Soviet Foreign Policy from the Spanish Civil War to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, 1936–1939

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Abstract: Having consolidated his power in the late 1920s, Joseph Stalin long focused on internal affairs: the Five Year Plans, collectivization of agriculture, rapid industrialization, and modernization of the Red Army. Despite his penchant for domestic policy, from the summer of 1936 Stalin's Soviet Union was increasingly drawn into foreign affairs. This article explores Stalin's foreign policy on the eve of the Second World War. The Soviet Union's multiple failures in forging an anti-Fascist alliance with Britain and France, most notably in the Spanish Civil War, will be explored as the prelude to Stalin's eventual decision, in August 1939, to authorize the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Keywords: USSR, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Vyacheslav Molotov, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Spanish Civil War, Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Red Army, Munich, Czechoslovakia, Moscow, Berlin, Reichstag

The tourist wishing to visit the Reichstag building in Berlin may well arrive from the former Western sector, passing through the Tiergarten via the Strasse des 17 Juni: the "Street of 17 June", named for the workers' uprising in 1953 that followed Stalin's death. Traveling east towards the Brandenburg Tor, the visitor cannot help but notice, to the left, the colossal Red Army memorial, pointedly situated a stone's throw from the Reichstag. The eye is drawn to the Herculean central smirking figure, whose self-satisfaction belies the terrible human and material cost of the Soviet conquest of Nazi Germany. His facial expression suggests not so much that it was easy as that it was, in the end, highly satisfying. This is one of two enormous monuments to the Red Army remaining and very much

maintained in Berlin; the other is off the beaten path, in the old East, at Treptower Park, and even bigger.

For the still visible public history of the Soviet victory in Berlin, the interior tour of Reichstag is equally interesting. In several corridors outside the parliamentary chamber, stretching to the seven-meter ceiling, are well-preserved soaring panels covered with graffiti in Cyrillic letters: messages left by Red Army soldiers who occupied the partially destroyed building in the spring of 1945.[1] The thrust of nearly all the graffiti is a triumphalist, vengeful declaration of Stalin having once and for all conquered Berlin. The graffiti has been painstakingly preserved with protective oils and varnish, a lasting and daily reminder for twenty-first century German parliamentarians that, in the middle of the last century, their country was overrun and occupied by the Soviet Union. The previous occupation by a Russian army is virtually forgotten: that was in 1760, under the reign of Empress Elizabeth, a brief episode in the Seven Years War, but a memory revived in summer 1939, to assuage public opinion in Moscow, at the moment the Nazi-Soviet Pact was announced (Asprey 1986, 467).

For the more recent occupation, and the handwritten messages in the Reichstag, these Cyrillic shouts from the past serve as a symbol: a visual-poetic exclamation mark that bookends a tumultuous and breathless three-decade period in Russian history. Is there any global-historical equivalent to the rolling crises of Russia in the years 1915–1945, beginning with the catastrophic setbacks of the Tsarist army in the First World War? A key date, indeed, was thirty years prior to the second occupation of Berlin, May 2, 1915, during the First World War, when the Austro-German army broke through the southwestern Russian front. From that disaster, Russia was propelled to the convulsions of two revolutions in a single year, the fall of the Romanov dynasty and installation of the world's first Communist regime, the March 1918 humiliating treaty of Brest-Litovsk—a loss of territory with no precedent in European history—then on to civil war, famine, international ostracism, forced collectivization, domestic terror, purges, and three ignominious military defeats: first to the Poles on the Vistula in 1920, then in the Spanish Civil War, and finally, in Finland, be-

[1] Among the scant scholarship on the graffiti is Jenkins (2002).

fore much larger losses in the first stages of the Great Patriotic War, with the accompanying widespread destruction of villages, cities, and arable land. Yet as the graffiti clearly shows, after thirty years of tumult, the Soviet Union emerged victorious and as the most powerful state in Europe.

The continent thus faced, in spring 1945, the obvious and absolute power of the Red Army, sitting on a flattened Berlin, but also the by then unquestioned mastery of the hitherto underestimated Stalin himself. This was a conclusion to the era of European civil war that few would have predicted. The Soviets were not invited to Versailles in 1919, nor to Munich two decades later. They were excluded from the League of Nations across the decade of the 1920s. In the early historical literature on the origins of the Second World War, the Soviet Union is barely mentioned. For example, the most important study, that of A. J. P. Taylor (1961), relegates Stalin and Moscow to the footnotes. There is no comparing these careless dismissals with Stalin's real position in 1945, and nowhere is that better exemplified than at Potsdam, where the Allies finally met to finalize the postwar settlement. Stalin's photographer, the Jewish-Ukrainian Yevgeny Khaldei, recalled how, after the Big Three had had their famous picture taken, arranged in the palace garden's high-backed wicker chairs, the photographers themselves took turns doing them same—that is, where Truman and Churchill had sat. None dared approach the place reserved for Stalin.[2]

In this season of the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Communism in Europe, it is an appropriate moment to take stock and assess evolving perceptions of Stalin's place in the coming of the war in 1939. More than for all the other Great Powers, the study of Stalin, Stalinism, and interwar and WWII Russia, has, since 1991, been transformed, and we may note several components to this sea change. First, up to 1991, one always spoke of Soviet and Western interpretations of history. Fifteen years ago, when the present author published a book in Barcelona on the Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War, it was necessary to separate out all of the literature emanating from the USSR and that from the rest of the world (Kowalsky 2004). That division has now melted away. If one could profitably compare

[2] Interview in the documentary film *Yevgeny Khaldei, photographer under Stalin* (Belgium: Marc-Henri Wajnberg, 1997).

and contrast the different conclusions reached in the works of Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk with those of the American historian Stephen Kotkin, not least in their recent biographies of Stalin, nothing would be gained in reverting to the anachronistic paradigm (Khlevniuk 2005; Kotkin 2017). Though, admittedly, elsewhere one does note that some Russianists are derisively labeled "pro-Russian", e.g., Stephen Cohen (Chotiner 2014). By the same token, anachronistic biases that influenced scholarly treatments of the Soviet Union before 1991 can be easily found today, in the form of lingering or resurgent biases. When a historian writes a thousand-page biography of Stalin, and refers to Stalin throughout as "the despot" (Kotkin 2017), is there any question objectivity has taken a holiday? Other tendentious arguments continue to circulate, sometimes despite new empirical evidence rendering them obsolete.

