

70 years since the Hitler-Stalin Pact

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Seventy years ago, on August 23, 1939, Nazi foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, a chief henchman of Joseph Stalin, met in Moscow to sign a hastily-negotiated Non-Aggression Pact between Hitlerite Germany and the USSR.

The effect of this agreement was to pave the way for Germany to wage war in Europe under the most favorable conditions for the Nazis. As Ribbentrop traveled to Moscow, the Nazi regime was desperate to secure an agreement with the USSR, allowing it to attack Poland without facing a two-front war against both the USSR and the two main imperialist powers in Western Europe, Great Britain and France. In addition to the non-aggression pledge, the contents of the Pact included a secret division of Poland and the Baltic countries between Nazi Germany and the USSR. Germany was to receive western Poland and Lithuania, while the USSR seized eastern Poland, Latvia, and Estonia.

A formal declaration of war on September 3, 1939 followed the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1. This marked the beginning of World War II in Europe—a war that would ultimately claim between 50 million and 70 million lives. Soviet forces entered eastern Poland on September 17, 1939.

Soviet neutrality allowed the Nazis, after rapidly defeating Polish forces, to concentrate their forces against Western Europe in 1940. With Stalin's acquiescence, Hitler conquered Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. When the inevitable Nazi invasion of the USSR began in June 1941, the USSR was completely isolated on the European continent. Stalin, ignoring overwhelming evidence of an imminent Nazi invasion, observed the terms of the treaty to the letter. The Kremlin sent the last shipments of strategic raw materials to Nazi Germany only hours before the invasion began on the morning of June 22, 1941.

The most significant aspect of the treaty was the Kremlin's complete contempt and indifference toward international working-class opinion. During the negotiations, Stalin toasted Hitler, saying: "I know how much the German people love their Führer." Following the line from the Kremlin, the Communist Parties of France and Britain adopted an official policy of neutrality towards the fascist regime, the embodiment of anti-working-class reaction.

Both Nazi and Soviet forces committed large-scale crimes in the occupied regions. Nazi forces launched Operation

Tannenberg, rounding up and executing tens of thousands of figures in Polish intellectual, cultural, and political life. In March of 1940, Soviet forces organized a massacre of Polish officers in the Katyn Forest.

To Hitler's surprise, during negotiations of the pact, Stalin did not ask the Nazis to release the German Communist leader Ernst Thälmann, who had been languishing in a concentration camp since shortly after the Nazis came to power in January 1933. Thälmann was later murdered by the Nazis shortly before the collapse of the Third Reich.

The Stalin-Hitler Pact was, on the surface, a stunning about-face in the foreign policy of both Germany and the USSR. The Nazi regime had presented itself as the bastion of resistance to the USSR and the threat of communism. The Stalinist regime, for its part, claimed to be the irreconcilable opponent of Nazi imperialism. Thus, the signing of the agreement was met with shock and incredulity by Britain and France. However, there was no small measure of hypocrisy in their condemnations of the pact, inasmuch as the two main European imperialist powers had been hoping to come to an agreement with Hitler at the expense of the USSR.

Until August 1939, powerful factions of the French and British ruling class hoped Hitler would unleash the *Wehrmacht* not against the West, but against the USSR. This was the basis of the 1938 Munich agreement: in exchange for a worthless Nazi promise of what British premier Neville Chamberlain called "peace in our time," Britain and France agreed to the Nazis' dismembering of Czechoslovakia.

There was one observer to whom the about-face in Soviet policy did not come as a surprise: Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Fourth International, who was then living as a political exile in Mexico.

With his characteristic far-sightedness, Trotsky predicted that Stalin, facing acute internal crises and a series of hostile regimes in Europe produced by his policies, might seek to ward off the danger of war through an alliance with Hitler. In June 1939, Trotsky wrote: "At the party congress in March of this year, Stalin openly declared for the first time that economically the Soviet Union is still very far behind the capitalist countries. He had to make this admission not only in order to explain retreats in the field of foreign policy. Stalin is prepared to pay very dearly, not to say any price, for peace. Not because he

'hates' war, but because he is mortally afraid of the consequences.

