscow, but nothing came of the negotiations. Stalin then decided to respond positively to German overtures for an agreement. Hitler pressed for an early meeting, for his plans called for an invasion of Poland in the coming weeks. On August 23, 1939, German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop flew to Moscow, narrowly missing being shot down by Soviet artillery uninformed about the visit. That same day, Molotov and Ribbentrop signed the pact. During the ceremony Stalin remarked, "Of course, we are not forgetting that your ultimate aim is to attack us."¹ Once the formalities had been completed, he lifted his champagne glass and toasted, "Let's drink to the new anti-Comintern Stalin! Let's drink to the health of the leader of the German people, Hitler!"²

The Nazi-Soviet Pact was a revolution in European diplomacy. Hitler was now free to attack Poland without considering Soviet opposition. When Britain and France responded by declaring war on Germany, the Nazis were able to turn westward without worrying about a two-front war. Stalin gained time and territory, but once Hitler defeated France and drove the British from the continent, the USSR faced an immensely powerful and determined Germany without any other significant opponents in Europe.

In the "secret protocol" to the Pact, Germany and the USSR divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence. Stalin received the Baltic republics, eastern Poland, and Bessarabia. This part of the Pact remained a state secret in the Soviet Union, and its existence was denied well into the Gorbachev years, for it demonstrated the treachery through which Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were turned into Soviet states. Eventually Germany and the Soviet Union quibbled about the spoils in Eastern Europe, but such minor matters of real estate were not the principal cause for the collapse of the Pact. As Stalin suspected, Hitler intended to invade the Soviet Union all along, part of his imperial design for Lebensraum (living space) for Germans and the eradication of communism. But when German troops massed on the Soviet border, Stalin refused to believe the warnings that he received from his intelligence services.

Memorandum of a Conversation Held on the Night of August 23d to 24th, Between the Reich Foreign Minister, on the One Hand, and Herr Stalin and the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars Molotov, on the Other Hand

VERY SECRET!

STATE SECRET

The following problems were discussed:

1. Dmitri Vokogonov, *Stalin, Triumph and Tragedy*, ed. and trans. by Harold Shukman (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), p. 385.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 386.

1) Japan:

The Reich Foreign Minister stated that the German-Japanese friendship was in no wise directed against the Soviet Union. We were, rather, in a position, owing to our good relations with Japan, to make an effective contribution to an adjustment of the differences between the Soviet Union and Japan. Should Herr Stalin and the Soviet Government desire it, the Reich Foreign Minister was prepared to work in this direction. He would use his influence with the Japanese Government accordingly and keep in touch with the Soviet representative in Berlin in this matter.

Herr Stalin replied that the Soviet Union indeed desired an improvement in its relations with Japan, but that there were limits to its patience with regard to Japanese provocations. If Japan desired war, it could have it. The Soviet Union was not afraid of it and was prepared for it. If Japan desired peace—so much the better! Herr Stalin considered the assistance of Germany in bringing about an improvement in Soviet-Japanese relations as useful, but he did not want the Japanese to get the impression that the initiative in this direction had been taken by the Soviet Union.

The Reich Foreign Minister assented to this and stressed the fact that his cooperation would mean merely the continuation of talks that he had for months been holding with the Japanese Ambassador in Berlin in the sense of an improvement in Soviet-Japanese relations. Accordingly, there would be no new initiative on the German side in this matter.

2) Italy:

Herr Stalin inquired of the Reich Foreign Minister as to Italian aims. Did not Italy have aspirations beyond the annexation of Albania—perhaps for Greek territory? Small, mountainous, and thinly populated Albania was, in his estimation, of no particular use to Italy.

The Reich Foreign Minister replied that Albania was important to Italy for strategic reasons. Moreover, Mussolini was a strong man who could not be intimidated.

This he had demonstrated in the Abyssinian conflict, in which Italy had asserted its aims by its own strength against a hostile coalition. Even Germany was not yet in a position at that time to give Italy appreciable support.