The end of Communism in Europe, and the collapse of the USSR, had two additional consequences on scholarship. First, the USSR's disappearance meant that its history suddenly appeared more fragile, subject to change, to erosion of power and prestige, and, over all, less monolithic. This would lead inevitably to a tempering of historical analyses adhering to a totalitarian model. If the Soviet Union could collapse, perhaps its strength and reach had all along been overstated.[3]

More critically, the archives opened up, but as in Spain after Franco, this was not something that happened overnight. In Russia, it remains a long-term process, with key staging points along the way. But the possibilities for research were immediately apparent, and archival declassifications in the 1990s opened up research possibilities for young scholars, and informed changes in perceptions of broad areas of Soviet policy (Kowalsky 1998). They did not solve all problems, however. There remains an unevenness in the range of declassifications. The Foreign Commissariat is exceedingly difficult to work in, whereas the party and military archives and state central archive have been accessible for almost twenty-five years.

[3] The totalitarian conceptualization of the USSR first came under attack in the 1980s, but the revisionist school that argued for inherent weaknesses in the Soviet system, especially under Stalin, gained greater traction after the end of Communism. Proponents included William Chase, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Robert W. Thurston, and J. Arch Getty; one of the first assessments of the trend is Laqueur (1987, 225–227).

But open access is no cure all. The sheer mass of documents, for example, in the military archive, and also the cumbersome requirement in having to read documents in situ, renders their complete use a logistical impossibility. Take Red Army operations in Spain. The researcher in the military archive would find over six hundred boxes containing perhaps one million pages of documents. Elsewhere, poor translations and even worse interpretations of those documents have proved that the availability of Soviet records can be a twin-edged sword.[4]

A historic release was the 2013 set of 474 declassified documents on Soviet policy and Spain, selected from the presidential archive (Efimenko, Myshov, and Tarkhova 2019; Kudriashov 2013). For over two decades, this archive was considered the Fort Knox of the post-Soviet archive archipelago, and was assumed to be perennially shut to normal research historians. The breaching of the door, and the publication of a diverse trove of documentation, organized chronologically, is sensational. Some of these files were already available in duplicate, in declassified fonds in the military or former party archives, but many others had never seen the light of day. Of special interest are those papers that trace the Soviet leadership's responses to outbreak of the war, the intervention of the Fascist states, and the organization of the Non-Intervention Committee. It is a fine overview of Stalin's evolving position during these critical three years that culminated in the pact and the beginning of the Second World War. Most of this material is correspondence to and from Stalin.

More recently, two major publishing events have further advanced the state of the field. Appearing in the end of 2018 was a Russian-Spanish bilingual edited volume (Volosiuk, Yuirchik, and Vediushkin 2018) that assembled the work of an international team of forty-six scholars, whose mission was to trace and flesh out the history of Russo-Spanish relations since the time of Peter the Great. Angel Viñas played a key role in the project, himself authoring many of the articles that cover the period of the civil war. Richly documented with facsimiles of declassified archival materials, photographs, interpretive essays, and an exhaustive bibliography,

[4] For example, in Habeck and Radosh (2001), the authors often reach conclusions that are the very opposite of what a dispassionate reading of the translated declassified documents would imply.

the work's sections on bilateral ties in the twentieth century are peerless. When this book was released, even the casual observer would have had difficulty imagining its being superseded at any point in the near future, yet several months later, in early 2019, an even more stupendous scholarly bombshell was announced: the publication of an invaluable trove of over two dozen specially commissioned research articles in the ever expanding historiography of the Soviets in the Spanish Civil War.[5] The organization of this special issue of *Istoriia*, edited by Ekaterina Grantseva and Georgy Filatov, proposes understanding bilateral ties through multiple discrete lenses: from the perspective of Soviets and other Russians sent to Spain; in terms of how the Soviet presence fit into the larger internationalization of the civil war; and as a problem of scholarship, historical memory, and public history, whose resolution lies in part in further mining of archival funds in the Russian Federation. Overall, it is difficult to overstate the sea change that has resulted, over the last two decades, with the publication these documents.

Soviet Foreign Policy in the Late 1930s

We now turn our attention to several aspects of Soviet foreign policy between the wars and how these connect with the larger question of Moscow's influence on the events that led to the pact in August 1939 and to the beginning of the Second World War in September of the same year. Soviet foreign relations, from the earliest days, were nurtured in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and reciprocal bellicosity vis-à-vis the West. The USSR was born on a war footing and the new regime was immediately under siege and at war: with former Tsarist officers and their White adherents as well as with neighboring states and the Western Entente—Russia's former allies. Lenin was initially unambiguous in forcefully fomenting violent revolution by client national Communist parties across Europe (Service 2000). According to Orlando Figes (1996, 537), "The belief in the imminence of a world revolution was central to Bolshevik thinking in the autumn of 1917".

[5] *Istoriia* 2 (76) (2019), edited by Ekaterina Grantseva and Georgy Filatov.

Nonetheless, Lenin's call for exporting the revolution was never matched with adequate military force. The demise of the German and Hungarian revolutions in 1919, the Polish victory in 1920 over the Red Army near Warsaw, and the subsequent triumph of the Black Shirts over the Italian Socialists suggested that the counterrevolutionary pushback across the continent was quickly becoming an impermeable juggernaut. The Comintern, founded in 1919, offered a nonmilitary alternative, supporting the rise of national Communist parties while not threatening the established order (Rees and Thorpe 1998). In lieu of admitting defeat, the official Kremlin rhetoric emphasized building "socialism in one country" (Carr 1970). On the world's stage, the Soviets were shunned, and considered a rogue state. Diplomatic recognition came slowly, with many states, like Spain, not establishing full ties until the early 1930s (Kowalsky 2003). Yet by 1933, the picture was rather more complicated. In Italy, the Fascists had already been in power for over a decade, and soon the Nazis would rule Germany. The Soviets began to court the West to create an anti-Fascist alliance. From 1935, collective security and advocacy of the Popular Front, not revolution, was the official party line.[6] The goal of collective security would be tested and would fail three times between its inception in 1935 and the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23, 1939. It would fail in Spain, at Munich, and in the frenzied eleventh-hour attempts, in summer 1939, to create a military alliance between France, Britain, and the Soviet Union.

