

INTRODUCTION

The author refers the presented work to the genre of historical journalism, which, like historical science, aims to study, understand and interpret past historical processes and events. At the same time, these two approaches to the formation of a picture of the world of a particular period differ both in goal and in the method of achieving it.

Historical journalism is aimed mainly at a wide audience by creating a narrative with the inclusion of elements of value judgments, that is, without adhering to academic discourse. On the other hand, scientific historical research consists of a thorough analysis of sources, description and explanation of the meanings, phases and characteristics of historical processes and events in a certain period of the past. The difference in writing style and methodology is obvious: journalists use skillfully crafted prose, figures of speech, value judgments, and works of art, such as caricatures from the relevant historical period.

In other words, historical journalism and professional historical work involve research and writing skills to establish facts and events and shape narratives from them, while differing in their approach, audience, sources, writing style, and emphasis on context and understanding.

Of particular importance for historical journalism is the modern sound and assessment of past events that affect the formation of a reliable picture of the world of modern man. We are witnessing a radical difference in the picture of the world with regard to the causes, processes and results of the Second World War. Take, for example, photos and videos of the meeting of Red Army soldiers by residents of liberated European countries and modern materials on the demolition of monuments of that era.

In the history of the Second World War, the issue of covering the events of its beginning is of particular importance. The Internet is replete with materials dedicated to this topic. However, most of them cannot be attributed either to the genre of historical journalism, or, especially, to scientific research. Usually, attempts are made to interpret certain events in a propaganda spirit. Such materials influence global political decision-making in various countries.

Therefore, there is a need for a journalistic presentation of the events that led to World War II, based on documents and memoirs with a minimum amount of value judgments. The initial content vector of this work is the assertion of many historians that the Second World War is a logical continuation of the First World War, more specifically its results enshrined in the Treaty of Versailles of 1919. And, of course, the processes of these 20 years cannot be considered without taking into account the dynamics of events that took place in various countries on the world stage.

I would formulate my task as an author as follows. I read many sources related to this problem and decided to present my vision, my version of the picture of the world in the period between 1919 and 1939. In the genre of historical journalism.

IN THE BEGINNING IT WAS...

In order to understand how monstrous the attempts to blame the Soviet Union for the beginning of World War II look, one must understand the pre-war historical processes well. It is important to establish the time frame for our discussion. Perhaps it would be correct to start with the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I in the period 1914-1918. Here and throughout the narrative, we will focus on the behavior of the main geopolitical players in this historical arena: the United States, England, France and Germany, excluding the allies of Germany, such as Bulgaria, Turkey, and Austria-Hungary. The Russian Empire as an ally of the Entente (Russia, Great Britain and France) no longer existed at that time.



Signing of the Treaty of

The Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28, 1919 by nearly three dozen nations, led to significant territorial and material losses for Germany both within Europe and overseas. Germans forfeited vital metallurgical resources and prime farmland, as depicted on this map.



Germany's African and Oceanian colonies were ceded to Britain, France, Belgium, and Japan. Additionally, Germany lost control of the Saar coal basin and was obligated to pay 132 million gold marks in reparations. Notably, Germany was barred from military rearmament, with its army limited to 100,000 troops. Germans viewed the Treaty of Versailles as demeaning and punitive, with particular indignation sparked by the sole attribution of blame for starting World War I to Germany.

But, again, we are interested in the positions of the leading players: the United States, Great Britain and France, which is very important for further exposition. It is important to understand that a big geopolitical game was emerging, in which each of the players pursued their own goals. The United States initially maintained relative neutrality in relation to European affairs, but then changed its position by investing capital in the German economy. In accordance with the Dawes Plan (1924), the United States provided loans to Germany, seemingly for the economic balance on the European continent, but, in fact, for control over German companies, as a result of which the German economy was able to recover in a short time.

In order not to be accused of bias, I would like to remind you that the Russian Federation (the Soviet Union was created in 1922) also did not stand aside from providing assistance to Germany. The RSFSR did not sign the Treaty of Versailles, and this allowed it to conclude the Treaty of Rapalle with Germany in 1922. agreement on military equipment and training of military personnel. The interest of the RSFSR was in the study of German military experience and in familiarization with modern military equipment, including aviation. In addition, the Soviet leadership hoped for the help of the Reichswehr in attracting German industrialists to restore the military potential of Russia. As a result of such mutual interest, a flight center was created in Lipetsk, which existed until 1932. And in 1935, in his speech in the Reichstag, Hitler announced the restoration of German aviation.



Hitler demonstrates the submission of the Reich Chancellor
to Reich President Paul von Hindenburg

From that moment on, rapid and unexpected transformations began to take place in German society. When asked how it could happen that a highly cultured society, which gave the world great thinkers, fell into the sin of Nazism, Eric Fromm, an American psychoanalyst of German origin, a witness to the rise to power of the Nazis, answers: *"...the fear of isolation, the relative weakness of moral principles, social frustration and the complementary aggrandizement of the people and race on the part of the state become a solid basis for the strengthening of Nazism in Germany."* In just three years, an impoverished society, torn apart by political strife, saw in Hitler its Führer, who gave them work and, consequently, hopes for the future.

Capture of the Rhineland

It was from this moment, in 1933, that a new era began in the great political game on the world map. I will begin the description of subsequent events with the gloomy prophecy of the French Marshal Foch, an ardent opponent of Soviet Russia, who made a significant contribution to the military confrontation with it, for which, by the way, he acquired the title of Marshal of Poland. After reading the text of the Treaty of Versailles, he exclaimed: "This is not peace, this is a truce for twenty years!". The prophecy came true, and the first thunderstorms thundered in March 1936. Germany had only three years for Hitler to take this step. The map clearly shows the Rhineland, which separated Germany from France, which was declared a demilitarized zone by the Treaty of Versailles. Its territory included such important cities as Cologne, Aachen, Koblenz, Wiesbaden, Mannheim, Karlsruhe, and was close to Frankfurt. Under this treaty, the signatory countries guaranteed the inviolability of the borders between Germany, France and Belgium. It was with the capture of this zone that the big game in the vastness of Eurasia began.



In general, Hitler's natural adventurism entered the stage of active action in 1936. The reason for this transformation was the attack of the Italian leader Benito Mussolini

on Abyssinia in October 1935. All the main geopolitical players sharply expressed their indignation at this action. Hitler decided to publicly support Mussolini, but limited himself only to military supplies, wanting to probe the reaction of England and France. Convinced that these countries did not actually condemn this step of the Fuhrer, Hitler moved on to decisive action in the foreign policy arena. To do this, he first of all obtained recognition of the absolute loyalty of his entourage, threatening otherwise even to commit suicide. And only after that, Hitler began preparations for the occupation of the Rhineland, giving this adventure the name "Winter Exercise". The Franco-Soviet treaty signed in May 1935 was declared the reason for the invasion, which Hitler regarded as a violation of the Locarno Pact of 1925.

It was a "moment of truth" for Hitler, as he himself later admitted: "...I asked myself: What would France do? Would she oppose the introduction of a few of my battalions? I know what I would do if I were in the place of the French: I would strike and not allow a single German soldier to cross the Rhine." The attack was planned for Saturday, March 7, 1936, which prevented a quick reaction from the British government, which was leaving London for the weekend.



German troops cross the Rhine

Hitler's adventure was a success and his fears were not confirmed. Prime Minister Baldwin and British Foreign Secretary Eden, after discussing the situation, came to the

conclusion that "... there can be no question of supporting French military action if it decides to prevent Hitler from taking control of the Rhineland." As German troops entered the Rhineland, Hitler excitedly announced, to thunderous applause at a meeting of the Reichstag: *"At the moment, German troops are entering the Rhineland."* Note that the commanders of the German battalions were ordered to retreat immediately if French troops came out against them. Finally, here is the answer of the Chief of the General Staff of the Third Reich Ground Forces, Guderian, to a question from a French officer during interrogation in 1945: *"If you Frenchmen had intervened in the Rhineland in 1936, we would have lost everything, and Hitler's fall would have been inevitable."*

Of course, the question cannot but arise: why did France not rebuff Hitler's adventure? In my opinion, three factors worked here. The first is the general reluctance to fight after the horrors of the First World War, the second is the financial difficulties as a result of the economic crisis, the third, and perhaps the most important, is the attitude of England.

It is now clear that the German military clique would have been stopped as early as 1936 if France and its allies, primarily England, had given a tough rebuff to the adventurous sortie of the Nazis. But this did not happen, and the abyss of future suffering opened up before Europe. Hitler rejoiced - the Germans saw in him a kind of messiah. And the Führer no longer felt such fear of the seizure of new territories. He knew that he would not be stopped. Ahead was the Anschluss of Austria, the seizure of Czechoslovakia, the occupation of France and other European countries, the war with the USSR.

The role of Poland.

I deliberately did not touch on the role of Poland in Hitler's Rhineland adventure. Now let's consider this issue in more detail. This, in fact, is not even a question, everything is very clear there. In the 30s, Germany concluded many non-aggression treaties with different countries. But the first on this list was Poland. Recall that under the Treaty of Versailles, Poland gained the opportunity to become a full-fledged state after many years of dependence and partitions. The desire to become one of the players in the foreign policy arena, plus the old ambitions of the slogan "Poland – from sea to sea", in the sense of from the Baltic to the Black, plus the hostile attitude towards Soviet Russia, especially after the victorious war of 1920, plus the historical wariness towards Germany, determined the main contours of Poland's foreign policy. But the larger players on the European continent did not consider Poland as a subject of the foreign policy game.

Surrounded by two growing neighbors, Poland made attempts to establish more or less normal relations with them. As a result of complex diplomatic manipulations, Poland nevertheless initiated the signing of a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union in 1932. Here it is important to understand the deep attitude of both Poland and other European countries to the USSR: they did not yet know what fascism of the 1940s was, but they were well aware of the real danger of social revolutions, given the attractiveness of the Soviet Union at that time in the minds of the proletarian strata. Therefore, in establishing relations with the Soviet Union, Poland secretly hoped for military-political cooperation with Germany both as an ally against the Bolshevik threat and in revising the borders established by the Treaty of Versailles.

After the Nazi Party came to power, the situation began to change dramatically in the direction of rapprochement between Poland and Germany. As early as October 1933, Hitler announced that Germany demanded equality in armaments with other countries and in protest was leaving the disarmament conference and the League of Nations, which was regarded in European capitals as a step towards war.

For reference. *The League of Nations was an international organization founded as a result of the Versailles-Washington system of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919–1920. Between September 28, 1934 and February 23, 1935, the League of Nations had a maximum of 58 states.*

France resumed negotiations with Moscow on the conclusion of a pact of mutual assistance, as a result of which Germany could find itself in international isolation. A month after Hitler's demarche in the League of Nations, the Reich Chancellor met with the Polish ambassador Józef Lipski, after which the process of preparing for the conclusion of a non-aggression pact began. Hitler's political envoy, in a conversation with the French ambassador in Berlin, François Poncet, outlined the following plan: Poland would conclude a military alliance with Germany against the USSR, return the Polish corridor and Danzig, but in return would receive part of the Ukraine with access to the Black Sea. Paris rejected such ideas and informed Moscow of Goering's proposal. Poland actually broke off relations with France in favor of Germany.

In short, each state of that period (although little has changed even today) solved two problems: the first was to stabilize international relations, primarily with neighbors, the second was to try to become a full-fledged partner in the European arena or even to achieve advantages, for example, in the form of territorial acquisitions.

By signing the Declaration on the Non-Use of Force, Warsaw de facto helped Germany break out of political isolation, which was one of the first foreign policy successes of the German government under Hitler. The normalization of relations with Poland allowed the German Führer to operate in the West (Saarland, Ruhr area) and build up armaments without fear for his eastern borders.

The level of rapprochement between Poland and Germany can be judged by the organization of the funeral of Marshal Piłsudski, who died in May 1935.



Goering at Pilsudski's funeral in Warsaw



Hitler at the Polish Embassy in Berlin

The Anti-Cominter Pact and the West's Change of Course

Between the seizure of the Rhineland (1936) and the active phase of the beginning of the seizure of territories in the countries of Eastern Europe (1938), there were two years, the events of which determined the further fate of the whole world. A little earlier than the Rhine adventure, as early as February 1936, left-wing republicans came to power in Spain, after which the nationalists began preparations for an armed uprising against the republic. First of all, they turned to Hitler and Mussolini, who promised

concrete assistance to the rebels in the form of weapons. The armed revolt of the Spanish fascists, led by General Franco, began on July 17, 1936. The Soviet Union and the Comintern intervened in the armed conflict on the side of the Republicans, and military and political advisers were sent to Madrid.

For reference. *The Comintern was an international organization that united the communist parties of various countries in 1919-1943. According to Lenin, it was "an alliance of workers all over the world striving for the establishment of Soviet power in all countries."*

In August of the same year, the international Non-Intervention Pact was signed in London, which gave hope for the victory of the Republicans. However, Germany and Italy began to supply material and military assistance to Spain. In response, in September 1936, the Soviet leadership decided to send communist volunteers to Spain. And in October of the same year, the Soviet Union began to officially help the Spanish government with weapons, military equipment and military specialists.

Foreign military supplies to Spain

	People	Planes	Tanks	Armored cars	Guns
	Nationalists				
Germany	226 500	650	200		700
Italy	880 000	1000	150	16	2000
	Republicans				
USSR	3 000	800	350	120	1500
Other countries	35 000				

It was these events that led to the conclusion of the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936, initiated by Germany and Japan.



Signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact

Japan was quickly arming: in August 1936, the government announced a threefold increase in military spending for 1937. Five years earlier, Japan had introduced the Kwantung Army into Manchuria, creating a puppet state formation of Manchukuo (満州郭) there. A confrontation began between Japan, China and Mongolia. Ahead were the events on Lake Khasan and on the Khalkhin-Gol River, which will be discussed later. **Moreover, these events are directly related to the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.**



The State of Manchukuo

The Anti-Comintern Pact actually created a platform for joint action against communist ideology, and in fact against the Soviet Union. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Hachiro Arita, declared: *"From now on, Soviet Russia must understand that it has to stand face to face with Germany and Japan."* Later, Italy joined the Anti-Comintern Pact and, after the defeat of the Republicans, Spain. that, firstly, fascism ceased to be an internal affair of Germany, and, secondly, the possibility of a war on two fronts. It was necessary to think not only about the world revolution, but also about one's own security.

1937 – THE TURN TO WAR

Germany

In 1937, events took place as a result of which the world finally turned towards war. Even before coming to power, in the summer of 1932, Hitler announced at a meeting a plan to create a German "racial empire" designed to dominate Europe and the world. *"We will never achieve world domination,"* he said, *"unless a powerful, steel-hard core of 80 or 100 million Germans is created in the center of our development."* In addition to Germany, this "core" included Austria, Czechoslovakia, and part of Poland. Around this "foundation of a Greater Germany" was to lie a belt of small and medium-sized vassal states: the Baltic States, Poland, Finland.

During the four years of Hitler and the Nazi Party's rule, Germany, as they say, "rose from its knees." Hitler, exploiting the ideas of revanchism, achieved impressive success in the socio-economic sphere. Unemployment disappeared: if in 1932 there were six million unemployed, then by 1938, as a result of the transition of industry to a war footing, a shortage of workers was revealed. By the way, Nazi leaders pointed out that it took Soviet Russia 14 years to solve the problem of unemployment, and Germany coped with it in four years. Arnold Wilson, a member of the British Parliament who visited Germany at that time, wrote: *"It is a pleasure to observe the physical condition of German youth. Even the poorest are better dressed than before, and their cheerful faces testify to psychological comfort."* In general, Hitler of this period gained many supporters and even admirers outside Germany. Perhaps the most impressive story in this regard is the episode with the British King Edward VIII. In 1936, he abdicated the throne to marry an American woman, Wallis Simpson.



Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson

After their 1937 wedding, the couple traveled to Germany, where they were invited to dine with Hitler and his closest associates. Additionally, Hitler intended to appoint Edward as the leader of a fascist Britain following the war. This support for Hitler was not isolated to Edward alone; within England, as well as in other European and American nations, numerous individuals from both the elite and the general populace became enthusiastic supporters of Hitler and his initiatives. There were no death camps or gas chambers yet. Sobering up came later.

But let's shift our focus back to the primary subject, drawing from the viewpoint of American historian J. Fest, who acknowledged, "The regime emphasized the absence of one social class dominating others; it aimed to provide all classes with the chance to progress, illustrating the class-neutral stance of the Nazis... These actions represented a notable departure from the traditional social hierarchy, leading to considerable enhancements in the economic circumstances of a significant portion of the populace."

And then it was the turn of nation to prepare for the historic mission, the purpose of which was set forth in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*. In the spring of 1937, Hitler spoke at the opening ceremony of the elite party school in Vogelsang and concluded it with a call for the general rearmament of the country: "*I want the German people to become*

the strongest in Europe! We will write the last chapter in German history! The training also affected education: the Nazis needed young men blindly loyal to the Führer in order to implement his ideas. Emphasis was placed on physical culture, racial biology, German history and literature. One of the Nazi educators of the time wrote: "We do not want to bring up our children in order to make frail scientists. Therefore, I declare: it is better to have ten kilograms less knowledge and ten calories more character."

An important moment in the pre-war era unfolded with the historic encounter of two dictators: Hitler and Mussolini. Mussolini, recognizing himself as the architect of fascism and the inheritor of the legacy of the Roman Empire, approached the meeting with a sense of superiority over a man devoid of historical prominence, unmarried, and without offspring. He left the gathering as a subordinate to the Führer. In his impassioned address at the Olympic Stadium, Mussolini proclaimed, "I have a comrade, and I will stand by him to the end!" The outcome of discussions between Hitler and Mussolini culminated in an agreement to foster friendly ties with Japan, extend support to Franco, and restrain the ambitions of France and England.

Amidst this fervent atmosphere, Hitler and the Nazi leadership ultimately conceived the notion of enlarging Germany's territorial domain, with the basic framework of the concept of war now in place. Hitler articulated this vision on November 5, 1937, during a gathering of political and military figures.

1. First, the liquidation of the "buffer" states of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe in order to improve Germany's strategic and economic position in the fight against the main opponents in Europe – the USSR and France, as well as Great Britain;

2. Delivering the first blow in the West with the aim of defeating France, removing Great Britain from the war, occupying the whole of Western Europe in order to create decisive strategic and economic prerequisites for the crushing of the Soviet Union;

3. the defeat of the Soviet Union as the most important condition for the establishment of the complete domination of fascist Germany in Europe and the subsequent struggle for world domination.

