

World War II Approaches: The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Katyn Massacre, and the “Winter War” against Finland

German-Soviet Relations

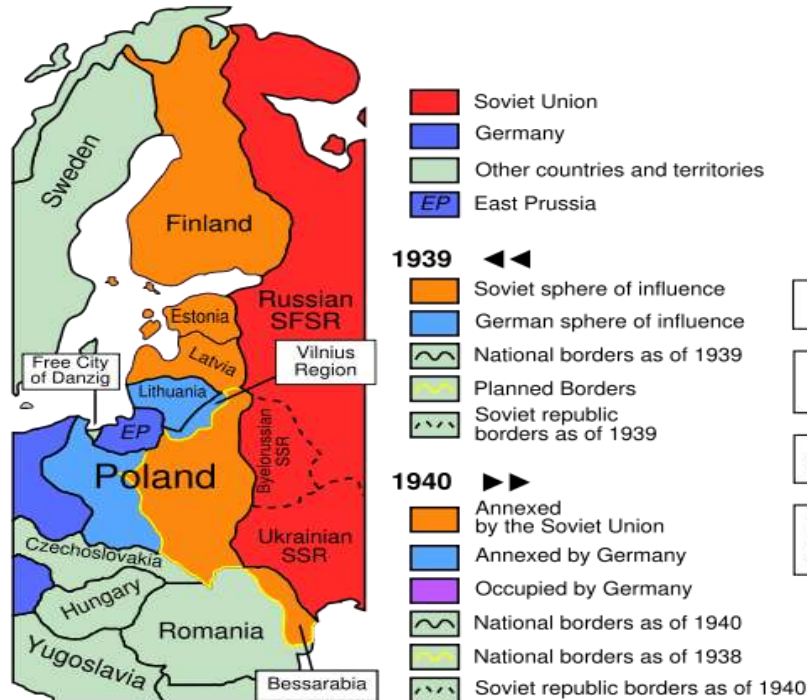
- After World War I, the U.S.S.R. and Germany found themselves to have common interests. Both were international pariahs—the Soviet Union, because it was, well, the Soviet Union, and Germany, because it had “caused the war” and lost. Germany needed raw materials and grain; the U.S.S.R., particularly after the advent of the Five-Year Plan, required expertise, technology, and industrial machinery. The two countries had a long-standing trading relationship dating back to the eighteenth century. Therefore, it was not a difficult step to re-establish these links after 1918. The trading relationship continued into the 1930s, even after the Nazis—dedicated to the destruction of “Jewish Communism”—in the Soviet Union had come to power. Hitler’s constant harangues about the “Jewish monster” (i.e., the Soviet Union) to the East, as well as Stalin’s frequent condemnations of “bourgeois fascism,” weakened but by no means broke the trading links. Indeed, certain specific exchanges—particularly of industrial machinery and engineering technology—increased after 1933.
- Relations nonetheless grew increasingly tense with each of Hitler’s foreign policy successes and the concomitant restoration of German military power. With Hitler’s demand that the Sudetenland be handed over to Germany in 1938, Stalin promoted a mutual defense treaty, whereby the U.S.S.R. would pledge to defend Czech independence if France did too, but he was turned down. The Sudetenland was soon thereafter handed over to Germany via negotiations among the French, Germans, Italians, and British at the Munich Conference (September 1938) without a shot being fired. For Stalin, this demonstrated clearly that the allies would rather isolate Russia than form a coalition against Nazi Germany. He also believed—and rightly so—that Britain and France hoped to direct Nazi aggression towards the U.S.S.R. and that the two powers would weaken one another.