Mussolini welcomed warmly the restoration of friendly relations between Germany and the Soviet Union. He had expressed himself as gratified with the conclusion of the Nonaggression Pact.

3) Turkey:

Herr Stalin asked the Reich Foreign Minister what Germany thought about Turkey.

The Reich Foreign Minister expressed himself as follows in this matter: he had months ago declared to the Turkish Government that Germany desired friendly relations with Turkey. The Reich Foreign Minister had himself done everything to achieve this goal. The answer had been that Turkey became one of the first countries to join the encirclement pact against Germany and had not even considered it necessary to notify the Reich Government of the fact.

Herren Stalin and Molotov hereupon observed that the Soviet Union had also had a similar experience with the vacillating policy of the Turks.

The Reich Foreign Minister mentioned further that England had spent five million pounds in Turkey in order to disseminate propaganda against Germany.

Herr Stalin said that according to his information the amount which England had spent in buying Turkish politicians was considerably more than five million pounds.

4) *England:*

Herren Stalin and Molotov commented adversely on the British Military Mission in Moscow, which had never told the Soviet Government what it really wanted.

The Reich Foreign Minister stated in this connection that England had always been trying and was still trying to disrupt the development of good relations between Germany and the Soviet Union. England was weak and wanted to let others fight for its presumptuous claim to world domination.

Herr Stalin eagerly concurred and observed as follows: the British Army was weak; the British Navy no longer deserved its previous reputation. England's air arm was being increased, to be sure, but there was a lack of pilots. If England dominates the world in spite of this, this was due to the stupidity of the other countries that always let themselves be bluffed. It was ridiculous, for example, that a few hundred British should dominate India.

The Reich Foreign Minister concurred and informed Herr Stalin confidentially that England had recently put out a new feeler which was connected with certain allusions to 1914. It was a matter of a typically English, stupid maneuver. The Reich Foreign Minister had proposed to the Führer to inform the British that every hostile British act, in case of a German-Polish conflict, would be answered by a bombing attack on London.

Herr Stalin remarked that the feeler was evidently Chamberlain's letter to the Führer, which Ambassador Henderson delivered on August 23 at the Obersalzberg. Stalin further expressed the opinion that England, despite its weakness, would wage war craftily and stubbornly.

5) *France:*

Herr Stalin expressed the opinion that France, nevertheless, had an army worthy of consideration.

The Reich Foreign Minister, on his part, pointed out to Herren Stalin and Molotov the numerical inferiority of France. While Germany had available an annual class of more than 300,000 soldiers, France could muster only 150,000 recruits annually. The West Wall was five times as strong as the Maginot Line. If France attempted to wage war with Germany, she would certainly be conquered.

6) *Anti-Comintern Pact:*

The Reich Foreign Minister observed that the Anti-Comintern Pact was basically directed not against the Soviet Union but against the Western democracies. He knew, and was able to infer from the tone of the Russian press, that the Soviet Government fully recognized this fact.

Herr Stalin interposed that the Anti-Comintern Pact had in fact frightened principally the City of London and the small British merchants.

The Reich Foreign Minister concurred and remarked jokingly that Herr Stalin was surely less frightened by the Anti-Comintern Pact than the City of London and the small British merchants. What the German people thought of this matter is evident from a joke which had originated with the Berliners, well known for their wit

and humor, and which had been going the rounds for several months, namely, "Stalin will yet join the Anti-Comintern Pact."

7) *Attitude of the German people to the German-Russian Nonaggression Pact:*

The Reich Foreign Minister stated that he had been able to determine that all strata of the German people, and especially the simple people, most warmly welcomed the understanding with the Soviet Union. The people felt instinctively that between Germany and the Soviet Union no natural conflicts of interests existed, and that the development of good relations had hitherto been disturbed only by foreign intrigue, in particular on the part of England.

Herr Stalin replied that he readily believed this. The Germans desired peace and therefore welcomed friendly relations between the Reich and the Soviet Union.

The Reich Foreign Minister interrupted here to say that it was certainly true that the German people desired peace, but, on the other hand, indignation against Poland was so great that every single man was ready to fight. The German people would no longer put up with Polish provocation.

