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## Hitler, Stalin and the Nazi-Soviet Pact\*

Europe and the world were shocked by the announcement of the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on August 23, 1939. The assumption of international society was that the huge ideological differences between the two dictators, Adolf Hitler and Iosif Stalin, would prevent any sort of Soviet-German entente on the continent. The totalitarian systems that they had constructed around their persons, Hitler's dictatorial racial state, the Third Reich, and Stalin's extreme Leninist police state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, had thrived on demonizing the other. For Hitler, Stalin and his Bolsheviks were the essence of despicable Jewish communism, "the scum of humanity," which had to be destroyed for the German nation to assume its rightful place as the rulers of Europe.<sup>1</sup> For Stalin, Hitler and the Nazis were the final and most reprehensible stage of capitalist and imperialist development. True, during the 1930s, and even during the war, the two dictators periodically showed some grudging admiration for the crafty and brutal methods of the other.<sup>2</sup> But the intensity of their mutual loathing, especially at the rhetorical and political level, should not be underestimated.

This view of the dictators' hostility does not diminish the fact that both Hitler and Stalin were most importantly committed to their own visions of the great power ambitions of their respective countries. Military power and diplomatic initiatives were to be used in the traditional pursuit of their country's interests. Their grand strategies were to be altered to fit the realities of international politics. The basic idea behind my remarks is that Hitler and Stalin sought to expand their respective goals in Europe (and the world) by taking advantage of the other's ability to disturb the equilibrium of the continent.<sup>3</sup> They were both essentially outsiders, rep-

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<sup>1</sup> From Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, qtd. in BERTHON & POTTS 2006, 6.

<sup>2</sup> NAIMARK 2001, 90.

<sup>3</sup> As Stalin told the British ambassador, Stafford Cripps in July 1940: "the U.S.S.R. had wanted to change the old equilibrium. [...] England and France had wanted to preserve it. Germany had also wanted to make a change to the equilibrium, and this common desire to get rid of the old equilibrium had created the basis for the rapprochement with Germany." Qtd. in WEINBERG 1989, 185.

resenting revisionist powers that sought territorial gains and international influence. Already at Rapallo in 1922, both countries were committed to destroying the Versailles Settlement that had ended World War I. With the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the accompanying Secret Protocols, that destruction would become complete. Stalin certainly understood that Hitler's expansionist ambitions would eventually be directed towards the Soviet Union. But before that happened, he reckoned he could advance his own goals in Europe. Ideally the Soviets would benefit from a capitalist war – consistently predicted by Marxist-Leninist ideology – in which Great Britain and France on the one side and Germany on the other would destroy one another through protracted mutual conflict. The Soviet Union, whose military power would then be rebuilt from its weakened state in the 1930s, could assume leadership of the continent and abet the spread of communism.<sup>4</sup> Both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were also revolutionary powers in their own ways, but both were willing to suspend their ultimate goals of radical transformation for the immediate purposes of dealing with the obstreperous Poles.<sup>5</sup>

During the course of the late 1930s, the major authors of the Versailles settlement, Great Britain and France, sought to restrain Hitler's ambitions in Europe, by making concessions to the revisionist Germans, while seeking to avoid military confrontation. They looked to accomplish this daunting task without bringing Stalin and the Soviets into the center of European discussions. From their point of view, best represented by Neville Chamberlain and the British leadership at the end of the 1930s, Hitler was a menace, but one who could be contained through a deft combination of traditional diplomacy and concessions on the issue of German needs for security and on Hitler's demands for the inclusion into the Reich of large German populations on the continent.<sup>6</sup> But because of their inherently subversive ideology and unpredictable behavior, Stalin and the Soviets should be quarantined, kept out of the center of European affairs. While Hitler's plan was to push the rest of Europe as far as he could to further his program of German domination of the continent, Stalin's goal was to break the quarantine and assume what he thought was his rightful place in the European concert.<sup>7</sup> To these ends, Hitler and Stalin ended up using and

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<sup>4</sup> See the rendition of the September 7, 1939 discussion of Stalin with Dimitrov, Molotov and Zhdanov in PONS 2002, 186. Also see OVERY 2004, 486.