The “Hitler-Stalin” Peace Pact

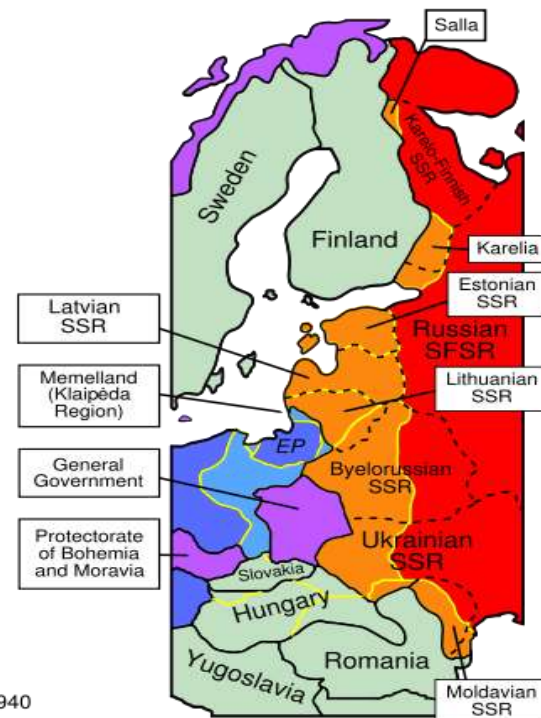
- After Munich, therefore, Stalin decided that he would foil the “western imperialist powers” by doing the impossible: achieving an alliance, or at least some sort of understanding between the U.S.S.R. and Germany. Throughout 1939, hints were exchanged by both sides that an agreement could be reached. In May Stalin replaced Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov with Vyacheslav Molotov. Litvinov was Jewish, and his replacement with a non-Jew signaled that Stalin meant to do business with the Nazis. On August 23rd, the German Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, flew to Moscow. The following day, the world awoke to hear the unlikely news that that a ten-year “non-aggression” treaty had been signed in the early morning hours. Known formally as the “Treaty of Non-aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” but referred to historically with various names, including the “Hitler-Stalin Pact,” the agreement stipulated that the two powers would maintain peace with one another for at least ten years and would remain neutral if either were attacked by a third party, such as Britain or France. The essence was basic: each power promised not to attack the other. Both sides got something. For the Germans, the agreement meant a free-hand in the West by assuring that any conflict would not unleash a war on two fronts—or at least not until the Germans wanted one. For the Soviets, the agreement meant time: time to rebuild the Red Army, which, during the Great Purges, had had its officer corps decimated. Indeed, Stalin had executed some of the army’s best generals.

- But possibly the most important component of the agreement was represented in its “secret protocols.” According to the “protocols,” their details revealed only after the end of World War II, the Soviets and Germans agreed to split up northeastern Europe into “spheres of influence.” Poland was divided along the Vistula River, with regions west going to Germany and regions East going to the U.S.S.R. Latvia, Estonia, and Finland were handed over to Russia. Lithuania was given to the Germans originally, but soon dispersed to the Soviets. The agreement foresaw occupation of these regions by the respective powers, and, indeed, the invasion of these regions began just over a week after the “secret protocols” had been signed. On September 1, 1939 Germany invaded and went on to occupy western Poland, which fell in two weeks. On September 17, the Red Army invaded and went on to occupy eastern Poland, which gave up without a fight.

Planned division of Central Europe according to Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact



Actual territorial changes 1939 - 1940



- **Modern History Sourcebook:
The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, 1939**
- ***Text of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact***
- The Government of the German Reich and The Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics desirous of strengthening the cause of peace between Germany and the U.S.S.R., and proceeding from the fundamental provisions of the Neutrality Agreement concluded in April, 1926 between Germany and the U.S.S.R., have reached the following Agreement:
 - **Article I.** Both High Contracting Parties obligate themselves to desist from any act of violence, any aggressive action, and any attack on each other, either individually or jointly with other Powers.
 - **Article II.** Should one of the High Contracting Parties become the object of belligerent action by a third Power, the other High Contracting Party shall in no manner lend its support to this third Power.
 - **Article III.** The Governments of the two High Contracting Parties shall in the future maintain continual contact with one another for the purpose of consultation in order to exchange information on problems affecting their common interests.
 - **Article IV.** Should disputes or conflicts arise between the High Contracting Parties shall participate in any grouping of Powers whatsoever that is directly or indirectly aimed at the other party.
 - **Article V.** Should disputes or conflicts arise between the High Contracting Parties over problems of one kind or another, both parties shall settle these disputes or conflicts exclusively through friendly exchange of opinion or, if necessary, through the establishment of arbitration commissions.
 - **Article VI.** The present Treaty is concluded for a period of ten years, with the proviso that, in so far as one of the High Contracting Parties does not advance it one year prior to the expiration of this period, the validity of this Treaty shall automatically be extended for another five years.
 - **Article VII.** The present treaty shall be ratified within the shortest possible time. The ratifications shall be exchanged in Berlin. The Agreement shall enter into force as soon as it is signed.
- ***[The section below was not published at the time the above was announced.]***
- **Secret Additional Protocol.**
- **Article I.** In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and U.S.S.R. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is recognized by each party.
- **Article II.** In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San.
- The question of whether the interests of both parties make desirable the maintenance of an independent Polish States and how such a state should be bounded can only be definitely determined in the course of further political developments.
- In any event both Governments will resolve this question by means of a friendly agreement.
- **Article III.** With regard to Southeastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterestedness in these areas.
- **Article IV.** This protocol shall be treated by both parties as strictly secret.
- Moscow, August 23, 1939.
- For the Government of the German Reich v. Ribbentrop
- Plenipotentiary of the Government of the U.S.S.R. V. Molotov