To curry favor with the West was a marked departure for Chairman Joseph Stalin, who, since having consolidated his power in the late 1920s, was long focused on internal affairs: the Five Year Plans, collectivization of agriculture, rapid industrialization, large-scale engineering projects (such as the Dnieper Dam, the Moscow Metro, and the White Sea Canal), and militarization—to wit, the modernization of the Red Army. Stalin was among the first of the Old Bolsheviks to focus on building "socialism in one country", and he was quite consistent in this; indeed, he was one of the towering nation builders of history. Further, once he became party

[6] For the definitive primary document collection on Soviet shift to the Popular Front tactic, see Shirinia (1975, 440–465).

chief, Stalin left the USSR only twice: for Tehran in 1943 and for Potsdam in 1945. His overarching obsession was the security of the Soviet state. He had good reason to focus on this. In terms of its geography and vulnerability to foreign invasion, Russia is quite unlike Spain. Spain has several formidable natural defenses. Russia has none. This is a transcendent fact that has shaped many centuries of Russian history. Historically, in lieu of natural defenses, Russia has counted on its massive territory to serve as a cordon sanitaire between the populous and politically significant interior and the vulnerable border.

Independent from Hitler's ascension to power in 1933, and quite aside from the anti-Bolshevik propaganda of the Nazi regime, telegraphed already in *Mein Kampf*, Stalin's Soviet Union prepared for war. The eventuality of war with Germany spurred on Stalin's domestic policy, which spared no cost, nor factored in resultant human indignities, for the vast population marshaled to the task. By any standard, the Soviet economy was on a war footing by 1934; by 1940, military expenditures amounted to a whopping one-third of the state budget.[7] From 1938, an industrial evacuation plan was put in place; when it was eventually implemented, Soviet factories that risked being overrun in the West were dismantled piece by piece, loaded on rolling stock, and reassembled east of the Urals. In 1939, the five-day work week was abolished to squeeze productivity out of the population to increase war production.[8] It is a vast understatement to observe that these preparatory measures of the 1930s would later be vindicated, and many statistics soberly quantify the Herculean size of the war in the East, the threat it posed to Slavic civilization, and the number of men, machines, and animals required to defeat Hitler's *Vernichtungskrieg*: his "war of extermination". Simply put, Barbarossa was on a separate scale, unlike any invasion in human history, before or since. In the first six months alone, Red Army deaths numbered 1,750,000, while the

[7] For a contemporary account of the rapid pace of militarization, see Knickerbocker (1941, 93). A usable scholarly overview is Siegelbaum (2000). For an assessment by the leading Soviet military historian, see Glantz (1998).

[8] Soviet war preparations have given rise to a rich historiography, with more titles appearing each year. A comprehensive study completed even before the bulk of archival declassifications is Harrison (1994, 237–262). See also Overy, Barber and Harrison (1991).

Wehrmacht lost 200,000, a fraction, perhaps, but nonetheless over six times the number of battle deaths Germany accumulated in the whole of the Western campaigns of 1940. In fact, for the Red Army the figure should be much higher, since the 1941 totals ignore the millions of POWs who were captured during the Blitzkrieg and later died in captivity (Harrison 1997, 431–432).

His penchant for domestic policy suited the first decade of Stalin's rule, for the Soviets remained cast out of the main state system and generally considered a rogue nation. All this began to change after 1933, and even more from the 1935 Seventh Party Congress, when Stalin's Soviet Union was increasing drawn into foreign affairs, most spectacularly on the Iberian Peninsula, in summer 1936. In Spain, the Soviets entered a civil war despite scant historical ties with the Spanish state, either Republican or imperial.

Moscow-Madrid

The Soviet experience of the Spanish Civil War informed Soviet foreign policy further afield, and without a doubt down to the eve of the pact, though historians have only recently come to some agreement on this assessment. For decades, misperceptions circulated, not least by those historians who knew very little about Spain but sought to make sense of it. A barometer of this may be perceived in surveying biographies of Joseph Stalin. In the seminal, though now dated, tomes of Robert Tucker and Roy Medvedev, events in distant Iberia were relegated to a handful of paragraphs and a few footnotes.[9] In more recent studies, this is no longer the case. For Oleg Khlevniuk and Stephen Kotkin, Spain looms large, and the Spanish Civil War becomes an event on a par—indeed intertwined—with the purges and the pact (Khlevniuk 2015; Kotkin 2017).[10] To indulge in a bit of antithesis, Khlevniuk's conclusion is not that Soviet policy shaped

[9] For Roy Medvedev (1989, 724–725), Spain is summarized in five paragraphs; a "lack of sources" prevents the author from delving further. Tucker (1990, 350–352, 524–525), who also had no access to unpublished materials, produces a four-page summary analysis.

[10] Kotkin uses no Spanish language sources, and he neglects all of the recent literature in French (Skoutelsky, for example).

the war in Spain, but that the war in Spain shaped Stalin's domestic policies in the USSR. Observing Spain's descent into anarchy, guerrilla warfare, sabotage, and extrajudicial justice (e.g., the general consequences of "total war"), Khlevniuk (2015, 153) astutely asserts that "Stalin . . . became further convinced of the need to purge the homeland in the interests of military readiness". For Kotkin, meanwhile, erroneously, Stalin is drawn into the Spanish Civil War principally to hunt his ideological enemies. Says Kotkin hysterically, adopting a suitably stereotypical Castilian metaphor: "The specter of Trotskyites capturing a physical redoubt in a real country would seize Stalin like the proverbial red cape in front of a bull" (Kotkin 2017, 323).