<sup>5</sup> SNYDER 2015, 102–103.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent analysis Chamberlain's extreme reticence towards the Soviets in this period, see CARLEY 1999, 144–182. Carley writes (p. 144): "Neville Chamberlain's opposition to a Soviet alliance was critical to the failure of trilateral negotiations during the summer of 1939 and a major contributing factor to the beginning of the Second World War."

<sup>7</sup> See M. M. Narinskii, in LOZHKIN 2012, 167–168. PONS 2002, 174.

exploiting each other. In order to do so, they both allowed their ideological hostility to simmer quietly on the back burner; the heat never quite turned off, while the hostility never got in the way of their need for each other. The supreme ideological dictators became ultra-realists.

The Munich Settlement of September 1938 was the crucial intersection of these two coordinates of diplomatic activity. The British and the French made a deal with the Nazis that sought to appease Hitler by acceding to his short-term claims to the Sudetenland, while the Soviets were left out of the negotiations and the settlement altogether. This was a bitter defeat for Stalin's foreign policy, which had promoted Moscow's central role in the collective security of the continent. As we know, Hitler was not sated by the appeasement at Munich, and subsequently destroyed the Czechoslovak state in March 1939. He immediately began to pressure Poland for concessions on the issues of the incorporation of Danzig (Gdańsk) into the Reich, and building transportation links across the Polish corridor. There is some question whether Hitler would have preferred a deal with Poland at this point, which would have included Poland in the Tripartite Pact, in order to turn his attention to the West. Adam Tooze, for example, argues that Hitler's deeply ingrained anti-Semitic ideas had shifted in 1938 and 1939 from focusing on the Jewish-Bolshevik menace in the east, to countering the increasing world-wide anti-Nazi influence of Roosevelt and later Churchill, whom he considered pawns of a capitalist Jewish conspiracy.<sup>8</sup> But, in the end, the Poles understood that Hitler wanted to turn their country into a vassal of Germany and refused to play his game, even if genuinely intended at the time. At the same time, the Poles would not go along with Soviet demands, presented to the British and French, to enter Polish (Romanian and Baltic territory), in the case of a Tripartite Alliance. For the Poles, this would mean becoming a "Soviet province."<sup>9</sup>

Stalin was insulted and felt brutalized by British and French indifference to his power and status. Even after Munich and the ever-more-insistent Nazi demands on Poland, Chamberlain continued to push for a deal with Hitler that would avoid war. He really never gave up on his policy of appeasement. At the same time, he now understood that war might well engulf the continent and he therefore pushed to modernize and beef up the British military so that it would be properly prepared to defend London's interests. The French could not seem to get beyond following the British example, so took no serious actions of their own that would draw the Soviets into the kind of Anglo-French-Soviet Entente that might deter Hitler from further aggression. For the time being, Stalin remained isolated.

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<sup>8</sup> TOOZE 2008, 664.

<sup>9</sup> MUSIAL 2012, 71.

## Hitler

This was the situation in the early spring of 1939, when the idea of a pact between the Soviet Union and Germany became increasingly attractive to both Hitler and Stalin. Let's look first at Hitler's motivations. As German demands on Poland became increasingly strident in the late winter and spring of 1939, the British, followed by the French, issued a guarantee of Poland's sovereignty (though not, crucially, of its territorial integrity), still hoping by such an act to avoid war. Hitler, however, was not convinced that the British and French would fight; indeed he was counting on dealing with Poland without their military intervention.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Poles were proving to be an unbending opponent. Hitler went ahead with his plans to launch an invasion of Poland. But he was determined not to fight a two-front war, which would be the case if the British and French managed to sign a military alliance with the Soviets, as seemed likely in early 1939. Therefore he encouraged his underlings, in this case Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and the Ambassador in Moscow, Friedrich von der Schulenberg, to pursue discussions with the Soviets, first of all on economic matters, but also on political issues. The initial trade talks went well: Germany desperately needed raw materials from the Soviets and the Soviets were anxious to gain access to German industrial and military related goods. By 1940, when the final stage of the trade talks had reached their height, the Soviet Union was sending 52% of its exports to Germany and supplying Germany with a very high percentage of its mineral (manganese, copper, phosphates, asbestos, etc.) and petroleum needs.<sup>11</sup>

