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Background to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact Legends and Facts

The old debate about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which was signed in Moscow on 23 August 1939, has resurfaced. The alliance between Nazi Germany and Communist Soviet Union has been a matter for controversy since the time of signing. Even contemporaries had difficulties comprehending how two countries with such diametrically opposing ideologies could come to an agreement. Surely, these contemporaries did not know about the secret clause attached to the pact of non-aggression, which divided Central Europe between the two powers. It was in the context of this agreement that the Wehrmacht attacked Poland on 1 September 1939, and the World War II began. Then, on 17 September, the Red Army attacked Poland, too. On 28 September the two totalitarian dictatorships negotiated and fixed the exact boundaries of occupied territories.

The world was already aware of Hitler's ambitions. The Anschluss had taken place by then and Czechoslovakia was no more. Therefore, it was not the interest driven attitude that surprised European public opinion but Stalin's response and approval. The anti-Fascist Left and supporters of the Soviet Union were and are still unwilling to face Stalin's real nature and his readiness to make a pact with Hitler and eradicate independent states. Hence their repeated efforts to blame powers of Western Europe or even, lately, Poland.

This takes place on each anniversary. For example, on 23 August 2009 the Russian state television screened a "documentary" that made an effort to convince spectators that Western Europe and Poland were responsible for the pact. In my essay [*Egy paktum furcsa évfordulója*](#) [Strange anniversary of a pact], I wrote about the phenomenon in the renown Hungarian weekly, *Élet és Irodalom*. The essay received a number of comments from experts such as Krisztián Ungváry, Gábor Székely, Zoltán Sz. Bíró és Tamás Krausz. However, the debate was eventually not about the pact itself, rather about whether Stalin planned the Sovietization of Central Europe in 1939. Thus, the debate was unfortunately twisted and it was not about the essential question.

At the end of 2019, President Vladimir Putin revived the argument of that documentary and triggered a number of responses, internationally. In a public statement, the Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, renounced the Russian attempt at falsifying history. The German ambassador to Poland and of the United States of America supported the Polish point of view. A response from the Foreign Ministry of Russia soon followed.



Boundaries of German and Soviet spheres of interests as specified in the pact (Map designed by Béla Nagy)

Let us see the arguments politicians and historians (see: Dyukov, 2009 – in Russian; Krausz, 2016 – in Hungarian) wishing to defend Stalin’s decision usually put on the table. Then, let’s try to reconstruct the chain of actual events based on available documents.

I.

Their prime argument is that the pact was only one of many similar agreements and it was the consequence of the Munich Agreement. “The Soviet-German non-aggression pact was a response to the Munich Agreement.” Those that do not see it this way “excuse Western European democracies, thus, the pact that they made with Hitler” (Krausz, 2016. 281.).

The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was indeed the last in a series of agreements. There is no debate about this. Germany and the Soviet Union signed their first agreement at Rapallo. Section no. 5 of the Treaty of Rapallo clearly referred to the military aspects: “The Government of Germany is ready to support cooperation that private companies wish to start in the Soviet Union.” Secrecy and cover were required because the Treaties of Versailles did not permit Germany to develop its army. Subsequently, the two states – that were the German companies and the Soviet Union – signed a number of contracts. For Berlin, it was of importance that it could establish military facilities, shooting ranges, and military schools in the Soviet Union. They had an airbase and a fighter training centre in Lipeck, a tank crew training centre at Kazan, while north of Moscow and in the Saratov area there were designated areas for practicing for

combat gas attacks. For the Soviets, access to modern military technology was highly valuable, thus, they could launch a reform of the armed forces.

Antipathy towards Poland constituted a common denominator between German and Soviet politics. Berlin was not willing to accept that it lost Poznan as a result of the Polish uprising of December 1918, while Moscow never forgot that Józef Piłsudski's army defeated the Red Army in 1920. For the Soviets, it was not only about development of military equipment and training. Cooperation with the Germans was important for improving their preparedness in military theory, too. The commander of the army defeated in the Battle of Warsaw of 1920, Mikhail Tuhachevsky, gave lectures in Germany. Hans von Seeckt - the commander of the Reichswehr, who proposed a German-Soviet military action against Poland in 1921 and argued for eradicating the Polish state in 1922 – lectured in the Soviet Union (Gorlov, 2001).