It was at this conference that the decision was made to seize Austria and Czechoslovakia as a priority task, the international reaction to these actions was analyzed, and confidence was expressed that England, and, consequently, France, would not dare to act against Germany. On the part of Italy, Germany did not expect any objections to the removal of Czechoslovakia.

At the same time, the conviction was formed that Poland, having Russia in the east, would hardly be inclined to enter into a war against Germany, and that Russia's military intervention could be prevented by the rapid entry of German troops. In general, it is more than dubious in view of Japan's position.

It must be said that in the autumn of 1937 Hitler could still be objected to, fearing a quick reaction from France and England: doubts were expressed by the generals, and even by Foreign Minister von Neurath. But Hitler was true to his style: to make decisions that were not expected even in his immediate environment. He mystically believed in his destiny and his prediction turned out to be correct.

The Soviet Union in 1937

This year is known all over the world as the year of the "Great Terror" in the USSR. Its cause is still being studied by historians and politicians. But in each such study, two factors are mandatory: the internal political struggle for power and mass purges as preparation for war. party organization. A political pretext for the repressions, as a result of which 700,000 people were shot in just two years, were the decisions of the February-March party plenum of 1937. But its participants were also repressed: out of 72 people who spoke at the plenum, 52 people were shot. The command staff of the Red Army was also subjected to repressions: in 1937 alone, more than 11,000 commanders were repressed. From May 14 to May 29, 1937, representatives of the highest command staff of the Red Army were arrested and shot: M.N. Tukhachevsky, I.E. Yakir, I.P. Uborevich and others. New faces came to take their places, but the general fear of possible reprisals fettered their initiative in reforming and rearming the army. Disputes and discussions on strategic issues ceased: now only Stalin made decisions. Here we can recall that similar events took place in Germany in 1934, when Hitler, as a result of an intra-party conflict, physically destroyed the top of the SA stormtroopers , and their leader and rival Fuhrer Ernst Röhm was shot in prison. As a result of the events of one night, from June 29 to June 30, Hitler seized absolute power in Germany.

In the same 1937, the governing bodies of the NKVD and foreign intelligence were destroyed. According to historians, in 1937-1938, out of 450 foreign intelligence officers (including the foreign apparatus), 275 people were repressed, that is, more than half of the personnel. Repressions also affected the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. During 1937-1938, many leading Soviet diplomats were arrested, convicted and shot. Among them are plenipotentiary representatives with vast experience, mainly of the Lenin-Chicherin school.

The year 1938 began in an alarming situation, full of dramatic events that led to the Second World War. The clock mechanism of its beginning was started.

1938 YEAR. THE ANSCHLUSS OF AUSTRIA AND THE SEIZURE OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA

In March 1938, Hitler began his movement to the East with the annexation (Anschluss) of Austria. The Nazi leadership called this aggression a "family affair." This action was incomparably easier for Hitler than the seizure of the Rhineland two years earlier. Now the Führer had no doubts about the non-interference of the leading European countries. A year later, the problem of the Danzig Corridor, which separated the main part of Germany with Königsberg and East Prussia, was solved relatively easily.

As early as November 1937, Poland and Germany signed the Declaration on National Minorities, with Hitler assuring Poland that Danzig was not a contentious issue. In January 1938, Hitler reaffirmed these promises in the presence of German Foreign Minister von Neurath and Polish Foreign Minister J. Beck. However, von Neurath was replaced by Joachim von Ribbentrop a month later, who closely followed Hitler's directives. With England and France's inaction assured and Poland's neutrality secured, Hitler proceeded with the annexation of Austria, initiating the indoctrination of Austrian politicians.

Austria as an independent state arose on the ruins of the Habsburg monarchy in November 1918. For many years, Austria has been trying to define its identity: as a result of the victory of the National Socialists in Germany, the problem of self-identification of Austrians has sharply worsened. Austrian Chancellor E. Dollfuss, elected in 1932, acquired dictatorial powers, persecuting both communists and fascists. Taking an anti-German position, he was simultaneously oriented towards Italy and personally towards Mussolini. Dollfuss was an ardent opponent of the Anschluss, the idea of which was already in the air. Such a person did not suit Hitler, as a result of which in July 1934 a group of Austrian fascists broke into Dollfuss's office, seriously wounded him, and demanded his resignation. He refused, and then the attackers deprived him of medical care, and he died a few hours later.

Then, having received news of the putsch, Mussolini moved his troops to the Austrian border, the rebels were forced to surrender. Germany not only remained silent,

but even expressed condolences to the Austrian government over the tragedy. And it was planned something completely different - the capture of Vienna and Austria. Trained SS units already on their way to the Austrian border were ordered to return, and Goebbels quickly eliminated the propaganda literature that had been prepared about the "successful change of system in Austria."

And then the situation changed, Italy was absorbed in the war in Spain, then it moved closer to Germany on the basis of the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936, and as a result, Austria was effectively left without allies. The subsequent Austrian Chancellor, Kurt Schuschnigg, adopted a contrasting policy, proclaiming Austria as a 'second German state. In response, Germany formally acknowledged Austria's independence.

Yet, this did not protect the chancellor either. In February 1938, Schuschnigg was invited to Hitler's residence in the Alps for negotiations. There, Hitler, no longer hiding his intentions, directly accused Austria of having done nothing to help the Reich. As a result of many hours of monologue, Hitler forced Schuschnigg to pardon all Nazi prisoners, give the Nazi Party equal rights and, most importantly, introduce Nazis into the cabinet. Schuschnigg still tried to resist, and on March 9 he announced a plebiscite on the question of independence.

After that it became obvious, that Austria did not intend to fight: Nazi demonstrations began in the capital, and at a meeting of the highest army commanders, Schuschnigg did not receive any support and resigned. The fate of Austria was decided: on March 11, German troops crossed the border with Austria. Before crossing the border, German military equipment was decorated with flags and greenery, giving it the most peaceful character. The population and Austrian troops greeted the German troops and Hitler personally with sincere enthusiasm. In March, on Heroes' Square, more than half a million people enthusiastically greeted the Führer, who made a speech from the balcony, ending it with the words: *"I announce to the German people the return of my Austrian homeland to the Greater German Reich."* The Reich received seven million men, and six brigades joined the Wehrmacht. The process of uniting all Germans into a single state, divided by the Treaty of Versailles, continued.



Hitler's motorcade on the streets of Vienna



Hitler's speech in Vienna

Only the Jews, who made up about 10 percent of the population in Vienna, were terrified. In just a few days, all the large shops and small shops were confiscated. The 70,000 Jewish-owned apartments and houses were emptied and quickly occupied. In the summer of 1938, all Jewish passports were stamped with special stamps – the initial letter of the word Jude – Jew from schools, universities, are deprived of the opportunity

to engage in liberal professions and medicine. The Jews were cut off from all economic and spiritual activity.



Viennese Jews are forced to wash the streets with toothbrushes
to the hoots of the crowd

All that remains is to add that Schuschnigg's attempts to find support in the Western democracies were unsuccessful. France appealed to England and Italy with a proposal to hold consultations, but they decided not to interfere. The British Foreign Secretary, Halifax, declared that *"the British Government cannot assume the responsibility of advising the Chancellor any action which may bring dangers to his country against which the British Government is unable His Italian counterpart* Ciano rejected the idea of a joint demarche by Britain, France and Italy in Berlin.

Next up was Munich...

Munich drama 1938....

Adolf Hitler consistently sought to recreate Germany by uniting all Germans divided by the Treaty of Versailles. The Rhineland and Austria were already part of Germany. Next in line were the Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia) and the Danzig Corridor (Poland) (see map). And now, in connection with the special role of the Munich Agreement (or agreement, according to the West), let's take a closer look at its participants, their goals, intentions, resources and capabilities. So, let's name these main players: Great Britain, France, Italy, the United States and Germany. Smaller players - the countries of the so-called Little Entente: Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia.

The Little Entente was created in 1920 as an important element in countering attempts to revive the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1933, its activities intensified sharply in connection with the conclusion of the so-called "Pact of Four" by the leading countries of Europe (Great Britain, Italy, France and Germany). In essence, this pact created conditions for a revision of the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles. The countries of the Little Entente and Poland, which joined them, considered the intentions of the big players dangerous for themselves and became worried. But, despite the fact that the "Pact of Four" was not signed, the reason for which was the demonstrative withdrawal of Germany from the Geneva Conference on Disarmament and the subsequent withdrawal from the League of Nations, The distrust of the small players regarding the intentions of the big players remains. The Pact of Four was not ratified by France, which began to pursue at least some policy of countering Germany's aggressive intentions.

But there was no unity within the Little Entente either: at a meeting in the Yugoslav town of Bled, contradictions arose between its members, which led to the actual isolation of Czechoslovakia. Now its independence completely depended on the position of England, France and the Soviet Union.

Now the focus of attention of large and small players was Czechoslovakia, and more specifically, the territory where the Sudeten Germans lived. Under the Treaty of Versailles, the Sudetenland was transferred to Czechoslovakia. In 1938, out of 14 million

people in the country, 3.5 million were ethnic Germans, of whom 2.8 million lived compactly in the Sudetenland and another 700 thousand in Slovakia and Transcarpathian Ukraine. Powerful industry was concentrated there, including military factories, and a line of fortifications was built there to protect Czechoslovakia. The Sudeten Germans were organized into a party headed by Konrad Henlein. Three years before the well-known events, Hitler had secretly financed its activities. And this hour has come...

Immediately after the Austrian triumph, at the end of March 1938, Hitler and Heinlein began to prepare a program for the creation of Sudetenland autonomy. But Czechoslovakia was not like Austria - there were no conditions for a conflict-free merger with Germany. And then the leaders of the Sudeten Germans provoked a wave of violence from the Czechs. In Germany, of course, the newspapers made a fuss about the oppression of national minorities. A month later, at the end of April, Henlein put forward demands for broad autonomy, and after the Czechoslovak leadership began to give up its positions, he demanded the transfer of the region to Germany.



Hitler was back to facing another choice, On the one hand, he had hated the Czechs since his life in Austria, and he regarded Czechoslovakia as the unfortunate child of the hated Peace of Versailles, and he shared Bismarck's view that the owner of the Sudetenland had the keys to dominating Central Europe. France and the Soviet Union, with which Czechoslovakia had signed treaties of mutual assistance. Therefore, he tried

to make Czechoslovakia's closest neighbors, Poland and Hungary, his "accomplices". Hitler bluntly stated to the Hungarian leader Regent Horthy: "If you want to eat, help cook." With Poland, it was even easier. The Czechoslovak ambassador in Berlin, J. Lipski, stated that the Polish leadership did not think that this country (Czechoslovakia) was "able to exist." Both Hungary and Poland had their own territorial claims to Czechoslovakia, since both Hungarians and Poles lived there.

It should be emphasized here that the actions of small states in relation to their compatriots were based on the principle of nationality and self-determination, which was the basis of the post-Versailles world order.

The leadership of the Soviet Union closely watched what was happening in Europe. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, M.M. Litvinov, a supporter of cooperation with England, in a conversation with the German ambassador von Schulenberg, expressed the position of the Soviet government: "... it will come to war, Germany will quite obviously be the aggressor who has carried out an unprovoked attack... The Soviet Union promised Czechoslovakia assistance; He will keep his word and do everything in his power." It should be noted that the conversation took place on August 22, 1938, on the eve of the surrender of Czechoslovakia. On September 2, Litvinov telegraphed to the Soviet plenipotentiary in Prague, S. Alexandrovsky: "... provided that France provides assistance, we are determined to fulfill all our obligations under the Soviet-Czechoslovak Pact, using all the means available to us for this. If Poland and Rumania are now creating difficulties, their conduct, especially that of Rumania, may be different if the League of Nations decides on aggression."

With regard to England and France, Hitler was confident, on the basis of German intelligence reports, that they would not interfere. The only danger came from the Soviet Union, which, as already mentioned, had a mutual assistance treaty with Czechoslovakia.

Now, let's scrutinize events more closely, following them daily (and later, in September 1939, hourly). I will also exclusively cite the statements and evaluations of contemporary Western politicians. Let's begin."

.. **On September 12**, at the Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg, Adolf Hitler made a statement regarding the fate of the Sudeten Germans: *"The Czech state is trying to destroy them. I appeal to the representatives of the Western democracies: we are concerned about the situation of the Sudeten Germans. If these people are denied justice and help, they will receive both from us. There is someone to protect the Germans in the Sudetenland! I am a supporter of peace, but in this situation I will not hesitate."*

On September 13, that is, literally the next day, a mutiny broke out in the Sudetenland, in response to which the Czechoslovak government, led by President Edvard Beneš, introduced martial law in the Sudetenland. **The leader of the Sudeten Germans, Henlein, fled to Germany.**

On September 14, having received news of the events in Czechoslovakia, the Prime Minister of England decided to fly to Germany for negotiations with Hitler. The fear of a possible war overcame the fear of flying by plane - this was his first flight.

On September 15. Chamberlain's negotiations with Hitler took place at his mountain residence, and the British Prime Minister managed to obtain from Hitler only a vague promise not to start a war if the dispute was resolved in favor of the principle of the right of peoples to self-determination. The barrier on the way to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia was raised.

On September 18. In London, N. Chamberlain, Prime Minister E. Daladier, and French Foreign Minister J. Bonnet decided to make a joint appeal to the Czechoslovak government on the Sudetenland issue.

On September 19. The ambassadors of Great Britain and France handed E. Beneš a joint ultimatum, the essence of which was that Czechoslovakia should satisfy Hitler's desire to transfer the Sudetenland to Germany. President Beneš was simply shocked by this attitude on the part of the seemingly allies.

From this point forward, we'll be tracking events as they unfold, hour by hour.

On the same day, Beneš, feeling the prospect of being left alone in front of the aggressor, had an hour-long conversation with Ambassador S.S. Alexandrovsky, through whom he addressed the Soviet government with a telegram, which contained two questions:

"1) What will the USSR do if France fulfills its allied obligations to Czechoslovakia?

2) How will the USSR behave if Czechoslovakia insists on its resistance to Germany even if France reneges on its obligations?

On September 20. In the morning, the telegram was received by the Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, V.P. Potemkin, since the People's Commissar M.M. Litvinov himself was in Geneva, where he was to make a speech the next day in the League of Nations in defense of Czechoslovakia. Beneš's questions were discussed for three and a half hours (14.15 to 17.45) at the Politburo, which finally decided to send the following answer to Ambassador Alexandrovsky:

(1) To Beneš's question as to whether the Soviet Union will render immediate and real assistance to Czechoslovakia, if France remains loyal to it and also renders assistance, you can give an affirmative answer on behalf of the Government of the Soviet Union.

(2) You may give the same affirmative answer to another question of Beneš's, whether the U.S.S.R. will help Czechoslovakia as a member of the League of Nations on the basis of Articles 16 and 17 if, in the event of a German attack, Beneš would appeal to the Council of the League of Nations with a request to apply the said articles.

(3) Inform Beneš that we are simultaneously informing the French Government of the content of our answer to both of his questions."

Czechoslovakia was seething all day. Members of the government expressed different points of view. Czechoslovakia's Foreign Minister K. Krofta quoted the words of the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs M.M. Litvinov: "*The USSR is ready to*

come to the rescue even if France does not fulfill its obligations, but Czechoslovakia needs to demand a decision of the League of Nations that would clearly designate the aggressor. Otherwise, in the event of assistance, the USSR will be recognized as the aggressor."

The debate moved to the streets, and most of the political parties, and above all the Communists, appealed to President Beneš: *"Mr. President, it is now up to you whether we will surrender... Capitulation means moral and political collapse for generations to come. We wouldn't have recovered from it. Will we take the risk of war... Everywhere there are people who will stand up for you and go with you to the end. ... We prefer a worse risk of war than a shameful capitulation, which will destroy everything Czech, strong and decisive in us."*

However, the General Staff of the Czechoslovak Army and a number of members of the government were already inclined to accept the ultimatum.

In the evening, at 7:45 p.m., K. Croft handed over to the ambassadors of Great Britain and France the response of the country's leadership to the Anglo-French note of September 19, in which the Anglo-French proposals were rejected. However, this is not entirely accurate. In fact, the text said that the government could not accept the Anglo-French plan, but at the same time it praised the proposed guarantees and put forward the idea of resolving the dispute with Germany through arbitration. British Ambassador B. Newton said that this was not the answer that England expected. He demanded an immediate meeting with Minister Krofta, to whom he told that if Chamberlain had to fly to Hitler the next day without a positive answer, it would lead to disaster. He bluntly stated that *"...if it comes to war, England will lose all interest in Czechoslovakia."*

That same evening, at 8:00 p.m., the Soviet government received a reply with a decision on the readiness to help Czechoslovakia. And on the same evening at 11:00 p.m., London received a telegram from its ambassador B. Newton about Czechoslovakia's refusal. *The government should be forced to make a decision. If I can hand E. Beneš something like an ultimatum on Wednesday, he and his government will be forced to bow to a higher power. The Czech Government must give its consent without*

reservation, otherwise His Majesty's Government will lose interest in the fate of this country. I know that my French colleague telegraphed to Paris in the same sense."

But on the same day, another event occurred. Poland and Hungary also expressed their claims to Czechoslovakia in relation to national minorities. Like, if there are such preferences for the Germans in the Sudetenland, then why should the Poles in the Cieszyn region and the Hungarians in Slovakia suffer?

On September 21. Exhausted by the events of the previous day, Czechoslovak politicians did not sleep for the second night. One can imagine their condition. At 2:00 a.m., the ambassadors of Great Britain and France presented their verdict to the Czechoslovak government, the meaning of which was as follows: *"...if Czechoslovakia did not comply, Germany would launch an offensive and the two powers would stand aside. And in the event of a refusal to cede the Sudetenland to Germany, Paris and London will refuse to recognize Czechoslovakia as a victim of aggression, with all the ensuing consequences."*

By that time, Beneš and his entourage knew about the Soviet government's response. It was on this night that the moment of truth came. Beneš was still trying to secure some guarantees, but the British and French ambassadors said in the form of an ultimatum that the proposals should be accepted without conditions, and only after full and clear agreement could the details be discussed. Moreover, the ambassadors made it clear that in the event of a joint action by Czechoslovakia and the USSR, the struggle against them could take on the character of a "crusade" against the Bolsheviks, and then it would be difficult for Britain and France to stay away from it.

In the course of this conversation, Beneš said literally the following: *"I ask you to assure your governments that I have always acted with a full consciousness of responsibility and have never allowed even the thought of war. It was never my intention to compel England and France to enter the war, and therefore I wish to explain my position, since such suspicions have already been expressed. I have never held doctrinaire views during the unpleasant discussions and negotiations that have taken place. I did not listen to the Soviet government, from which I deliberately kept aloof, did*

not rely on its support and did not take into account its wishes during my negotiations."

