The Nazi–Soviet Pact

How and why did Germany and the USSR make this unlikely alliance?

**Causation**

*Before you read this*

Familiarise yourself with the foreign policies during the 1930s of Germany, the USSR, Britain and France. Who feared whom and what most, and why?

**Key concept**

On 23 August 1939, the German foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, flew to Moscow to meet with his Russian counterpart, Vyacheslav Molotov. Hours later, the pair shocked the world with the signing of the Nazi–Soviet Pact. These two ideologically opposed nations now pledged that, for the next 10 years, neither side would wage war against the other, or come to the aid of any country that might be at war with the other.

The significance of this pact is multifaceted. On the one hand, it lends itself to discussion of the longstanding **intentionalist–structuralist argument** concerning the nature of Nazi policymaking. On the other hand, it plays an important role in any study of Anglo–Soviet relations during this period. Fundamentally, though, the treaty can be seen as the trigger for the outbreak of the Second World War less than 2 weeks later.

The central question for historians is simply one of how this could have happened. Since April 1939, the USSR had been courting an alliance with Britain and France against Germany, whose recent territorial conquests—Austria, the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia—suggested it was an increasing threat within Europe. Signing the non-aggression pact, therefore, marked a clear U-turn in Soviet foreign policy, and blatantly contradicted the anti-Fascist rhetoric articulated by the regime.

Hitler, in turn, had never made any secret of his contempt for communism, which he equated with...
Judaism. The Soviet model was routinely denounced in Nazi propaganda, and plans for conquering land in the east for Lebensraum (living space) had long been set out in Mein Kampf: 'If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her vassal border states.' An agreement with the USSR, then, seemed deeply at odds with everything the Nazis stood for, and can be seen as fitting into the 'Hitler was an opportunist' school of thought.

Observers at the time greeted this sudden turn of events with a sense of astonishment. Many — including the British cartoonist David Low — viewed it with great scepticism, suggesting that both Hitler and Stalin were, undoubtedly, up to something. The notion that the agreement could only be a temporary phenomenon was, of course, borne out less than 2 years later, in June 1941, German forces invaded Russia. What, though, had induced these two powers to make a conciliatory gesture in the first place?

**German motives**

Writing in his diary in August 1939, Ribbentrop claimed that a settlement with Russia was, 'My very own idea which I urged on Hitler'. Given that the Nazi regime ended up signing an agreement with the Soviet 'enemy', and fighting a war against Britain — Hitler’s envisaged ally — many scholars have been inclined to argue that Nazi foreign policy was incoherent and driven by a desire for war for its own sake, rather than any clearly defined programme. While it is easy to hold the Nazi-Soviet pact up as evidence that Hitler simply took advantage of situations as they arose, there was an element of pragmatism behind it. The tactical manoeuvring — and the role of Hitler himself in orchestrating the diplomatic overtures to the Soviets — should not be ignored. The pact would enable the Germans to receive vital raw materials from the USSR and, most significantly, avoid fighting any future war on two fronts. The memory of defeat in the First World War remained fresh in people’s minds, and there was a keen desire to split any allied force that had the potential to form against Germany. For the Nazis, there were great benefits to be had from this unlikely union.

**Soviet motives**

Russian motives for signing the pact have been subjected to even greater scrutiny, debate, particularly given the scarcity of Soviet primary sources. Nonetheless, it is clear that Russia also had good reasons for wishing to strike a deal with Germany. The pledge of non-aggression granted it time to build up its own armed forces, while the territorial clauses contained within the secret protocol meant the USSR could fulfill its own expansionist ambitions in the Baltic in the process. Traditional historical accounts suggest that Stalin had desired this all along, that it was part of a determined Machiavellian plot to extend his sphere of influence in Europe and to seize parts of Poland. On 3 May 1939, Russia had, after all, seen the dismissal of the then foreign minister Maxim Litvinov, a determined (and Jewish) anti-Fascist who favoured an alliance with the Western powers, and the appointment instead of Molotov, a figure more open to the idea of initiating a dialogue with Germany.

More recent interpretations, though, argue that the pact was much more of a last minute decision, a final desperate gamble to try and avoid war. Historians here point to the Danzig Crisis of March 1939, which increased Soviet anxieties about an imminent German threat to eastern Europe, and the recent episode in Munich, which aroused fears that the USSR, like Czechoslovakia, could be abandoned by the West to bear the brunt of the Nazi menace alone. Stalin declared he could not let our country be drawn into conflict by warmongers whose custom is to let others pull their chestnuts out of the fire. It is the Russian leader’s increasing cynicism over Anglo-French motives and, in particular, the extent to which British distrust and a reluctance to work with the USSR pushed Stalin into accepting an agreement with Adolf Hitler, that has formed the basis for much of the continuing interest in the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

**British failures**

The British had certainly long harboured suspicions of the USSR, with many ministers doubting both Stalin’s trustworthiness, and the Red Army’s ability to make an effective contribution to any military
alliance. Neville Chamberlain commented in March 1938, ‘I must confess to the most profound distrust of Russia...I distrust her motives, which seem to me to have little connection with our ideas of liberty, and to be concerned only with getting everyone else by the ears.’