The cooperation that began at Rapallo continued with a trade agreement in 1925 and a neutrality pact in 1926. The latter was to last for a period of five years, and it was renewed in 1931 and 1933 (that is after Hitler's rise to power) and the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact referred to this latter agreement. It is true that when the terror reached those officers and commanders of the Red Army that took part in the cooperation with Germany to develop the Soviet army, German-Soviet relations became hostile. Stalin claimed that the reason for executing Tuhachevsky and his team was that they were spies of the Reichswehr, however, it was an argument used as a cover for getting rid of potential opposition in the army.

Let us now turn to the Soviet position towards the Munich Agreement! There is consensus among historians that the agreement of 30 September 1938 in which Daladier, Chamberlain and Mussolini agreed to annexing the Sudetenland, which had a German majority population, to Germany and, thus, cutting into Czechoslovakia was a morally unjustifiable act and did not bring about peace. Using Russian and Hungarian archival documents, Attila Kolontári proved that the Soviet Union was not worried about the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia and was more anxious over the German expansion. Maxim Litvinov Soviet Foreign Minister for Foreign Affairs told Mihály Jungerth-Arnóthy, the Hungarian ambassador in Moscow that the Soviet Union would agree to a general revision that includes some amendments of international boundaries. The Hungarian ambassador put this to Prime Minister Kálmán Darányi in format according to which the Soviet Union will not come to the aid of Czechoslovakia. (Kolontári, 2009. 224–227.). The Soviets were both excluded and happy to stay away from the issue of the Czechoslovakia. As proof of their intentions, one might cite the article that appeared in the Pravda on 14 February 1938 in which Stalin argued that the Soviet Union expects that the conflict among capitalist countries will be so deep that it will become a war and that will the moment of the proletarian revolution.

Those that support the Soviet and Russian argument about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact mention that Poland acted immoral and lost its right to judge similar acts when it occupied the area of Teschen/Cieszyn, thus taking part in the partition of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939. However, the Polish move meant the recapture of the territory that Czechoslovakia occupied in 1920, at the time when the Bolshevik Army besieged Warsaw.

II.

Another argument that Russian revisionism puts forwards is that the Government of Poland was allegedly pro-German. This is something that the Soviet intelligence kept reporting to

Stalin. The Polish stand was in the making for years and eventually – with astonishing short-sightedness - they decided to link the interests of Poland to Germany against the Soviet Union and Lithuania.

In reality, German-Polish relations were tense after 1918. Germans did not resign themselves to losing their Eastern territories. Hans von Seeckt, the Chief-of-staff of the army argued several times that Poland must be eradicated. Radical anti-Polish propaganda was a feature of the Weimar Republic.

Polish leadership was worried about German revisionism to the extent that they signed a mutual non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union on 25 July 1932. Negotiations for these began in 1926 and then gained momentum with the ratification of the Litvinov Protocol in 1929. The Soviet Union, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Romania declared that they would mutually forgo aggression and territorial claims. The treaty also stated that these states would resolve conflict in a peaceful way. Moscow also signed bilateral treaties with the countries of the treaty. When Herbert von Dirksen the German ambassador to Moscow, asked Kliment Vorosilov about the implications of the Polish-Soviet treaty on the German-Soviet relations, the Marshall replied that there were no implications. When Wilhelm Adam German general aksked Vorosilov about the international boundary with Poland he clearly stated that „the Soviet Union does not accept the current bounderies with Poland.” (*Szovjetszko–polszkije odnosenyija...* 2004. 64.).

With Hitler’s rise to power the German pressure on Warsaw eased as the Nazis needed time before starting a major war. The Polish diplomacy, led by Józef Beck, made use of this and managed to obtain German consent for issuing a declaration of mutual non-aggression on 26 January 1934. Thus, Poland did not form alliance with Hitler, it was only a declaration (deklaracja, Erklärung) of non-aggression.

