

The Enemy of My Enemy is My Friend: Soviet Foreign Policy in Europe, 1933-1939

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When the Soviet Union was first established as a nation, between the October Revolution in 1917 and the official declaration of the Union itself in 1922, it struggled to find a place in international politics. The Soviet Union was the first Communist state ever, and its leaders believed that others were out to stop them from achieving their goal of spreading the revolution. After foreign states sent troops and military support to the enemies of the Communists in the Russian Civil War of 1918-1921, they began to feel that they were alone both diplomatically and politically. No one came to their aid to help sustain their new Communist state, and many were not sure if it could survive without other countries supporting them. As a result, a feeling of isolation began to evolve, but they were spared from being secluded in the diplomatic world in 1922 when Weimar Germany agreed to a treaty that made them economic and military partners. The Soviet government began to understand the need to become recognized as a state willing to take part in international affairs, and valued it more and more over continuing the Communist revolution. The fearful feelings subsided slightly as more states recognized the Soviet Union throughout the 1920s, but into the 1930s a new threat in the form of fascism was posed to destroy Communism from the face of the earth.

The Soviets tried their best to avoid war in Europe, and that became apparent in their foreign policy decisions leading up to World War II. They felt secluded diplomatically and under threat militarily when Hitler came to power in 1933, but felt slightly more comfortable when they were accepted into the League of Nations. The feelings of diplomatic and political remoteness returned, as their Western allies allowed Hitler to take territory as he wished, and no longer felt that allied defense against him would deter him from taking more land. The Soviets chose to ally with Germany in 1939 in order to secure a peace agreement for their country; otherwise they believed Hitler might have invaded the Soviet

Union right at the start of the war. They made a deal with a country that they had spent the last six years trying to defend against, but the Soviets felt that this treaty signed between the two would truly avoid war and keep the Soviet Union intact.

Background: Relations between Germany and the Soviet Union before 1933

The states of Germany and Russia were both large political powers in Europe for many decades before the events of this paper. Russia had grown into the largest state in the world during the rule of the Romanov dynasty over a period of several centuries. The Kingdom of Prussia united all of Germany in 1870, and with the leadership of Kaiser Wilhelm and Otto von Bismarck they created one of the largest militaries and empires in the world. The two empires interacted frequently over time because they both had spheres of influence that overlapped in eastern Europe. The big factors that led to the events of 1933-1939 were the First World War and its aftermath.¹

The German and Russian empires were at war with one another from 1914-1917, fighting over spheres of influence in between the two states. In 1917, a provisional government led by Alexander Kerensky overthrew the Romanov dynasty, but he kept the Russian people in the war against Germany. The people in Russia were not pleased with the war, so Vladimir Lenin led his Bolshevik Party to take power in the October Revolution. Lenin and his followers, one of whom was Joseph Stalin, installed the first Communist government in Russia in 1917, and then at the end of the Russian Civil War created the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922.

The Soviet government was fearful during the Russian Civil War from 1918-1921 of foreign military adversaries, which were capitalist nations such as the United States and Great Britain. These nations tried to give armed assistance to the pro-Tsarist White Army in order to overthrow the

Communist, or Bolshevik, Party from taking full control. The Communists had to fight both foreign and domestic enemies without any support from other countries in Europe. As a result of other states aiding the White Army, the Bolsheviks became wary of interacting with other states, thinking that they might try and overthrow them again.² However, this fear soon began to subside slightly when the Soviet Union was created in 1922, and their future was made more certain as they began to bring in other neighboring states into the new Communist empire surrounding Russia.³

Before the Soviet Union was created, one major event that further aided the Soviet cause of state recognition by the world's powers was the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo with the Weimar Republic in 1922. The treaty with the Germans grew out of the Genoa Conference between many states in Europe that were attempting to fix economic problems that were plaguing the continent after the First World War, as well as addressing how capitalist states were going to interact with the Bolsheviks.⁴ In the end, the Bolsheviks became more a legitimate state in European affairs and were not so much a revolutionary party looking to overthrow all of European capitalist economies.

However, the Bolshevik delegation secretly signed the Treaty of Rapallo with Germany while the Genoa Conference was in the last stages of negotiations.⁵ This treaty reignited all diplomatic and consular relations between the two states as well as economic cooperation.⁶ This was the first time the Bolsheviks, soon to be the Soviet Union in late 1922, had created a diplomatic partnership with one state since they took power in Russia. As previously mentioned, the Bolsheviks had felt very anxious about being left alone to fight multiple enemies inside and outside of Russia during the Russian Civil War. They did not want to be consistently fighting around and within their state to ensure the existence of Communism in Russia. By 1922, the Bolsheviks emerged as a legitimate state willing to participate in world affairs instead of revolutionizing the world. With the new partnership with Weimar, they now had Germany willing to embrace a diplomatic relationship with them. These events would all eventually lead to the events of the 1930s in Soviet foreign policy.