Kotkin's basic thesis already circulated widely during and after the civil war; it originated in part with Orwell's distortions, to wit, that the Republic's fortunes were sabotaged by Stalin's alleged purge of the POUM (Orwell 1938). Picking up where Orwell left off, from the late 1960s, was the influential work of Burnett Bolloten (1991), whose studies on the Republic's wartime government progressively revealed a great deal about Soviet policy and activities in Spain. In Bolloten's oeuvre, Soviet published sources that were long neglected in the Western historiography began to be incorporated into a revised understanding of the war. Bolloten was concerned with the net impact of Soviet intervention on the functioning and ideological direction of the Republic's government. For Bolloten, the USSR's involvement in Spain was the basic source of the Republic's inability to quell the internal rebellion and turn the tide of the war.

Orwell, Bolloten, and Kotkin single-mindedly avoid the conclusion that has now emerged as something close to an article of faith among the most recent revisionist scholars of the Soviet Union and the Spanish War: that Moscow's involvement in the Spanish imbroglio was above all a clear example of Popular Frontism and the primacy of the Kremlin's drive for collective security with the West. Moreover, in narrowing their focus to the Stalinist ideological witch hunt, which certainly existed and in fact was cotemporaneous with events in Spain, these historians fail to see the global picture and extraordinary depth of Moscow's commitment to the Republic. Had Stalin wished to only undermine or exterminate the nonaligned, renegade revolutionary left in Catalonia (e.g., the CNT anarchists and the

Marxist POUM), could he not have sent sufficient agents to the Republic to do this? Why, in addition, rush authorization of the logistically challenging "Operation X", dispatching over five dozen heavy vessels, from a Black Sea port, at a distance of three thousand kilometers, and over a period of twenty-six months, in order to supply the Republic with the latest Soviet fighters and empty Russian armor parks of the finest tank then produced anywhere in the world, the T-26? Or why, indeed, support that matériel through the organization and funding of a vast army of volunteer fighting men, drawn from cadres in fifty-three countries?[11] Why, furthermore, admit three thousand Basque children into the Soviet Union, evacuated from the northern front, in 1937, to be housed and schooled in balmy palatial accommodation, with sea views, entirely at Soviet expense?[12] Why import to the USSR every variety of tactile Spanish cultural artefact and put them on display in the Museum of the Revolution?[13] Why export to the Republic Soviet film products, arranging screenings in cities and at the front of classic pictures that included the *Battleship Potemkin*, *We of Kronstadt*, and *Chapaiev*?[14] In sum, Stalin's implication in Spanish events went so far beyond what Orwell, Bolloten, and Kotkin have narrowly misconstrued that it is impossible to adhere to their monocausal arguments.

Whether it is Kotkin's intention, the result of his work, like that of his forbears, is to negate the possibility that Stalin was motivated in his Spanish policy by collective security. Kotkin's scholarship is often informed by discredited Cold War era research and Franquista propaganda, all the while ignoring key scholarship. He does not use the magisterial trilogy of Angel Viñas (2006, 2007, 2008), now a basic reference for the topic. Kotkin also ignores the superlative scholarship of the Catalan Josep Puigsech, who, over the past decade, has meticulously documented relations between the Soviet consul general in Barcelona and the Catalan government through-

[11] For a narrative history of Soviet involvement Spain in its myriad facets, see Kowalsky (2003). For an enthralling sociocultural study of the creation of the International Brigades, see Kirschenbaum (2015). Still highly relevant, and never surpassed where the fate of the Brigaders is concerned, is Pike (1993).

[12] On the *niños*, the interested reader is spoiled for choice. See Alted et al. (1999), Young (2014), and Moreno Izquierdo (2017).

[13] On the reception of Spanish culture in the USSR, see Novikova (2008).

[14] See Kowalsky (2007).

out the civil war. Puigsech's starting point is the long-held assumption, reiterated in innumerable books and articles dating from as early as 1938, that it was through the Soviet consulate that Stalin attempted to exercise military and ideological control over both the Generalitat and, more broadly, the whole of Republican Spain. The author demonstrates that Moscow never achieved dominance nor even undue influence in either axis, and that, furthermore, the Kremlin neither sought nor desired such a dominance in Spain. Parallel conclusions have been reached by Jonathan Sherry (2017), who has investigated Soviet-style show trials of the POUM leadership in the Republican zone.[15] Whereas these trials were hitherto held up as examples of Stalinist oppression in the Republic, Sherry's thesis is much the opposite: the accusations of sabotage and collusion with the Fascists were not plausible, and the accused were acquitted.[16] In the same vein, Boris Volodarsky (2015) tackles the topic of NKVD repression in loyalist Spain. In contrast to the Orwellian myth (parroted in Bolloten and Kotkin, though also in Tucker) of swarms of Soviet illegals carrying out assassinations and sapping the Republic's morale, Volodarsky's sobering revision concludes that the Stalinist purges were exported to Spain on such a small scale as to have barely made a ripple: at most twenty kills, perpetrated by fewer than ten men, and this in a war where over three million men were mobilized, and well over three hundred thousand men and women were murdered extrajudicially.[17]

Why have we dwelt on these interconnected theses? If there is a narrative arc in the recent studies published on Stalin and Spain, it is a vindication of the hitherto minority thesis that Popular Frontism motivated Soviet policy. Spain was not a trial run for the imposition of an Eastern Euro-

[15] See also Puigsech (2014). Since bursting on the scene less than fifteen years ago, the author has been prolific. Of equally great interest are *Entre Franco y Stalin: El difícil itinerario de los comunistas en Cataluña, 1936–1949* (Puigsech 2009) and, most recently, *La Revolució Russa i Catalunya* (Puigsech 2017).

[16] Sherry's forthcoming monograph will no doubt become a standard reference in the field: *Stalinism on Trial: Communism and Republican Justice in the Spanish Civil War* (Eastbourne, England: Sussex Academic Press, 2020).