The Soviets kept an eye on the Polish-German negotiations. Karol Radek (who was Stalin’s advisor on international relations at that time) met Józef Piłsudskival and Józef Beck in the Summer of 1933. The Polish leaders asked the Soviet Union to do their good offices on behalf of Poland regarding the Corridor of Gdańsk corridor and offered that the Polish troops would engage the German army if it was to advance towards Leningrad. Stalin, however, did not raise the issue of the corridor with Hitler. Despite this, Radke believed that Polish decision makers were afraid of German Nazism and there was no reason to fear a Polish attack against the Soviet Union. In his report dated 3 December, he noted that there is not even anti-Soviet propaganda in the country. He clearly stated that the Polish-German declaration that was in the making did not have anti-Soviet Union component. Probably it was due to this assessment that on 5 May 1934 the Polish-Soviet non-aggression pact was extended until 31 December 1945.

It is this context against which we need to evaluate the claim that the period between 1934 and 1938 was the time of German-Polish rapprochement. The thesis that the German-Polish declaration prevented the creation of a system of collective guarantees is a similarly unsubstantiated one. The French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Louis Barthou, kept working on creating the so-called “Eastern Locarno”. The Polish were right in arguing that the only way to secure Central Europe is to involve the Germans since it was Hitler that had ambitions for Eastern expansion (Drang nach Osten). If Berlin does not guarantee it, an agreement would only be a piece of paper. Since Germans rejected the “Eastern Locarno” plan Poland could not take part of it as it would have terminated the recent German-Polish declaration.

Thus, the strategic direction of Polish foreign policy was to keep equal distance from Berlin and Moscow and avoid provoking either. Based on Piłsudski's ideas Beck came up with the concept of "Space between Seas" (Międzymorze) that referred to the cooperation of countries between the two totalitarian powers between the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea. Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania and Italy would have constituted the core and Beck called this "Third Europe" (Kornat, 2007.).

Poland had to improve its army even as it did not want war. They had reasons for this. It suffices to quote the handwritten letter that deputy Commissioner Vladimir Potemkin sent to Jakow Suriz, the Soviet polpred in Berlin: "Germany has claims for Gdańsk and the Memel area, Polish Lithuania, Latgela and Liepā. It is highly likely that Hitler will induce Polish appetite for these areas. His calculations are fairly clear. Stalin talked about this to Laval while the latter was in Moscow the last time. [Pierre Laval French Prime Minister was in Moscow between 13 and 15 May 1935]. Hitler sees it unavoidable to destroy Poland with the help of our army. When we occupy a certain part of Poland, Germany will do the same from their side. Practically Poland will cook its fourth division and loss of their national independence for itself, executing Hitler's plan." Although this letter was confidential, shortly thereafter Potomkin talked about the fourth division of Poland in an article that he wrote using a pseudoname in the paper called Bolsevik. (Quoted in: *Szovjetszko-polszkije otnosenyija...* 2004. 162–163.)

At the same time, the German-Polish alliance that Stalin calculated did not materialize. Hitler's policy towards Poland changed at the end of 1938. He began to exert pressure. On 24 October, Joachim von Ribbentrop Foreign Minister called for Józef Lipski ambassador and made the following proposal: if Poland sanctions the Corridor, which is an extra-terrestrial autobahn and railway line, and joins the anti-Comintern Pact, then the validity of the declaration of 1934 may be extended by 25 years. Hitler and Ribbentrop repeated these terms on 5 January 1939 to Józef Beck and added an offer about "expelling" Jews from Poland. However, Polish foreign policy gave evasive answers and did not join the anti-Comintern pact.

Joachim Ribbentrop és Józef Beck (Varsó, 1939. január 25.)

Forrás: NAC, 1-D-1192-1.



Beck knew that the corridor to Gdansk was only a pretext and the Germans would attack. This is just what Hitler also told military commanders on 23 May 1939. Yet, Germans kept the Polish under pressure. On 25 January 1939, Ribbentrop went to Warsaw, however, he did not take home any result. The Polish response was that: “*if Germany wished to use violence to achieve its objectives that would mean war between the two countries*” (Székely, 2020. 265.). Ribbentrop repeated his proposal once more for Lipski on 21 March. However, Hitler did not wait for yet another rejection and informed the German military leadership about his plans regarding the invasion of Poland. This was just a couple days after the partition of Czechoslovakia. (*Geneza paktu...* 2012. 16–19.)