Diplomatic relations and, more importantly, the policies that were created in the Treaty of Rapallo began to fade in the 1930s between the Soviet Union and the Weimar Republic. The Soviets had proved to not be as reliable as they had promised in 1922. By 1927, they had fallen out of favor with the British government because of the amount of pro-Soviet and Communist propaganda that the

Soviet government had been sending to Britain to spread Communist ideals.⁷ The Foreign Ministry was trying their hardest to make the Soviet Union become a lawful state in Europe willing to engage in proper foreign relations, but the ideological agencies of the Soviet Union were placing agents in the Ministry to make sure that spreading Communism was still the main goal of every department in the Soviet government and Party.⁸

The Comintern, or the Communist International, had been heavily involved in the development and actions of the German Communist Party (KPD) as well during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Comintern's role was to spread the revolution throughout the world, and they were in charge of most of the other Communist parties in other countries. They took full control of KPD in the mid-1920s and were involved in many political incidents in Germany between the KPD and their opponents.⁹ These events had a profound influence on Adolf Hitler, who saw Russia as a land to be used as a new area for his beloved German people to take over and colonize for themselves.¹⁰ The Nazis had many political and paramilitary confrontations with the KPD during their rise to power from 1924-1933, and further made Hitler's case that Bolshevik Russia was an evil regime that must be destroyed.¹¹

In terms of the military agreements of the Treaty of Rapallo, both sides no longer had a desire to keep the status quo that was developed after the treaty was signed in 1922. The Weimar Republic began plans to rearm Germany, and therefore did not need much of the aid that was given by the Red Army during the 1920s.¹² The Red Army also did not need the relationship with the Germany Army as well, because new leaders did not feel that a strong military relationship was necessary with Germany.¹³ The Soviets no longer needed German economic assistance as the end of the first Five Year Plan was coming to an end in 1932, and the Soviets no longer needed the aid of German engineers to produce heavy industrial goods.¹⁴ In Germany, they no longer needed the Soviet Union in order to export as many supplies because they were not getting military goods in exchange for their assistance at the end of the Five Year Plan.¹⁵ However, neither state could predict that the Nazis would take power in 1933. This would change the Soviet's outlook on Germany greatly moving into the mid-1930s and affect their foreign policy as a result.

All the events mentioned in this section were very essential in the 1930s for Soviet Foreign Policy, especially the Soviet need to be recognized as a true state and the creation of the Treaty of Rapallo with the Weimar Republic.

The Soviets managed to rid themselves of their sentiment of being alone in political, military, and diplomatic affairs with the Rapallo treaty and state recognition. However, the feeling of loneliness would return when Hitler took power in 1933 and began to end Germany's relationship with the Soviet Union. This emotion would then shape foreign policy into a new mold for the Soviets in the mid-1930s.

1932-1934: Soviet Diplomatic Policies after the Ascension of Adolf Hitler

As already outlined, the Soviet Union did interact with Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist, or Nazi, Party during the 1920s; not directly, but through the KPD by means of the Comintern. Despite the support that the KPD received from the Soviet Union in the 1920s and the early 1930s, they were not able to seize power in Weimar. Instead, the Weimar government gave power to Hitler and the Nazis in January 1933. This was a devastating blow to the Soviet Union and to the Communist effort for an international revolution. Now the Soviet Union had a right-wing party, who identified the Soviet Union as inferior and targeted for German expansionism, in control of a former power that was looking to climb back to the top of the political realm in Europe.¹⁶

Historian Gerhard Weinberg claims that Hitler himself never cared for the Soviet Union at all. Weinberg says that:

Hitler did not want a relationship (with Russia) to be very close, and he was to forestall all efforts on the part of either his own diplomats or occasional feelers from the other side to make them so.... The subject of German-Russian relations in those years (1933-1939) was of far greater interest to the German professional diplomats than to Hitler.¹⁷

Given Hitler's political attitudes toward the Soviet Union—he wanted to eliminate the Communist threat in Russia so more land could be used for Germany and he made only lackadaisical efforts to maintain relations with Russia—the potential for diplomatic encounters did not look very positive between the two nations with Hitler's ascension.¹⁸

The Comintern was the Soviet institution that dealt with the Nazis first, because they were most prevalent in Germany with the KPD. Their first reaction to the rise of the Nazi Party in 1933 was to create a public call of the defense of Marxism against fascism throughout Europe. A document that was sent by the Comintern to socialist parties throughout the European continent read:

The crisis is continuing to spread and deepen.... The bourgeoisie is preparing to launch a campaign against all the political and economic achievements of the working class.... The establishment of the open fascist dictatorship in Germany has directly confronted millions of workers of all countries with the question of the necessity of organizing a united front of struggle against the fascist offensive of the bourgeoisie.¹⁹

The language of this quote is very militant and not inviting to create more open diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union, or any Communist or socialist party in Europe, with the Nazis. It must be noted, however, that the Comintern was not created to act as a typical institution of the Soviet government. It acted as a tool of ideology for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, separate from the government. It was used to instigate the international Communist revolution and did not behave like a standard foreign relations institution.