"From this standpoint it is not difficult to evaluate the comparative benefits for the Kremlin of the two alternatives: agreement with Germany or alliance with the 'democracies.' Friendship with Hitler would mean immediate removal of the danger of war on the Western front and thereby a great reduction of the danger of war on the Far Eastern front. An alliance with the democracies would mean only the possibility of receiving aid in the event of war. Of course, if nothing is left but to fight, then it is more advantageous to have allies than to remain isolated. But the basic task of Stalin's foreign policy is not to create the most favorable conditions in the event of war, but to avoid war. This is the hidden meaning of the frequent statements by Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov that the USSR 'needs no allies.'" ("The Riddle of the USSR," *The Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1938-1939* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2002) p. 403-404).

Trotsky based his judgment of the Kremlin's foreign policy on a broader evaluation of the counter-revolutionary policies that the Soviet bureaucracy had pursued over the previous decade.

As fears of a Soviet-German war grew after Hitler came to power in 1933, the Kremlin sought alliances with bourgeois and social-democratic parties against fascism in Western Europe. The basis of these relations was the political subordination of the working class to capitalist rule. Stalin hoped to curry favor with the European bourgeoisie by suppressing, politically and physically, left-wing and revolutionary movements. Trotsky succinctly described the resulting "Popular Front" alliances as an "alliance of bourgeois liberalism and the GPU," the Kremlin's secret police.

In France, the May-June 1936 general strike was sold out by the trade unions and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). PCF leader Maurice Thorez, then collaborating politically with a Popular Front coalition government consisting of the Socialist Party and the bourgeois Radical Party, famously announced that "one has to know how to end a strike." The Popular Front government collapsed in 1938, bringing to power the conservative government of Daladier.

In Spain, the Popular Front strategy tied the Spanish proletariat to the bourgeoisie during the Spanish Revolution and 1936-1939 Civil War against the Fascist coup leader, General Francisco Franco. The Kremlin insisted that armed workers' detachments should return their weapons to the bourgeois government of Manuel Azaña, to whom they would also leave political and military control of the war effort.

As Trotskyists pointed out, Azaña's government feared the Spanish revolution far more than it feared Franco. It remained implacably hostile to a call to nationalize the land to win over Franco's peasant armies. France and Britain, though nominal Soviet allies, imposed a blockade on assistance to the Spanish Republic, for fear that the revolution might spread beyond

Spain. The ultimate result was the victory of the Spanish Fascists.

Trotsky commented: "The fundamental trait of Stalin's international policy in recent years has been this: that he *trades* in the working class movement just as he trades in oil, manganese, and other goods. In this statement there is not one iota of exaggeration. Stalin looks upon the sections of the Comintern in various countries and upon the liberation struggle of the oppressed nations as so much small change in deals with the imperialist powers." ("What lies behind Stalin's bid for agreement with Hitler?," *ibid.* p. 235)

Inside the USSR itself, Stalin sought to ingratiate himself with his new-found imperialist allies and to head off political discontent by liquidating Marxist opposition to his rule. In the Moscow Trials and the ensuing Great Purges of 1936-1938, Stalin framed and massacred the Old Bolshevik cadres and large sections of the socialist intelligentsia. This included the shooting of three-quarters of the Soviet officer corps, including such veterans as Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky and General Iona Yakir—with devastating consequences for the battle-readiness of the Red Army.

Trotsky wrote, "During the last three years Stalin called all the companions of Lenin agents of Hitler. He exterminated the flower of the general staff. He shot, discharged, and deported about 30,000 officers—all under the same charge of being agents of Hitler or his allies. After having dismembered the party and decapitated the army, now Stalin is openly posing his own candidacy for the role of ... principal agent of Hitler." ("Stalin's Capitulation," *ibid.* p. 254)

Coming at the end of this string of betrayals, the Hitler-Stalin Pact constituted a desperate and ultimately unsuccessful attempt by Stalin to prevent a war for which his own policies bore heavy responsibility. When Germany invaded the USSR less than two years later, the Soviet Union was woefully unprepared. Nearly 30 million Soviet soldiers and citizens perished in the struggle to repel the fascist attack.

Ultimately, however, the incredible sacrifices of the Soviet people were betrayed by the dissolution of the USSR in 1991—the final outcome of the counter-revolutionary policies of Stalinism.

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