Therefore, the argument that the Polish government considered a German alliance against the Soviet Union and, thus, deserved partition, is a false claim. On the other hand, Stalin could imagine the partition of Poland in cooperation with Germany. This was so despite the rapprochement between Poland and the Soviet Union that took place in those tense months. The trade agreement that the two countries signed on 19 February 1939 is a tangible evidence of this development.

III.

The third argument in defence of Stalin is the following: the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was in the interest of the Germans and the Soviet leaders did not make any effort for rapprochement. In the final analysis, the government of the Soviet Union could only choose between the pact and war. Stalin bought one and a half year of peace by signing the pact. Supporters of this stand often add that the British and French delegations did not have a real mandate for making an anti-German alliance and that it was very unlikely to succeed because Poland and Romania opposed the idea.

On 31 March 1939, Chamberlain declared that if Poland were attacked the United Kingdom would step in if the Polish government asked for help. Three days later, France made a similar statement. By the time Józef Beck reached London the British government had the proposal ready. In the joint declaration issued on 6 April there were guarded statements without any reference to Germany. As it appeared, this was only a “temporary” agreement, but London was prepared to sign another one of “permanent nature” in a way that it would also not be directed against “any country”. Paris made a more overt undertaking: “France and Poland mutually come to each other’s aid immediately if any direct or indirect threat arises”. (Székely, 2020. 283–284.).

It became clear that the Government of the UK did not think it necessary to shut the door on Hitler even after the experience with the Munich Agreement. It hoped for new negotiations and that the UK could stay out of the war. Józef Beck made a mistake when he overrated the British guarantee. He did not realise that Chamberlain did not want to go to war with Germany over Czechoslovakia or Poland.

British-French-Soviet negotiations about military alliance began thereafter. There were several factors that made the viability the project uncertain. None of the parties were ready for war with Germany, thus, a preventive war was unthinkable. On the other hand, they were late in terms of strategic steps and planning. The Nazis have annexed the Rheinland, Austria, the Sudetenland, Memel, partitioned Czechoslovakia and have made the decision to attack Poland.

The Munich Agreement made Hitler confident and revealed that European countries were not efficient in coordinating their actions against him and that they rather make concessions than attack. Third, the Government of UK was unenthusiastic in its dealings with the Soviet Union and had difficulties giving up the policy of appeasement as they still preferred to stay out of the conflict in Europe. Fourth, it was difficult to convince Poles and Romanians that the Soviet Union would guarantee their safety against Germany. Finally, the attitude of the Soviet Union was also ambiguous. Despite their alliance with Prague they did not rush to save Czechoslovakia. Moreover, the military cooperation they started with the Germans in 1922 did not completely end in 1934. Stalin's speech of 10 March accused Paris and London of instigating Berlin against the Soviet Union and he sacked Litvinov, the commissioner responsible for foreign policy, who had good relations with the British and was in favour of creating a popular front. Importantly, Litvinov had Jewish roots. His successor, Molotov, was loyal to Stalin.

We cannot give a detailed account of the negotiations here. It suffices to note that Hitler was aware that he did not risk a lot when he made a proposal that Stalin liked.

German-Soviet negotiations began early in 1939 but they gained momentum during the summer. The key moment was the report that Ivan Proskurov, the head of GRU sent to Vorosilov about the German plans on 9 July 1939. He stated that Hitler will not allow the British-French-Soviet negotiation to influence his plan to "solve the Polish problem in a radical manner". According to the German informant – Bruno Kleist, one of Ribbentrop's close collaborators – Hitler and Ribbentrop do not think that the Soviet Union would take part in a war against Germany on the side of the British and French. They also calculated that the Polish resistance would collapse before the French and British regained their senses. Proskurov reported that the attack was to be expected in August or September. (The documents is published in: *Geneza paktu...* 2012. 159–163.)

Following the report, events speeded up. Exchange of notes became more frequent and during the meetings the common standpoint started to form that the agreement should not only be about trade, but it should also be a political treaty. Molotov successfully negotiated for specific security guarantees. On the basis of available documents, one can even argue that the idea of the secret clause first appeared in Moscow.