Although the attitude of the Comintern was very hostile toward the Nazi Party in Germany in 1933, the Soviet government began to send out a different kind of message at the same time they were beginning to target the Nazis as a possible threat. At the twelfth plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), they began to explain to followers of the Comintern that an imperialist war would damage their cause. This plenum met because of the Japanese invading China, a Communist partner with the Soviet Union, in 1931.²⁰ The statements claim:

A new imperialist war, a new intervention against the U.S.S.R., will bring to the workers and the toilers of the entire world suffering, privations, and bloody sacrifices such as were not experienced even during the first world imperialist slaughter. The sharpening of all forms of bourgeoisie dictatorship, the intensification of reaction, the growth of fascism, the persecution of the revolutionary movement, shootings and hangings, already serve as the preparation of the rear areas for the imperialist war and armed intervention against the U.S.S.R.²¹

Here can be seen the beginning of what would become the Soviet diplomatic policy for the rest of the 1930s. However, at the time that the plenum took place this had yet to occur throughout every Soviet administration. This policy

will be below, but it is important to see the beginning of the policy where the Soviet Union begins to fear a large war that will destroy all the work that had been accomplished for Communism in Europe and the world.

The Soviet government also began to see the threat of Nazi Germany and the possibility of war in 1933.²² Gustav Hilger, who was a diplomat for Nazi Germany during the 1930s, wrote in his memoirs about how Hitler viewed Soviet Russia and how the Soviets responded to his beliefs. Hilger said that Hitler saw Russia as the main target for German imperialism and expansionism well before he took power.²³ More importantly, he claims that leaders in the Soviet government and the military began to see how Hitler's beliefs and policies would possibly be used against the Soviet Union if war came. The Soviet director of TASS, the Soviet Telegram Agency, expressed his apprehension about Hitler to Hilger even before he took power in 1933.²⁴ The director, Doletsky, said that the policies of the Nazi Party bothered the Soviet government, but they also believed that sensible relations could continue even if the Nazis took control of Germany.²⁵

Even though Hilger was German himself, he could see that Hitler could be a problem for the Soviet Union in the future. He pointed out that Hitler had long hated the Treaty of Rapallo, and this made the Soviet leaders believe that Hitler wished to get rid of Rapallo in favor a return to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.²⁶ The Brest-Litovsk treaty was the peace agreement made between Russia and Germany that resulted in Russia pulling out of World War I, and Germany seizing some Russian lands in Eastern Europe. What Hilger means by this is that he would be in favor of very unstable relations between the two states where Germany takes land away from Soviet Russia and the Soviets appear defeated, as had happened at the end of World War I. An end to the Rapallo treaty scared the Soviet leaders very much, because it meant that Germany could possibly return to a state of war with Russia without the treaty in place. Although the treaty was not as effective in the early 1930s, as mentioned earlier, it was still in place when Hitler took power in 1933. Unfortunately for the Soviet Union, this would no longer be the case after Hitler had been in power for a several months.

Historians have discussed the topic of the end of the Treaty of Rapallo at length since writing began on the subject shortly after the end of World War II. Walter Laqueur was a strong proponent that the end of Rapallo was difficult for the Soviet Union to accept. Hitler ratified the Treaty of Berlin in May 1933, which was a new treaty with the Soviet Union but it was not a renewal of Rapallo.²⁷ This treaty was a positive treaty with the Soviet Union, but it did

not include the military assistance that was prevalent in the Rapallo treaty.²⁸ Rapallo was not renewed because many leaders in the Germany Foreign Ministry did not want to renew it as a result of their anti-Soviet sentiments.²⁹ This sent mixed messages around Europe, because a new treaty was created between the nations after a very anti-Soviet Adolf Hitler took power, but the main treaty that was in place was not renewed. According to Laqueur, when the German ambassador returned from Moscow in November, he said, "the Rapallo chapter is closed."³⁰

The Soviets in the government and the Red Army believed that although Rapallo was not renewed, a healthy relationship could be maintained. However, in the end the Red Army closed all German military installations within the Soviet Union.³¹ This action meant that the Soviets no longer trusted the German leaders and the Germany military. From the Soviet perspective, they had lost an ally that had been with them since they became an officially recognized country in 1922. The leaders of the Soviet Union began to feel the same political, military, and diplomatic alienation that they felt in the early 1920s. They had lost an ally and did not have many states that wanted to maintain as strong a relationship as Germany had with Soviet Russia from 1922–1933. Also, their former ally now posed a large threat to them in the future because of their conflicting political ideologies and dictatorial leaders. War was not certain by 1933, but many within the Soviet Union could see that war may come at some point in the future. The Soviet fear of war and its lack of allies became apparent to the international public when they developed the policy of collective security. This was the strategy of the new Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Maxim Litvinov. This policy and new policies of peace for the Soviet Union would lead them into a new era: moving away from revolution and towards peace agreements to create allies in the face of the growing Nazi hazard.