[17] Volodarksy's revisionist research supersedes the conclusions in canonical works of Slavic studies published throughout the Cold War, rendering obsolete, for example, Robert C. Tucker's (1990) hysterical discussion of a "multitude" of Stalinist agents, whose reign of terror handicapped the Republic's war effort, is characteristic of the deeply flawed analysis, supported by now discredited sources.

pean People's Republic-type Communist regime *avant la lettre*, as Payne (2004) and Moa (2003) have argued. In fact, it was the most important moment in Moscow's search for common ground with the West over the threat of Fascism. More to the point, that Stalin was rebuffed in his policy towards the West in the Spanish theater was only compounded by the Munich Agreement, which occurred as the Spanish war was winding down.

As at Versailles in 1919, the USSR was excluded from the September 1938 Munich gathering, as was its ally Czechoslovakia. In the event, Germany played host to Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, and these three powers collectively approved Hitler's imminent annexation of the Sudetenland.[18] The agreement has always been referred to in Czech and Slovak as the "Munich Betrayal". To Stalin, the message at Munich was clear. The West would not forge collective security with the Soviet Union, but would enable Hitler to erode the cordon sanitaire of post-WWI Eastern European states that put distance between Moscow and a resurgent Germany. Spain and Munich, together with the complete Nazi annexation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, influenced Moscow's decision to eventually, by mid-August 1939, respond to Hitler's overtures for a nonaggression treaty.

For Moscow, apart from the loss of faith in collective security that these three key international events engendered, there was one additional element of importance that emerged uniquely from the Spanish Civil War. This was the Red Army's war experience in that conflict, which included a close look at the latest German military hardware, and made Moscow's costly involvement much more than a test of Western resolve to stand up to Hitler. In the literature, Stalin was sometimes criticized for sending outdated weaponry or overcharging the Republicans for what was sent. A favorite trope was to refer derisively to the dispatch of small arms dating from the Crimean War (Kowalsky 2003, 218). It is a trivial distraction to focus on some old small arms when the shipments that mattered were not only the latest tanks and planes then produced by the Soviet Union in 1935 and 1936, but indeed the most advanced armor and aircraft available at that moment, at any cost, anywhere in the world.[19] And though

[18] The classic account of the conference remains Gilbert and Gott (1967).

[19] The military intervention is best covered in Ribalkin (2000).

Stalin did not authorize sending the Red Army to Spain, apart from two thousand tankers, pilots, and instructors, he did fund, through the Comintern, a volunteer army equal to two divisions.[20] Regarding the epic Battle of Madrid, a vast literature bears witness to the critical role that Soviet matériel, together with the International Brigades, played in narrowly averting defeat in early November 1936. It was clear that nothing the Germans or Italians had sent Franco could compete with Moscow's equipment at that moment in time.

But this was a long war, much longer than the invincibility of a single generation either of armor or bombers. Within a year, Germany's accelerated industry, since abrogating the terms of Versailles in 1935, had met and surpassed Soviet capabilities in the theater.

The Soviet technological advantage in the war was conclusively lost by late in the spring of 1937. By that time, the most advanced Russian tanks and planes available could no longer compete with the weaponry being supplied to the rebels. The arrival of the German-made HE-111 and ME-109 rendered the entire Red Air Force fleet of bombers, fighters, and reconnaissance aircraft essentially obsolete (Kowalsky 2003, 295–298). While the Nationalists were never able to match the Russians in armor, the dispatch of large numbers of witheringly effective German antitank guns rendered the issue moot (Kowalsky 2003, 307–320).

After August 1937, even had a safe and efficient transit route from Russia been opened up, no matériel then being produced by the Soviet defense industry could have undermined the rebels' widening position of technological domination. In this light, it is hardly surprising that Moscow scaled back its aid in mid-1937, though Stalin did not withdraw completely, but instead remained engaged with the Republic until quite close to its demise. Near the end of the war, Moscow granted the Republic a large line of credit, and renewed arms shipments as late as December 1938, but it could not turn the tide.[21] In sum, if we add to Moscow's technological

[20] Speculation about the origins of the International Brigades was resolved with the declassification of formerly unpublished documents in the party archive. Codavilla report to ECCI, 22 September 1936, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, hereafter, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, del. 233, ll. 56–99.

[21] The late dispatch of some fifty-five million dollars of Soviet arms, transferred on seven ships, was for many years considered a myth, yet today declassified documents from the Russian State

disadvantage the further self-inflicted handicap of Stalin's purge of the Red Army officer corps—significant but rather beyond the scope of this article—we can reasonably assert that, by 1939, the USSR was in no way prepared to prosecute a war with Nazi Germany. For Moscow, the Spanish Civil War mattered. Spain clarified, firstly, where the Soviets stood vis-à-vis their presumed allies in Britain and France, and, secondly, how ready Moscow was for armed conflict with presumed foes Germany and Italy.

Moscow-Berlin

The other axis worth considering is Moscow-Berlin, and that relationship runs back much further, and is significantly deeper, than the Spanish-Soviet one of the 1936–1939 period. The ties between the Prussian court and the Russian tsars date back to the late medieval period. By the late seventeenth century, under Peter the Great, Moscow had an influential German-speaking enclave—nearly 10% of the city's population—and other concentrations dotted the Tsarist Empire (Kappeler 1987, 11). In the early twentieth century, relations between the two imperial courts, and their successor regimes, were unusually complex, and require some disentangling. Russia and Germany were at war from 1914, but the German high command later conspired to help bring a Russian national to power, hoping he would then pull his country from the war. To that end, German authorities supplied a sealed train so that Lenin could travel through Germany and Finland and catch up with a revolution he had predicted but then missed because he was still in exile.[22] Germany's reward for its role in the eventual Bolshevik triumph was Lenin's promised withdrawal from the war, and the resultant Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. Brest-Litovsk gifted Berlin the greatest postwar territorial settlement in European history: fully one-third of the former Tsar's European domains were shorn off and incorporated into metropolitan Germany. Yet six months on, Germany had surrendered and lost the war to the Entente. The next

Military Archive (RGVA) confirm that this did indeed take place. The logistics of the operation, and contents of the delivery, down to the precise number of shells (1,382,540), are revealed in manifests in RGVA f. 33987, op. 3, del. 1259, ll. 85–105.