The Soviets began to retreat from negotiations with French and British governments. It was not a difficult move. Stalin asked for a mandate for the Red Army to cross Poland. He knew the Poles would not give their consent. Hitler's offer reached on 7 August according to which – with the exception of Lithuania – the Baltic states, former Russian Poland and Bessarabia should go to the Soviet Union, while Gdańsk and the former Prussian Poland would belong to Germany. The decision about Galicia was postponed. On 12 August, Molotov sent a cable to Berlin saying that "we are interested". (*Geneza paktu...* 2012. 175–179.)

The parties agreed that first Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg the German ambassador in Moscow would sign a trade agreement on behalf of Ribbentrop, then the latter would go to Moscow to sign the political treaty. The first act took place on 19 August, the latter on 23 August (Németh, 2017.).

It was easy for Hitler to make an offer that would wreck negotiations among France, the UK and the Soviet Union. Just as Hitler, Stalin also did not hesitate much about terminating the non-aggression pact with Poland. It was easy for Stalin to make the partition of Poland sound desirable internally, too. On 7 September, Georgi Dimitrov noted the following about his talk

with Stalin: “Currently, the annihilation of this state means that there is one less bourgeois Fascist state. What is wrong about crushing Poland if it results in spreading Socialism in new territories?” (The document is quoted in: *Geneza paktu...* 2012. 195.) Thus, Hitler and Stalin did not see the partition of Poland as a temporary solution, but they understood this as crushing Polish and Baltic statehood.

Stalin did not choose between war and peace when he signed the pact with Nazi Germany. As a result of the agreement, the Soviet Union attacked Poland and then Finland on 30 November, occupied and Sovietized the Baltic states and, finally, annexed Bessarabia from Romania on 28 June 1940.

IV.

Having proved that Stalin was not on the defence, let us now turn to examining his real motives for signing the pact. From available documents, there are two reasons that emerge. These, on the one hand, the trade agreement that should be evaluated as one that constitute a package together with the pact. On the other hand, the offer that Hitler made was serving objectives that Stalin had long been hoping to realize. He wanted to push the boundaries of the Soviet Union westwards to the River Bug and annex Bessarabia in the south.

On 29 March 1935, Anthony Eden British Minister of Foreign Affairs met Stalin in Moscow. While Eden was about to leave, they passed in front of a large map about which Eden noted that “What a beautiful country and what a large country!” Stalin’s response was “Big country with big problems” and pointing at the British Isles added that “Small island but a lot depends on it. If this small island told Germany that it would not give more money, raw materials and steel then the peace could be secured in Europe.” (Quoted in: Székely, 2020. 171

Although with unfortunate delay but the British listened to Stalin’s advice. When Hitler attacked Poland they placed Germany under blockade. They did not foresee that it would be Stalin who helps Hitler in terms of raw materials.

The literature on the pact rarely discusses the trade agreement. Hungarian historians Mária Ormos and István Majoros characterized the agreement in the following terms: “The supply of Germany and its position in terms of alliances improved significantly. The German-Soviet economic agreement (signed on 11 February 1940) secured huge amount of oil, metal and grain for Germany, and mostly, for the German army. The Soviet party met the deadlines with worrisome punctuality until the moment of German invasion, thus making it easier for Hitler to occupy the territories that were the sources of these shipments.” (Majoros–Ormos, 2003. 412–413.). However, the authors do not discuss the details of the contracts and their impact on the war. Bogdan Musiał, a Polish historian living in Germany, is the only one who systematically analysed this problem. He did so on the basis of archival documents from Russia.

According to the trade agreement of 19 August, the Third Reich provided a 200 million Mark loan at 4.5 interest to the Soviet Union. Using 180 million Mark, the Soviets were obliged to of machinery from Germany. The Kreml was free to choose any German companies as partners. The Soviet Union mostly needed lathes, arms and technology. In return for the goods and the loan, the Soviet Union primarily shipped raw materials to Germany. This was much needed since due to the blockade that was imposed on Germany after the invasion of Poland, the balance of trade deteriorated by 40%. German reserves of crude oil, iron, zinc, copper, aluminium and other metals were only enough for 9-11 months.