When the Soviet Foreign Ministry representative in Berlin, Grigorii Astakhov, indicated to the German trade negotiator, Karl Schnurre, in mid-April 1939, that economic talks should be put in the context of political agreements, the Germans jumped at the opportunity and suggested that a deal about spheres of influence in Eastern Europe just might be worked out.<sup>12</sup> Hitler's motivations were multiple in responding to, indeed creating, these diplomatic openings. First of all, if he was going to fight a war, late 1939 was the best time to do it. According to Albert Speer, Hitler believed that Germany's "proportional superiority" in weapons and military readiness would "constantly diminish," given problems in German armaments production in the summer of 1939, and the rapidly growing military capabilities of Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> His

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<sup>10</sup> MUSIAL 2012, 34. Musial writes that Hitler counted on the attack on Poland being "a short local conflict," while the Soviets had much more wide-ranging plans.

<sup>11</sup> SLUCH 2009.

<sup>12</sup> KERSHAW 2000, 196. TOOZE 2008, 321.

<sup>13</sup> TOOZE 2008, 216.

geostrategic position had also deteriorated in the late 1930s. Neither Japan nor Italy was willing at that point to sign a military pact, while the United States was moving ineluctably towards joining Great Britain in a potential war. If the Soviets ended up concluding an agreement with the British and French, then Hitler would be in very bad geostrategic position to face a coalition of that magnitude. Finally, there was always the pressure of ideology, which demanded, among other things, that the Nazis constantly achieve new successes in their march to dominate Europe. As long as he was victorious and expanding his power and territory, Hitler felt he was serving the larger cause of German revival and might. In his mind, stasis would undermine the dynamism of his militarized racial state.

The Soviets were, however, careful and patient negotiators. Stalin instructed his subordinates to proceed with caution, not to make suggestions, but to prompt the Germans into doing so.<sup>14</sup> Negotiating at the same time with Britain and France about a potential tripartite alliance, Stalin felt that he had the upper hand and could afford to wait for the better deal. But Hitler was impatient by late July, early August 1939, and ready to conclude an arrangement with the Soviets that would isolate Poland and free up his forces for the planned invasion, which was initially to take place on August 26.<sup>15</sup> The talks between Molotov and Schulenburg in Moscow, which shaped the character of the pact that followed, were going far too slowly for his schedule. The Soviets were haggling about a number of points, just as instructed by Stalin. Therefore Hitler wrote directly to Stalin on August 21, proposing to send Ribbentrop to Moscow on August 22 or 23. In the meanwhile, Stalin was increasingly frustrated by the British and the French, who dragged their feet particularly on the issue of whether the Soviets would obtain the right to march into Poland and Romania to defend their interests against an aggressor and especially into the Baltic States in the case of what the Soviets called “indirect aggression.”<sup>16</sup> This certainly contributed to Stalin giving Hitler and von Ribbentrop the go-ahead to begin serious talks in Moscow. From the diplomatic record of Soviet-German discussions in late July and August 1939, including the negotiations about the non-Aggression Pact and the Secret Protocol, it was apparent that Hitler was ready to grant the Soviets a substantial sphere of interest in Eastern Europe, which they could influence as they saw fit. In the negotiations, von Ribbentrop acceded to almost every point of the original draft agreement proposed by Stalin – and indeed the *vozhd'* was the one who did most of the negotiating, as well as editing and rewriting of the pact and the Secret

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<sup>14</sup> PONS 2002, 171.

<sup>15</sup> NEKRICH 1997, 118.

<sup>16</sup> RIEBER 2005, 140.

Protocol.<sup>17</sup> Hitler wanted war with Poland; that was clear. He was ready to grant the Soviets their demands in order to remove them as an inhibiting factor in his planning. When von Ribbentrop suggested that some high-flown language be added to the pact about the flourishing of Soviet-German relations, Stalin demurred.<sup>18</sup>