Secret Protocol to the Treaty, in German

Geheimes Zusatzprotokoll.

Aus Anlaß der Unterzeichnung des Nichtangriffsvertrages zwischen dem Deutschen Reich und der Union der Sozialistischen Sowjetrepubliken haben die unterzeichneten Bevollmächtigten der beiden Teile in streng vertraulicher Aussprache die Frage der Abgrenzung der beiderseitigen Interessensphären in Osteuropa erörtert. Diese Aussprache hat zu folgendem Ergebnis geführt:

1. Für den Fall einer territorial-politischen Umgestaltung in den zu den baltischen Staaten (Finnland, Estland, Lettland, Litauen) gehörenden Gebieten bildet die nördliche Grenze Litauens zugleich die Grenze der Interessensphären Deutschlands und der UdSSR. Hierbei wird das Interesse Litauens am Wilnaer Gebiet beiderseits anerkannt.

2. Für den Fall einer territorial-politischen Umgestaltung der zum polnischen Staate gehörenden Gebiete werden die Interessensphären Deutschlands und der UdSSR ungeführt durch die Linie der Flüsse Warau, Weichsel und San abgegrenzt.

Die Frage, ob die beiderseitigen Interessen die Erhaltung eines unabhängigen polnischen Staates erwünscht erscheinen lassen und wie dieser Staat abzugrenzen wäre, kann endgültig erst im Laufe der weiteren politischen

Entwicklung geklärt werden.

In jedem Falle werden bei Regierungen diese Frage in Wege einer freundschaftlichen Verständigung lösen.

3) Hinsichtlich des Südostens Europas wird von sowjetischer Seite das Interesse an Bessarabien betont. Von deutscher Seite wird das völlige politische Desinteressement an diesen Gebieten erklärt.

4) Dieses Protokoll wird von beiden Seiten streng geheim behandelt werden.

Moskau, den 23. August 1939.

Für die
Deutsche Reichsregierung
W. Ribbentrop

Für die
Regierung
UdSSR
W. Molotow



- After the documents were signed, pleasantries were exchanged between Nazi Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Stalin. Both were agreed that previous “misunderstandings” about, for example, Germany’s “Anti-Communist International” organization were just that: “misunderstandings.” Their ostensibly “common” interests had always been directed against Britain, which they criticized as a nation of “shopkeepers,” a reference, it is true, that both Hitler and Stalin (and Napoleon for that matter) had frequently used. The bottom line: Stalin seems to have taken the treaty seriously. Von Ribbentrop, as well as Hitler of course, saw it as a sham. They were already planning their invasion.



The Joint Declaration

- On September 28th, after Poland had been occupied on both sides, the two countries issued a joint declaration: “After the Government of the German Reich and the Government of the U.S.S.R. have, by means of the treaty signed today, definitively settled the problems arising from the collapse of the Polish state and have thereby created a sure foundation for a lasting peace in Eastern Europe, they mutually express their conviction that it would serve the true interest of all peoples to put an end to the state of war existing at present between Germany on the one side and England and France on the other. Both Governments will therefore direct their common efforts, jointly with other friendly powers if occasion arises, toward attaining this goal as soon as possible. Should, however, the efforts of the two Governments remain fruitless, this would demonstrate the fact that England and France are responsible for the continuation of the war, whereupon, in case of the continuation of the war, the Governments of Germany and of the U.S.S.R. shall engage in mutual consultations with regard to necessary measures.”