1934-1938: Collective Security and Soviet Entrance into the League of Nations

Maxim Litvinov was the Soviet Foreign Commissar when Hitler took power in 1933. Although the Comintern guided Soviet foreign policy previously, Litvinov had more control over the role of the Commissar for Foreign Affairs and the foreign policy direction of the country in the 1930s. He managed to bring about the changes to the foreign policy of the Soviet Union by introducing the idea of collective security. Litvinov's goal with collective security was that if peace could be created elsewhere in Europe, then it would be easier to prevent Soviet Russia from entering any conflicts

that may occur.³² They were willing to sacrifice their international revolution in order to keep peace and protect their interests in spreading revolution later.³³ This is different compared to the ideas of the Comintern from the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Comintern wanted revolution to occur, while Litvinov and the Commissar for Foreign Affairs wanted peace to avoid war. The two different policies did overlap for a brief period, but during 1933 and into 1934 the Comintern began to support Litvinov's policies and advocate for alliances in order to avoid war.³⁴

Litvinov was not the only leader in the Soviet Union who wanted to ensure peace, stop the acts of revolution, and keep fascism from advancing out of Germany. Stalin supported the tactics of foreign policy created by Litvinov and his comrades in the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. Stalin gave orders to the Comintern to enforce this new policy by uniting other Communist parties around Europe, which would in the end lead to a united socialist front against fascism.³⁵ Litvinov's main focus was on the idea of preserving peace within the continent and trying to keep the Nazis from breaking rules in terms of militarization.³⁶ Litvinov focused on state affairs, while Stalin focused on the ideology of the party and other Communist parties. Both wanted the same result, which was to contain fascism in Germany, create alliances with other states, and prevent war.

These same ideas of united peace were used in 1934 when the Soviet Union became a member of the League of Nations. After the Soviet Union was formed in 1922, many states around the world refused to grant official recognition of the new state. As mentioned earlier, the Soviet diplomats tried their best to create bonds with nations in order to demonstrate their legitimacy, but the revolutionary tendencies of the Soviet system led to distrust by leading world powers. The Soviets believed that a move to a more conventional diplomatic approach to international relations would help them in the cause for peace.³⁷ Stalin believed that Hitler was getting ready for war, and so he allowed Litvinov to begin to integrate the Soviet Union with the League of Nations and, more importantly, with the West.³⁸

The Soviets could feel more military pressure being applied by the Nazis in Europe. General Tukhachevsky, the leading general of the Red Army, could see that the Nazis were rearming themselves well beyond the limits set by the Treaty of Versailles.³⁹ He also observed that Hitler was appeasing France, because he still needed some of their resources to build his own military and wanted to make sure that they did not rearm at the same rate that Germany did.⁴⁰ Based on these observations, the Soviet military could see

how the Nazis were becoming a threat to all of Europe, not just to the Soviet Union. The military believed that Hitler and the Nazis needed to be stopped from breaking rules placed on them by the Treaty of Versailles, which could lead to war. In this way the Soviet military agreed with the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.

Maxim Litvinov also could see for himself that Hitler's acts broke both the provisions of the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations. He believed that Hitler needed to speak out and repudiate his violations to the League of Nations in order for peace to be maintained.⁴¹ At this point in 1935 when Litvinov spoke out against Hitler, the Soviet military, Comintern, and Commissariat for Foreign Affairs were all aware of the growing military threat posed by Nazi Germany. They feared not just an invasion of the Soviet Union but the rest of Europe if correct measures were not taken to keep Nazi Germany from building a large army. In order to deal with this issue, the Soviets took a diplomatic approach in order to protect themselves and avoid war.

In 1936, after three years of political and diplomatic tension between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the relationship appeared to be deteriorating even more. Hitler gave a speech to the Reichstag in March 1936 in which he accused the French of breaking the Rhine Pact between the two by allying with Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.⁴² He explained in reference to the Franco-Czechoslovak-Soviet Pact, "In accordance with the fundamental right of a nation to secure its frontiers and ensure its possibilities of defense, the German Government has today restored the full and unrestricted sovereignty of Germany in the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland."⁴³ Based on this statement, the Nazis believed that the alliance between the three states posed a major threat to the security of Nazi Germany. The Soviets may have just been trying to secure their own borders and make sure that peace alliances were made, but when they did create the treaty with France and Czechoslovakia the Nazis viewed it as aggression and chose to retake the Rhineland as punishment. The Soviets were reacting to the Nazi militarization by creating peace alliances, but the Nazis were still militarizing in response to formation of Soviet alliances. This shows that both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were reacting to one another, and both saw the other as a threat.