[22] That extraordinary story finally has its chronicler: Catherine Merridale (2016).

European treaty, at Versailles in 1919, reversed Brest-Litovsk but pointedly did not restore said territory to Moscow. Those lands withheld from the Russians, who were not invited to the Paris peace conference, soon became the postimperial successor states of Eastern Europe, organized along Wilsonian principles of self-determination.

For the balance of the interwar period, though eventually becoming apparent ideological opposites, Germany and the newly declared Soviet Union not only had much in common but sought common ground. The Bolshevik regime scarcely had diplomatic ties with most European states in the 1920s, yet Moscow and Berlin remained friendly, and managed a fruitful conference, in 1922, at Rapallo, and a few years later, in 1926, in Berlin (Mueller 1976).[23] Military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation ensued. The two states renounced territorial and financial claims against one another, while simultaneous trade agreements led to mutually beneficial commercial ties. With the Nazis in power from early 1933, German-Soviet trade fell off, though the two authoritarian regimes remained far from estranged. Hitler's anti-Bolshevik and anti-Slavic rhetoric was often as toxically virulent as his anti-Semitism, yet he never ruled out reaching common ground with the USSR, if it could advance his global aims.[24] Despite the institutionalization of the Popular Front tactic, made official at the Seventh World Comintern Congress, as late as that same year, 1935, the Kremlin would not have rated Germany even among the top three potential military threats; those were Japan, Poland, and Turkey. It was not until summer 1937, as we have seen, that Stalin became convinced, through the Red Army's worsening fortunes in Spain, that Nazi military prowess could menace Soviet security.

The Tripartite Pact

The Munich Agreement was signed on the last day of September 1938, Czechoslovakia was invaded on March 15, 1939, and the Spanish war end-

[23] See also Fink, Frohn, and Heideking (1991).

[24] Revealingly, Hitler declared he was willing to "walk part of the road with the Russians, if that will help us". Quoted in Rauschning (2006, 136–137).

ed exactly two weeks later. Despite this trio of setbacks, Moscow reacted to the defeat of the Spanish Republic and the loss of Czechoslovakia with redoubled efforts to forge collective security with the West. In April, the Kremlin proposed a tripartite military coalition with the French and British. As envisioned by Moscow, this alliance would be prepared to go to war with Hitler if German expansion continued into Eastern Europe. From April until August, negotiations to hammer out the deal occupied diplomats from the three countries, but they were hamstrung by Stalin's demand for the Red Army to have rights to pass, in the event of war, through Romania and Poland. In the case of Poland, London could not consent, having, on March 31, 1939, pledged its support for Polish independence. Further muddying the water was Stalin's demand that the Baltics be extended a similar territorial guarantee, lest Hitler decide to use those states to stage an invasion of the USSR.[25]

Stalin was in any case unconvinced by the West's sincerity, believing it was buying time and hoping that Hitler would present war in the East as a fait accompli. On May 3, 1939, the ousting of Maxim Litvinov as commissar for foreign relations, and his replacement with Molotov, marked the first significant ebbing of the Kremlin's unsuccessful pro-Western campaign. An insular, xenophobic Russian nationalist, Molotov was the antithesis of his cosmopolitan and multilingual Jewish predecessor, and his sudden preeminence sent a strong message to Berlin (Fitzpatrick 2015, 143–145). The tripartite negotiations nonetheless dragged on through summer. When, in early August, Britain dispatched its representatives to Russia by the slowest means of transport then possible—a six-day journey by merchant ship to Leningrad followed by an onward train to Moscow—Stalin's patience evaporated (Overy 1998, 44–45). Worse, London's lead diplomat revealed, when discussions commenced on August 12, 1939, that he had no credentials and no authority to negotiate (Read 2003, 565–566). Paradoxically, it may have been the Poles who dealt the final blow to collective security, announcing on August 19 that Warsaw would not consent to the Red Army's traversing Poland, even to confront an invading Wehrmacht. As during the Spanish Civil War, British intransigence

[25] For an excellent overview of the spring 1939 tripartite negotiations, see Kotkin (2017, 643–651).

left Stalin hanging. Infuriated by Britain's latest diplomatic charade, Stalin concluded, finally, that he would get nothing from London and Paris.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

One day after the Polish declaration, on August 20, 1939, the Soviets signaled they were ready to negotiate with Berlin, and events now moved rapidly.[26] Whereas Britain had insulted Stalin by sending its diplomats by sea, Hitler, who had proved his mastery of the air many times over—in the skies above Nuremberg and in the skies over Gibraltar—lent Ribbentrop his personal transport: a plush, two-cabin Condor, for the quick hop to Moscow. In one of the great near misses in history, Red Army antiaircraft units sitting on the border, uninformed by the center that Ribbentrop was coming, fired on the German plane (Kotkin 2017, 662–663). That they could not connect with the low-flying, unarmed Condor—indeed, the gunners had a second chance: an accompanying aircraft carried the foreign minister's entourage—was but further evidence that Stalin needed more time to ready the USSR for war.

At the Kremlin, the German negotiators were surprised to be greeted by not only Molotov but Stalin himself. Interpreters and typists were in place, and someone had arranged for a photographer. The agreement was hammered out in a few hours, the terms remarkably straightforward and jargon free. Ribbentrop and Molotov signed a document that had three components: first, a nonaggression treaty; second, a trade deal; and third, a secret protocol that was not made public and that divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, with Poland split between the two states, and Romania, Finland, and the Baltics allotted to the USSR. The official photograph, circulated in the Soviet press on August 24, shows a visibly pleased Stalin, whom we are told refilled glasses and even lit cigarettes (Kotkin 2017, 665–668).

There then ensued a cataclysmic, tumultuous global response. Few positive things have ever been said about the pact. Mercutio's dying curse

[26] The topic has attracted a great deal of attention. The most enthralling narrative is Read and Fisher (1989). Incorporating newer material is Moorhouse (2014).

upon the Capulets and Montagues is apropos here. The signing of the pact was mentioned in nearly every diary published from that period, from Churchill's to Maisky's and the endlessly quoted William Shirer's.[27] Political cartoonists like David Low had a field day. The pact even entered literature in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: Winston Smith is tasked with updating published newspapers to create the impression that a new alliance has always existed. In the real world, the news was treated as the diplomatic bombshell of the century.