- **Soviet and German soldiers fraternizing in Lublin, along their common frontier through the center of Poland.**



Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-013-0068-18A
Foto: Höllenthal | 22. September 1938

- **Soviet and German soldiers fraternizing in Brest, again along their common Polish border.**



The Katyn Massacre

- One of the most prominent concerns of Soviet officials, first and foremost Joseph Stalin, was to eliminate each and every potential threat to Soviet control in occupied Poland. From the Soviet perspective, this threat represented itself in the form of the Polish officer corps, as well as priests, industrialists, estate owners, and any other group that might serve as a “fifth column.” The purges in the U.S.S.R. had proven the efficacy and practicality of mass purges, and therefore the decision was made—authorized by the Politburo on March 5, 1940—to eliminate the entire Polish officer corps and, along with it, other rebellious types. Consensus has it that some 22,000 poles, of whom 10,000 were army officers, were killed in the weeks that followed. Many of the massacres—and the most famous among them-- occurred on April 3 and 4th in the Katyn forest, near Smolensk. The NKVD (Soviet Secret Police), however, also carried out significant numbers of the killings in the inner sanctuaries of various prisons and police installations. Among the dead were 14 Polish generals. The motive for the killings has been widely debated, but one main theme seems clear: Stalin wanted to destroy the potential for Poland to rise as a military threat some time in the future.

The Discovery at Katyn

- The fate of the Poles who were killed remained a mystery well into the war. In late June 1941, following the German invasion of the U.S.S.R., the Polish government-in-exile formed an alliance with the Soviets. Not surprisingly, Stalin was asked about the missing officers, who were seen as critical to resistance to the Germans. He explained that “they had lost track of them.” Nothing was made of it until 1943, when German general Rudolf Christoph Freiherr von Gersdorff discovered a grave containing the bodies of over 4,000 officers (this was the number that was eventually determined) in the Katyn forest near Smolensk—hence the infamous name of the massacres. Joseph Goebbels, Minister for Enlightenment and Propaganda in Germany, immediately recognized the value of the discovery, for it had the potential to divide the Allies and the Soviets, whose alliance was recognized as a dire threat to Germany. On April 3, 1943, broadcasters in Berlin revealed to the world that the German army had discovered “a ditch ... 28 metres long and 16 metres wide [92 ft by 52 ft], in which the bodies of 3,000 Polish officers were piled up in 12 layers.” International investigators were invited in to examine the discovery and, shortly thereafter, it was determined that the killings occurred, indeed, in early 1940, long before the Germans had occupied the region. (The Soviets claimed that the executions had been conducted by the Nazis.) The findings placed great stress on the alliance between the western powers and the Soviet Union. No fool, Winston Churchill was aware that the crimes had been committed by the Soviets. As he noted in his diary, “Alas, the German revelations are probably true. The Bolsheviks can be very cruel.” But the alliance was never broken. As Churchill also noted some time later, “we shall certainly oppose vigorously any ‘investigation’ by the International Red Cross or any other body in any territory under German authority.” The need to defeat Nazi Germany, which depended in large part on the Red Army’s advance from the East, outweighed everything else. Nonetheless, awareness of the “Katyn massacres” certainly helped trigger the disagreements that emerged soon after Germany’s defeat and caused the Cold War. As the threat of Germany retreated from people’s minds, the awareness of the depravity and horrors of Stalin’s regime, represented by the killings at Katyn, returned.

- **Bodies of officers in the Katyn pit.**



- **Aerial photograph of mass grave (center) in Katyn forest.**



Excavated mass grave at Katyn



Winter War, Nov.-March 1940

- After occupying Poland, the Soviets went on to take the rest of their “non-aggression treaty” spoils. Their first target: Finland. Stalin believed that Finland, like Poland, would simply give up. He was sadly mistaken. On paper the odds looked good. Soviet forces were overwhelmingly superior to those of the Finns. For each Finnish soldier, there were four Russians. For each Finnish plane, there were 300 Soviet aircraft. For every Finnish tank, the Soviets had four hundred. But these statistics missed essentialities of the situation: the Red Army’s leadership had been decimated during the purges. The morale of the Red Army was, therefore, terrible. Finnish territory was, to say the least, treacherous and cold. The Finns knew had to use their geography to their advantage, and they did—with striking results.

