

# The Struggles and Gains of the Soviet Union: The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

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## ABSTRACT

The Non-Aggression Pact between Nazis Germany and Soviet Russia, also noted as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, was signed in August, 1939 — right before the invasion of Poland. It is commonly interpreted that the Non-Aggression pact was one of the essential triggers of WWII, and the center of the thesis is to analyze the connections and intertwined relationships between Germany and Russia regarding the protocols, causes, and effects of the Molotov Ribbentrop Pact. Through personal letters and public speeches from, leaders, foreign ministers, ambassadors and also articles and publications from historians, it is evident that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was more secretive and significant than it seems. While the public protocols reflect Russia and Germany's intension for quelled aggression and national security, the secret protocols reveal each Nation's private intensions. For Germany it meant collective security against Western Europe an ensured the acquisition of Poland. In Russia's perspective, the pact brought economic development through German investments and thwarted Japan from aggression. While the pact provided benefits to both countries, their ideological differences prevented an effective yet sincere alliance. Russia's long economic objective proved them innocent in this matter, whereas Germany's belligerent intension to conquer led to Operation Barbarossa.

**Keywords:** *Non-Aggression Pact of 1939, Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, The Alliance between Stalin and Hitler, The Third Five Year Plan, Operation Barbarossa, Partition of Poland*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

World War II, the most massive scale of armed conflict the world has ever seen just twenty years after the Versailles treaty in 1918, was beyond the definition of destruction. WWII falls within the category of total war due to its massive involvement of multiple global superpowers and its complete unrestricted of strategic moves, weapons, and militants. However, WWII was also a war of ideologies; the western democratic nations such as France, Britain, and the U.S formed a "strange alliance" with communist Russia and China to combat facism in Italy, Germany, and its conquered allies. To an extent, democratic countries cooperated with communist nations to defeat their common enemy, facism, but the connection between these incredibly dissimilar political systems lends itself to a much more ambivalent, nuanced, and complex relationship. Nazism was never at war with the communists, but in cooperation; the Non Aggression Pact signed by Germany and Russia was truly a shock to the whole world. The significance of the Non Aggression pact, the reason for Hilter's immediate invasion and why Stalin was neglecting this possibility, is the essential question. German and Russian behaviors before and after the violation of the Non Aggression pact remains a great piece of the puzzle in world history. In fact, Germany's

alliance with Russia proved tactically beneficial. When Hitler decided to invade Russia without warning in Operation Barbarossa, with an massive army including more than three million military personnel, five thousand tanks, around ten thousand artillery, and three thousand aircraft, it devastated the Russian superpower and paved a path for future collaboration of volunteers supporting the German Reich.<sup>[1]</sup> The Non aggression pact, in truth, was a great controversy residing between the relationship of Nazis Germany and Communist Russia; it was psychological warfare between two great dictators who would deceive each other at all cost in order to achieve their own objectives.

When the Nonaggression pact was officially signed on August 23rd, 1939, in Moscow, "[it] stunned the world and paved the way for the beginning of World War II with Hitler assur[ing] his troops would not have to fight a war on two fronts."<sup>[2]</sup> The protocols were simple and straightforward; the combined seven articles of the pact's protocols roughly emphasized a statement of mutual acknowledgement, excluding third parties' influences and attempting to quell aggression towards one another. Furthermore, the two countries also stated that no military actions would be executed against each other.<sup>[3]</sup> However, the secret supplement protocols attached with the Non Aggression pact indicated the splitting of soon to be conquered territories, such as the Baltic States and Poland.<sup>[4]</sup> Beyond such agreements, Germany and the

USSR reached an economic contract exchanging Reichsmarks for Raw Materials.[<sup>5</sup>] Overall, such financial arrangements provided the Soviet funds for “important Soviet capital construction”, and opened up room for growth regarding Germany’s industries.[<sup>6</sup>]

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. *The Triggers of the Non-Aggression Pact*

The seemingly “impossible alliance” that brought together two enemy states consolidated its symbiotic traits. However, it is important to note that the Soviet Union and Nazis Germany were brought together under immense foreign pressure and a lack of suitable alternatives; the Non Aggression pact was the last solution. In 1939, Hitler aimed to acquire territories in Poland without waging a two-front war with Russia in the east, while Stalin was determined to move against Japan in East Asia in order to eliminate Russia’s potential enemy on their second front. The Soviets and their Mongolian allies launched an attack on the Japanese at a contested border (between Mongolia and Manchuko) on August 20th, 1939. The immediate signing of the Non-Aggression pact three short days after the invasion not only temporarily eliminated the potential threat from Japan for the Soviets, but also nullified the Anti-Comintern Pact signed between Japan and Nazis Germany. [<sup>7</sup>] The nullification of the Anti-Comintern Pact demonstrates Germany’s determination as they chose the Soviet Union over Japan as their ally. In simpler terms, “Stalin had achieved exactly the result that he wanted” [<sup>8</sup>]; he maximized short term security for the Soviet Union in East Asia, and also acquired consent from Germany to obtain spheres of influences in Poland and the Baltic States according to the Secret Additional Protocol of the Non-Aggression Pact.