Hitler's idea was to destroy the Polish state, while absorbing large pieces of what were partly German inhabited territories of Poland into the Reich. The Soviet Union would be neutralized through granting it a sphere of influence in the east. Hitler's plans also included Operation Tannenberg, which designated some 60,000 Polish political and civic leaders for extermination.<sup>19</sup> The scenario proceeded pretty much as Hitler planned. The Germans marched into Poland on September 1 and besieged Warsaw on September 8. The Polish Jews were sporadically confined to overcrowded and under-provisioned ghettos. Von Ribbentrop invited the Soviets to move into their designated part of Poland east of the Vistula, San, and Narew rivers on September 3. But Stalin waited cagily until September 17, when he was sure that his troops were ready, Poland was defeated, and the British and French would not get involved.<sup>20</sup> The Soviets subsequently incorporated eastern Poland (what they called Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine) into the USSR in early November. Like the Nazis, the Soviets also developed a plan to destroy Poles as well as Poland. Some 370,000 Polish men, women and children were deported to Siberia and the east. Some claim the numbers were much larger.<sup>21</sup> Twenty-two thousand Polish officers and civil servants were shot by the NKVD in what became known as the Katyn forest massacre. As Molotov famously and uncouthly put it at the October 31 meeting of the Supreme Soviet: "[...] [o]ne swift blow to Poland, first by the German army and then by the Red Army, and nothing was left of this ugly offspring of the Versailles Treaty."<sup>22</sup> Hitler now had the more or less pacified eastern border with the Soviet Union that he had sought. He could and did turn his attention to Western Europe and, above all, Great Britain.

The question remains whether Hitler would have been content to continue his arrangement with the Soviet Union, while taking over the bulk of the continent and keeping up the fight with the British. It is likely that neither he nor Stalin saw the Nazi-Soviet Pact lasting for the ten-year period that was designated. Once Norway, Denmark, and the Low Countries

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<sup>17</sup> SLUCH 2009. Hans von Herwarth, qtd. in LEONHARD 1989, 4. HILGER 1956, 286–287.

<sup>18</sup> CARLEY 1999, 207.

<sup>19</sup> ROSSINO 2003.

<sup>20</sup> NEKRICH 1997, 126.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the numbers, see JOLLUCK 2002, 10–13.

<sup>22</sup> Moscow News, November 6, 1939.

were in Hitler's hands in April and May 1940, and France fell in June, geo-strategic thinking dictated that, given the ongoing resistance of the British, Hitler would turn his attention to eliminating the Soviet Union as an independent factor in European politics. There was always the danger that the British and Soviets would come to some kind of alliance at his expense, as threatened by the Stafford Cripps mission to Moscow in the summer of 1940.<sup>23</sup> Hitler convinced himself that the only way to defeat Great Britain was to destroy the possibility of the British forging an alliance with the Soviet Union. The actions of the Soviets, too, contributed to Hitler's growing determination to destroy the Soviet state and Bolshevism itself. Stalin and Molotov continued to make demands from the Germans for spheres of influence in the Balkans, the Straits, and Bulgaria in particular. Molotov's visit to Berlin in November 1940 did not go well, as Hitler and von Ribbentrop tried to interest him in the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and India, and dividing up the world with Japan, Italy and Germany. Molotov kept returning – clearly on Stalin's daily prompting – to the Balkans, to the Straits, and to access to German industrial and military goods.<sup>24</sup>

There was also the crucial issue of *Lebensraum*, territory in the east for the Germans to dominate and colonize, an idea that since *Mein Kampf* had always had its focus on Russia and particularly on Ukraine. Hitler entertained fanciful visions of a Ukraine studded with prosperous German villages. With the British blockade of the continent, there were already serious food shortages in Germany and Western Europe, even with the timely Soviet delivery of agricultural goods.<sup>25</sup> Shortages were predicted to get much worse, as feed grain for cattle and other livestock grew perilously short, endangering the supply of meat to millions of West Europeans. The Germans had always looked covetously (and exceedingly romantically) at Ukraine as a potential breadbasket for the Reich. *Lebensraum* was a noxious blend of strategic, economic, and ideological ideas. Even if Hitler's rantings about the international Jewish conspiracy focused increasingly on London and New York, Churchill and Roosevelt, there was still plenty of residual feeling among the "old [Nazi] party members," as Goebbels put it, that the alliance with the hated Bolsheviks was a "blemish on their honor." Striking at the Soviet Union released all of those powerful feelings among Nazi party members, Hitler at their head, and made it possible, again in Goebbels's chiliastic words, for "our nation" to make "her way up into the light."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See GORODETSKY 1984.

<sup>24</sup> See "Zapis' besedy B. Molotova s von Shulenburgom," November 25, 1940, and especially the *Prilozhenie* in *SSSR-Germanija*, 305–306.

<sup>25</sup> KERSHAW 2000, 423. TOOZE 2008, 477–478.