The Soviets began to transport goods to Germany in December 1939. Until 11 February 1940 Stalin sent 22 400 tons of crude oil, 32 350 tons of grain and some thousand bales of cotton to Germany. These amounts could not make up for the losses incurred as the result of the blockade, thus, Germany initiated new talks about stepping up these volumes. On 11 February the parties signed another trade agreement. Within this new framework the Soviets shipped 650 million Mark worth of raw materials to Germany until the Germans attacked the Soviet Union. Until 11 February 1941, 872 thousand tons of crude oil, 934 thousand tons of grain, 91 500 tons of cotton, 500 thousand tons of iron ore and 100 thousand tons of raw material for smelting reached Germany that worth the total of 410-420 million Marks. The remaining goods should have been shipped until 11 August 1941, but the German invasion obviously interrupted this on 22 June. However, until that date Germany received 11 thousand tons of copper, 3 thousand tons of nickel 950 tons of zinc and 500 tons of molybdenum and wolfram. Stalin even promised that if the Soviet Union did not have sufficient reserves of a raw material that Germans needed they would try to secure it from a third country.

In February 1940 the German press celebrated the pact with the Soviet Union. The *National-Zeitung* went as far as to state that “the new agreement meant more for Germany than winning a battle, this is a decisive victory”. Army commanders agreed to this assessment. In his memoir published in 1953 Eduard Wagner stated that “*the pact saved us*”.

Notwithstanding, the Soviet Union also profited from the deal: it gained access to modern military technology. According to the agreement signed on 11 February 1940, it received a Lützow class cruiser, large amount of material for ship building, boilers, pivots, and also equipment and materials for building submarines. Shipment of arms and military equipment were important too. Stalin personally supervised the arrival of lathes needed for producing ammunition. Of this the Soviet Union received 6430 that was worth 100 million Marks. Moreover, Germans assisted the Soviet Union in modernizing its chemical industry, too.

The deal did not come out of the blue when we consider that the Soviet-German military cooperation was continuous since the Rapallo Treaty and was only halted for some years of the Great Terror. We may state the Soviet Union was Hitler’s main ally in his war against Western Europe. Italy, Japan and Hungary did not provide supplies, Swedish iron ore and Norwegian oil did not reach their destination due to the blockade.

V.

These facts damage Stalin’s reputation as anti-fascist leader both internationally and internally. That is why some feel the need to subvert these. Having assessed the events and contexts, one cannot place Stalin at the head of anti-Fascist war as he did not only assist in attacking Poland, but he also provided the material supply base for the Western campaign. on the other hand, all these reveal the imperialist features of the Soviet Union.

Three years after the end of World War II, the Department of State of the USA published some of the German diplomatic papers that the USA army got hold of. The volume is called the [*Nazi-soviet relations, 1939–1941. Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office.*](#) It was obviously published with the intention of defaming the Soviet Union in the first phase of the Cold War. On 3 February 1948, Andrey Vyshinsky the deputy chair of the Committee of People’s Commissioners, presented the first three chapters of the Soviet response to the volume. This latter publication bore the title “Response to the slanderers”. After that point Stalin took

over and personally corrected some parts editing out sections and inserting quotes. He also added a whole chapter to the book. He also changed the title that eventually became “Falsifiers of History (Historical Survey).” It first appeared in Russian on 9 February 1948 and the next day the Pravda began to publish it in sequels. Translators immediately started working on it. On 28 April Vyshinsky reported that the counter campaign was successful. In the people’s republics it was published in millions of copies: in Romania 1.1 million, in Czechoslovakia 1 million, in Bulgaria 600 000, in Poland 500 000, in Hungary 165 000 copies were printed. In France there were 700 000 copies printed, but in England and the USA only 50-60 000 were possible. At the same time, it was published in Norway, Denmark, Canada, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Columbia, Mexico, Australia, India, Sweden, Argentina, Belgium, Egypt etc. (This is based on: *Geneza paktu...* 2012. 197–233.)

Therefore, one needs to be cautious and avoid repeating the arguments that Stalin himself crafted in his own defence.

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