What is it?

The meeting with the ambassadors lasted more than an hour and a half and ended at 3:45 a.m. And at 4:00 a.m., a meeting of the Political Committee of the Czechoslovak Republic began (a fairly narrow circle of politicians of the highest rank), at which Beneš actually defended the provisions of the Anglo-French ultimatum. He was reminded that the decision to revise the borders should be made by the Parliament, but there was no time or desire for this. The top leadership of Czechoslovakia knew that neither the Parliament nor the "street" would agree to capitulate.

The government meeting began at 6.00. Again discussion, again disputes, unfulfilled hopes for France, despair, even tears. And here is a very interesting point. One gets the impression that it has become advantageous for Czechoslovak politicians (both President Beneš and Prime Minister Hodža) to call the demarche of England and France an ultimatum. In this way it was easier to explain to the Parliament and to the broad masses the forced compliance.

Much more was said at this meeting of the government. It lasted no more than an hour, but the final decision on surrender was made only at the end of the day on September 21. However, at five o'clock in the evening on Wednesday, September 21, 1938, loudspeakers in the streets of Prague informed people that the Czechoslovak government, under pressure from Great Britain and France, had agreed to change the state borders.

It was mentioned above that People's Commissar M. M. Litvinov was in Geneva at that time. He spoke in the League of Nations and proposed to urgently convene a conference of the European powers and other interested states in order to work out collective measures and to bring the Czechoslovak question to the organization for discussion. He sharply declared: *"It is not our fault if our proposals, which, I am convinced, could give the desired results both in the interests of Czechoslovakia and the whole of Europe and world peace, were not allowed to proceed. Unfortunately, other*

measures have been taken which have led, and could not but lead, to a capitulation which sooner or later will have absolutely immeasurable catastrophic consequences."

This is how those days, full of drama, despair and fear, ended. But there was still a week left before the capitulation, that is, before the Munich Agreement full of now tragic events. To this can only be added that on the same day Poland moved its troops closer to the border with the USSR, in response to which the command of the Kiev Special Military District received an order to redeploy the Zhytomyr and Vinnitsa army groups consisting of 10 rifle, 6 cavalry divisions, 4 tank and 1 motorized rifle brigades.

On September 22. What the top leadership of Czechoslovakia feared happened literally as soon as it became known about the government's decision to agree to the Anglo-French ultimatum. Prague took to the streets. Women shouted: "We will give you our sons, give them weapons!" French and English journalists were shocked by the actions of their governments and openly expressed solidarity with the Czechs. and President Beneš appointed Ján Syrová as Prime Minister. Now there were two generals in the government. In Prague, rallies were going on all day.



Czechs protest against the Munich Agreement

However, on that very day, Chamberlain and Hitler held a meeting in Bad Godesberg, during which the British prime minister presented his plan for appeasing

Germany, which essentially amounted to the following. Czechoslovakia transferred the Sudetenland to Germany, and a commission of three participants was created in relation to the rest of the territories - representatives of Germany, Czechoslovakia and some neutral country a guarantee against an unprovoked attack on Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia itself must be completely neutral. Hitler asked: "Do I understand correctly that the governments of England, France and Czechoslovakia agree to hand over the Sudetenland to Germany?" And then the unexpected happened. Hitler declared: "I am terribly sorry, but in the light of the events of the last few days, the proposed solution has already lost all meaning." After that, the Reich Chancellor put forward a demand for the immediate occupation of the Sudetenland by Germany and indicated a deadline of no later than October 1. A map was at hand, on which the Fuhrer noted which territories were subject to immediate occupation. At the same time, the intentions of Poland and Hungary to get those areas of Czechoslovakia in which Poles and Hungarians lived compactly, respectively, were announced.

On September 23. In the morning, Chamberlain made another attempt to negotiate with Hitler, offering him another solution to the Sudeten problem. But Hitler did not want to hear anything. Then Chamberlain asked the Reich Chancellor to set out in writing the proposals of the German side. but Hitler objected to him, pointing to the title of the document: Memorandum. Hitler demanded that the withdrawal of the Czechoslovak army begin on September 26 and be completed within two days. Chamberlain replied that in such a situation he did not see the possibility of continuing negotiations. Hitler objected that he had a plan for the invasion of Czechoslovakia. It was on September 23 at 10.30 p.m. There was an ominous pause in the negotiations.

Hungary and Poland also joined the big game. Hungary demanded by note that the Hungarian minority should be accorded the same rights as the Sudeten Germans, and that the part of Czechoslovakia in which the Hungarians were in the majority should be transferred to Hungary and that Poland should receive the Cieszyn region.



On the same day, the directive was issued by the People's Commissariat of Defense and the General Staff of the Red Army to put the troops of the Belarusian Special and Kalinin Military Districts on alert and advance units of the Vitebsk and Bobruisk army groups to the border and on the concentration of bomber aircraft in the area of Vitebsk and Orsha.

On September 24. Mutual consultations, meetings, negotiations, and the exchange of telegrams continued all night and all day. In Prague, they were actually inspired by the recommendation to the Czechs to begin mobilization. And it began - more than 1 million 120 thousand citizens of Czechoslovakia took up arms.

In London, they conferred and were burdened by the fact that they had become intermediaries between Berlin and Prague. In the end, they appealed to the Czechoslovak government so that it would come to terms with Hitler itself. In the process of discussion, the politicians did not yet have the written memorandum that Chamberlain had asked Hitler for. When the memorandum was received, it was regarded as a plan to seize Czechoslovakia. Hitler demanded that the withdrawal of the Czechoslovak army begin on September 26 and be completed within two days. Chamberlain replied that in such a situation he did not see the possibility of continuing negotiations. Hitler objected that he had a plan for the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

In France, in the morning, the Chief of Staff of the National Defense, General M. Gamelin, said that France had no other means of preventing war than to be prepared for it. Therefore, in the last 48 hours, 14 divisions were sent to the Maginot Line. If the issue of war is brought to a meeting of parliament. Finally, he took a step that drew the United States into the Munich conflict. He appealed through the American ambassador W. Bullitt to the U.S. government with a request to initiate an international conference that would put an end to the Czechoslovak crisis.

On September 25. During the night, the Czechoslovak government finally received the text of the Godesberg Memorandum. Attached to it was a map of the areas to be transferred to Germany (marked in red) and a map of the areas where the plebiscite was to be held (it was colored green). Czechoslovak troops were to be withdrawn from the disputed territories in order to avoid pressure on the German population before organizing a vote. Including military equipment, was to be handed over to the German authorities without damage. The deadline was indicated: October 1. In contrast to the mood of September 22, there was no such mass upsurge in Prague, and the high command of the army was already inclined to withdraw from the Sudetenland in order to save the nation. It was a terrible shame to lose territories with high economic potential, with defensive structures, but the military, having an elongated border, was reasonably afraid of German aviation, which at that time was superior to the Czech one.

On the same day, US President Roosevelt, who received the report of his ambassador Bullitt, proposed the idea of appealing to the leaders of the conflicting parties to continue negotiations. Telegrams were sent to European capitals.

On September 27. This is very important day in understanding the events of the Munich drama. Roosevelt's address did not provoke a response from European leaders. The pause threatened either to prolong or to be resolved by war. And then Roosevelt turned first to Mussolini, whom he considered more "decent", and then to Reich Chancellor Hitler. He drafted the text of the appeal to Hitler with his own hand and proposed to convene a quadripartite conference with the participation of Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy. The Hague, but Hitler called Bavarian Munich. At the same

time, Roosevelt turned to Stalin with a proposal to support his initiative. The feverish days of preparation for the Munich conference began.

On the same day, the Polish envoy again handed President Beneš an ultimatum from Warsaw on the immediate cession of Cieszyn Silesia to Poland.

On September 28. In response to Roosevelt's appeal, Stalin replied that the USSR agreed to participate in a conference of all interested parties on the Sudetenland problem "to find practical measures to counter aggression and save the world by collective efforts." Chamberlain, who had not yet appreciated the significance of Roosevelt's appeal, asked Mussolini to persuade Hitler to postpone the invasion of the Sudetenland and to mediate in resolving the Czechoslovak crisis. then Hitler, who finally realized that London and Paris, and even more so Rome, had already reconciled themselves to his plans. He therefore immediately invited Mussolini, as well as Chamberlain and Daladier, to come to Munich and end the protracted conflict. Stalin did not receive such an offer.

On September 29-30. On the morning of the 29th, the Reich Chancellor met the Duce at Kufstein on the former Austro-German border. There was a touching meeting in which Mussolini already regarded Hitler as a leader. On the way to Munich, Hitler shared his plans with Mussolini, telling him: "The time is approaching when we will have to fight side by side against France and England."



From left to right: British Prime Minister Chamberlain, French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier, German Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler, Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini, Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano.



The newly built Führerbau building, where the signing ceremony took place

Representatives of Britain, France, Germany and Italy met without consulting the Czechoslovak government. Representatives of the Czechoslovak Republic were not allowed into the hall - their diplomats, the ambassador to Germany, Vojtěch Mastny, and an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Hubert Masaryk, sat in a small room and waited.... At 7:00 p.m., a man from Chamberlain's entourage came out to them and handed them the text of the adopted document with the words: "If you do not accept it, you will have to decide your own affairs with Germany." Vojtěch Mastny replied: "It's a choice between murder and suicide."

The Munich Agreement signed as a result of the conference in practice meant the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Germany received 1/5 of its territory and about 1/4 of its population. Czechoslovak military installations, half of the country's mining and metallurgical enterprises, and important railways passed to Germany.

But on the same day, on Chamberlain's initiative, the Anglo-German Declaration was signed:

THE ANGLO-GERMAN DECLARATION

We, the German Fuehrer and Chancellor, and the British Prime Minister, have had a further meeting today and are agreed in recognising that the question of Anglo-German relations is of the first importance for the two countries and for Europe.

We regard the agreement signed last night and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.

We are resolved that the method of consultation shall be the method adopted to deal with any other questions that may concern our two countries, and we are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible sources of difference, and thus to contribute to assure the peace of Europe.

ADOLF HITLER SEPTEMBER 30, 1938

NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN

The signatories returned to their capitals with different feelings. Both were greeted by crowds of people who enthusiastically received the news of Hitler's appeasement. Only Daladier, seeing his enthusiastic compatriots in the window, muttered through clenched teeth: "*Fool!*" He understood what had happened. But Chamberlain at the ladder of the plane, shaking a paper with the text of the treaty on the new relationship between Great Britain and Germany, exclaimed: "*I have brought peace to our generation.*"



Chamberlain brandishing the Agreement

The news of the signing of the Agreement caused a sigh of relief on the European continent. The Sudeten Germans met their "liberators" with flowers, and in Germany itself, on this occasion, they staged a "mass rejoicing" of the German people.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 103-H13150
Foto: v. Ang. 13. Oktober 1938

The rejoicing of the Sudeten Germans



This jubilation will end in 7 years with the tragedy of exile and the death of about 1 million people on the road:

In Moscow, the news of the Munich events was received **with** disappointment. The idea of collective security was collapsing. People's Commissar Litvinov with undisguised reproach told the outgoing French ambassador Coulondre that France *"...systematically evaded attempts by the Soviet side to reach the necessary military agreements to the 1935 Treaty of Mutual Assistance, even when Czechoslovakia really needed their help."*

Answering the ambassador's question about what needs to be done, Litvinov said: *"We consider what has happened to be a catastrophe for the whole world. One of two things remains: either Britain and France will continue to satisfy all Hitler's demands, and the latter will gain dominance over the whole of Europe, over the colonies, and he will calm down for a while to digest what he has swallowed, or Britain and France will realize the danger and begin to look for ways to counteract further Hitler's dynamism. will inevitably turn to us and speak to us in a different language. In the first case, only three great powers will remain in Europe - England, Germany and the Soviet Union. Most likely, Germany will want to destroy the British Empire and become its heir. Less likely is an attack on us, more risky for Hitler."*

On December 6, a declaration between France and Germany was signed:

Mr. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the French Republic, and Mr. Joachim von Ribbentrop, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the German Reich, acting on behalf of and on behalf of their Governments, agreed at Paris on 6 December 1938 as follows:

1. *The French Government and the German Government fully share the conviction that peaceful and good-neighbourly relations between France and Germany constitute one of the most essential elements for the consolidation of the situation in Europe and the maintenance of universal peace. The two Governments will therefore make every effort to ensure that relations between their countries develop in this direction.*
2. *The two Governments acknowledge that there are no longer any unresolved questions of a territorial character between their countries and solemnly recognize as final the frontier between their countries as it now exists.*
3. *The two Governments decided, in so far as their special relations with third powers were not affected, to maintain contact with each other on all questions of interest to both their countries and to consult each other in the event that the subsequent development of these questions might lead to international complications.*

And now a little about Poland. Let us give the floor to Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister during the war, the author of the 6-volume work "The Second World War", which received the Nobel Prize in Literature for it.

«On September 30, Czechoslovakia bowed to the decisions of Munich. "They wished," they said, "to register their protest before the world against a decision in which they had no part." President Benes resigned because "he might now prove a hindrance to the developments to which our new State must adapt itself." He departed from Czechoslovakia and found shelter in England. The dismemberment of the Czechoslovak State proceeded in accordance with the Agreement. But the Germans were not the only vultures upon the carcass. Immediately after the Munich Agreement on September 30, the Polish Government sent a twenty-four-hour ultimatum to the Czechs demanding the immediate handing-over of the frontier district of Teschen. There was no means of resisting this harsh demand.

The heroic characteristics of the Polish race must not blind us to their record of folly and ingratitude which over centuries has led them through measureless suffering. We see them, in 1919, a people restored by the victory of the Western Allies after long generations of partition and servitude to be an independent Republic and one of the main Powers in Europe. Now, in 1938, over a question so minor as Teschen, they sundered themselves from all those friends in France, Britain, and the United States who had lifted them once again to a national, coherent life, and whom they were soon to need so sorely. We see them hurrying, while the might of Germany glowered up against them, to grasp their share of the pillage and ruin of Czechoslovakia. During the crisis the door was shut in the face of the British and French Ambassadors, who were denied even access to the Foreign Secretary of the Polish State. It is a mystery and tragedy of European history that a people capable of every heroic virtue, gifted, valiant, charming, as individuals, should repeatedly show such inveterate faults in almost every aspect of their governmental life. Glorious in revolt and ruin; squalid and shameful in triumph. The bravest of the brave, too often led by the vilest of the vile! And yet there were always two Polands; one struggling to proclaim the truth and the other grovelling in villainy».

It should be noted that at that time no one complained to the Soviet Union for not providing assistance to Czechoslovakia. Ahead was 1939 - the year of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

1939. THE YEAR OF THE BEGINNING OF WORLD WAR II

Generally, in many informational materials concerning the prehistory of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the events connected to the ultimate occupation of Czechoslovakia by Germany and Carpatho-Ukraine by Hungary are often highlighted. Then delving into the intricate web of geopolitics during that era, one can't help but notice the diverse approaches taken by historians from different countries in their study, conclusions, and assessments. What can we say about journalists and, more broadly, about pseudo-historical “experts”? The question of who was the initiator of the rapprochement between Germany and the Soviet Union, which resulted in the infamous pact, has been a subject of much debate and analysis. The search results provide various perspectives on this matter.

Other questions arise: what prompted both sides to take such an unexpected step for ideological opponents. Some argue that this is a consequence of the collusion of two totalitarian regimes, others, in particular, not just anyone, but Leon Trotsky himself, argued that the pact was Stalin's capitulation to Hitler. Recall that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed on August 23, 1939. But the beginning of rapprochement can be attributed to January. But first, about the geopolitical situation.

Thus, the events related to the Munich Agreement unequivocally indicate that the Soviet Union was removed from European affairs. This can be judged from the caricatures of that time.

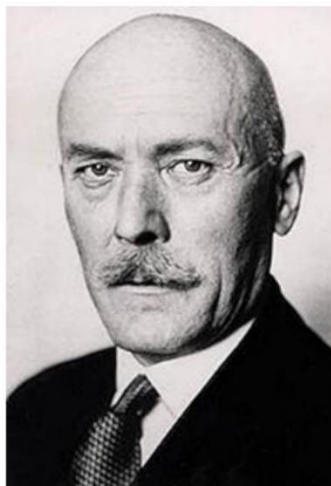


It became clear to the Soviet leadership and, above all, to Stalin, that the policy of collective security in Europe had clearly failed. The USSR remained isolated. The problem of acquiring industrial facilities and technologies that the armed forces needed so much became acute again. But Germany also needed an accelerated rearmament of its army. True, the Anschluss of Austria and the annexation of the Sudetenland significantly increased the military-industrial potential of the Reich. But Germany was in desperate need of raw materials, especially rare earth metals. This, in my opinion, created the prerequisites for forced rapprochement of the two countries. Each country continued its game.

Here it is important to pay attention to the activities of employees of both embassies, as well as employees of trade missions. Attempts to revive trade contacts began as early as December 1938. In early January 1939, the German ambassador, Count Werner von Schulenburg (*five years later he would be hanged as a participant in the plot against Hitler*), met on his own initiative with the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs M.M. Litvinov in order to find out about the reaction of the Soviet side to the German offer of loans.



Maxim Litvinov.



Werner von Schulenburg

The ambassador did not see much reaction. Literally the next day, the Soviet plenipotentiary representative A.F. Merekalov was invited to a meeting by the former

German ambassador to the USSR R. Nadolny (it was not possible to trace his genealogy) and the embassy counselor G. Hilger (born in Moscow and interned in Germany in 1914), responsible for trade issues. It is difficult to find out whether they acted on their own initiative or on a decision sent down from above. But, one way or another, H. Hilger said that the German side was waiting for proposals from the Soviet side on a list of necessary equipment, loans and delivery dates. And already on January 10, Plenipotentiary Envoy Merekalov turned to the responsible employee of the German Foreign Ministry, E. Wil, with a request for a meeting to convey the response of the Soviet government "regarding Germany's offer of loans." It can be assumed that the response of the Soviet government was associated with the intensification of German-Polish relations.

The fact is that literally on the same days, or rather on January 6, German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop met with Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck in Munich and made him the following proposal: *"Danzig joins Germany. In return, Poland will be granted economic privileges, and all its economic interests in the region will be preserved. Germany will be granted access to East Prussia by means of an extraterritorial highway and railway line."* Beck replied: *"For the first time I am pessimistic... In particular, on the question of Danzig, I do not see any possibility of cooperation."*

And on January 12, an episode occurred that made many European (and not only) politicians ponder in puzzlement: what would this mean. On this day, a New Year's reception of the diplomatic corps took place in the building of the new Reich Chancellery. And if earlier the Fuhrer simply ignored the presence of Soviet diplomats, this time he demonstratively approached the plenipotentiary representative A. Merekalov and talked with him for more than 5 minutes. Hitler's adjutant Fritz Wiedemann later recalled: *"...I don't know what the Fuehrer talked about with the Russian plenipotentiary... But the manner and frankly friendly mood with which he did this was a clear sign that something had changed in his position. In any case, Hitler deliberately singled out a Russian."* Europe was at a loss to guess what this would mean.