<sup>26</sup> Goebbels Diaries, June 22, 1941, 423.



## Stalin

There are those who would argue, Sergei Sluch among them, that Stalin sought an agreement with Hitler from the moment the Führer came to power.<sup>27</sup> There is certainly no question that despite the Soviet dictator's critical view of Nazism and fascism, he would not be deterred from advancing Moscow's interests because of his ideological opposition to Hitler. That he turned to the policy of "collective security" was certainly in part the result of Hitler's supreme disdain for dealing with the Soviets. After Hitler came to power, he quickly withdrew all the cooperative agreements that had characterized the spirit of Rapallo. German scientists, technicians, and weapons specialists were removed from the Soviet Union and trade between the two countries fell to an all-time low. Nazi propaganda was fearfully anti-Soviet, driving home the argument that the Jewish conspiracy and Bolshevism were completely intertwined. Still, there were openings, represented in particular by the ongoing conversations between Gustav Hilger, a counsellor at the German embassy in Moscow, and his counterparts in the Soviet Foreign Commissariat.<sup>28</sup> Hilger, like others in the Foreign Ministry and Wehrmacht, favored better relations with the Soviet Union as a way to advance German interests on the continent. But their influence was minimal until the crucial turnaround came in the spring of 1939.

As was his wont, Stalin allowed his lieutenants to argue about the pursuit of Soviet foreign policy in the increasingly dangerous atmosphere of post-Munich Europe. Led by Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet Foreign Ministry had pursued a policy of "collective security" since the early 1930s. The idea was to bolster the readiness of the European democracies, especially Britain and France, to join with the Soviet Union to deter the territorial and political ambitions of Hitler. Litvinov worked tirelessly to engage the Western democracies in a struggle against fascism, which he saw as the greatest danger to Soviet security. But from Stalin's point of view, the Munich Agreement of September 1938 was a disaster, demonstrating the supreme failure of Moscow's reliance on collective security. The lesson drawn by Litvinov was that the British and French would now understand that they should close the gap with the Soviets in order to deter Hitler from carrying out his new threats against Poland.<sup>29</sup> However, within the Soviet leadership, other points of view became more salient. In a meeting with Stalin and Ivan Maisky in April 1939, Viacheslav Molotov, acting, as he frequently did, as Stalin's bulldog, denounced what he said were

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<sup>27</sup> SLUCH 2009.

<sup>28</sup> HILGER & MEYER 1953, 294–298. See also MUSIAL 2012, 72–73.

<sup>29</sup> PONS 2002, 150.



Litvinov's excessively sympathetic views of the interest of the Western democracies in stopping Hitler, rather than simply turning him to the east against the Soviets.<sup>30</sup>

Stalin removed Litvinov as Foreign Minister on May 3, 1939, and replaced him with Molotov, then Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, who previously had very little foreign affairs experience.<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, Stalin ordered Molotov to "remove all the Jews from the Commissariat."<sup>32</sup> Removing Litvinov was also an important signal to Hitler, which, as Hilger emphasizes, was not missed by the Führer.<sup>33</sup> First of all, of course, Litvinov was a Jew, and this move was seen as a concession to Hitler's anti-Semitism. Secondly, Litvinov was associated with the collective security policy, which was seen as having failed at Munich and was doing little or nothing to get the French and British to forge a workable alliance with Moscow. Thirdly, Litvinov was a traditional Soviet diplomat, a specialist, who relied heavily on the hierarchical procedures of the Foreign Ministry to reach foreign policy decisions. Stalin had developed a strong working relationship with Molotov throughout the 1930s. They frequently consulted on the phone, as well as in person. Stalin knew he could rely on Molotov to do his bidding. (Molotov later said of himself that he was little more than an errand boy for Stalin!<sup>34</sup>) In short, it could well be that Stalin was not necessarily giving up the policy of collective security and the hope for a Tripartite agreement with Britain and France by removing Litvinov. Instead, he was installing a new system of making foreign policy that would give him daily control over negotiations with the Germans, as well as with the British and French.<sup>35</sup> Stalin was a micro-manager in many fields of Soviet endeavor. He now extended his intense dictatorial competence to matters of foreign policy.