Stalin’s foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, believed that although the Non-Aggression pact did not ensure alliance, it’s signing meant “other possibilities of ensuring peace and eliminating the danger of war between Germany and the USSR”.[<sup>9</sup>] Furthermore, Molotov legitimized the alliance with Nazis Germany by bringing up the longevity and obstacles encountered during a four month negotiation with Britain and France; he stated “that the Anglo - French - Soviet negotiations were doomed to fail”.[<sup>10</sup>] Molotov specifically mentioned the controversy and inefficiency during this negotiation regarding Poland; while he claimed that the USSR was willing to offer the military assistance to Poland requested by Britain and France, Poland strongly refused any form of military aid offered by the USSR. Molotov was frustrated and irritated by this ludicrous situation where “assistance on the part of the USSR is declared beforehand to be unnecessary and an intrusion”.[<sup>11</sup>] Moreover, Molotov publicly denounced Britain and France’s incompetence and unwillingness to provide assistance to the USSR against Germany aggression when the USSR promised the same; he argued

that “such pact of mutual assistance” is nothing more than “camouflaged chicanery”.[<sup>12</sup>] At last, Molotov strongly criticized the hypocritical and disrespectful attitudes of British and French delegates during the proceeding. Molotov emphasized the laziness of Britain and France to send unimportant personnel with a weak work ethic to such a manner that they deemed serious. Molotov claims these “intrinsic contradictions” as one of many other major causes that led to the failure of the Anglo-French-Russian alliance.[<sup>13</sup>]

The failure to draft an alliance between these three countries is yet another cause that led the USSR to turn to Germany, however, the alliance with Germany, according to Molotov, coincided with the interests of Nazis Germany. The Soviet Union desired Poland as a buffer satellite state against western attacks (ironically from Germany) while Germany failed to create an offensive against the USSR with Japan or Poland. When all options were unavailable for Germany, the Non-Aggression Pact “replaced the phantom of a German-Polish- Japanese encirclement of the Soviet Union with a very real German-Soviet encirclement of Poland” while at the same time, excluding the Japanese. [<sup>14</sup>]

### 2.2. *Mistakes made by Soviet Russia*

However, the Soviet Union was unable to recognize the essence of this pact. The Pact with Germany was beneficial, but it was far from ideal. For Soviet Russia, the best situation and foreign diplomatic move would be “to conclude a collective security agreement with all the antifascist powers.”[<sup>15</sup>] On the other hand, as the United States was still inactive in European affairs, Britain and France were “hoping for an agreement with Germany and were trying to direct German aggression eastward.”[<sup>16</sup>] The attempted cooperation between the Anglo-French alliance with Hitler logically justifies the failure of their negotiations with the Soviets. Nevertheless, Stalin secured the pact with Hitler, but his mistake wasn’t anything related to the pact’s protocols; the Non-aggression pact did not exactly stand for friendship. While the Pact was beneficial to both parties in many channels, the Soviet Union failed to recognize the underlying risk and the dangerous motive of the Reich. As the author Konstantin Simonov stated:

It still seems to me that the pact of 1939 was founded on *raison d’etat*, in the almost hopeless situation we were in back then, the summer of 1939, when the danger of the Western states pushing fascist Germany against us became immediate and real. And yet, when you look back, you feel that for all the logic of *raison d’etat* in this pact, much that accompanied its conclusion took away from us, simply as people, for almost two years, some part of that exceptionally important sense of ourselves, which was and is our precious peculiarity, connected with such a concept as “the first socialist state in the world.” ... That is, something happened which was in a moral sense very bad.[<sup>17</sup>]

Simonov implies that under normal circumstances, such a pact would not in any way have been formed, as both parties were compelled to form an alliance. But instead of realizing this, Stalin put too much trust in Hitler; this was a significant mistake for Soviet Russia.

Another mistake committed by Soviet Russia was the signing of the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty in aim to re-establish peace and order in the collapsed Polish territories.<sup>[18]</sup> Article number II stated that both parties recognized the boundaries and would be committed to suppress agitation from third parties. It directly led to “a complete halt to all antifacist propaganda in the USSR.”<sup>[19]</sup> To clarify such a claim, Soviet foreign minister Molotov, in his speech delivered on October 31st, 1939, established Germany as a country “in the position of a state which is striving for the earliest termination of war and for peace” while discrediting and denouncing Britain and France for their actions “in favour of continuing the war and... opposed to the conclusion of peace.”<sup>[20]</sup> The pact signed between Germany and Russia certainly did not mean peace, but from Molotov’s statements, Soviet Russia openly justified their alliance with Germany by depicting the Nazis as a victim of aggression. Such actions halted Russian caution towards Germany and anti-facism sentiments within the Soviet Union even when Germany’s criminal and aggressive intentions were clear.