Despite the fact that tensions were high by 1936, the Nazis did maintain an economic relationship with the Soviet Union through trade. Historian Edward Ericson claims that they wished to continue because the Soviets wanted to pay off much of their debt, while the Germans were using it to rearm their military.⁴⁴ Here a clear contradiction can be seen compared to

Soviet foreign policy with Nazi Germany. The Soviets wanted to create peace with other European nations in order to create political alliances in case of a war caused by Nazi aggression. Meanwhile, the Soviets were actually giving the Nazis money to rebuild their military. The Soviets were trying to keep the Nazis from rearming so they could keep peace, but at the same time were helping the Nazis fund the rearmament.

The two states created a 200-million Reich mark credit plan in April 1935, which was the time when Hitler began to rearm the military.⁴⁵ In fact, six economic plans were made from 1935–1939, but they all failed eventually due to political circumstances.⁴⁶ Although there appeared to be an economic partnership growing slightly during the mid-1930s, in March 1935 Litvinov gave his speech speaking out against Nazi Germany and their violations of the Versailles treaty. The Soviets were at odds politically with Nazi Germany, but they still wanted to continue an economic relationship. It is unclear exactly why the Soviets still felt that they needed the economic trade with Germany, but most likely it was because they needed goods to help build their nation. Stalin was in the process of industrialization and collectivization, two large economic plans that he and high Soviet leaders developed in order to make the Soviet Union into a large manufacturing power. Both the Nazis and Soviets wanted economic aid from one another to grow into strong industrial powers, and this is why they continued to try to cooperate via trading despite the political problems between them. However, the differing actions of the Soviet government between Nazi Germany in economics and politics made the Soviets look naïve when in fact they were trying a diplomatic new approach.

Walter Laqueur points out that over the time period of 1932–1940, the Weimar and Nazi government began taking in more imports from Soviet Russia but giving less to them.⁴⁷ This shows that the Soviets were trying to keep the Nazis content economically and avoid war over the time period. The Soviets, in fact, do contradict themselves, as seen with the stern anti-Nazi foreign policy but open economic policy, but the main purpose was to avoid war and keep peace. From 1933 to early 1938, the Soviets had been somewhat successful in creating alliances with other nations to secure their sovereignty if war did come. Their economic trade with Germany kept the Nazis from building political animosity toward the Soviet Union for the time being during 1935–1938. The Soviets were still trying to avoid isolation and were never sure if the alliances with other states would work out. Unfortunately, all alliances and political ties created in this period would be put to the test in late 1938, and regrettably for the Soviets they would not matter.

Munich Conference, 1938-1939: The End of Collective Security

The crisis that sparked the Munich Conference was the Nazi invasion of the Sudetenland, a western section of Czechoslovakia where many German-speaking people lived. Before the Nazis entered Czechoslovakia, the Soviets had a treaty signed with Czechoslovakia that stated if they were invaded at any time by anyone, the Soviet Union would come to their aid with military support.⁴⁸ Soviet leaders, primarily Litvinov, believed that if the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France stood up to Nazi Germany, Hitler would back down and the alliances that the Soviet Union trusted so greatly would conquer aggression.⁴⁹

Despite the hopes of the Soviet leaders that the alliances made would prevail, France did not declare war with Germany over Czechoslovakia. There were two pacts in place, one between the USSR–Czechoslovakia and another between France–Czechoslovakia. There was a clause in the pacts between the three countries that France and the Soviet Union had to mutually agree to help Czechoslovakia in any crisis in order for either to send military aid.⁵⁰ The French did not believe that the Soviets would indeed step in and aid them if they raced to help the Czechoslovaks.⁵¹ Litvinov was perplexed by the French stance and was very passionate in vocalizing that the Soviet Union would aid Czechoslovakia if the French agreed to help as well.

There was one problem when it came to the Munich Conference itself: the Soviet Union was not invited to participate.⁵² The conference resulted in the French and British allowing Hitler to possess the Sudetenland as German territory, and Czechoslovakia peacefully agreeing to concede the territory to Germany.⁵³ The Soviets had the option of standing up with the Czechs together against the Nazis, but the Soviets were very hesitant to fight the Nazis without the aid of Britain or France.⁵⁴ Litvinov, Stalin, and other high members of the Soviet government believed that a united defense against Hitler, primarily with the aid of other strong nations such as Britain and France, would bring aggression to a standstill and produce peace in Europe. When this did not happen during the Munich Conference, the Soviets did not give up hope on collective security prevailing over aggression, but as a result Soviet leaders began to doubt the commitments of Britain and France.