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<sup>30</sup> "The atmosphere at the meeting," Maisky writes, "was extremely explosive. Even though Stalin seemed relaxed and smoked his pipe throughout, one felt that he was extremely hostile towards Litvinov. Molotov incessantly raged and inveighed against Litvinov, accusing him of every cardinal sin." Qtd. in PONS 2002, 161–162. In a May 1939 plenum of the Central Committee, described by Dmitri Maniul'skii, Stalin upbraided Litvinov as a mere "'specialist' in international affairs who would assail the Politburo's ineptitude [...]" Ibid., 162.

<sup>31</sup> At roughly the same time, late April 1939, the Soviet ambassador in Berlin, Aleksei Merekalov, was recalled to Moscow and the charge d'affaires, Georgi Astakhov took over negotiations with the Germans.

<sup>32</sup> NEKRICH 1997, 110. Molotov later noted that the Jews in the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs were untrustworthy.

<sup>33</sup> HILGER 1956, 280.

<sup>34</sup> CHUEV 1991, 99.

<sup>35</sup> This is the observation of the French charge d'affaires in Moscow, Jean Paryart. Qtd. in CARLEY 1999, 134. ROBERTS 2012, 22.

It should be clear that Stalin had no compunction whatsoever about signing a pact with Hitler, despite the fact that foreign communists had dutifully carried on propaganda campaigns and resistance against Nazi and fascist incursions throughout Europe on Moscow's explicit orders. It was very hard for those foreign communists, whether living in the Soviet Union, or operating within their own countries, to understand how the pact came to be. They were told absolutely nothing in advance about it. Given the completely changed tone of the Soviet press, Georgi Dimitrov, head of the Comintern, repeatedly turned to Stalin, Molotov, and Zhdanov for advice in late August about the implications of the pact, but could get no straight answers.<sup>36</sup> When French communists wrote to Moscow asking for instructions about their role in preserving the policy of collective security, Dimitrov and Manuil'skii wrote to Stalin on April 20, asking whether "the party, given the present international situation, should serve as leader on behalf of collective security" or not. Stalin replied to Dimitrov on April 26: "We are very occupied now. Decide these questions by yourself."<sup>37</sup> Wolfgang Leonhard, who experienced first-hand the shock and incomprehension that surrounded the announcement of the pact, later wrote that Stalin talked about the Comintern as nothing more than a *lavochka*, a little store, which exerted little influence on the real course of international affairs and revolution.<sup>38</sup> By the time of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the Comintern had as little ideological punch as the Anti-Comintern Pact, which as Georgi Astakhov noted in his diary, "did not mean German antipathy to the Soviet Union."<sup>39</sup>

So why did Stalin negotiate, author, and firmly abide by a pact with the Nazis, when he knew, just as Hitler did, that it could not last very long and that it went against much of his own propaganda and policies of the 1930s? The story is complicated and multi-dimensional. The Soviet Union had emerged from a difficult period of industrialization, collectivization and political purges at the end of the 1930s, in which a great deal of damage had been done to the infrastructure and economic, not to mention political, leadership of the country. At the same time, it is probably fair to say that the Soviet Union also emerged from this period more unified and capable of concerted action under Stalin's leadership than it was earlier. However, it was crystal clear to Stalin and to his military leadership that the Soviet Union could not yet fight a war with Nazi Germany.<sup>40</sup> Stalin needed time to

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<sup>36</sup> DALLIN & FIRSOV 2000, 148–149.

<sup>37</sup> The letter is translated in full in DALLIN & FIRSOV 2000, 150, but has a different date sequence. The Pons book is more up-to-date. So I use his dates. PONS 2002, 159.

<sup>38</sup> LEONHARD 1989, 30.

<sup>39</sup> "Dnevnik G. Astakhova," June 27, 1939, in SSSR-Germanija, 189.

<sup>40</sup> DALLIN et al. 1991.

rebuild his armed forces and the country's economic infrastructure before he could do so. A tripartite agreement with Britain and France might have given him that essential breathing space, as well. In lieu of an agreement with the Western powers, one with the Germans was essential. The Germans also promised help easing relations between Japan and the Soviet Union, which would alleviate Stalin's worries about a two-front war.<sup>41</sup> And the possibilities of expansion were open-ended. Astakhov reports that von Ribbentrop told him in several different ways at several different times: "We can agree without difficulty about any problems that are related to territories *from the Black to the Baltic Seas*."<sup>42</sup>