8) *Toasts:*

In the course of the conversation, Herr Stalin spontaneously proposed a toast to the Führer, as follows:

"I know how much the German nation loves its Führer; I should therefore like to drink to his health."

Herr Molotov drank to the health of the Reich Foreign Minister and of the Ambassador, Count von der Schulenburg.

Herr Molotov raised his glass to Stalin, remarking that it had been Stalin who—through his speech of March of this year, which had been well understood in Germany—had brought about the reversal in political relations.

Herren Molotov and Stalin drank repeatedly to the Nonaggression Pact, the new era of German-Russian relations, and to the German nation.

The Reich Foreign Minister in turn proposed a toast to Herr Stalin, toasts to the Soviet Government, and to a favorable development of relations between Germany and the Soviet Union.

9) *When they took their leave, Herr Stalin addressed to the Reich Foreign Minister words to this effect:*

The Soviet Government takes the new Pact very seriously. He could guarantee on his word of honor that the Soviet Union would not betray its partner.

Hencke

Moscow, August 24, 1939.

August 23, 1939.

TREATY OF NONAGGRESSION BETWEEN GERMANY AND THE UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS

The Government of the German Reich and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics desirous of strengthening the cause of peace between Ger-

many and the U.S.S.R., and proceeding from the fundamental provisions of the Neutrality Agreement concluded in April 1926 between Germany and the U.S.S.R., have reached the following agreement:

Article I

Both High Contracting Parties obligate themselves to desist from any act of violence, any aggressive action, and any attack on each other, either individually or jointly with other powers.

Article II

Should one of the High Contracting Parties become the object of belligerent action by a third power, the other High Contracting Party shall in no manner lend its support to this third power.

Article III

The Governments of the two High Contracting Parties shall in the future maintain continual contact with one another for the purpose of consultation in order to exchange information on problems affecting their common interests.

Article IV

Neither of the two High Contracting Parties shall participate in any grouping of powers whatsoever that is directly or indirectly aimed at the other party.

Article V

Should disputes or conflicts arise between the High Contracting Parties over problems of one kind or another, both parties shall settle these disputes or conflicts exclusively through friendly exchange of opinion or, if necessary, through the establishment of arbitration commissions.

Article VI

The present treaty is concluded for a period of ten years, with the proviso that, in so far as one of the High Contracting Parties does not denounce it one year prior to the expiration of this period, the validity of this treaty shall automatically be extended for another five years.

Article VII

The present treaty shall be ratified within the shortest possible time. The ratifications shall be exchanged in Berlin. The agreement shall enter into force as soon as it is signed.

Done in duplicate, in the German and Russian languages.

Moscow, August 23, 1939.

For the Government
of the German Reich:
v. Ribbentrop

With full power of the
Government of the U.S.S.R.:
V. Molotov

SECRET ADDITIONAL PROTOCOL

On the occasion of the signature of the Nonaggression Pact between the German Reich and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics the undersigned plenipotentiaries of each of the two parties discussed in strictly confidential conversations the question of the boundary of their respective spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. These conversations led to the following conclusions:

1. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is recognized by each party.

2. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narew, Vistula, and San.

The question of whether the interests of both parties make desirable the maintenance of an independent Polish state and how such a state should be bounded can only be definitely determined in the course of further political developments.

In any event both Governments will resolve this question by means of a friendly agreement.

3. With regard to Southeastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterest in these areas.

4. This protocol shall be treated by both parties as strictly secret.

Moscow, August 23, 1939.

For the Government
of the German Reich:
v. Ribbentrop

Plenipotentiary of the
Government of the U.S.S.R.:
V. Molotov

Raymond James Sontag and James Stuart Beddie (eds.), *Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939-1941: Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 1948), pp. 72-78.

Memorandum from Lavrenti Beria to Stalin

March 5, 1940

With the dismemberment of Poland in 1939, tens of thousands of Polish military officers, political figures, and ordinary people ended up on the Soviet side of the German-Soviet parti-