Almost at the same time, an agreement was reached on the visit of a German trade mission to Moscow for negotiations with the People's Commissar for Foreign Trade A. I. Mikoyan. However, due to the leakage of information, negotiations with Mikoyan were suspended.

In February, the rapprochement between Germany and Hungary, which joined the Anti-Comintern Pact, was noticeably revived. This caused a negative reaction from the Soviet Union in the form of a rather harsh note to the Hungarian government. Germany was preparing to seize all of Czechoslovakia and tried to make Hungary and Poland its allies. Hungary was given consent to the seizure of Carpatho-Ukraine.

On March 11-12, 1939, under the influence of Germany, the "independence" of Slovakia was proclaimed, the government of which turned to Berlin for help. Czechoslovak President E. Hacha and Foreign Minister F. Chvalkovsky achieved a meeting with Reich Chancellor Hitler, who in an ultimatum form demanded their consent to Germany taking Czechoslovakia under its "protection". During the meeting, President Gakha even fainted from excitement.

On March 15, Wehrmacht and SS troops crossed the border of Czechoslovakia and reached Prague in three hours; Czechoslovak troops were ordered not to resist. Germany announced the creation of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Hitler arrived in Prague on the evening of March 15, and the next morning he received a parade of his troops in the main square of the city. From the rostrum it was announced that Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist. The Czechs practically did not resist the Germans. In the streets of Prague, pro-German Czechs cheered the incoming Wehrmacht troops, while most of the inhabitants of the Czech capital were in a state of despair and hopelessness.



Hitler's motorcade on the streets of Prague



Prague residents greeted the Germans differently

On the same day, the Hungarian armed forces entered the territory of Carpatho-Ukraine. In Khust, the independence of the Carpathian Republic was proclaimed. A local militia was created, which, together with the paramilitary self-defense organization "Carpathian Sich", entered into a battle with the Hungarians. On the first day of resistance, the Czech military were next to them, but after an order from Prague, they were withdrawn, and in some places even opposed the Ukrainians. But the forces were unequal and Carpathian Ukraine was occupied. In fact, it should be recognized that it was the Ukrainians who offered the first armed resistance to the German satellite. And why should not this historical fact be considered the beginning of the Second World War?

The leaders of the European democracies did not officially condemn the new act of German aggression against Czechoslovakia. In contrast to them, the Soviet Union sent a note to the German government on March 18, which stated that "*...the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent actions of Germany cannot but be recognized as arbitrary, violent, aggressive.*" In the opinion of the Soviet government, the actions of the German government became a threat to world peace, disrupted political stability in Central Europe and dealt a new blow to the sense of security of the peoples. It should be noted that it follows from this note that the policy of the Soviet Union towards Germany has not yet undergone changes, despite a certain revival of trade negotiations. And Hitler's flirtation at the New Year's reception can be explained by the fact that the Führer wanted to persuade Stalin to neutrality in relation to the seizure of Czechoslovakia.

In March, the Spanish Civil War ended in the defeat of the Republicans; many countries recognized the regime of General Franco. On March 16, the Romanian envoy in London announced at the Foreign Office that Germany had practically presented Rumania with an ultimatum demanding that she be granted special economic and political rights in Rumania. France and the Soviet Union. The Soviet side proposed to hold a conference with the participation of the USSR, England, France, Poland, Romania and Turkey to discuss the situation. Romania was playing tricks, on the one hand, it did not want to provoke Berlin, wanting the initiative to protect its borders to belong to England and France, and, on the other hand, it did not want the USSR to participate in this. During the week, the diplomats intensively exchanged views, but their maneuvers resemble the well-known problem of how to transfer a wolf, a goat and a cabbage to the other side. As a result, nothing good came out of the idea of holding a conference.

A little later, on April 7, Italian troops entered Albania. Mussolini took a few days for the Albanian parliament to vote for the deposition of King Zog and offer the Albanian crown to the Italian king Victor Emmanuel. The future Hitlerite coalition grew.

But let us return to German-Polish relations. At the same time, in March, the leader of the British opposition, Winston Churchill, speaking to voters, asserted: "We do not know where his next aggression will be directed, because since Munich and the partition of Czechoslovakia, Hitler has had so many doors open to him that he himself began to show concern. Hitler himself did not know exactly what to do sooner, whether to begin with the capture of Memel or Danzig, or to stir up the population of Transylvania against Rumania...".

The Lithuanian city of Memel (present-day Klaipeda) was handed over to Germany by decision of the Lithuanian government on March 20 in response to the German ultimatum of J. Ribbentrop, announced the day before. Now Danzig was next in line. Recall that Germany strongly recommended that Poland transfer the Danzig Corridor, in return promising certain economic privileges, in particular, the construction of a highway to the Baltic Sea. The map shows that the Danzig Corridor divided the German population of two states (Pomerania and East Prussia).



The Danzig Corridor

The proposal for the transfer was voiced by German Foreign Minister J. Ribbentrop at a meeting with Polish Foreign Minister J. Beck. In case of agreement, Berlin guaranteed new German-Polish borders and was ready to extend the German-Polish non-aggression pact of 1934 for 25 years. The next proposal came on January 25-27 during Ribbentrop's visit to Warsaw. At this point, Józef Beck directly refused to discuss this issue. Two months later, on March 21 to be exact, that is, after the occupation of Czechoslovakia and other European events, Hitler himself demanded the return of

Danzig to Germany, as well as permission for Germany to build an extraterritorial highway and railway. March declared that a change in the status quo in Danzig would be considered an attack on Poland, and the Polish General Staff began to implement measures to strengthen the borders in the west.

Of course, there is no subjunctive mood in history, but one can imagine what would have happened if Poland had yielded to Germany and abandoned the Danzig Corridor. Then there would have been no reason to occupy Poland, there would have been no Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, there would have been no, and so on... But the thought does not leave the thought that the European democracies pursued a policy of pushing Hitler to march to the East. Let us see further how England and France fulfilled their obligations to Poland in the protection of its borders. However, Hitler had his own ideas about Poland, the Baltic States, and the USSR with its resources.

That was the moment of truth. Here it would be possible to describe in detail the history of relations between Germans and Poles over the centuries, and it would be possible to vividly describe the features of the Polish national character. Of course, this greatly influenced the behavior of the Polish leadership. But in this case, the Poles firmly counted on the diplomatic support and military assistance of England and France. On April 6, a meeting between N. Chamberlain and Y. Beck took place in London. And although the parties announced their intention to conclude a treaty on a military-political alliance in the future, no official agreement was signed, since the British avoided it in every possible way. The news of the British guarantees to Warsaw infuriated the Fuhrer. It would seem that Poland should have been grateful to Hitler for his favor in seizing the Cieszyn region of Czechoslovakia in the autumn of 1938.

Now Hitler had no doubts about the need for a military solution to the problem of Danzig. On April 3, the Fuehrer gave the order to begin preparations for the occupation of Poland. The operation, called "Weiß", was aimed at being carried out at any time, starting on September 1, 1939. Specific military planning began, the tasks of which were defined by the "Directive on the Unified Preparation of the Armed Forces for War for 1939-1940", approved by Hitler on April 11.

Diplomatic games before war

The question of creating a collective security system in the face of Germany's obvious aggressive plans arose again in full force. Recall that on March 18, the Soviet government appealed to the governments of Great Britain, France, Poland, Romania and Turkey with a proposal to convene a special conference. The British government rejected this proposal, considering it premature. On March 21, People's Commissar M. M. Litvinov was handed an English draft declaration of Great Britain. According to which these four countries were to discuss the measures necessary to provide common resistance to Germany's aggressive aspirations. The Soviet Union gave its consent, but the **Polish government refused to sign a document, even of a purely consultative nature, together with the USSR.** The reasons for the Polish refusal were the fear of increasing the influence of the USSR and the unwillingness to be drawn into a conflict with Germany.

There were two points of view in the British ruling elite. British Prime Minister Chamberlain wrote in a letter to his sister on March 26, 1939: *"I must confess that I have a deep distrust of the Russians. And in no way do I believe in their ability to conduct effective offensive operations, even if they want to. Nor do I trust the motives of the Russians, which, in my opinion, have little to do with the ideas of freedom and are aimed only at quarreling everyone else with each other. Moreover, Russia is viewed with hostility and suspicion by most small states, especially Poland, Romania and Finland. Our close cooperation with it, therefore, may cost us the sympathy of those who are able to really help us, if we can keep them on our side."*

On April 17, 1939, the Soviet government came up with its detailed proposal. It provided for the conclusion by Great Britain, France and the USSR of an agreement on mutual assistance, including military assistance, for a period of 5-10 years. Assistance was to be provided in the event of aggression in Europe against any of these three states or against states bordering the USSR. The sense of growing danger intensified after Germany denounced the German-Polish non-aggression pact concluded in January 1934 on April 28. Moscow wanted to sign an agreement with potential allies, but with precise obligations from the parties. This is exactly what Great Britain sought to avoid.

Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, in his address to the government on May 4, 1939, declared: *"The British people, who now, having sacrificed an honest and ingrained custom, have accepted the principle of compulsory military service, have the right, together with the French Republic, to call upon Poland not to put obstacles in the way of the common cause. It is necessary not only to agree to Russia's comprehensive cooperation, but also to unite the three Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia."*

May escalation

At the beginning of May, events took place that need to be described in more detail. On May 3, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs M. M. Litvinov was dismissed. He was replaced by V. M. Molotov, who also remained chairman of the Council of People's Commissars. This meant that, in the opinion of the Soviet leadership and, above all, of Stalin himself, the policy of collective security turned out to be ineffective.



V.M. Molotov

On the same day, May 3, 1939, at a meeting of the British government, the question of the desirability of resuming contacts with Germany was again discussed. Both Prime Minister Chamberlain and Foreign Minister Halifax expressed their conviction that under certain circumstances London could refuse to fulfill its obligations to Poland. And two days later, on May 5, the head of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, J. Beck, spoke in the Sejm. that Warsaw had nothing to share with its neighbor and had nothing to concede, he even refused to use the term "corridor", contrasting it with "Pomeranian Voivodeship". According to him, the Polish government was in favor of peace, but not for peace at any cost. At the end of his speech, Beck declared: *"The price of peace is great... But it is limited. We here in Poland do not know the concept of 'peace at any cost... The only thing in the life of an individual, a state and a people is immeasurable in price: honor."* By the way, a month earlier, Y. Beck was sure that the threats to Germany were *"Hitler's bluff. He is trying to intimidate Poland and thereby force it to make concessions. Hitler will not start a war"*

The position of the British government was of key importance. The draft declaration proposed by him on May 8 provided for the obligations of the USSR to provide assistance to Great Britain and France in the event of a German attack on Poland or Romania. The draft did not indicate British and French obligations to assist the USSR in the event of a German attack on itself or on the Baltic states. Poland's attitude to the Anglo-French-Soviet negotiations requires special attention.

On April 17, Poland and Romania confirmed that their treaty of alliance **was directed against the USSR**, and Poland refused to cooperate with the USSR in collective action against aggression. At the same time, Poland declared to Germany that *"it was a European barrier against Bolshevism"* and would exert influence on Britain not to come to an agreement with the USSR. On May 8, 1939, Polish Ambassador W. Grzybowski was summoned to Molotov for explanations, where he officially admitted that the Polish-Romanian treaty was directed against the USSR. Below are fragments of the record of this conversation, made by Molotov.

"I received the ambassador at his request ... In the first place, the Polish Government declares that the French initiative in negotiations on guarantees for Poland does not correspond to the point of view of the Polish Government, which considers it possible to conduct such negotiations only itself, and which has not entrusted France with such negotiations. Secondly, Poland does not consider it possible to conclude a pact of mutual assistance with the U.S.S.R. in view of the practical impossibility of Poland rendering assistance to the Soviet Union, and yet Poland proceeds from the principle that a pact of mutual assistance can be concluded only on the basis of reciprocity. At the same time, the Ambassador, in answer to my question, said that Poland could not object to the conclusion of a pact of mutual assistance between the U.S.S.R., Britain and France, considering that it was a matter for these states themselves. To my question whether Poland was interested in such a pact, the ambassador answered evasively, rereading the instructions he had received. To my question whether Poland was interested in guarantees from the European states bordering on the USSR, the ambassador replied that this should not apply to Poland. He

explained that he was saying this in relation to the present moment, which in the future the question could arise differently. The whole conversation testified to the fact that Poland did not want to bind herself at the moment to any agreement with the USSR or to consent to the participation of the USSR in the guarantees to Poland, but did not exclude the latter for the future".

Looking ahead, it is appropriate to note that at the time of the attack of Hitlerite Germany on Poland, the Romanian government refused to come to the aid of Poland, which openly violated the previously concluded treaty and demonstrated that that it was by no means supposed to restrain the German aggressor, as the parties to the treaty tried to present for many years.

Summing up the results of the spring aggravation of the diplomatic game, it can be concluded that Britain and France, wishing to help Poland resist German aggression with the help of the Soviet Union, at the same time did not undertake to support the USSR in the event of aggression against it. Poland's position was set forth above, here it is only necessary to add that Poland generally opposed military assistance to the USSR and believed that it could do without it.

Perhaps the position of the Soviet Union in April-May 1939 will be clearer if we quote the words of People's Commissar Molotov: "*The British and French demand unilateral and gratuitous assistance from us, not undertaking to provide us with equivalent assistance.*" And Stalin expressed himself even more specifically: "*The British and French wanted to have us as farm laborers and at the same time pay nothing.*"

The Far Eastern threat

Analyzing the events preceding the outbreak of World War II, it is impossible not to take into account the existence of aggressive plans of Germany's ally in the "Anti-Comintern Pact" - Japan. Exactly on the same day that Molotov met with the Polish ambassador (May 11, 1939), hostilities began on the Khalkhin-Gol River (Mongolia). They were preceded by numerous provocations from Manchukuo, a puppet state created by Japan back in 1932. In 1936, the Soviet government signed the Soviet-Mongolian Protocol on Mutual Assistance against Aggression. But here the aspect of Japanese-British relations is extremely important. The fact is that the events at Khalkhin Gol were considered by the Japanese leadership as an important trump card in the diplomatic game with the West. This is confirmed by Japanese documents. For example, in the "Secret Operational Diary of the Kwantung Army" in connection with the beginning of the Khalkhingol events, the following entry was made: *"There is confidence in the consistent defeat of the Soviet army... This is the only way to create a favorable environment for Japan in negotiations with Great Britain."* We are talking about negotiations between England and Japan, which would later be called the Far Eastern version of the "Munich Agreement" (more on this later). And the reports of the Soviet intelligence officer, the legendary Richard Sorge, left no doubt about the aggressiveness of Japan's plans against the USSR.

In early June, Sorge prepared a detailed report for Moscow with important assessments and conclusions on the military-political situation in the Far East, on the prospects for military cooperation between Japan, Germany and Italy, and the probable timing of Germany and Japan's readiness for a major war. The main points of the report were as follows:

"1) A military action by Germany and Japan against the USSR in the near future is unlikely. Germany is wholly absorbed in the preparations for the seizure of Poland and in the struggle against England and is unlikely to be able to show any direct interest in the question of war against the U.S.S.R. in the near future. Within the next few months, the fate of Poland must be decided. Then, after the defeat of Poland, new,

unforeseen, boundless opportunities for development would arise before the German army, which could have a certain impact on the actions of Japan.

2) The protracted war in China is straining all the forces of Japan. There can be no question of simultaneously unleashing a war against the USSR without support from Germany. The Japanese armed forces—army, navy, and air force—require a thorough reorganization and rearmament. According to the German BAT, the completion of this reorganization will require another 1.5-2 years, that is, Japan will be ready for a "big war" no earlier than in 1941.

(3) In entering into an alliance with Germany and Italy, the Japanese will not bind themselves so unconditionally as Germany and Italy. However, in their policy in the Far East, they will keep an eye on Germany and Italy. If Germany and Italy unleash a war, Japan will undertake certain hostile acts against England and France in the Far East and, in particular, will not pass by Singapore in her actions."

Now it is not difficult to imagine in what conditions the Soviet government would make fateful decisions. In the West, the imminent approach of war with Germany, suspicion of the negotiability of the democracies, especially Great Britain, and the essentially hostile position of Poland, in the East – a clear threat from Japan. A war on two fronts would have been a real disaster for the young Soviet state, which had barely recovered from the previous two wars and with incredible efforts created its own industry capable of arming the army. The Civil War ended in 1922, that is, only 17 years ago. It seems that the most important task for the Stalinist leadership was the task of preserving the state.

Soviet-German rapprochement

As early as March 1939, no one even thought about a possible rapprochement between Stalin and Hitler. Such a development of events simply could not even be discussed. Speaking at the VIII Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), he described the West's policy towards Germany as best he could: *"...not to hinder, say, Germany from getting bogged down in European affairs, from getting involved in a war with the Soviet Union, from allowing all the participants in the war to sink deeply into the mire of war, to encourage them to do so on the sly, to allow them to weaken and exhaust each other, and then, when they are sufficiently weakened, to appear on the scene with fresh forces, to act, of course, in the "interests of peace," and to dictate their terms to the weakened participants in the war. But Stalin, as a faithful Marxist, proceeded from the existence of deep contradictions between the imperialist predators. It should not be forgotten that Hitler had his own score to settle with Great Britain. And to enter into a battle on two fronts could lead to the fact that it was Great Britain that would become the winner. And Germany would again find itself at the "broken trough." Proceeding from this logic, Hitler came to the conclusion at the end of 1938 That first it is necessary to neutralize Western rivals, and then move east. This new policy of the Fuehrer became known to his inner circle only in mid-March.*

A completely new situation has developed. Stalin and Molotov lost faith in the sincerity of the intentions of the Western democracies to create a system of collective security. And in the event of a failure of negotiations with England and France, the Soviet Union could find itself (and eventually was) practically isolated. Moreover, the military pointed to the threat of "pincers" that appeared as a result of the seizure of Western Ukraine by the Hungarians, German satellites, and from the north - the signing of a German-Estonian cooperation agreement, which made it possible to bring German troops into the territory of Estonia. Nor should we disregard the threat of a war on two fronts in the face of the vast distances between the western and eastern theaters of the military.