The diplomatic attempt at an alliance with Britain and France at Munich failed, but there was another opportunity a few months later that could have provided the united defense against fascism that the Soviet Union was seeking. In March 1939, a half a year after the debacle of the Munich

Conference, Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia, and the clouds of war grew ever darker.⁵⁵ Maxim Litvinov understood this, and made one last attempt at a peace with Britain and France in order to guarantee military assistance if the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ The negotiations for an association between the three states went well into April and May, and finally on May 4 Joseph Stalin decided to remove Litvinov from the position of Commissar for Foreign Affairs.⁵⁷ As for any alliance with Britain or France, Stalin believed that having another Foreign Minister step in might help to produce one.

Stalin and other members of Politburo began to feel that there was no assurance for them that any alliance with the West against Nazi Germany would come to fruition. At the Eighteenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Stalin stated that:

To what then are we to attribute the systematic concessions made by these states to the aggressors? Britain, and France, have rejected the policy of collective security, the policy of collective resistance to aggressors, and have taken up a position of nonintervention.... The policy of nonintervention reveals an eagerness...not to hinder Germany from enmeshing herself in European affairs, from embroiling herself in a war with the Soviet Union.⁵⁸

The failure of the Munich conference and the long negotiations that ensued in early 1939 demonstrated to the Soviet high command that the British and French were not willing to confront the Nazis over their aggression. Stalin himself believed that the British and French were interested in allowing Hitler to invade eastern Europe without stopping him. This mindset came from the fact that the Soviets and Western powers knew that Hitler did not want the Soviet Union to exist and wanted lands in eastern Europe for Germany. Stalin believed that France and Britain were thinking that if they let Hitler have what he desired in the east, including the Soviet Union, he might in turn leave the west alone. Here is where the first true divide began between the west and the Soviet Union in European affairs since the age of collective security began at the beginning of the decade.

Stalin then reiterated the idea to his people that Western powers in Europe would not aid the Soviet Union in a war with Germany, so that they understood that no one else was willing to help them. At the same party conference in 1939, he said that the Soviet Union would not fight the

battles of Britain and France for them, and that the Soviet Union would handle all foreign matters in their own way.⁵⁹ Before this, Litvinov and Stalin had stated that the Soviet Union would unite with other states, such as in the League of Nations, to stop aggression. After the events of late 1938 and early 1939, the Soviet leadership was now confident that the League of Nations and the states in it were not going to work as a collective to stop aggression. Instead of waiting to fight a costly battle against the Nazis to stop aggression, Stalin had another plan that most did not expect. He did the unthinkable at the time, deciding to ally the Soviet Union with the state that he had spent nearly a decade trying to stop from invading all of Europe.

August 1939: Deal with the Devil

In April 1939, when Joseph Stalin sensed that the nations of France and Britain did not truly support the survival of the Soviet Union, he decided that his country had to take a new approach to foreign policy in order to avoid being left without allies if conflict arrived. The first step that Stalin took to create a new foreign policy initiative was to appoint his friend and fellow Politburo member Vyacheslav Molotov as Commissar for Foreign Affairs.⁶⁰

There are multiple explanations for why Stalin decided to make this move in May 1939, and historian Geoffrey Roberts helps to point out some of those explanations. Roberts believes that Stalin may have wanted Molotov to take over for Litvinov because he was a Politburo member and Litvinov was not, which meant that Molotov had power over both the Communist Party and over the state affairs of the Soviet Union.⁶¹ Roberts also believes that Stalin wanted to become more involved in foreign affairs, in which he previously had little to no interest.⁶² If this was true, then Stalin needed Molotov in the position of Foreign Commissar because they had been close friends in the Communist Party for many decades.⁶³ Stalin trusted Molotov more than Litvinov to do what he wished. The real reasons for Stalin's beliefs are unknown, but what is known is what Stalin instructed Molotov to do as Foreign Commissar in 1939.

Despite the fact that Stalin distrusted Britain and France and had Litvinov removed after those two nations began to look like they would never get a pact created with the Soviet Union, he had Molotov continue negotiations with them.⁶⁴ The negotiations went into August 1939, with several problems bringing the discussions to a standstill. One problem was that the Soviet Union wanted the British and French to recognize any foreign invasion of the Baltic States of Finland, Latvia, and Estonia as an invasion on the Soviet

Union.⁶⁵ Another was that the British and French included a draft that said that if a state were invaded that Britain or France felt was worth supporting with military assistance, such as Holland or Belgium, then Soviet assistance was guaranteed.⁶⁶ If a state that the Soviets considered worth sending assistance, such as the Baltic States, came under threat, then a meeting would have to be held between the three to decide what would be done.⁶⁷ The Soviets felt unequal as a result, because their safety was not automatically guaranteed unlike Britain and France.