This distrust was evident throughout 1939, as repeated attempts at negotiating an Anglo-French-Soviet front against Nazi Germany broke down over the Russians’ central demands that Latvia, Estonia, and Finland should be guaranteed (i.e. that their independence be upheld by a larger power), just as the British and French were guaranteeing Poland, Greece, and Rumania. The Western powers were unwilling to accede to this request, fearing it would simply allow Stalin to extend his reach across the continent. The last round of talks, held in Moscow from 14 August 1939, similarly reached a stalemate when the Anglo-French delegates were unable to agree to Soviet requests for troop passage through Poland and Rumania to meet any German advance. The Russians subsequently adjourned the discussions on 21 August.

While the Soviets were keen to cement a trilateral alliance with Britain and France to safeguard themselves from the growing German threat, the Western nations seemed far less convinced of either the urgency or the desirability of such an agreement. When trying to account for Russia’s decision to sign the non-aggression pact with Germany, the apparent British failure to take negotiations seriously appears a significant factor. Representatives at the various meetings were routinely drawn from the lower ranks of the British Foreign Office. In June 1939, the Soviet invitation for the British foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, to travel to Moscow and speak with Molotov personally went unfulfilled. William Strang, a former member of the British embassy in Moscow, arrived instead, lacking Halifax’s authority and consequently less able to hammer out an agreement. The final, August delegation was similarly staffed by ‘junior’ personnel. The Soviet ambassador to London, Ivan Maisky, noted at the time:

I think, judging from the posts they hold officially, the delegates will not be able to make any decisions on the spot and will have to refer everything to London. It is also suspicious that, again because of the kind of posts they hold, the members of the delegation will be able to stay in Moscow indefinitely.

This, coupled with the fact that the Anglo-French agents decided to travel by sea, taking 4 days to reach Moscow, undermined any sense of urgency about the matter and suggested that the West saw the talks largely as an exercise in keeping the Russians happy and being seen to be at least open to the idea of discussion, rather than any real determination to reach an accord.

**German-Soviet relations**

Conversely, Hitler and Ribbentrop proved much more amenable to reaching an agreement with the USSR. The Germans, spurred on by the fear of a British-French-Soviet alliance against them, had been steadily trying to cultivate relations with the USSR for some months. In May 1939, for example, the prospect of resuming trade links was deliberated. However, the Soviets remained reluctant to enter serious negotiations with Germany at this time. The example of Czechoslovakia had taught Stalin to view the Nazis with suspicion, although the appearance of entertaining their advances was certainly considered a useful stick in the ongoing effort to encourage Britain and France to reach a three-power settlement.

Matters came to a head at the start of August, when the German ambassador to Moscow was instructed to tell Molotov, ‘There is no question between the Baltic and the Black Sea which cannot be settled to the complete satisfaction of both countries’. The Nazis were keen to show that they were more than prepared to meet Russian demands in the desire to form their own alliance. Ribbentrop’s speed in getting to Moscow on 23 August (traveling by aeroplane) also set up a stark contrast to the way in which the British seemed to be dragging their heels. Furthermore, not only was Hitler prepared to send a leading member of the Nazi hierarchy to meet Molotov, he also took care to send a personal request
There are a lot of websites devoted to the Nazi-Soviet Pact, many of them much the same. Those that stand out are: *Modern History Sourcebook*, which gives the text of the pact at: www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1939pact.html. There is a simplistic and easily assimilated site at: http://johnclare.net/RoadtoWwii.html, which is similar to our Aiming High column, in that it gives sources, a map of territory exchanged etc. One that looks really useful is the BBC site giving modern views on the pact at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/822119.stm. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has an excellent map depicting the gains for both parties after the signing of the pact: www.ushmm.org/. In the web search box on the site, key in ‘German–Soviet Pact’, which will take you to the relevant page, where you click on the map.

to Stalin himself to facilitate this meeting. This in itself was an unprecedented move, and signalled the Third Reich’s willingness to do business.

**Conclusions**

The fact that, by mid-August, the USSR had decided to look towards Germany, rather than Britain or France, to safeguard its borders can be attributed to a combination of three key factors which occurred in quick succession:

- the crisis over the port of Danzig, which rendered an alliance so necessary
- the breakdown of discussions with Anglo–French delegates
- the favourable offers now being extended to the USSR by the Germans

However it came about, the conclusion of the Nazi–Soviet Pact in the early hours of 24 August 1939 would have major implications for European history. Russia’s promise to remain neutral in the face of a German attack on Poland afforded Hitler the opportunity to concentrate his initial energies on waging his *Blitzkrieg* (lightning war) against Western Europe without having to worry about any possible attacks on his eastern flank. The effects of this conflict would be devastating.

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