It has been shown above that the first steps of the subsequent rapprochement between Germany and the Soviet Union began as early as the end of 1938 as a result of a new impetus in trade relations. A key role here was played by the catastrophic deterioration of the financial condition of the Weimar Republic. An active role in promoting contacts was played by the counselor of the Soviet embassy in Germany, G.A. Astakhov. But, until May, there were no political motives for rapprochement. Events began to change rapidly in May 1939 in connection with the change in the leadership of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. Before that, it was impossible even to imagine any contact between the Jew Litvinov and the Nazi Ribbentrop, let alone Hitler. But after the defeat of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, the situation changed.

In the same May, literally two days after Litvinov's resignation, the counselor of the Soviet embassy, G. Astakhov, cautiously touched on the topic of a change of leadership. Here it is necessary to note the special role of G.A. Astakhov in the establishment of relations between the two countries. In fact, he used high-ranking informants in the person of State Secretary Ernst von Weizsäcker, Deputy Head of the Press Department Braun von Stumm, Head of the Eastern European Referenture Karl Schnurre and even J. Ribbentrop himself for regular reports to V.M. Molotov. At the end of May, or rather on May 30, Weizsäcker made a direct proposal to Astakhov about a future German-Soviet political compromise. Already in the evening of the same day, the cipher was handed over to Stalin, and the next day to the inner circle with a resolution "Out of turn".

Literally two weeks later, German Ambassador to the USSR F. Schulenberg came to G.A. Astakhov, a fragment of the conversation with whom should be quoted in the original: *"...Schulenburg began to assert that the German government seriously wanted to improve relations, but did not know how to do it. It did not dare to raise the question directly, for fear of running into an affront, a refusal, but the existence of such a desire was unquestionable. And it was understandable, because Germany had no contradictions with the USSR. In essence, it is clear and resolved. It is only necessary*

to inject a new elixir into what actually exists. This is precisely the desire of the German government, and therefore everyone in the Ausamt [Foreign Office - author's note] is waiting for an answer to the questions put to me by Weizsäcker." The record of this conversation and subsequent ones was sent to Molotov, but it was not until July 28 that the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs approved the counselor's initiative for the first time, and then instructed to find out the details of the German proposals.

An important moment in Soviet-German relations came on August 2, 1939. On that day, G.A. Astakhov met with German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop. At first, the conversation was about trade relations, but then political issues were touched upon. We quote the German position as stated by Ribbentrop during this meeting: *"In our view, the successful conclusion of trade negotiations can serve as the beginning of a political rapprochement. Until recently, many sores have accumulated in our relations. They cannot pass suddenly. They take time to dissolve, but it is possible to overcome them. There is one precondition that we consider a necessary prerequisite for the normalization of relations – mutual non-interference in internal affairs. Our ideologies are diametrically opposed. We will not tolerate any indulgences for communism in Germany. But National Socialism is not an export commodity, and we are far from imposing it on anyone. If your country holds the same opinion, then further rapprochement is possible."*

And further: "As for the other issues standing between us, there are no serious contradictions between our countries. On all problems related to the territory from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea, we could easily agree. I am deeply convinced of this. I do not know, of course, what path you intend to take. If you have other prospects, if, for example, you believe that the best way to settle relations with us is to invite Anglo-French military missions to Moscow, then, of course, it is up to you."

Recordings of conversations with German officials continued until August 19, 1939, when G.A. Astakhov was summoned to Moscow, but never returned. In February 1940, he was arrested, sentenced to 15 years and died in prison. Now he was not needed - the negotiations had moved to the highest level.

A New Stage of the Anglo-French-Soviet Negotiations

But negotiations with England and France were still ongoing. In the summer, there was a difficult exchange of views, texts of new drafts and amendments. In Moscow, the negotiations were conducted by British representatives W. Seeds and W. Strangom, the French ambassador P. Nagiar, and on the Soviet side by the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs V. M. Molotov. Meanwhile, a great difficulty arose in the Moscow negotiations: the parties could not come to a common interpretation of the concept of "indirect aggression". Nevertheless, the British and French governments decided to support the Soviet initiative to immediately open negotiations for the signing of a military convention. On July 25, they expressed their readiness to send their representatives to Moscow.

Here we must recall Soviet-Japanese relations, because in July, precisely in those days when the Soviet Union was negotiating with Britain and France and carefully studying Germany's proposals, the signing of the "Arita-Craigie agreement" took place, which was called the "Far Eastern Munich".

In July, while the Soviet Union was engaged in negotiations with Britain and France and carefully considering Germany's proposals, it is worth noting the significance of Soviet-Japanese relations during that time. It was during these days that the "Arita-Craigie agreement" was signed, which has been referred to as the "Far Eastern Munich".

In accordance with this agreement, Britain recognized the "legality" of Japanese aggression in China, agreed to the presence of Japanese troops in this country for an indefinite period of time, and pledged not to interfere with the establishment of a "new order" in China. At the same time, Japan did not assume any obligations towards England. At a time when Japan was conducting military operations against the USSR and the Mongolian People's Republic in the area of the Khalkhin Gol River, the Arita-Craigie agreement, which was part of the "Far Eastern Munich" policy, strengthened Japan's position and the position of the Japanese troops in China on the bridgehead from which they were operating against the USSR and the Mongolian People's Republic. The

Soviet state thus found itself facing the immediate danger of war simultaneously in Europe and in the Far East, and without allies.

By the way, I would like to highlight another little-known, but very important for understanding the change in the policy of the USSR in the summer of 1939, related to Japan. In the same summer, Germany and Italy intensified their efforts to create an "axis", to which Japan was invited. But due to contradictions in the Japanese establishment itself, it was not possible to reach an agreement. The reason was the wording that defined the conditions for Japan's accession. The Japanese government refused to commit itself to enter the war, except in the event of an attack on one of the allies by the USSR. But the threat of a major war, given the military aggravation in the summer in the area of the Khalkhin-Gol River, still remained. The Soviet leadership was aware of Japan's plans for an attack on the USSR. It was at this moment that Germany made a very important statement that the Soviet leaders should not overestimate the threat from the East and even offered assistance in resolving the Soviet-Japanese conflict. Moreover, Ribbentrop himself held a conversation with the Japanese ambassador in Berlin, H. Oshima, and spoke in favor of normalizing relations between Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union. All this made it easier for Germany to seize Poland, ensuring neutrality on the part of the USSR. But Stalin could now fear less for the result of hostilities in Mongolia.

It was in such a difficult situation that the negotiations of the military missions began in Moscow on August 12-21, 1939. The delegation of the USSR was headed by the People's Commissar of Defense, Marshal K. E. Voroshilov, the delegation of Great Britain, the adjutant of the king, the head of the naval base in Portsmouth, Admiral P. Drax, and the delegation of France, a member of the Supreme Military Council, General P. Drax. Members of delegations (compare level):

from the USSR: Chief of the General Staff, Commander of the First Rank B.M. Shaposhnikov, People's Commissar of the Navy N.G. Kuznetsov, Chief of the Air Force A.D. Loktionov and Deputy Chief of the General Staff I.V. Smorodinov;

from England: Air Marshal C. Vernet, Major-General T. Heywood, as well as a number of even less important persons;

from France: General M. Valin, teacher of the naval school, Captain 1st Rank Villaume, Captain A. Beaufre and others.



K. Voroshilov



P. Drax



P. Drax

The mission of potential allies was in no hurry. It was Chamberlain who was forced to board a plane for the first time in his life in the critical days of Munich, and these negotiators used the steamer, spending almost a week on the crossing.

The meeting of the military delegations began with the presentation of the credentials approved by the Governments. Voroshilov, who chaired the meeting, read out the text of the authority issued by the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR, which indicated that the delegation "is authorized to negotiate with the British and French military missions and sign a military convention on the organization of the military defense of England, France and the USSR against aggression in Europe." The credentials of the French delegation stated that General Doumenc was authorized to negotiate with the High Command of the Soviet Armed Forces "on all questions relating to the entry into cooperation between the armed forces of both countries." It followed that the French delegation had the authority to negotiate. The British delegation did not have written credentials. On this occasion the following dialogue took place between the heads of the Soviet and British delegations.

Marshal K. E. Voroshilov: "... But the powers, in my opinion, are necessary in writing in order that it may be mutually seen within what limits you are authorized to

negotiate, what questions you can touch, to what extent you can discuss these questions, and how these negotiations may end. Our powers, as you have seen, are all-encompassing... Your powers, set out in words, are not entirely clear to me. In any case, it seems to me that this question is not idle - it determines at the very beginning both the order and the form of our negotiations..." Admiral P. Drucke declares that if it were convenient to move the negotiations to London, he would have all the powers... Marshal K. E. Voroshilov, to the general laughter, remarks that it is easier to bring papers from London to Moscow than to go to London with such a large company.

So, already on the first day of the meetings, the declared intentions of the British and French governments to conclude a military convention, and consequently the tripartite treaty as a whole, were again questioned by their representatives.

The Soviet delegation proposed a specific military plan, the implementation of which guaranteed the suppression of German aggression. Chief of the General Staff Shaposhnikov outlined a plan for the deployment of the Soviet Armed Forces on the western borders of the USSR "Considerations for negotiations with England and France." The document contained proposals for the actions of the three branches of the armed forces of the USSR, England and France. The secret instruction that Marshal Voroshilov wrote down presumably under Stalin's dictation on August 7, 1939, included the requirement for the passage of Soviet troops through the territory of Poland (the Vilna Corridor from the northwest and Galicia from the southwest), as well as through Romania. Without this, the instruction said, "defense against aggression in any of its variants is doomed to failure." But Poland categorically objected.

Nowadays, there are publications that the Soviet delegation did not set itself the goal of reaching an agreement, claiming that Voroshilov did not have a plan for the general conduct of military operations. But here is what the head of the French delegation, J. Doumenc, wrote later: *"... the plans which he (Voroshilov, the author) has just elucidated are undoubtedly the best way to repel aggression and that it would be useful to find ways to realize them without further waiting. As for my personal opinion, the missions (themselves) have already expressed their interest in them."* And a member

of the delegation, Captain Beaufre, stressed: *"It would be difficult to express myself more clearly and concretely."*

The composition of the delegation and the instructions given to it showed that the Chamberlain Cabinet did not want to bind itself to any firm obligations. diplomats and the military tried to influence the unyielding Poland. But Poland still remained irreconcilable on the issue of the movement of Soviet troops through its territory. Both England and France tried to persuade her, but Poland remained steadfast. The Polish commander-in-chief E. Rydz-Smigly declared: *"... Regardless of the consequences, not a single inch of Polish territory will ever be allowed to be occupied by Russian troops."* The dejected French Foreign Minister J. Bonnet believed that refusing to agree to the passage of Soviet troops would mean that **"Poland would assume responsibility for the possible failure of the military negotiations in Moscow and for all the consequences arising from it"** (emphasis added). according to which, in the event of German aggression, the Red Army would field 136 divisions. The Minister of Defense of the USSR, K.E. Voroshilov, in order to mitigate Soviet conditions, proposed a plan for passage through two narrow corridors. But this also caused objections from the Poles. Winston Churchill assessed the situation as follows: *"The military conference soon failed due to the refusal of Poland and Romania to allow Russian troops to pass - Poland's position was as follows: "With the Germans we risk losing freedom, and with the Russians - our soul." ... "The obstacle to the conclusion of such an agreement was the horror that these same border states felt at the Soviet assistance in the form of Soviet armies that could pass through their territories to save them from the Germans and incorporate them into the Soviet-Communist system along the way. After all, they were the most fierce opponents of this system. Poland, Romania, Finland and the three Baltic states did not know what they feared more, German aggression or Soviet salvation. It was the need to make this terrible choice that paralyzed the policy of England and France."*

Failure of negotiations. Last week

As early as the end of July, during the Anglo-French-Soviet negotiations, Chamberlain's adviser H. Wilson began consultations with a member of Göring's apparatus, H. Wohltat. Wilson's plan, which he outlined to Wohlat on July 21 and to the German ambassador Dirksen on August 3, provided for the conclusion of a German-British non-aggression pact that would absorb the system of guarantees given by Great Britain to the countries of Eastern Europe. The spheres of interest of the two countries in Europe would be delineated, and Hitler would be recognized as hegemony in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. It also provided for agreements on the levels of armaments, the settlement of colonial claims to Germany and the provision of a large loan to it. But Hitler did not agree to an agreement with Chamberlain, since this agreement contained a condition not to take any actions that could lead to war in Europe without the consent of England.

In short, in conditions of mutual distrust, all participants tried to maneuver and often played a double game. As one of the researchers of this period wrote, "...The calculation of the *British was based on the fact that Hitler could come to an agreement with Great Britain and could not with the USSR. The calculation of the French was that Stalin could come to an agreement with Great Britain and France, but not with Hitler. Hitler's calculation was made on the fact that the West would not dare to go to war, and therefore an agreement with Stalin was more important. Stalin's calculation was based on the contradictions between the two groups of imperialists. who will give more for the USSR.*"

As a result of Poland's uncompromising position, it became obvious to the Soviet leadership that there was no prospect of continuing the negotiations. Winston Churchill cited in his 6-volume work "World War II" his conversation with Stalin during their meeting in Moscow in 1942, where the Soviet leader said: "*We have the impression that the governments of England and France have not decided to enter the war in the event of an attack on Poland, but they hoped that the diplomatic union of England, France and Russia would stop Hitler. We were sure that this would not happen.*"

It was possible to cite quite a lot of evidence of how Poland's intransigence actually disrupted the fateful negotiations on the creation of an anti-Hitler coalition. For Stalin and Molotov, this was quite clear. In such a situation, they simply did not see any other way to avoid war on their territory if Germany seized Poland and found itself near the borders of the USSR. The impasse in negotiations with Great Britain and France pushed Stalin to accept Germany's proposals. But the Soviet leaders were in no hurry, the initiative for rapprochement came from Germany. Hitler was in a hurry, the attack on Poland was planned for August 26. Now the days were counting.

I would like to add the following here. For the Soviet leaders, a meeting at such a high level was extremely important. Until now, such meetings were impossible - the Soviet Union was not considered as an equal partner. And here, for the first time, they not only recognized, but also asked for a meeting. Even for fateful negotiations with England and France, secondary representatives of the authorities were sent, who did not have powers. But one of the goals of the Soviet leaders was to become an equal European partner.

On August 14, V.M. Molotov finally agreed to discuss relations with Germany, about which G.A. Astakhov informed K. Schnurre, and the latter informed J. Ribbentrop. Literally the next day (so in a hurry), on August 15, the now Ambassador W. Schulenburg received an instruction from Ribbentrop to offer the Soviet side to accept the visit of a major German leader in the near future. It is interesting here that this proposal was recommended not to be passed on to Molotov, but only read out. Ribbentrop was not sure of a positive reaction from the Soviet People's Commissar and Prime Minister. And in the event of a negative reaction, there should be no written evidence of the German initiative. Here are some excerpts from the text of this oral proposal, translated immediately within 40 minutes and sent to Stalin: *"Germany is ready to conclude a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, which is not subject to change for 25 years... The period of confrontation may end once and for all... the capitalist democracies of the West are the implacable enemies of both National Socialist Germany and the Soviet Union. The Fuehrer is of the opinion that, in view of the external*

situation, which is daily fraught with the possibility of serious events, a rapid and fundamental clarification of German-Russian relations is desirable. For this purpose, I am ready to fly to Moscow in person at any time after Friday, August 18, with full authority from the Fuehrer."

On August 14, the counsellor of the embassy, G. Hilger, sought an audience with Molotov on August 15. In the end, the meeting was scheduled for 20:00. The meeting lasted several hours. Schulenberg and Molotov were cautious in their statements and probed their interlocutor. Molotov again stated that "*...The question must be discussed more concretely, so that in the event of the arrival of the Reich Foreign Minister here, the question will not be reduced to an exchange of views, but concrete decisions will be taken.*" But the decisive thing in this conversation was that the Soviet government changed its position, expressing its wishes for the first time. They were specific, precise and consisted of the following:

- a non-aggression pact with Germany,
- joint guarantees of neutrality of the Baltic States,
- Germany's refusal to incite Japanese aggression and instead exert influence on Japan in order to end its border war,
- conclusion of an agreement on economic issues on a broad basis.

On August 16, Schulenburg sent a report on the meeting, which was understood in Berlin as the agreement of the Soviet government "*to put German-Soviet relations on a new political basis, but expressed itself in the sense that long study and diplomatic preparation would be required before the start of direct negotiations.*" organization of the signing of the contract. The German researcher Dr. Ingeborg Fleischhauer, who at one time received access to the personal archive of Ambassador Schulenberg, describes in sufficient detail the chronology of events related to the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, including this one, the most important for understanding the policy of the Soviet leaders of the day - August 17. The call of the counselor of the German embassy, G. Hilger, to the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs rang out at 10:00. But it was at that moment that the penultimate meeting of the Anglo-French-Soviet

negotiations began. Molotov was forced to postpone the beginning of the meeting and immediately contacted Stalin. Further, according to the text, J. Fleischhauer "... Stalin weighed the significance of the message, which he probably appreciated quite highly in connection with the circumstances, and gave two orders:

- During the first meeting of that day, he instructed Voroshilov to resolutely demand that Western military missions answer the "cardinal question". Up to that day, the Soviet government had not completely ruled out the possibility of a radical turn in the negotiations, but from that moment on, its expectations were reduced to a minimum;

- Molotov was instructed to receive and listen to the German ambassador at the end of the day.

After receiving instructions from Stalin, Voroshilov sharply raised the "cardinal question" of Poland's position regarding cooperation in agreement with resistance to German aggression. And also about the credentials of the British delegation. Again, no answers were received. And then Voroshilov demanded for the last time to wait for a positive decision from Poland and at 13:43 announced the postponement of the negotiations until August 21.

After the termination of the negotiations, the members of the Soviet delegation went to report to Stalin. According to the memoirs of Admiral N.G. Kuznetsov, Stalin and his inner circle, having listened to the military, came to the logical conclusion that the break in the military negotiations should be used to test the reality of the German proposals.

W. Schulenberg, waiting for an answer, was terribly nervous - he was constantly called and sent telegrams from Berlin, insisting on continuing contacts with Molotov. But Molotov did not answer, because, as we know, he was busy almost all day. I would like to emphasize that Schulenberg himself sincerely wanted a rapprochement between Germany and the Soviet Union, without feeling hostility towards the USSR. The 64-year-old German ambassador, Count Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg, was a representative of the old school of diplomacy, all contemporaries characterized him as

an unusually educated and pleasant, gifted and charming person. He repeatedly expressed his disagreement with Hitler's policy towards the Soviet Union. This ended with Count Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg being sentenced to death by the People's Court on October 23, 1944, for his participation in the German Resistance to Hitler and executed on November 10 of the same year.

