The Nazi–Soviet Pact

'Rendezvous', David Low, London Evening Standard

On 29 August 1939, the German government astonished the world by signing a non-aggression pact — in effect an alliance — with Stalin. There were good political reasons for this Nazi–Soviet Pact, but it still came as a major shock to many people. After all, Hitler had written openly of the need to destroy communist Russia and the two countries were bitter enemies. The pact inspired a number of cartoons, most taking a very cynical view. David Low's 'Rendezvous' (meeting) which appeared in the London Evening Standard, quickly became one of the best known.

Low was a New Zealander whose cartoons often attacked and ridiculed the Nazis; he later featured on a Nazi death list. Here Low presents Hitler and Stalin greeting each other with heavily overdone politeness, clearly insincere, genteelly using the very insults they have only lately been throwing at each other: 'The scum of the earth, I presume?' 'The bloody assassin of the workers, I presume?' The whole scene is rather like the moment when Stanley 'found' David Livingstone in the middle of Africa and greeted him with 'Dr Livingstone, I presume?' as if they were in someone's drawing room. But although these two men appear ridiculous, even comic, there is also a strong sense of menace. Both carry pistols at their belts — the implication is that they could just as easily shoot each other as take tea together. In the meantime, the one who actually is dead is the figure lying in the centre representing Poland. Low's point is that, whatever the truth about this sudden friendship between the two enemies, it means death for Poland; they carve it up between them, which, shortly after this cartoon appeared, they did.

Cartoon from the Polish newspaper Mucha, No. 37, August 1939

All of which makes the second cartoon particularly interesting, since it actually comes from Poland. Did the Poles see them-
selves as doomed? Interestingly, although we know that many Poles did indeed realise that they were about to be attacked, this cartoonist seems to be a lot more confident than the Low cartoon would suggest he should be. Here we see Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister, kneeling in front of Stalin and kissing his hand, while Stalin sits like a king on a throne. Next to him stands Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister who had negotiated the terms of the pact, looking very pleased with himself.

The suggestion is that the Russians have done very well out of the pact, and that henceforth the Germans are going to have to do as Stalin tells them. Why on earth should anyone take such a wildly inaccurate view? Certainly this accorded with the official Communist Party line on the pact, which suggested that cunning old Stalin knew what he was doing, though it may be no more than wishful thinking on the cartoonist’s part, desperately hoping that Stalin would somehow protect Poland from Hitler. If so, the cartoonist will have been sadly disappointed. Stalin joined in the invasion of Poland and in 1940 his men murdered thousands of Polish officers in the forest of Katyn. Meanwhile, Hitler’s death squads were operating in the German half of the country and in due course, Poland would be the site of Nazi extermination camps.

On the evidence of these two cartoons at any rate, Poland’s plight seems to have been clearer in London than it was to some people in Warsaw.

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