Among the faithful, reactions could be extreme: in disgust, some Nazi party members hurled their badges on the lawn of the headquarters in Munich (Kotkin 2017). The Communist faithful, especially those who had been attached to the cause of the Spanish Republic, experienced a rush of soul searching. Spain had raised anti-Fascism to a basic reference for the global left, both abroad and especially in the Soviet Union, where newspaper coverage had been incessant. In *Izvestiia*, the war had consumed up to 25 percent of available column space; it never dipped below 5 percent, even in March 1939 (Allen 1952, 437–438). On hearing the news, the journalist who was responsible for much of that copy, Ilya Ehrenberg, stopped eating (Ehrenberg 1961, 202). As recently as July 1939, Esther Shub's anti-Fascist documentary on Spain, *Ispaniia*, had been screened across the USSR (Kowalsky 2003, 182, 186). This disorientation in the days and months that followed would be compounded by the moral issue that would only weigh later, when the secret protocols were exposed at the same moment as Nazi war crimes. From there, the alleged amoral equivalency of the two regimes would become the source of successive disputes among historians.

On the other hand, for the USSR, it would be a mistake to overstate as wholly negative the way in which news of the pact was digested. For many Soviets, the pact came as a relief, for war would be averted, and this was broadly perceived as evidence of Stalin's cunning. In the months that followed, the Soviet map came to resemble that of the old Tsarist Empire. If Versailles had caused grievance in Germany, it had equally outraged public opinion in Russia, and the pact had now corrected the slight. One for-

[27] For a brief sketch of memoir entries, see Roberts (2006, 30).

eign correspondent summed it up thus: "There was a widespread feeling in the country that 'neutrality' paid: that, as a result of the Soviet-German Pact the Soviet Union had become bigger and, as yet without too much bloodshed, more secure" (Johnson 2011, 21–22). For public consumption, ideological calisthenics required some vigorous Orwellian revisions. The fate of Eisenstein's 1938 *Alexander Nevsky*, with the emblematic score by Prokofiev, was the but one example of how the arts in the Soviet Union were held hostage to political vicissitudes at the time of the pact. The film told the story of the thirteenth-century invasion of Novgorod by Teutonic knights, eventually defeated by Prince Alexander. Created at the height of growing Soviet-Nazi tensions, it was viewed by some twenty-three million Soviet citizens in its initial theatrical release (Anderson 2005, 539). When news of the pact broke, it was quickly suppressed, only to be returned to wide circulation at the onset of Barbarossa, not only in Russia but in Allied countries; in the United States, it was recut and became part of the propaganda picture *The Battle of Russia* (Anatole Litvak, USA, 1943) (Biskupski 2009, 148–152). What is less well known is that while Eisenstein's film disappeared for twenty-two months, a theater piece then on in Moscow called *Keys to Berlin* did not. This play was set in 1760, in the Seven Years War, and told of General Saltykov's occupation of Berlin during the reign of Empress Elizabeth. According to Khrushchev, *Keys to Berlin* served as an understated symbol to the party faithful that Stalin had got the best of Hitler (Fitzpatrick 2015, 147).

Perhaps too much has been made about the improbability of Stalin and Hitler's ideological volte-face. British policymakers of the same era were far more ideologically dogmatic than Hitler and Stalin. Chamberlain in particular was unswerving in his hatred of the Bolsheviks; the record of this is overwhelming (Hucker 2011, 207–208). For others, the pact is but one example of the limits of ideology during our period; Stalin certainly paid it little mind. Didn't Stalin come to the defense of the pluralistic, liberal democracy that was the Spanish Republic? He, moreover, sought a pact with the imperialist West, showing little compunction in doing so and striving for that goal from 1935 to 1939. But the Fascists could often be equally accommodating of their supposed ideological opposites. In Spain, Hitler was flexible enough to find value in supporting Franco's Catholic

nationalism. Pragmatism trumped *Weltanschauung* on both sides, for both Hitler and Stalin extracted the best deal possible, having exhausted their Western options.[28] In the end, there was little hand wringing as these two supposed ideologues unceremoniously set aside rhetorical posturing in favor of dividing Eastern Europe between themselves. Yet there was a curious nod to the optics at the end of the August 23 meeting, and this was the closest either side ever came to admitting that ideology was but a veneer. Having agreed on arrangements for trade and nonaggression as well as on the secret protocol for a division of spheres of control, Molotov suggested, as icing on the cake, a friendship treaty. Stalin thought this would try the collective patience of their peoples. "But we have been emptying buckets of filth on each other for years", he remarked, and the proposal died there (Read and Fisher 1989, 254–257).

Conclusion

The pact set in motion tragic events for much of Europe, and within ten months, Nazi dominions were greatly expanded, East and West. For the Soviet Union, enormous complications ensued. While eastern Poland was soon absorbed into the Soviet republics of Ukraine and Belorussia, and the Baltic states were forced to sign mutual-assistance treaties—in advance of being later invaded on the same day that the Wehrmacht entered Paris—thinly populated, insignificant Finland refused submit to Moscow's will, and, improbably, in October 1939, declared war on the USSR. If the defeat of France's great army the following spring would send shockwaves across the globe, at least as unexpected was Finland's rousing Winter War performance against the Soviets, the small country winning a truce after inflicting one million casualties on the colossus.