Clearly, Stalin’s attempts to mitigate political tension with Germany failed, as Germany, in June, 1941, launched Operation Barbarossa, a full-scale surprise invasion against the Soviet Union. Although called the National Socialist German workers party, Hitler’s political perspective was the opposite of communism. It was known that Hitler had a fervent anti-communist mind due to his identity as “an advocate of the hierarchical principal” and his “lack[] [of] sympathy for the underdog.”<sup>[21]</sup> Hitler’s widely known political stance made impossible a permanent friendship with Soviet Russia. When Germany launched the strike against Soviet Russia, Nazis Germany classified Operation Barbarossa as “appropriate counter-measures in the military sphere” due to “a serious threat of a political and military nature which was emanating from Soviet Russia.”<sup>[22]</sup> Hitler, in his speech delivered to the German people on June 22, 1941, claimed that “the Jewish-Bolshevist rulers in Moscow have attempted to set not only Germany, but all of Europe, aflame” and that “[they] have constantly attempted to subject us and the other European peoples to their rule” through intellectual and militaristic means.<sup>[23]</sup> It is therefore logical to conclude that Germany’s invasion was a preemptive strike against Soviet Russia’s ill intentions towards Germany.

### ***2.3. Russia’s innocence interpreted through their economy***

However, Hitler’s assessment of Soviet Russia’s potential actions isn’t supported through historic evidence, especially when considering “Stalin’s trade relationship

with Germany and its association with Stalin’s capital investment under Russia’s Third Five-Year Plan.”<sup>[24]</sup> While the first and second Five Year Plans’ objective was “to lay the foundation of socialist society,” the Third Five Year plan aimed “to initiate along the whole line competition for economic primacy with capitalism.”<sup>[25]</sup> According to Molotov, one of Soviet Russia’s challenges in the Third Five Year Plan was to boost Soviet Russia’s development in order to relieve itself from “being economically less developed than the capitalist countries,” and in order to do so, Molotov urged, in the Third Five Year Plan, to employ “all that is best in modern engineering and the technology of production, and also in scientific methods of organizing work.”<sup>[26]</sup> For Soviet Russia to efficiently achieve their goal, Russia “must utilize the experience of other countries in all respects” in order to reach the goal of the Third Five Year Plan.<sup>[27]</sup> Soviet Russia’s aim for rapid economic development justifies “the revival of economic negotiations” between Germany and Soviet Russia. Such extensive capital investments, noted by Molotov, was an essential factor in “[t]he huge plan for the promotion of the national economy in the Third Five-Year Plan period necessitat[ing] new construction on a corresponding scale”. The 181 billion Russian Rubles deposited for capital investment, “exceed[ing] the sum total of capital investments under both the First and Second FiveYear Plans,” demonstrates Soviet Russia’s immense attention directed towards economic growth.<sup>[28]</sup>

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Thus, it is the most logical explanation that the Soviet Union, due to their close-knit economic relationship with Germany, had no desire to violate the Non Aggression Pact. Stalin’s commitment to Soviet Union’s industrial growth provides significant meaning and evidence that supports Russia’s need for a friendly relationship with Germany. On the other hand, Stalin’s long term economic pursuit did not exactly coincide with Hitler’s short term diplomatic objectives; in this case, Hitler commitment to the Non Aggression Pact is not nearly as strong as Stalin’s.<sup>[29]</sup> In Hitler’s words, the negotiated details of the Non Aggression pact “has been produced which must be regarded as the greatest possible gain for the Axis.”<sup>[30]</sup> However, what would forever remain a great mystery among modern historians is why Stalin neglected all signs of a German invasion even with the help from his spies. Maybe Stalin simply did not believe such a statement, or that he trusted Hitler’s words, but such behavior from Stalin during this extremely tense period is simply foolish. It’s also important to note that in January, 1934, Germany and Poland signed a similar pact “of a lasting peace between their countries” with “the guarantee of peace” for a duration of ten years.<sup>[31]</sup> Just as expected Germany violated this pact and invaded Poland immediately after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, emphasizing the aggression and ambition of Germany. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, similarly, was a risk; two ideologically

conflicted countries formed an tenuous alliance in order to benefit themselves as much as possible, and in this case, it was indeed an alliance between devil.

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