At the same time that the negotiations with the British and French were floundering, Stalin had Molotov do the unimaginable: begin diplomatic discussions with Nazi Germany. In July 1939, Stalin and Molotov decided that a pact with Germany could be accomplished, because the British and the French could not agree on what the Soviets wanted or wanted more from the Soviet Union in terms of assistance than they were willing to give in return.⁶⁸ The Nazis had been trying to develop a treaty with the Soviets in order to prevent any alliance between France, Britain, and the Soviet Union from becoming a reality.⁶⁹ In August, German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop told the Soviets that all states that the Soviet Union wished to keep between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea would be left alone when the Nazi invasion began.⁷⁰ This was the answer that the British and French were unwilling to give, because they did not want to allow the Soviets to defend the Baltic States in case of invasion, whereas the Nazis allowed them to bring the Red Army into the Baltic region if they pleased.

The negotiations between the Anglo-French delegation and the Soviet Union truly came to an end in mid-August when they refused to allow the Red Army to move their forces through Romania and Poland if the Nazis invaded.⁷¹ The Soviet Union believed that they could not help the British and French fight against the Nazis if they could not move into those countries and assist from there.⁷² On August 23, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was officially announced in Moscow, completing a return to open diplomatic relations between the two states not seen since before Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933.⁷³

The treaty itself is very complicated, because of a secret clause that was not announced to the public. The public part of the treaty explained that there was a state of guaranteed non-aggression between the two states for a period of ten years, and any issues between the two would be settled via diplomatic talks.⁷⁴ The secret clause divided up eastern Europe between the two states, with Poland being split in half.⁷⁵ The public part of the treaty can be explained as

coinciding with the Soviet foreign policy of the last six years. They were able to guarantee on paper that there would not be any aggression between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Although the Soviets were not able to secure any allies against Germany in this pact, they did ease their fear of being alone without military and diplomatic allies by solidifying their security with this pact.

The second part of the pact is harder to explain. The Soviets did not reveal to the British and French that they planned to take over states in eastern Europe if they were to move their army to fight Germany, just that they would have to cross through certain states. Either the Soviets sincerely wanted to take over those states, such as the Baltic States and Poland, when they were in negotiations with Paris and London, or they were just going to cross through to help fight the Nazis. The interpretation that matches this research is that the Soviets wanted to have borderlands guarded and accounted for if war ever came. When in discussions with the British and French, Molotov said it was unacceptable to allow the Baltic States to be invaded. What he meant by this was that the Baltic States lined the border of the Soviet Union and needed to be defended as if they were the Soviet Union itself. The Soviets set up the non-aggression pact to guarantee that the Nazis would not invade them any time from 1939-1949, but they made the secret section so that they could take over the border states of the Soviet Union in case an invasion did come. Whether an invasion came from Nazi Germany or anybody else did not matter. The Soviet Union now had to deal that not only avoiding a war with Germany, but also to kept themselves out of the war to come between Germany and western Europe. The Soviet Union, at that moment in August 1939 at least, was safe from foreign invasion, which they had so greatly feared since their rule in Russia began in 1918.

Conclusion

When the Soviet Union was created under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin in 1922, other countries did not view the first Communist state as very friendly diplomatically. Lenin stated that in order to achieve the goal of world Communist revolution, the Soviet Union needed to support Communist parties in other European states, and their goal was to take over control of their governments. States around the world did not trust the Soviet Union when the country was first formed, because they saw the Soviet Union as a military and political threat to them. Therefore, they did not want Communism to succeed nor have Communism succeed in countries around the world.

Nations such as Britain and the United States sent in

troops to aid the Tsarist armies in the Russian Civil War, demonstrating to Lenin and the Bolsheviks that they were indeed fighting alone without allies to support them in their cause. This feeling of political and military separation from the rest of Europe, particularly capitalist states, set in from the beginning, as can be demonstrated by the fact that the Soviets approved of the Treaty of Rapallo with Germany in 1922. Germany was the first country to form any kind of alliance with the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet Union, under the leadership of Stalin, still tried their best to spread Communist propaganda and rhetoric around the world, more and more countries began to recognize the Soviet Union as an official state with a true diplomatic agenda.

The biggest problem that arose for the Soviet Union in international politics was the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany in 1933. This changed everything for the Soviets, as they now had a party that detested Communism controlling a state that had engaged in diplomatic interactions with the Soviets in the 1920s. The Soviets began to feel threatened again, as they had during the Russian Civil War, and the fear of being without allies in a major war began to reappear. Stalin knew that he could no longer afford to scare away potential military and diplomatic partners by continuing to pursue the revolution, and so instead gave the reigns of Soviet foreign policy to Maxim Litvinov and the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. Litvinov championed new ideas about collective security and peace agreements between nations against aggression. As the Nazi war machine began to grow into the mid 1930s, the Soviets became more involved in the League of Nations to try to unite many states together to prevent the Nazis from invading countries in Europe.