- At right, Red Army invasion routes.



The Finns were ready for them.



Battle of Raate-Road

- No battle of the conflict exhibited how Soviet forces were brutalized better than the Battle of Raate-Road. In January 1940, the Soviets sent one of their “elite” divisions, the 44th, to assist the 163rd division, which was stuck deep in Finnish territory. Moving slowly along the Raate-Suomussalmi road, the 44th was attacked mercilessly from strategic positions. The attacks were conducted by four Finnish squadrons, which quickly made mincemeat of the stunned Soviet soldiers, cutting up their forces into smaller and smaller pieces until those who survived struck out into the wilderness to try to escape. The Finns soon came upon the frozen bodies of thousands of Red Army soldiers who did not make it.
- This episode was emblematic of the whole war. Against overwhelming odds, the Finns kept repelling the disorderly and, at times, seemingly helpless Soviets.



- The conflict continued into March 1941, when the Finns agreed to a truce. They had defeated the Soviets, but realized that their limited resources would eventually be overwhelmed by the much larger Soviet Union. According to the Moscow Peace Treaty, Finland gave up about 9 percent of its territory, including a small portion of its industry. Nonetheless, unlike its neighbors—in particular the Baltic States (about which I am about to say something), Finland retained its independence.
- Following the launching of Operation Barbarossa against the U.S.S.R. in June 1941, Finland allied with Nazi Germany. After the war turned against the Axis in 1944, Finland signed a separate peace with the Soviet Union and retained its independence throughout the Cold War—a reflection of the fact that the Red Army feared further engagement with the Finns.

- Territories ceded by the Finns to the U.S.S.R. under the Moscow Peace Treaty.



One Million Red Army Dead?



- The above statistic noting possibly one million Soviet dead is almost certainly an exaggeration. Nonetheless, it does point to the overwhelming defeat of the Soviets. Why did the gallant Red Army perform so badly? The most obvious reason was that Stalin had destroyed the army's leadership cadres. By purging the best and most able officers, as well as generals, engineers, and tacticians, Stalin ensured that this vast army of millions would be disorganized and undirected on the battle field. The destruction of the officer corps also had a devastating effect on the morale of the average soldier. No one knew who to look up to. This stood in dramatic contrast to the Finns, who were devoutly devoted to their officers and who felt they were fighting desperately to preserve their own freedom—which they were.

Hitler Observed the Winter War with Great Interest

- Lessons were learned from the “Winter War” disaster. Stalin, for one, immediately went about rebuilding the Red Army, trying to recruit officers and leaders based, not on political reliability, as had been his penchant before the disaster, but according to their military skills and cunning. Hitler, however, decided that the war demonstrated that the Red Army was irreparably damaged. If a relatively small group of Finns could hold it off, how could the Red Army stand up to the mighty German *Wehrmacht*? As Hitler began to think and express to his colleagues, the “U.S.S.R.” was rotten; all one had to do was kick in the front door and the whole thing would come crashing down. As the “Winter War” was still being fought in January 1941, Hitler gave the order to invade the U.S.S.R. as soon as possible. The invasion began only six months later.



- Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were not so lucky. Immediately after the Soviet occupation of Poland, they were forced to sign a “mutual assistance” treaty with the U.S.S.R. The following spring, the U.S.S.R. began accusing each of the countries of reneging on this treaty and working to undermine the Soviet Union. In June, Red Army and N.K.V.D. (secret police) troops invaded each of the countries, none of whom had a defendable frontier. The N.K.V.D. went onto appoint puppet governments, essentially bringing each of the states into the Soviet “Empire.” Thousands of Letts (Latvians), Lithuanians, and Estonians deemed threats to Communism were subsequently executed or shipped off to Siberia; Baltic agriculture was collectivized, and command economies were instituted in each of the countries.
- With the arrival of German forces in the summer of 1941, a brief period of quasi-“independence,” though under German tutelage, ensued. However, it came to a quick halt with the return of the Red Army in the summer of 1944.
- To the story of the Nazi invasion and repulsion, we turn next week.