As Steve Kotkin points out in his superb first volume of his planned three-volume biography of the Soviet tyrant, Stalin was quintessentially a man of the Russian Empire.<sup>43</sup> He was born and educated in the Empire; he absorbed its values; he relished in its immensity. The defeats of the early Bolshevik period, especially at the hands of the Poles near Warsaw in October 1920 and to the White Armies in the South during the Civil War, sat uncomfortably in his psyche. The loss of territory due to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of 1918 and the Treaty of Riga of 1921 bothered him deeply. In 1931, during some of the worst difficulties of the First Five Year Plan, Stalin bemoaned the fact that Russia was repeatedly beaten up by its enemies over the course of its history. He would not let this happen again. By the end of the 1930s, he was ready to reclaim lost territories of the empire as part of his vision of Russian greatness. Some historians suggest, in fact, that Stalin himself initiated the Nazi-Soviet Pact explicitly for this expansionist purpose.<sup>44</sup> Others claim that he even had developed plans to attack the Nazis in spring and early summer of 1941 in a preventive war to spread his communist empire deeper into Europe.<sup>45</sup> While offensive military plans were always on Stalin's table, the sheer facts of Soviet weakness and Nazi strength were fully understood by Stalin. As a result, Stalin's intentions were to gain the territory he could within the context of the negotiations with Hitler. Essentially, he was offered more territory by the Nazis than he was by the Western Powers.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, he took eastern Poland (Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine) and absorbed them into the Soviet Union. The Secret Protocol of August 24 granted the Soviets the Baltic States as a sphere of influence, with adjustments regarding Lithuania coming some-

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<sup>41</sup> CARLEY 1999, 177.

<sup>42</sup> "Zapis' besedy G. Astakhova s von Ribbentropom i K. Shnurre", in SSSR-Germanija, 195.

<sup>43</sup> KOTKIN 2014, 12–13.

<sup>44</sup> See RAACK 1995.

<sup>45</sup> PLESHAKOV 2005, 43–44.

<sup>46</sup> MUSIAL 2012, 80.

what later. In a series of escalating demands on Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Stalin also incorporated them into the Soviet Union in the beginning of August 1940.<sup>47</sup>

The situation with Finland, which, it will be recalled, had been a semi-autonomous Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire, was different and therefore instructive in its own right. Stalin's demands on the Finns to give up strategically important territory north of Leningrad, including the crucial Mannerheim Line, were rejected by the Finns. Unlike the Balts, who understandably decided not to protect their neutrality with arms, the Finns resisted the Soviet ultimatum and prepared their army to fight. The subsequent Winter War was a well-known fiasco for the Red Army. Only when over three-quarters of a million Soviet soldiers were put into the field in February 1940 were the Finns forced to capitulate and sign the March 12 peace.<sup>48</sup> The Soviets gained the strategic territory they had previously demanded, but their attempts to set up a puppet Finnish communist government under Otto Kuusinen was a colossal failure. The Soviets' readiness to halt their advance and make a deal with the Finns demonstrates that Stalin did not necessarily seek to recreate the Russian Empire in every case or to expand into Europe without solid strategic reasons.<sup>49</sup> Of course, threats of British intervention also encouraged Stalin to come to an agreement with the Finns.

### Conclusions

In recounting Stalin's diplomatic and strategic goals in 1939, it is important to remember that he did not in the least abandon his attachment to ideology in order to operate on principles of *Realpolitik*. Stalin understood that the essence of Marxism-Leninism was devoid of any Utopian elements. Hard-nosed realism and looking after the immediate and long-term interests of the Soviet Union was, in Stalin's view, the very heart of the communist view of the world. There was no morality higher than that. From the very beginning of his ascent in the Soviet party, Stalin had rigorously, even murderously, opposed the views of the alleged "sectarians," Trotsky among them, whose attachment to communist values took precedence sometimes over the relationship between power and politics.

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<sup>47</sup> The importance of the Baltic states to the making of the pact is duly noted in ROBERTS 2012, 34–37. The Baltic was also important in the "unmaking" of the pact. See the chapter, "The Third Reich and the USSR and the Baltic States, August 1939 to August 1940," DEBSKI 2003, 211–255.

<sup>48</sup> NEKRICH 1997, 148.

<sup>49</sup> PONS 2002, 193–197. VOLKOGONOV 1992, 363–365.