The Munich Conference dealt a blow to the Soviet policy of collective security, as Britain and France opted for the option of nonintervention with the Nazis in Czechoslovakia instead of united defense against them. The Soviets tried very hard to get some sort of alliance worked out with Britain and France before the war started, but the Soviets could not get the two Western powers to agree to terms that the Soviets wanted. It appeared as though the Soviets would indeed be on their own in the looming war. It was then that Stalin and new Foreign Commissar Vyacheslav Molotov struck a deal with Germany. This did not create an alliance between the two, but it guaranteed that one would not invade the other in any form, and it allowed the Soviet Union to take over several states in Eastern Europe. The Soviets wanted to use these states as a buffer in case any country in the West did decide to invade. Although the Soviets were not allied against the Nazis

anymore, they did manage to secure their borders and their sovereignty, at least for a few years.

Endnotes

¹ Although in this essay I will be looking at the events that occurred in Germany up until Hitler took power in 1933, this paper is still a focus on Soviet Foreign Policy from 1933-1939. I am only including the past of Germany in the twentieth century to show the interactions that the two had after the end of the First World War.

² Alastair Kocho-Williams, *Russian and Soviet Diplomacy, 1900-1939* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), 77.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 84-85.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 90-91.

⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁹ Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin, eds., *Fascination and Enmity: Russia and Germany as Entangled Histories* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 60-65.

¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹¹ Ibid., 84-88.

¹² Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy, 1933-1939: The Road to World War II* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005), 89.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 88-91.

¹⁷ Ibid., 89-90.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Xenia J. Eudin and Robert M. Slusser, *Soviet Foreign Policy 1928-1934: Documents and Materials*, vol. 2 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1967), 513.

²⁰ Ibid., 504.

²¹ Ibid., 505.

²² It is important to point out how the Comintern and Commissariat were different from one another, because although they both dealt with foreign affairs they operated very differently. The Comintern saw everything in terms of economic issues and class struggle, as the Soviet ideology dictated. The Commissariat acted like any Ministry of Foreign Affairs in any country, and it saw the world in terms of states that existed and how to interact with them. The Comintern tried to create revolution, while the Commissariat looked for peaceful relations, leading other states to distrust the U.S.S.R. This will be important later in seeing how the Comintern began to act more like a foreign ministry in the 1930s when they ceased revolutionary activity and promoted state-sponsored peace.

²³ Gustav Hilger and Alfred G. Meyer, *The Incompatible Allies: A Memoir-History of German-Soviet Relations, 1918-1941* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 250.

²⁴ Ibid., 253.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Walter Laqueur, *Russia and Germany: A Century of Conflict* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), 163-65.

- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Kocho-Williams, *Russian and Soviet Diplomacy*, 119.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (Toronto: Little, Brown, 1960), 293-94.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Kocho-Williams, *Russian and Soviet Diplomacy*, 120.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Jane Degras, ed, *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy (1933-1941)*, vol. 3 of *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy* (New York: Octagon Books, 1978), 124-26.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Maxim Litvinov, *Against Aggression: Speeches by Maxim Litvinov* (New York: International Publisher Co, Inc., 1939.), 18-21.
- ⁴² Roderick Stackelberg and Sally A. Winkle, eds., *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 193.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Edward E. Ericson, *Feeding the German Eagle: Soviet Economic Aid to Nazi Germany, 1933-1941* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1999), 17.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 23-26.
- ⁴⁷ Laqueur, *Russia and Germany*, 173.
- ⁴⁸ Geoffrey Roberts, *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War: Russo-German Relations and the Road to War, 1933-1941* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 49.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 54-55.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 58-59.
- ⁵² Ibid., 49-50, 54-55.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 59-61.
- ⁵⁵ Geoffrey Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012), 21.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Roberts, *The Soviet Union*, 71. Stalin did not make this decision on a whim or without another plan of action. His new plan will be discussed in the next section.
- ⁵⁸ Alvin Z. Rubenstein, ed., *The Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972), 130-35.
- ⁵⁹ Kennan, *Russia and the West*, 326.
- ⁶⁰ Roberts, *The Soviet Union*, 72.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 72-73.
- ⁶⁴ Roberts, *Molotov*, 22-25.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 25
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., 28.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 27.
- ⁷² Ibid., 30-31.
- ⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Raymond James Sontag and James Stuart Beddie, eds., *Nazi and Soviet Relations, 1939-1941: Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office as Released by the Department of State* (New York: Didier Publishers, 1948), 76-77.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 78.

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