For Moscow, however, the French defeat caused more consternation, for Hitler would now be freed to attack eastward at will. That was still no foregone conclusion, for there was still Britain to be dealt with. Less than a year after the flurry of Soviet-Nazi diplomacy of summer 1939, a new round thus commenced, this time with Berlin hosting. Much has

[28] For a judicious and probing summary analysis, see Khlevniuk (2015, 166–169).

been written regarding Molotov's poor showing in Berlin, in November 1940, where he decamped with an entourage of five dozen lieutenants and aides, and many counterfactual propositions have emerged. Some historians have continued to see these negotiations as further evidence that Hitler was Stalin's first choice all along, that Soviet collective security had been a disingenuous stratagem, that Moscow imagined a longer-term and more ambitious divvying up of the British Empire.[29] With little evidence, this view is pushed as far as Stockholm, early summer 1943, when some allege that Stalin belatedly attempted to renegotiate the pact. The historian who has spent more time than any other historian in the post-Soviet archives exploring the question, Oleg Khlevniuk, has turned up nothing. More convincing is the thesis that, towards the end of 1940, both dictators continued to play for time: Hitler, to ensure continued Soviet deliveries of raw materials essential for German industry; Stalin, to shore up defenses, prepare for the evacuation of industry, and correct weaknesses revealed in recent engagements in Spain and Finland, not least the crisis of generalship, a calamity he himself had created in the purge of Red Army officers. Nonetheless, no one doubts that following Molotov's visit, the die was cast, and by year's end, Hitler set in motion plans for Barbarossa.[30]

A persistent historiographical thread states that in the pact Stalin was a bit too smart: he thought he was guaranteeing peace, but he guaranteed war. Hitler made quicker work than expected, and was ready to invade the USSR in spring 1941, only delayed because of Mussolini's Greek disaster. This interpretation would suggest that the pact lulled Stalin into a false sense of security, that he then found himself in denial when the facts of an imminent German invasion were presented to him, and he refused to mobilize the Red Army to prepare for the onslaught. The reading is mistaken on several levels. First, Stalin was not oblivious, as is often suggested, to the German attack. It was the largest military invasion in history, one involving millions of men and the same number of horses. The Soviet leader could not miss it. But Stalin, like the Western leadership,

[29] See Dallas (2005). A counterinterpretation is offered by Lukacs (2005), who maintains that whether or not Hitler was Stalin's first choice, Stalin was never Hitler's.

[30] Though published a quarter century ago, Geoffrey Roberts's succinct analysis of the period from November 1940 to the onset of war in the East remains unmatched (Roberts 1995, 122–146).

was determined not to repeat the mistakes of August 1914, when mobilizations led inexorably to a war that no one even wanted. There was a logic to not moving more divisions to forward-facing positions, for they would certainly have been encircled and lost. The critical preparations were elsewhere, and, in fact, earlier. These had little to do with matching the eventuality of a Nazi invasion, division for division. Instead, from the late 1930s, an elaborate blueprint was set in place to eventually evacuate and convert to military purpose many thousands of factories sitting in the direct path of the Wehrmacht. This would be the last of the great engineering accomplishments of interwar Europe, after the Maginot Line and the great Soviet dam, canal, and underground construction projects. It was far more ambitious, for it involved dismantling nearly all the factories in European Russia, crating and loading them onto rolling stock, reassembling them east of the Urals, and, critically, converting them to a military purpose.[31]

The pact necessitated both parties' gambling on factors that could not yet be known. Stalin could not have predicted that Germany would make such quick work of western Poland, that Warsaw's guarantee by the British would not result in anything beyond the aptly named *drôle de guerre*, or indeed that French resistance the following spring would collapse in six weeks. But Hitler would eventually be handicapped by two factors beyond his control. First, he ultimately realized that Stalin had used to his advantage, and so efficiently, their twenty-two month truce, preparing the Soviets' defensive positions in such a way that, after the catastrophic opening losses in summer 1941, Blitzkrieg was revealed to have failed. Second, independent of Hitler's projected timeline in the West and East, his southern flank was thrown into disarray owing to events in the Balkans clumsily set in motion by his Italian ally.

The pact followed on directly from the Republic's defeat in Spain, the debacle of Munich, and the failure of the Tripartite Coalition, all of which signaled to Stalin, successively, the deepening erosion of the goal of collective security with the West. The pact was also the culmination of a crisis of leadership in the West. The ideologically rigid ruling elites in Lon-

[31] For a summary analysis of the evacuation of industry, see Roberts (2006, 162–164).

don, Paris, and Washington failed to see until too late the necessity of joining forces with Stalin's Russia to defeat the Nazi menace. The pact set in motion a series of events that had tragic consequences for millions of Europeans, for it allowed Hitler to smash and occupy Poland with impunity and to begin the extermination of the Jews. It also gave Stalin a free hand in eastern Poland and the Baltics, leading to the massacre at Katyn in spring 1940, as well as to the deportation of over one million people.

In first week of December 1941, Churchill sent his foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, to Moscow.[32] This was one of the first meetings between the Allies to discuss eventual postwar spheres of influence. Stalin's interest was to obtain the West's commitment to guaranteeing Soviet frontiers as they were on June 21, 1941; that is, from the eve of Barbarossa. This would include all territory swallowed up by the USSR through the secret protocols of the pact, but, more to the point, frontiers that were a redrawing the map of the old Tsarist Empire, the same request he had made to and received from Ribbentrop, twenty-eight months earlier. But Eden was not Ribbentrop, and insisted he was not empowered to negotiate on that question. The needle had not moved, and the British remained highly distrustful of their ally, with Lenin's bellicose warning of a "worldwide socialist revolution" still ringing in their ears. During this impasse in their discussions, Stalin paused, listening to German artillery fire beyond the Kremlin wall. Hitler's Army Group Centre—including over one million troops—occupied a position just west of Moscow. As they listened together, Stalin observed that "Hitler's problem is that he does not know where to stop". Eden, remembering the topic at hand, jumped in: "Does anyone?" To which Stalin replied, without hesitation, "I do".[33] This proved true. In 1939, as in 1945, Stalin's paramount interest, regardless of the human cost, regardless of the required ideological calisthenics, was in nation building, national security, and protection of the Soviet frontier. He would stop at Berlin.

[32] The meeting is the subject of a vast literature of primary and secondary documentation. A highly insightful, kaleidoscopic primer may be found in Secretary of State Cordell Hull's letter to Roosevelt from February 4, 1942 (Noble and Perkins 1961, 740.0011 European War 1939/17085a). For the Battle of Moscow, see Braithwaite (2006).

[33] Quoted in Lukacs (2015).

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