This thoroughgoing realism, more than anything else, distinguished Stalin's view of his relationship with Hitler from Hitler's to Stalin. Hitler could not free himself from his hatred of Communism and his desire to destroy the Jewish-Bolshevik state. From Hitler's point of view, the war against the Soviet Union was moral and pure; victory was absolutely necessary to achieve the higher good that he sought. Initially, he thought the campaign would take four months; others thought Bolshevism would collapse sooner than that from its internal weaknesses.<sup>50</sup> When the Soviet state did not collapse from within, despite the stunning advances of the Wehrmacht in the summer and fall of 1941, the writing was on the wall; the Nazis would lose the war. This became even more apparent after the German defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943 and their reversals at Kursk the following summer. But Hitler's Utopianism got the better of him. He would fight on, and, as a consequence, ended up destroying his people, his country, and himself. In the process of understanding that the war would not be won, he turned his fury on the hated Jews, carrying out what can be considered the greatest crime of the modern age, the mass murder of 6 million people.<sup>51</sup>

Even though shorn of Utopianism, Stalin's realism proved to be imperfect. He never quite grasped the fact that Hitler did not operate on the basis of the same pragmatic empiricism that he did. He did not believe, for example, that Hitler would fight a two-front war. That would have been irrational. During the period of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Stalin delivered goods in the proper quantity and quality demanded by the Germans. His press ceased attacks on the Nazis and his police cooperated with the Gestapo in handing over German communists and Jews. He was a near perfect partner in the division of Eastern Europe, despite his later demands for more influence in the Balkans and the Straits.

Yet as the signs of an imminent attack mounted in the late spring of 1941, he did little to prepare his army and his nation for the coming conflict. The Germans were stunned by his inability to respond to their obvious, if ostensibly secret, mobilization. Goebbels noted in his diary that Russia was like a rabbit frozen in place by a coiled snake.<sup>52</sup> Alexander Nekrich writes that Stalin was in a state of self-hypnosis, convincing himself that Hitler was bluffing and that a call for negotiations was imminent.<sup>53</sup> All Stalin could do was to try to offer the Germans no excuses to attack.

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<sup>50</sup> Goebbels Diaries, June 16, 1941, 413.

<sup>51</sup> For the latest argument about whether Hitler's defeat in Russia or his "premature euphoria about likely victory" earlier on was the "key tipping point" toward the Final Solution, see BROWNING 2015, 42.

<sup>52</sup> Goebbels Diaries, May 7, 1941, 351.

<sup>53</sup> NEKRICH 1997, 238.

It is possible, as some have suggested, that he understood an invasion was coming and that he was not fooled by the Nazi denials or his own rhetoric that reports of an attack were British provocations. He may have felt that his army, helped by the great Russian expanses, would hold up well enough in the case that the assault proved real. After all, he had roughly the same number of men at arms as the Germans and would be fighting on his own soil. The Nazi campaign in the Balkans had cost the Wehrmacht dearly – maybe even fatally – in terms of time and of materiel. As pointed out by Gabriel Gorodetsky this unexpected delay from the spring to the early summer may have saved the Soviet Union from extinction.<sup>54</sup> In any case, Stalin's lack of defensive measures cost his people dearly. Some twenty-seven million died as the country was destroyed.

In her lead article in *Osteuropa* on the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Susanne Schattenberg suggests that the way the two dictators led and ran their respective countries, dealt with the desiderata of diplomacy, and above all viewed and admired the other determined the nature of their relationship. She adds that both represented a “new style of diplomacy, which was comparable in its symbolism, tone and tempo.”<sup>55</sup> There is certainly something to her argument, though it is insufficient, in my view, in explaining both how the two dictators came to an agreement when they did and how that agreement was incinerated in the flames of war. In short, there was much more that joined them in the late spring of 1939 than their similar modus operandi and discursive tactics. They were both Great Power statesmen, united by the overwhelming desire to destroy the international system that had tried to isolate them and confine them to a subordinate role in the European concert. That they joined their efforts in the Nazi-Soviet Pact, which in turn triggered the beginning of World War II – on September 1 for the Germans and September 17 for the Soviets – had profound consequences for the international system which we continue to live with until this day.

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<sup>54</sup> GORODETSKY 2001.

<sup>55</sup> SCHATTEBERG 2009, 7.

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