As a result of the discussion of the report of the military delegation at the talks on August 17, Stalin personally dictated to Molotov the text of the reply, which was handed over to the German ambassador Schulenberg: "*The Soviet government takes note of the statement of the German government about its real desire to improve political relations between Germany and the USSR ... Further, the answer contained a list of old grievances and a counter-proposal – "to prove the seriousness of their intentions and to conclude economic agreements: the allocation of a loan of 200 million marks to the Soviet Union for seven years, the supply of valuable equipment."* And then it was stated that the next step could be a non-aggression pact or a confirmation of the old neutrality pact of 1926. *with the simultaneous signing of a protocol that will determine the interests of the signatories in a particular foreign policy issue and which will be an integral part of the pact."*

It must be said that the tone of the answer was not friendly, on the contrary, it contained intonations of arrogance. But this did not stop the German side. The Germans were in a hurry to attack Poland until the autumn thaw. Recall that Hitler set this date as August 26. Schulenberg's report was received by Hitler on the morning of August 18 and was considered completely unsatisfactory. Instructions were immediately given to arrange an audience with Molotov the next morning, Saturday, and to take all measures to ensure that the ambassador was received in the morning.

In the remaining days, French officials launched a final attack on Polish positions. On August 17, the British ambassador in Warsaw, Sir W. Kennard, finally received instructions from the British government to support the efforts of his French counterpart Noel to persuade the Polish government to agree to the passage of Soviet troops through Polish territory. On August 18, the military attaché in Warsaw, General F. Musset, and

the French ambassador to Poland, D. Noel, urged the Chief of the General Staff Polish Army General W. Stakhevich and Polish Foreign Minister J. Beck to allow the Anglo-French delegation to include in the treaty a clause on the passage of Red Army units through Polish territory. But they received a categorical refusal. On August 20, J. Beck sent a telegram to the Polish ambassador to France, J. Łukasiewicz, with the following content: *"Poland is not bound by any military treaties with the Soviets, and the Polish government does not intend to conclude such a treaty."* The disappointed French representative at the Moscow talks, General J. Doumenc, telegraphed to Paris: ***"The failure of the negotiations is inevitable if Poland does not change her position»***. The text is highlighted so that the reasons for the breakdown of the negotiations are completely clear.

On the morning of August 19, Schulenburg received instructions that instructed him to achieve *"...immediate conversation with Herr Molotov and to use all means to ensure that this conversation takes place without the slightest delay."* The counselor of the embassy, G. Hilger, again tried to contact Molotov. Having waited all morning for a call from the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, Schulenberg was in complete despair, as he himself wrote, *"his heart is about to burst."* But at 3:30 p.m., Schulenberg received a call from the People's Commissar V.M. Molotov himself and invited him to a meeting literally an hour later. At the appointed time, the ambassador entered the office of the People's Commissar. Unexpectedly for him, Molotov hurriedly got up from the table and went out to meet Schulenberg, smiling affably. Shocked, Schulenberg could not believe his ears: Molotov announced to the ambassador that the Soviet government had revised its views and was ready to receive Ribbentrop for the signing of a non-aggression pact on August 26 or 27. After that, Schulenberg was handed the text of the Soviet draft treaty. This text was sent to Berlin on the night of August 20 and received at 03 a.m. 15 min: The translation was made by the Germans in Moscow. The project was sent to Hitler on the morning of August 20, as well as to Ribbentrop. The full text of the draft was as follows:

"The Government of the USSR and the Government of Germany,

Guided by the desire to strengthen the cause of peace among the peoples and proceeding from the basic provisions of the neutrality treaty concluded between the USSR and Germany in April 1926, they came to the following agreement:

Article 1.

The two Contracting Parties undertake to mutually refrain from any violence or aggression against each other or from attacking each other, either separately or in conjunction with other Powers.

Article 2.

In the event that one of the Contracting Parties is the object of violence or attack by a third Power, the other Contracting Party will not support in any form such action by such Power.

Article 3.

In the event of disputes or conflicts between the Contracting Parties on certain issues, both Parties undertake to resolve these disputes and conflicts exclusively by peaceful means by way of consultation or by establishing, if necessary, appropriate conciliation commissions.

Article 4.

This Treaty shall be concluded for a period of five years, provided that, as long as one of the Contracting Parties does not denounce it one year before the expiry of the term, the term of the Treaty shall be deemed to be automatically extended for a further five years.

Article 5.

This Treaty shall be ratified as soon as possible, after which the Treaty shall enter into force.

Postscript.

The present Pact shall be valid only if a special protocol is signed simultaneously on the points of interest of the Contracting Parties in the field of foreign policy. The Protocol is an integral part of the Covenant."

What happened that day, more specifically between 2:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m.? I confess that I do not even want to try to analyze the events of that day. An incredible number of different interpretations, for example, regarding the meeting of the Politburo of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), at which Stalin allegedly spoke, took place. The fact remains that it was on this day that Stalin began to decide on the choice of further foreign policy in favor of signing a non-aggression pact with Germany.

W. Schulenberg immediately reported the meeting to Berlin, but even such close dates, August 26-27, did not suit Hitler. After all, the date of the start of the Polish campaign was set for August 26. Now he personally addressed Stalin with a personal message. Here is its text.

Telegram of the Reich Chancellor of Germany A. Hitler to the Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) J. V. Stalin

August 21, 1939

{{ Transmitted by the German Ambassador to the USSR, F. Schulenburg, to V. M. Molotov at 3 p.m.}} (translation)*

To Mr. J. V. Stalin

1. I sincerely welcome the conclusion of the German-Soviet trade agreement, which is the first step towards a change in German-Soviet relations.

2. The conclusion of the non-aggression pact means for me the consolidation of German policy for a long time. Germany is thus returning to a political line that has been useful to both states for centuries. The German Government is therefore determined to draw all the conclusions from such a radical change.

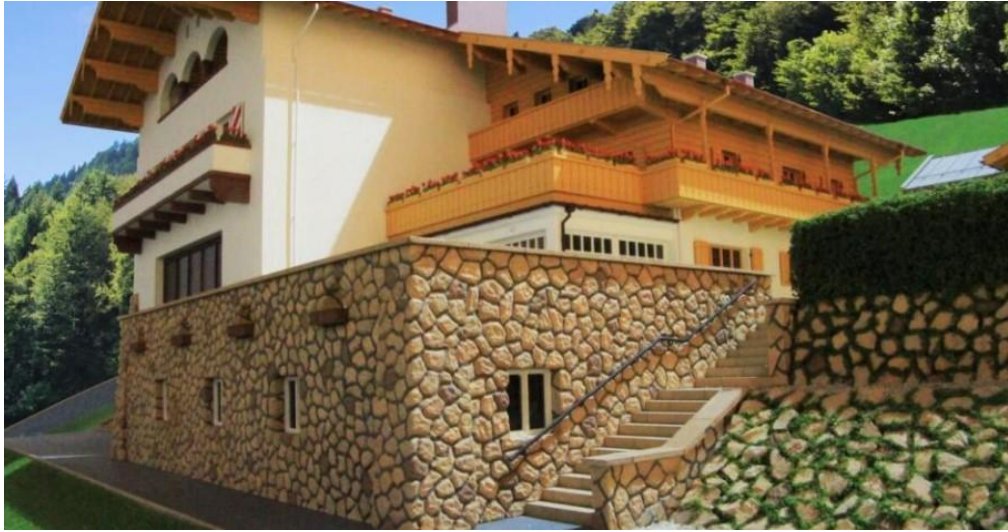
3. I accept the draft non-aggression pact proposed by the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars and the People's Commissar of the U.S.S.R., Mr. Molotov, but I consider it necessary to clarify the questions connected with it as soon as possible.

4. The Additional Protocol desired by the Government of the U.S.S.R., in my opinion, can, in essence, be clarified in the shortest possible time, if the responsible German statesman is given the opportunity to negotiate about it in Moscow in person. Otherwise, the German Government cannot imagine how this additional protocol can be clarified and drawn up in a short time.

5. The tension between Germany and Poland became intolerable. The Polish behavior towards the Great Power is such that a crisis can break out any day. Germany, at any rate, is now determined to defend her interests against these claims by all means.

6. I believe that if both States intend to enter into a new relationship with each other, it is advisable not to lose time. I therefore propose that you receive my Minister for Foreign Affairs for the second time on Tuesday, 22 August, but no later than Wednesday, 23 August. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has full and unlimited powers to draw up and sign both the non-aggression pact and the protocol. A longer stay of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Moscow than one day or a maximum of two days is impossible in view of the international situation. I would be glad to receive a prompt answer from you.

Adolf Hitler



Berchthoff – Hitler's residence

But, here's what is usually overlooked here. Let us trace the path and time of this telegram from Berchthoff, Hitler's residence. From there the telegram left on August 20 at 4:35 p.m., from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at 6:45 p.m., and Ambassador Schulenberg received a warning in Moscow about the dispatch of the telegram on Sunday at about 9 p.m., and was received by the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs at 00:45, that is, already on August 21. On that day, Ribbentrop sent two telegrams to Schulenberg, at 10:35 and 14:30, urging the ambassador to arrange a meeting with Molotov. But it was not until 5:00 p.m. that Molotov met with Schulenberg and gave him Stalin's reply to the Fuehrer's message. Why so long? Here's why. It was on that day that representatives of Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union met for the penultimate time in negotiations on the creation of a coalition, and the last hope remained for a change in the Polish position on the passage of the Red Army units. And what is extremely important, that morning the two central newspapers Pravda and Izvestia published a report by TASS (the telegraph agency of the Soviet Union) about the conclusion of a Soviet-German credit agreement on August 19, 1939. This message, probably, should have become a weighty argument for exerting pressure on uncompromising Poland. In addition, the Soviet government apparently sought to avoid reproaches about secret negotiations with Germany. But there is another point of view.

According to J. Fleischhauer, until that time Stalin had been "delayed" in giving instructions for the signing of the already initialed trade and credit agreement, that is, to take the first step towards further German-Soviet rapprochement. "He used the trade and credit agreement as a brake, waiting to see if he could not yet conclude an agreement with the British and French. On August 19, the Poles refused. On the night of the 19th to the 20th, he gave instructions to sign."

It is extremely important to understand the logic of those events to take into account the fact that it was on that day, August 20, that the decisive offensive of the Red Army units in the Far East began. But its outcome was far from clear to the Soviet leadership. In the first stage of hostilities, the Japanese side had a clear advantage, especially in the air. So, on June 22, in air battles, the Japanese shot down 17 Soviet aircraft, losing only 7 of their own. In the early morning of June 27, Japanese planes launched a surprise attack on the Soviet air bases of Tamsak-Bulak and Bain-Burdu-Nur and the rear airfield of Bain-Tumen, destroying 20 aircraft, losing only 4 of their own. Not to understand the significance of these failures on the eve of fateful negotiations with Germany means either not to understand anything at all, or to deceive yourself.

And then the last day of negotiations came - August 21. After another fruitless attempt to solve the problems that had arisen, the People's Commissar of Defense K.E. Voroshilov declared: *"The Soviet mission believes that the USSR, which does not have a common border with Germany, can render assistance to France, England, Poland and Rumania only on the condition that its troops pass through Polish and Romanian territory, because there are no other ways to come into contact with the aggressor's troops.... The Soviet Military Mission cannot imagine how the governments and general staffs of Great Britain and France, when sending their missions to the U.S.S.R. to negotiate the conclusion of a military convention, could fail to give precise and positive instructions on such an elementary question as the passage and action of the Soviet armed forces against the aggressor's troops on the territory of Poland and Rumania, with which Britain and France have corresponding political and military relations.*

If, however, the French and British turn this axiomatic question into a big problem requiring lengthy study, it means that there is every reason to doubt their desire for real and serious cooperation with the USSR. In view of the above, the responsibility for the delay in the military negotiations, as well as for the interruption of these negotiations, naturally falls on the French and British sides."

Of course, Voroshilov knew that Ribbentrop was expected to arrive to sign the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, but the logic of events shows that if Poland agreed (and documented) to the passage of the Red Army, the situation could change radically. The German military attaché in Moscow, Ernst Koestring (born in Russia, graduated from the Moscow gymnasium and the Mikhailovsky Artillery School and emigrated to Germany before 1914) *"He would* also recount his conversation with Voroshilov in the presence of the Chief of the General Staff of the Red Army, B.M. Shaposhnikov, after the signing of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact. Interestingly, they were sitting at the same table at which the negotiations were taking place. Koestring asked the Soviet People's Commissar how he was going to negotiate with the British and French. Voroshilov answered: *"Yes, it was terrible. If the French and British had sent other negotiating partners, you probably wouldn't be sitting in their shoes now!"*

And the next day, August 22, K.E. Voroshilov met with the representative of France, General J. Doumenc, and held a conversation with him, in which Voroshilov once again pointed out the main obstacle to the conclusion of a military convention - Poland's refusal to allow the Red Army to pass. Here are some excerpts from this conversation.

Gen. Doumenc. ... *I am frank with the marshal. At the same time, it has already been announced that someone must come, and I do not enjoy these visits.* (Ribbentrop's arrival – the author.)

Voroshilov. *This is true. But the French and British sides are to blame for this. The question of military cooperation with the French has been on the agenda for a number of years, but it has not been resolved. Last year, when Czechoslovakia was dying, we were waiting for a signal from France, our troops were ready, but they never came.*

.....

Voroshilov. *I have already said that if the Poles had given a positive answer, they would have demanded their participation in our negotiations, since this is not the case, which means that they do not know or do not agree.*

Gen. Doumenc. *I see that the Marshal has no intention of continuing the work of our conference in the near future, and I can state this. Still, I believe that it makes sense for us to continue our work.*

Voroshilov. *To this question, our delegation has already given its answer: until we receive a clear answer to the questions we have raised, we will not work.*

By the way, some researchers, based on this conversation, concluded that the Soviet delegation had no intention of continuing negotiations because of Ribbentrop's upcoming visit. That is why they conducted negotiations so harshly. But the situation was different, time was running out. The Soviet leadership knew that Germany would attack Poland in any case, regardless of whether the treaty was signed or not. that in March 1939 the main task of this body was not to combat emigration, but to prepare residencies for war in Europe and the Far East. There were many informants, but the most valuable were Rudolf von Shelia, who served as a counselor of the German embassy in Warsaw, and an anonymous "German journalist." R. Shelia hated both Hitler and the Nazis, so he passed the received materials to a German businessman, whom he considered an agent of one of the Western countries, but who in fact passed the received materials to Soviet military intelligence. The anonymous journalist was close to the adviser to the office of the German Foreign Minister, P. Kleist. By the way, in one of their conversations, Kleist said that "*...Hitler is determined to ensure Germany's military security in the East during this year by liquidating the Polish State in its present territorial and political form.*" And further: "*...Germany's military action against Poland is scheduled for the end of August or the beginning of September. Military preparations in East Prussia are almost complete, but in Germany and Slovakia they continue.*" An important source of information was the legendary Richard Sorge. Rich in content and

analysis of European events, information was provided to the Soviet special services by former Russian émigré diplomats, united in the "Council of Ambassadors".

In such conditions, when there were only a few days left before the attack on Poland, the Soviet leadership was faced with a fateful choice. And I repeat, it is not known how events would have unfolded if Poland had not only agreed to cooperate with the Soviet Union, but also confirmed it in writing. But Poland, due to its exorbitant ambitions, prejudice against Russia in general (and there were grounds), and, rather, primarily based on full confidence in the military support of England and France, missed its (and not only its own) chance. In just a week, it will become clear that no one will support Poland. But more on that later.

German Foreign Minister J. Ribbentrop, at the head of a German delegation consisting of 37 people, flew to Moscow on two giant four-engine Focke Wulf-200 Condor transport aircraft. The planes were accidentally fired upon in the Velikiye Luki area, but still landed safely at the Tushino airfield near Moscow around noon. The visit was so hasty that the Soviet side had difficulty finding Nazi banners for an official meeting (found at Mosfilm), and the orchestra barely had time to learn the anthem. The head of German diplomacy, J. Ribbentrop, was met by Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs V.P. Potemkin. After a short breakfast, they immediately went to the Kremlin, where a preliminary meeting with Stalin took place. Ribbentrop did not expect that Stalin would be in the office with Molotov. This meant that the treaty had to be signed without delay. The meeting began at 3:30 p.m. and in three hours the text of the treaty was basically agreed. The German side was ready for any amendments, as long as the treaty was concluded immediately.

On that day, after difficult negotiations in Warsaw, Ambassador L. Noel was finally able to send a telegram to Moscow with the following content: "The Polish Government agrees that General Doumenc should say the following: 'We are confident that in the event of joint action against German aggression, cooperation between Poland and the USSR on technical conditions to be agreed upon is not excluded (or: possible).'"

But in this case, the saying "a spoon is worth dinner" is true and "better late than never" is unfair.

It will not be superfluous to recall that it was on the same days, starting from August 20, that fierce battles unfolded at Khalkhin Gol. Later, Molotov would say: *"Zhukov and I performed the same task almost at the same time, postponing the war. I signed a non-aggression pact with Germany, and Zhukov in the Far East rebuffed the Japanese samurai."* Successful actions in the Far East were also factors in the Moscow negotiations. Hypothetically, one can imagine what would have happened if the Japanese had won.

The second meeting of the day took place in Molotov's office, where a table was set for four people: Stalin, Molotov, Ribbentrop and Schulenberg. In addition to them, there were two interpreters in the office: Gustav Hilger from the German side, and Vladimir Pavlov from the Soviet side. how the signing and the subsequent banquet took place. This is due to the fact that four officials and two interpreters were participants and witnesses of this evening and night. Stalin left no memoirs, Ribbentrop and the two translators did, but much later and under completely different political circumstances. Molotov generally pretended that he either did not know anything about the secret protocol, or did not remember what was written in F. Chuev's book "140 Conversations with Molotov". Ribbentrop wrote suicide notes in prison during the Nuremberg trials, Hilger was not free in his revelations. Therefore, I did not consider it necessary to cite their memories, especially since they were all "well drunk" during the banquet and did not always say what they would not say soberly. The meeting ended only by five o'clock in the morning on August 24.



Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union

USSR government and German government

Guided by the desire to strengthen the cause of peace between the USSR and Germany and based on the basic provisions of the neutrality treaty concluded between the USSR and Germany in April 1926,

came to the following agreement:

Article I

Both Contracting Parties undertake to refrain from any violence, from any aggressive action and from any attack against each other, either separately or jointly with other powers.

Article II.

In the event that one of the Contracting Parties becomes the object of military action by a third power, the other Contracting Party will not support this power in any form.

Article III.

The Governments of both Contracting Parties will remain in future contact with each other for consultation in order to inform each other about matters affecting their common interests.

Article IV.

Neither of the Contracting Parties will participate in any grouping of powers that is directly or indirectly directed against the other party.

Article V

In the event of disputes or conflicts between the Contracting Parties on issues of one kind or another, both parties will resolve these disputes or conflicts exclusively peacefully through a friendly exchange of views or, if necessary, by creating commissions to resolve the conflict.

Article VI.

This agreement is concluded for a period of ten years, with the understanding that unless one of the Contracting Parties denounces it one year before its expiration, the term of the agreement will be considered automatically extended for another five years.

Article VII.

This treaty is subject to ratification as soon as possible. The exchange of instruments of ratification must take place in Berlin. The agreement comes into force immediately after its signing.

Compiled in two originals, in German and Russian, in Moscow, August 23, 1939.

By authority of the Government of the USSR V. Molotov

For the Government of Germany I. Ribbentrop

Generally speaking, there was nothing unusual in the signing itself, the first such agreement was signed back in 1926. On June 24, 1931, a protocol was signed between Germany and the USSR on the practically indefinite extension of this treaty, provided that each of the contracting parties had the right to denounce it.

The treaty consisted of seven short articles:

Article I obliged the parties to refrain from aggression against each other;

Article II obliged the parties not to support the aggression of third countries against the other party;

Article IV obliged the parties not to enter into military alliances directed against the other party;

Article V proposed ways to resolve conflicts peacefully;

Article VI described the duration of the treaty (ten years, with automatic renewal for five years each time);

Articles III and VII were purely technical.

The main and most important difference from the previous treaties was the presence of a secret protocol.

Secret additional protocol

When signing the non-aggression treaty between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the undersigned representatives of both parties discussed in strictly confidential manner the issue of delimiting areas of mutual interests in Eastern Europe. This discussion led to the following result:

1. In the event of a territorial and political reorganization of the regions that are part of the Baltic states (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern border of Lithuania is simultaneously the border of the spheres of interest of Germany and the USSR. At the same time, the interests of Lithuania in relation to the Vilna region are recognized by both parties.

2. In the event of a territorial and political reorganization of the areas that are part of the Polish State, the border of the spheres of interest of Germany and the USSR will approximately run along the line of the Narev, Vistula and Sana rivers. The question is whether it is in mutual interests to preserve an independent Polish State and what the borders will be of this state, can be finally clarified only during further political development. In any case, both Governments will resolve this issue in the manner of friendly mutual consent.

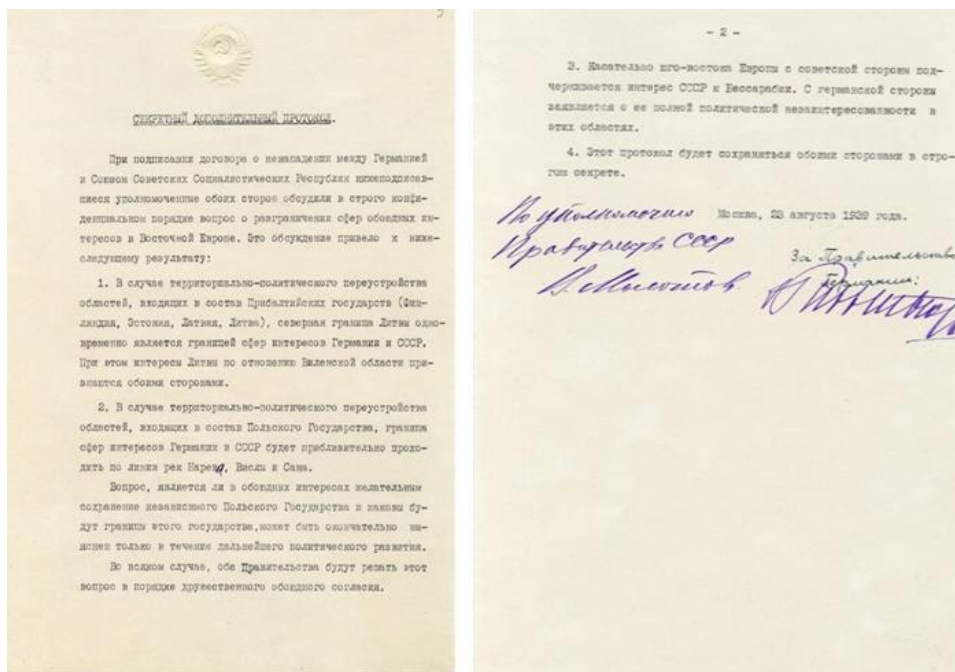
3. Regarding the southeast of Europe, the Soviet side emphasizes the USSR's interest in GlossarBessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterest in these areas.

4. This protocol will be kept strictly confidential by both parties.

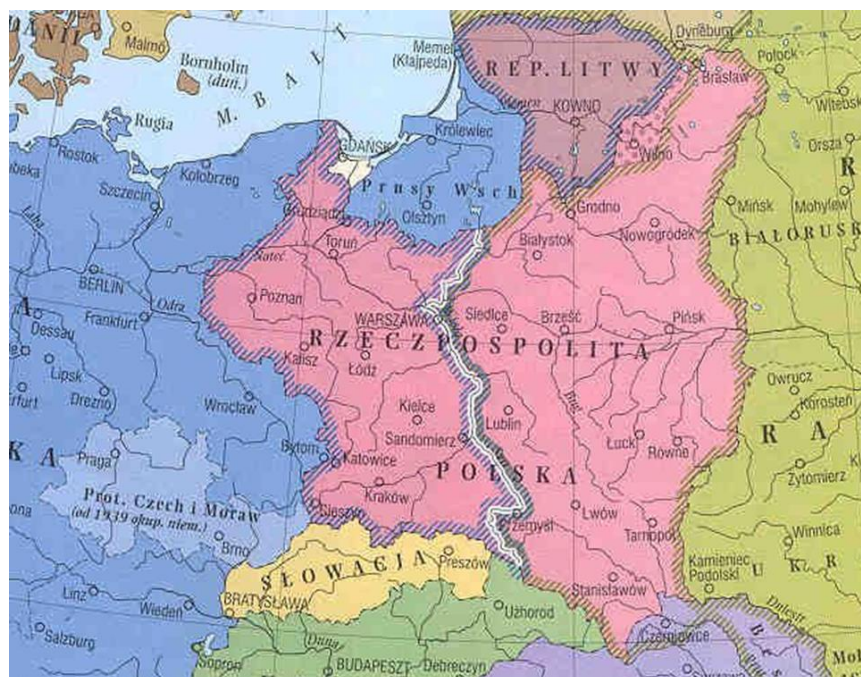
Moscow, August 23, 1939

By authority of the Government of the USSR GlossarB. Molotov

For the Government of Germany GlossarI. Ribbentrop



Soviet original in Russian.



Map of the declared interests of Germany and the Soviet Union

And in the morning ...

The signing of the non-aggression pact produced the impression of an exploding bomb throughout the world, as they say. And not only in Europe, Asia and America, but also in the Soviet Union. But this remark does not quite accurately reflect the foreign policy situation in the world. The fact is that information about Ribbentrop's upcoming trip to Moscow became widely known starting from August 22. In connection with this, Ribbentrop sent instructions to German missions abroad before departure. This instruction placed the conclusion of the pact in direct connection with the aggravation of the situation around Poland and emphasized the German "interest in preventing the Soviet Union from going over to the side of England." In addition, the tactical nature of this rapprochement was recognized: it was necessary to dispel the Soviet government's sense of threat in the event of a German-Polish conflict. The reaction of Italy and Japan is important here. Ribbentrop spoke personally with representatives of his allies in the Anti-Comintern Pact. Italian Foreign Minister G. Ciano was discouraged, clearly not expecting such a development of events. But Italy has not been particularly affected, at least for the time being. In any case, the Italians did not ask the Germans for any

additional explanations. And the reaction of the Japanese ambassador H. Oshima was completely different. For him, the news of Ribbentrop's impending visit was a heavy blow.

The real flurry of information reaction of governments, politicians and journalists to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact began on August 24. It is not the task of this work to describe it. We will only note the reaction of Japan. Its government regarded it as treacherous on the German side and made an official protest. On August 28, the cabinet of Prime Minister N. Hiranuma, which advocated the conclusion of a military alliance with Germany against the USSR, resigned. *"The news of the conclusion of the pact made a stunning impression here... the newspapers are beginning to cautiously discuss the possibility of concluding a similar pact with the USSR."*

A big problem was the difficulty of explaining the new Soviet policy towards fascist Germany to the Communist Parties, in particular, to the General Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, G. M. Dimitrov. At a meeting with him, Stalin outlined the logic of the events of the end of August in the following words: *"The war is going on between two groups of capitalist countries (poor and rich in terms of colonies, raw materials, etc.) <... >We don't mind them having a good fight and weakening each other <... >We can maneuver, push one side against the other so that we can get apart. The non-aggression pact to some extent helps Germany <... > Before the war, the opposition of a democratic regime to fascism was absolutely correct. In a war between the imperialist powers, this is no longer correct. The division of capitalist states into fascist and democratic has lost its former meaning."*

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Winston Churchill was sympathetic to the signing of the treaty: "The fact that such an agreement was possible marks the depth of the failure of British and French policy and diplomacy for several years. In favor of the Soviets, it was vital for the Soviet Union to push the starting positions of the German army as far west as possible so that the Russians could gain time and gather forces from all parts of their colossal empire. In the minds of the Russians, the catastrophes that their armies suffered in 1914, when they rushed to the offensive against the Germans before they had finished mobilization, were imprinted with a red-hot iron. And now their borders were much farther east than during the First War. They needed to occupy the Baltic states and most of Poland by force or deception before they could be attacked. If their policy was coldly calculating, it was also highly realistic at the time."

On the morning of August 24, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was informed about the non-aggression pact and the secret protocol. The counselor of the U.S. Embassy, C. Bohlen, received the news from the counselor of the German embassy, H-G. Von Bittenfeld, who showed him the text. Despite this, Roosevelt chose not to share this information with any of the involved parties, including Poland.

Was there collusion?

On September 9, 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and recognizing it as the cause of the outbreak of World War II. The signing of this document is seen as a conspiracy between the two totalitarian regimes. Let the reader judge for himself how informationally prepared the delegates were for such a decision and what they were guided by. The author wants to show the absurdity of such an opinion.

What is "collusion"? In English political discourse, "collusion" refers to a secret or illegal agreement or cooperation between parties, often with the intent to deceive or

manipulate. It typically implies that two or more entities are working together in a way that undermines fairness, legality, or ethical standards. That is, it means that Hitler and Ribbentrop from the very beginning agreed to "go to work" with Stalin and Molotov. But let's take a closer look at how Hitler and his inner circle behaved just before August 23. Further exposition is based on the materials of the same Ingeborg Fleischhauer.

The day before, Hitler, encouraged by the successful start of his cooperation with Molotov, had made a speech to the generals. In this speech he admitted that the previous successes of recent years were the result achieved "thanks to the bluff of the political leadership." *Personal contact was established with Stalin. Von Ribbentrop will sign the treaty the day after tomorrow. Now Poland is in the position in which I wanted to see her.*" This speech of Hitler, writes J. Fleischauer, "certainly gave rise to a certain confusion. The remarks which Hitler heard during the dinner which followed the meeting confirmed that in this circle neither the political isolation of Poland nor the possibility of localizing the war against it was considered a given.

Further, the author (J. Fleischauer) writes about Hitler's second speech, which he made on the same day in response to the skeptical forecasts of the military. In this harshest of all speeches made before the war, Hitler recommended: *"Iron determination in our ranks. Give up on nothing. Everyone should adhere to the view that we are ready from the very beginning to fight against the Western powers as well. To fight to the death... Overcoming the old times by getting used to the most difficult trials... The destruction of Poland is in the foreground. The goal is to eliminate manpower, not to reach a certain milestone... I will provide a propaganda pretext for unleashing a war, no matter how credible it may be... Compassion has no place in our hearts. Act ruthlessly. 80 million people must find their right... The right belongs to the stronger. Ultimate hardness... The order to start will probably follow on Saturday morning."*

Hitler's adjutant, Colonel E. von Below, would later write: "We were faced with the fact that in a few days Germany would find herself in a war which the Fuehrer considered inevitable and which he wanted, and which he had no confidence in the

generals, because they saw in it a misfortune. Nevertheless, they did nothing against Hitler."

All day on August 23, Hitler was in a state of great agitation, becoming more and more restless in the evening. At about 8 p.m., he ordered to request an embassy in Moscow and received only a laconic answer that nothing had yet been reported about the negotiations. The tension of expectation increased. Ribbentrop called in the process of negotiations, Hitler answered instantly. And only after Ribbentrop's call late at night about the signing of the treaty, Hitler breathed a sigh of relief and victory.

And now let's look into Ribbentrop's plane, during the flight. As J. Fleischhauer writes: "Throughout the flight, the mood of the members of the delegation, so different in origin, education and political sympathies, was marked by such great uncertainty and nervousness that it came to personal confrontations: over everyone hovered "the tense expectation of the adventure towards which we were flying». A member of the delegation, R. Schmidt, whose duties included drawing up a report on the progress of the negotiations and recording any agreements that might be reached, recalled: "Unlike the German public, we were far from consoling thoughts about the prospect of mutual understanding with the Russians." Somehow all this does not look like a "conspiracy."

We can add to this the seemingly insignificant fact that the Soviet side, waiting for a high-ranking partner in the "conspiracy", did not even provide him with a residence in Moscow. Ambassador W. Schulenberg had difficulty accommodating the German delegation and Minister Ribbentrop himself in the building of the former Austrian embassy. By the way, five years later, on October 19, 1944, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill would stay in the same building, where, in particular, the fate of Poland was again decided.

Working on these materials, the author had to re-read many scientific articles, political assessments, accusations and praise of the Soviet leadership. But the author saw the most striking characteristic of the meaning of the concluded non-aggression pact in the caricature of that time.



The last week before the start of the war

This week was victorious for the Soviet Union. On August 26, 1939, Soviet troops completely surrounded the 6th Japanese Army. On August 28, the suppression of Japanese resistance began in the area of the last defense center. About 400 Japanese soldiers who tried to break out of the encirclement during the night were completely destroyed in a fierce battle that reached hand-to-hand combat. By the morning of August 31, the territory of Mongolia was completely cleared of Japanese troops. After that, ground battles subsided, but air battles resumed. But now the advantage was on the side of the Soviet pilots. In air battles, Japanese aviation lost 70 aircraft against 14 downed Soviets. Realizing their defeat, the Japanese asked for an armistice, which was signed on September 15, 1939.

The British government, having received news of the signing of the non-aggression pact, on the same day, August 24, 1939, sent a proposal to Marshal Rydz-Śmigły to evacuate the most modern ships of the Polish fleet from the Baltic. The next day, August 25, a pact was signed between Poland and Great Britain on common defense. either party will be attacked by a third party. That morning Hitler made another attempt to neutralize Britain. He summoned the British ambassador N. Henderson to the Office. Hitler's personal interpreter, R. Schmidt, recalls this meeting as follows. Hitler first told the Ambassador: *"Yesterday in the House of Commons your Prime Minister made a speech which in no way alters the relations of Germany. The only result of this speech could be a bloody and unpredictable war between Germany and England. But this time Germany will not have to fight on two fronts, for the agreement with Russia is unconditional and represents a long-term change in German foreign policy."* This was followed by his famous offer of a guarantee of the inviolability of the British Empire, and even an offer to provide assistance "in any part of the world where such assistance may be needed."

Then came the turn of the French ambassador, R. Coulondre. Hitler told him the same thing as he had told Henderson. But the Frenchman was more resolute. He told Hitler: *"In such a critical situation as this, Herr Reichskanzler, the misunderstanding*

between countries is the most terrible. Therefore, in order to clarify the essence of the matter, I give you my word of honor as a French officer that the French army will fight on the side of Poland if that country is attacked." Then, raising his voice, he continued: *"But I can also give you my word of honor that the French Government is ready to do everything possible to preserve peace and to mediate a settlement in Warsaw».* How can we not remember that in his speech on August 22, Hitler was afraid that "at the last moment some pig will slip in an offer of mediation."

The third was the Italian ambassador B. Attolico, who this time brought such an impatiently awaited answer to Hitler's confidential message about the impending invasion of Poland. *"At one of the most difficult moments of my life,"* Mussolini wrote, *"I must inform you that Italy is not ready for war."*

Irritated, Hitler was forced to postpone the attack on Poland from August 26 to September 1. Confusion arose, since some of the combat formations had almost reached their original positions, and some units had already begun military operations to destroy the Polish infrastructure.

The next three days were filled with an intensive exchange of messages between Berlin, London and Paris. French Prime Minister E. Daladier wrote to Hitler: *"If Poland is attacked, the honor of France will demand that she fulfill her obligations."* Ambassador N. Henderson flew to London on August 28 and brought a memorandum from the British government. *"His Majesty's Government cannot, whatever advantages may be offered to Great Britain, acquiesce in an agreement which would jeopardize the independence of the State to which it has given guarantees."* As a next step, it was proposed to resume direct negotiations between the Polish and German Governments, about which "certain assurances had already been received from the Polish Government." *A simple settlement of these questions between Germany and Poland could open the way to world peace. Failure to achieve it would destroy hopes for a better understanding between Germany and Great Britain, bring the two countries into conflict and quite likely plunge the whole world into war. Such an outcome would be a disaster that has no parallel in history."*

Hitler's reply, already more concerned with the organization of the impending attack on Poland than with correspondence with opponents, was harsh. He once again accused the Poles: *"...barbarous cruelty that cries out to heaven", "persecution of the German population in Poland", "murder of Germans living in the country or their forced evacuation under the most cruel circumstances", "a state of affairs intolerable for a great power"*. And at the end of the letter to Chamberlain it was: *"Under these circumstances, the German Government accepts the offer of mediation by the Government of Great Britain, according to which the Polish party negotiations with the necessary powers will be sent to Berlin. The arrival of the Polish envoy is expected on Wednesday, August 30, 1939, and the government will immediately prepare its proposals."*

On August 29, Henderson read the text of Hitler's reply and expressed surprise at the short time given to the Poles to prepare for the meeting. Hitler replied: *"Time is short, because there is a danger that new provocations may lead to the outbreak of war."*

The next day, Hitler's proposals for the settlement of the Polish conflict were prepared. Schmidt, the interpreter, who had been present at the last meeting between Ribbentrop and Henderson, would later write: *"I suddenly realized what a game Hitler and Ribbentrop were playing. At that moment I realized that Hitler's loud proposals were only for show and were never supposed to be carried out."* A plebiscite on the question of the Polish Corridor was to be supervised by an international commission of British, French, Italian and Russian representatives; Gdansk remained in Polish hands; Poland was to be given the international highway and railway in the territory that was becoming German.

At this meeting, Henderson stated that *"it is unreasonable to expect that Great Britain will be able to arrange for the arrival of a Polish representative in Berlin within twenty-four hours."* Ribbentrop burst out: *"Time is up. Where is the Pole whom your government was supposed to deliver?"* According to Schmidt's interpreter, this meeting almost ended in a fight between the German Foreign Minister and the British Ambassador.

The last day of peace came, August 31, 1939. In the late afternoon, the Polish ambassador, J. Lipski, came to Ribbentrop and handed him a message from the Polish government about its agreement to accept the British proposal to hold direct negotiations between Germany and Poland. Below are the transcripts of a conversation between German Foreign Minister J. Ribbentrop and Polish Ambassador to Germany J. Lipski.

August 31, 1939

Ambassador Lipski read out the following instruction from his Government:

Tonight the Polish Government received news from the British Government of an exchange of views with the German Government concerning the possibility of direct negotiations between the German Government and the Polish Government.

The Polish Government is taking into account in a favourable sense the suggestions of the British Government, which will be given a formal answer in this matter in the next few hours.

To the Reich Foreign Minister's repeated question as to whether he was authorized to negotiate, Ambassador Lipski replied that he was not. He had only instructions to hand over to the Reich Foreign Minister the instructions already read, which he then handed over also in writing.

The Reich Foreign Minister then gave a brief account of the exchange of views between the German and British Governments and the German proposal that a Polish representative should arrive in Berlin during August 30. The Fuehrer waited all day, but it was not until late in the evening that he received a rather meaningless statement from the British Government.

To the repeated question of the Reich Foreign Minister about the possible powers of Lipski to conduct negotiations, he again stated that he was not authorized to negotiate.

In accordance with the instructions, this is submitted to the Reich Foreign Minister.

On hearing Ambassador Lipski's reply that he had no authority to negotiate, Ribbentrop said: "Well, then there is no point in continuing this conversation." This was the last conversation between the diplomats, after which the guns began to speak. We will only add that Ribbentrop himself did not have such powers. Why? Everything was clear.

September 1, 1939. Started...

The chronology of the first day of the outbreak of World War II is well known. It has been featured in numerous articles, books, and movies. At 5:30 a.m. on September 1, 1939, without a prior ultimatum or a formal declaration of war, Hitlerite Germany attacked Poland. At 5:40 a.m., Hitler made a radio address to his army, in which he stated that the Polish government had rejected a peaceful settlement of the disputed issues and therefore he was forced to appeal to the force of arms. The Führer threw 57 of his best divisions into Poland, German aviation smashed Polish cities, a huge number of tanks, armored cars and artillery pieces rapidly fell on Polish lands. Poland could oppose the onslaught of the Germans with only 31 divisions, 800 aircraft, of which only about half belonged to modern types, a rather modest amount of artillery and a very small number of tanks.

However, our focus lies on the stance of England and France, who pledged to promptly come to Poland's defense. In this regard, we will refer to the memoirs of the Soviet ambassador to England, I.M. Maisky, who witnessed these events and whose books have been widely published in both Russia and abroad.

Chronologically, the events unfolded as follows: on September 1, at 9:40 a.m., the British and French ambassadors in Berlin handed the German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop a statement from their governments, the essence of which was reduced to an ultimatum: if Germany did not immediately cease hostilities and did not evacuate her troops from Poland, Britain and France would fulfill their treaty obligations with regard to Poland. But for more than two days, the prime ministers were in no hurry to fulfill these obligations, which caused sharp criticism from the indignant opposition in parliament. Chamberlain tried to justify himself by referring to the possibility of

resolving the conflict by means of a "conference of five" (Germany, Italy, England, France and Poland), the convocation of which was proposed by Mussolini.

Yielding to the attacks of the opposition and the wrath of public opinion, Chamberlain was forced to promise that no later than the next morning the government would communicate to the people a definite decision. On Sunday, September 3, at 9 a.m., the British ambassador in Berlin, N. Henderson, handed the German government a note stating that if Hitler did not agree to the withdrawal of German troops from Poland within two hours, Britain would declare war on Germany. A similar demarche was made by the French ambassador in Berlin, with the only difference that the term of the French ultimatum expired not at 11, but at 5 o'clock in the afternoon on September 3. Of course, Hitler did not even respond with the inflamed brain of a predator chasing prey.

Realizing the futility and hopelessness of trying to influence the wave of events to come, Chamberlain was forced to announce a state of war between the two countries in a brief radio speech at 11:15 a.m. on September 3. At a meeting of Parliament, a depressed Chamberlain said: *"This is a sad day for all of us, but for no one is it so sad as for me. Everything I worked for, everything I hoped for, everything I believed in throughout my public activity, all this now lies in ruins."* Ambassador I. Maisky, sitting in the gallery, mentally said, which is reflected in his memoirs: *"You are only reaping the fruits of your own stupidity and malice. The chariot of justice moves slowly, but it moves all the same, and now you have stomped under its wheel. It's a pity that the broad masses of the people will have to pay for your crimes."*

Thus, England and France, albeit belatedly, fulfilled their promises and declared war on Germany. In historical literature, this war was called "strange". This is how the then leader of the Labour Party in parliament, A. Greenwood, characterized it in mid-September. *It's terrible! Awfully! Our government has made the most solemn promises to come to the aid of Poland in the event of a German attack, and what are we doing? ... We have not sent a single plane to Poland, but we use our own planes!"* Another liberal member of parliament, J. Mander, said bitterly: *"I do not understand the policy of our*

government, it stands in sharp contradiction to all our traditions, our concepts of honor and dishonor! I am simply ashamed to look at the light of God."

During the "phoney war", England and France limited themselves to local combat episodes and 18 million leaflets dropped on the territory of Poland with appeals to German soldiers.

What are the reasons for the policy of evasion by Great Britain and France of their obligations to Poland? The answer to this question has given rise to a large number of myths and speculations. But there were also serious studies and in-depth assessments. In this regard, the work of the British historian D. Kimche "The Battle That Did Not Take Place" is interesting, in which he analyzes in detail the policy of England and France, in particular, in September 1939.

Answering the question about the reasons for the inaction of Poland's Western allies, D. Kimche writes: "There is no one action, one person and one policy that could be blamed for the failure of the British and French in ensuring victory and the end of the war against Hitler in the autumn of 1939. People have made mistakes, and they continue to make mistakes. Good intentions and high moral considerations led people to such a path of action that brought disaster on their own and other peoples. And the men in power in England and France stooped to deceive their people, their Cabinet colleagues, and their Polish ally, not because they wanted to betray Poland, but because they believed most sincerely that by these means, however doubtful, they would be able to keep Hitler from going to war. In the end, however, they betrayed the Poles, as they themselves were seized by fear of the possible results of a Luftwaffe attack on the cities of England and France. This belief and this fear were justified and justified by the information which the British and French Governments and their advisers had at the time."

General de Gaulle writes in his memoirs: "When in September 1939 the French government, following the example of the British Cabinet, decided to enter the war in Poland, which had already begun by that time, I had no doubt that it was under the illusion that, despite the state of war, it would not come to serious fighting. As

commander of the Panzer Forces of the Fifth Army in Alsace, I was not at all surprised at the utter inaction of our mobilized forces, while Poland had been routed within two weeks by German armored divisions and air squadrons.

On the other hand, the representative of the High Command of the Land Forces at Hitler's headquarters, General Voormann, later noted that the German-Polish war was for Nazi Germany "a dance on a barrel of gunpowder, to which the fuse was already attached. If the forces [of Poland's Western allies] were to be set in motion, which had a tremendous superiority... then the war would inevitably end. In Poland, it would have been necessary to stop hostilities. At the most, in a week the mines of the Saar and the Ruhr area would have been lost..."

Until September, and especially in the last days of August, the Polish government, diplomats, and armed forces were absolutely convinced that Hitler would refrain from attacking Poland because of the British warning that it would cause a world war. Confident in the promised military assistance from their allies, the Poles, it must be said frankly, showed steadfastness in the fight against the Nazi hordes in the tragic first days of September. But as the Germans advanced deep into Polish territory, the Poles became anxious. In the first three days, Polish aviation was practically destroyed. On September 5, the Battle of Warsaw began.

On September 4, the Franco-Polish Treaty of Mutual Assistance was signed. It was identical to the Anglo-Polish treaty signed on August 25. The Polish ambassador in Paris then insisted on an immediate general offensive in the West. But, as it turned out, everything that the British and French promised during numerous negotiations was not put into practice. It also turned out that there was not even any coordinated plan of action between England and France in case of assistance to the Poles.

On the same day, a joint meeting of representatives of the British and French General Staffs was held, but it was inconclusive. On September 6, French Prime Minister Daladier admitted that France could not help the Poles either by means of air force or by the navy. The British Royal Air Force also categorically refused to send planes to Poland. The Allies, who had already decided that such assistance was

impossible, began to openly lie, claiming that they were either already fighting the Germans or were about to begin. Prime Minister Daladier wrote in those days: *"I rode several kilometers deep into the positions conquered by our army on German territory. I can be aware of the merits of our command, which managed to avoid unnecessary offensives... We are not afraid, like our enemies, of a long war."* But the Poles continued to hope even in such a situation.

Historian D. Kimche writes in his book: "It was a tragedy for Poland; But there was another, more severe tragedy. Refusing to take advantage of the situation that had developed at the very beginning of the war, the Western powers not only left Poland in trouble, but also plunged the whole world into five years of devastating war. For in September 1939 the question was not whether the Allied offensive in the West would help the Poles, but whether it would lead to Hitler's military defeat."

The determination of the Allied governments in the early days of the German offensive in declaring war on Germany was received with alarm and concern in Berlin. The actions taken by Chamberlain and Mussolini to convene a conference similar to the Munich conference seriously frightened Hitler. But as the British and French lost their chances day after day in confronting German aggression, Hitler's confidence grew. How can one not recall in this connection Hitler's remark at the end of August, in the midst of the exchange of messages: *"The Allies ... Allies! And what do they mean? Absolutely nothing! I saw those wretched worms of Chamberlain and Daladier in Munich. They are too cowardly to stand up for anyone. Especially to attack."*

To the Poles' credit, it must be acknowledged that even after realizing that they could no longer rely on the Allies, the Polish forces remained steadfast, refusing to surrender or engage in armistice negotiations with Germany. The Polish leadership gave the order to evacuate from Poland and move to France. The government itself and the top military commanders crossed the border with Romania near the city of Zalishchyky on the night of September 18. Let's remember this date - on the night of September 18. All this time, that is, for more than two weeks, the Soviet Union did not interfere in the events. The decision to cross the border was made only on September 16.

It becomes clear why the Soviet leadership decided to send troops to Poland only on September 16. After all, in the event of a joint strike by British and French troops at the very beginning of the Polish campaign, the situation at the front could have changed dramatically. And how Stalin would have behaved in the new situation is anyone's guess. Most likely, he would still bring his troops to the same border, as if helping Poland and its allies defeat Germany. In any case, he would not have extended a helping hand to Hitler. But, as you know, there is no subjunctive mood in history.

We crossed the border at the river... (lines from a song of that time)

Stalin's silence and non-interference irritated Hitler. Just as the Poles "bombed" the British and French, reminding them of their allied obligations, the Germans sent indignant notes to the Soviet government.

On September 3, German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop cabled the ambassador to the USSR, Schulenburg: "*We definitely expect to finally defeat the Polish army within a few weeks. We will then maintain under military control the territory which has been defined in Moscow as the sphere of German interest. Naturally, however, we shall be compelled, for military reasons, to continue hostilities against those Polish armed forces which at that time will be stationed on Polish territory belonging to the sphere of Russian interests. Please discuss this immediately with Molotov and find out whether the Soviet Union does not consider it desirable that the Russian armed forces move at the appropriate moment against the Polish armed forces in the area of the Russian sphere of interest and occupy this territory for their part.*"

Ambassador Schulenburg sent Molotov's reply on September 5, 1939: "We agree with you that at the appropriate time it will be absolutely necessary for us to begin concrete action. We believe, however, that this time has not yet come."

The Soviet military command announced training sessions in seven military districts only on the night of September 6-7. The deployment of the field administrations of the Belorussian and Kiev Special Military Districts to the Belorussian and Ukrainian fronts began only on September 11. The directive on the entry of the Red Army into the territory of Poland, signed by the People's Commissar of Defense Voroshilov and the Chief of the General Staff Shaposhnikov, was sent to the troops on September 14, 1939.

From September 1 to September 6, the German army, having broken through the Polish defenses, approached Warsaw and the Polish government left Warsaw. This event prompted Molotov, through Schulenburg, to "*congratulate and greet the German government.*" By September 10, Germany had captured 40% of the territory of Poland and all its main economic centers and seaports. counted on such a pace and therefore found itself in a difficult situation. The military needs another two or three weeks.

Another explanation is given by the historian V. Rogovin, referring to Schulenberg's reports to Berlin that the Soviet leadership was forced to take into account the fears of the general public that the Soviet Union could be involved in the war. But I think the explanation lies in the fact that the top Soviet leadership was waiting for England and France to come out in defense of Poland. And when Stalin and Molotov were convinced that there **would be no action**, then (these are, of course, my assumptions) they exchanged views with satisfaction about how right they had done, not believing the French and British at the negotiations at the end of August. Here, they would have signed, and they would have behaved exactly as they do now in the event of a German attack, leaving Germany face to face with the Soviet Union.

Time passed, and it became more and more dangerous to delay entering the war. The Germans had already reached the demarcation line approved by the non-aggression pact. Nationalists became more active in Western Ukraine, and Hitler transparently hinted that he could, in the event of a delay in the entry of the Red Army into the war, contribute to the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state. Finally, the news came that German troops had crossed the Curzon Line, the agreed demarcation line. Hitler was bluffing again, but now he could reproach Stalin for violating the agreements. And if Stalin had remained silent, there is no doubt that German troops would have been ordered to occupy all of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia. In any case, this is what happened a year earlier in Czechoslovakia.

It was in such circumstances that Stalin decided to start hostilities. At three o'clock in the morning on September 17, 1939, Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR V.P. Potemkin read out a note to the Polish ambassador to the USSR W. Grzybowski: *"The Polish-German war revealed the internal bankruptcy of the Polish state. Within ten days of military operations, Poland lost all its industrial areas and cultural centers. Warsaw as the capital of Poland no longer exists. The Polish government has disintegrated and shows no signs of life. This means that the Polish state and its government have virtually ceased to exist. Thus, the treaties concluded between the USSR and Poland terminated. Left to herself and left without leadership,*

Poland turned into a convenient field for all kinds of accidents and surprises that could create a threat to the USSR. Therefore, being neutral until now, the Soviet Government can no longer be neutral about these facts. Nor can the Soviet Government be indifferent to the fact that the Ukrainians and Byelorussians living on the territory of Poland, abandoned to the mercy of fate, should be left defenseless. In view of this situation, the Soviet Government ordered the High Command of the Red Army to order the troops to cross the border and take under their protection the lives and property of the population of the Western Ukraine and Western Byelorussia. At the same time, the Soviet Government intends to take all measures to rescue the Polish people from the unfortunate war into which they have been plunged by their unwise leaders, and to enable them to live a peaceful life."

After Potemkin had finished reading the note, a rather tough exchange of views took place between him and Ambassador Grzybowski. The Polish ambassador refused *"to accept the note, for it would be incompatible with the dignity of the Polish government."* The ambassador said many bitter words about the Soviet side, which would have been absolutely fair if it had not been for those events of recent years and especially at the end of August, when Poland did not agree to the passage of the Red Army. In the conversation, Potemkin, explaining the position of the Soviet Union, also cited the following argument: he told the ambassador that he obviously did not take into account the inability of the Soviet armed forces to resist the rapid attack of the Germans. Based on the reports of its military attachés, the Soviet government believed that the German army would inevitably approach the borders of the Union. As a result, the note was handed over to the embassy while Grzybowski was in the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.

At 4:20 a.m. on September 15, the Military Council of the Belorussian Front issued combat order No 01, according to which *"... the Belarussian, Ukrainian and Polish peoples are bleeding in the war started by the ruling landlord-capitalist clique of Poland with Germany. The workers and peasants of Byelorussia, the Ukraine and Poland rose up to fight their eternal enemies, the landlords and capitalists. The main*

forces of the Polish army were severely defeated by German troops. At dawn on September 17, 1939, the armies of the Belorussian Front went on the offensive with the task of assisting the insurgent workers and peasants of Byelorussia and Poland in overthrowing the yoke of the landlords and capitalists and preventing the seizure of the territory of Western Byelorussia by Germany. The immediate task of the front is to destroy and capture the Polish armed forces operating east of the Lithuanian border and the Grodno-Kobrin line."

On September 17, Soviet troops entered Poland from the east in the area north and south of the Pripyat marshes. At 2:00 a.m. on September 17, the German command was informed of the entry of the Red Army into the territory of Poland and at 7:00 a.m. ordered its troops to "*stop on the line Skole - Lvov - Vladimir-Volynsky - Brest - Bialystok.*" The Polish high command from Romania ordered the troops not to resist the units of the Red Army.



Entry of the Red Army into Poland



This is how the soldiers of the Red Army were met

Thus, Soviet troops entered the territory of Poland only on September 17, that is, 17 days after Hitler's intervention. Such a delay was due not only to the fact that the Polish government was still on the territory of Poland. There was another significant factor that forced the Soviet leadership to hurry. The German command, contrary to the agreement on the delimitation of the captured territory along the Curzon Line, approached the fortress of Brest on September 14. The defense of the fortress was held by the scattered remnants of the units that retreated from the west, as well as reservists - the local militia. The Poles managed to hold out for three days and only after the entry of the Red Army units left Brest. According to the Polish consul in Brest, Jarosław Księżek, the command of the fortress, perhaps until the very last moment, hoped that the Western powers, England and France would come to the aid of Poland.

As a result of the decisions made, on September 20, units of the 29th Tank Brigade of Brigade Commander Semyon Krivoshein approached Brest and began negotiations with the commander of the 19th Motorized Corps of the Wehrmacht, General Guderian. Krivosheev tried to abandon this dubious event. Probably, the Jew Semyon Krivosheev did not really want to stand next to the fascist Guderian.

In the end, on September 22, the German flag was lowered in the fortress and the Soviet flag was raised. German units paraded out of the city, units of the Red Army solemnly entered it.

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