

THE NAZI-SOVIET PACT: PERFIDY OR REALISM?

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

Sam Houston State University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

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August, 1975

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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

Roach, Mary W., The Nazi-Soviet Pact: Perfidy or Realism? Master of Arts (History), August, 1975, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

The world was shocked by the announcement that the Soviet Union and Germany had signed a nonaggression pact on August 23, 1939. Britain and France were angered as well by the apparent duplicity of the Russians who had, during the summer of 1939, simultaneously negotiated with them a mutual assistance pact which would also guarantee Poland's security. Despite the suddenness of the announcement and the furtiveness with which the pact was negotiated, there had been numerous portents of such an agreement.

The Soviet Union had played a very small part in European affairs in the decade following World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. In the early 1930's, she had responded to the increasing militarism of Germany and Japan by joining the League of Nations and arranging treaties with most of the nations of Central and Eastern Europe in an effort to contain Fascist aggression in Spain, Ethiopia and Europe by collective security. When Britain and France failed to uphold League principles and showed themselves willing to buy peace and security for themselves by the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia at the Munich Conference in 1938, the Soviet Union was much alarmed. At the same time she was gravely offended by the repeated rebuffs and exclusions with which her own diplomatic overtures were met during 1937 and the first half of 1938 as a result of the deeprooted Western distrust of Communism. She believed that the Western democracies would view with equanimity an invasion of Russia, as two enemies could

thus be simultaneously removed.

In March, 1939, Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia and other threatening moves forced upon Russia and the West an acknowledgement of the need for cooperation. Several attempts to reach an agreement were made during the spring. Britain and France were stampeded into a hasty and unwise guarantee of Poland so that, in effect, Russia's border was already protected by their guarantee and her bargaining position in negotiations much enhanced. These negotiations reached an impasse in May which was broken by the German-Italian "Pact of Steel" and the increasing Japanese threat.

A formal diplomatic mission from Britain and France went to Moscow in mid-June to assist in negotiations. Unfortunately, its members were junior officials who were little known and without full plenipotentiary powers. The offended Soviets were enabled by the Polish guarantee to steadily escalate the demands they made of the West. Many of their requirements, such as the guarantee of the Baltic states, were met but a deadlock was reached over the means by which the treaty was to be implemented in the event of indirect aggression or a coup d'etat. Agreement was made much more difficult by the steadfast objections of Poland and the Baltic states to any defensive arrangement which involved the Soviet Union. The Soviets demanded at the end of July that a military mission be sent to replace the diplomatic team. The members of the British and French General Staffs were no more distinguished than their diplomatic predecessors had been, possessed no better credentials and were very tardy in arriving in Moscow. The Soviets again believed that they were being insulted and negotiations were unavailing. The primary reason for

the failure of the talks was the uncompromising refusal of the Polish Government to agree to the Russian Army's entry into Poland for the implementation of the treaty.

At the same time, the members of the Nazi government were in frequent contact with certain British politicians. Several developments led the Soviets to believe that appeasement was still the policy of England and that she actually favored an agreement with Hitler, at the expense of Eastern Europe. This led Stalin to permit diplomatic approaches from the Nazi regime, which were carried on under the guise of economic talks. As Hitler became determined to invade Poland, it became necessary to first secure Russia's neutrality in order to avoid the necessity of fighting a two-front war. As Poland remained intransigent and the West seemed likely to turn to Germany, the Soviets clearly perceived that their most certain prospect for at least temporary security lay in an alliance with Germany, whose requests had become more urgent as the deadline set for a Polish invasion drew nearer. The Germans were also quite willing to accede to any Soviet demands. The pact as it was completed contained a secret annex by which Russia was given a free hand in the Baltic area in return for her neutrality.

This coldly logical exercise in realpolitik was the culmination of a decade-long Soviet search for security, in which she had been constantly frustrated by the West.

Approved:

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my appreciation to Drs. James Hagerty and Lee Olm for the interesting and rewarding classes and conversations I have had with them. I am most of all grateful to Dr. Mary Owen, whose interest and encouragement have meant much to me in the past three years. The satisfaction I feel at the attainment of a Master of Arts degree has been much increased by my knowledge of the high quality of their own scholarship and the stringency of the standard they have set.

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## Chapter I

### EARLY SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY, 1919-1939

No development in the eventful 1930's so shocked, angered, and dismayed the Western world as did the announcement, on August 23, 1939, that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had signed a nonaggression pact. The German invasion of the Rhineland, the Austrian Anschluss, and the partition of Czechoslovakia had been met with preoccupation or indifference in European capitols. Now, however, it was no longer possible to sustain the illusion that Adolf Hitler was impelled by any but purely expansionist aims. But the motives by which the Soviet Union was led to make such an agreement were much less clear, and the Western democracies reserved for her their keenest feelings of outraged betrayal. They need not have been so astonished by this turn of events.

Since 1917, the Soviet Union's relations with the rest of the world had been marked by considerable unevenness. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia had removed herself from the European conflict by the Brest-Litovsk Treaty with Imperial Germany. This had initiated a long period of introversion and a preoccupation with domestic affairs. During this time, aside from her attempts to foster a world-wide proletarian revolution, the new Soviet Union could scarcely be said to have a foreign policy; the aristocratic Foreign Minister Georgii Chicherin's chief function appears to have been the lending of an air of respectability to Soviet post-war maneuvers.<sup>1</sup> When she was not invited to become a member of the League of Nations and when her hope that the Russian workers' revolution would ultimately spread to the capitalist nations of Europe,



Asia, and America was not realized, the Soviet Union sank into a profound isolation.<sup>2</sup>

The early 1930's ushered in a new era in Soviet foreign policy. In reaction to encirclement by the Fascist and militaristic governments of Germany, Italy, and Japan, the Soviet Union sought the security of European alliances.<sup>3</sup> This change of policy was signalled by the appointment of Maxim Litvinov as the Peoples' Commissar for Foreign Affairs. A doctrinaire Communist, Litvinov was also an internationalist, a remarkable linguist, and an ardent proponent of the principle of collective security.<sup>4</sup> Under his leadership, the Soviet Union made her debut as a world power in what has been termed her "Return to Europe."<sup>5</sup>

With the victory of the German Nazi Party in Munich elections in September, 1930, other East European nations also recognized the threat being presented here and began to regard with greater favor alliances with the Soviet Union, at whom they had formerly looked askance. France, responsible for the guarantee of the security of these smaller states, was also now prepared to overlook ideological differences with Russia.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, treaties of neutrality and nonaggression were drawn between the Soviet Union and France on November 29, 1932; Finland on January 21, 1932; Poland on November 23, 1932; Estonia on May 4, 1932; and Latvia on February 5, 1932.<sup>7</sup> Only Rumania declined such a treaty, as there yet existed between her and the Soviet Union a residuum of bitterness generated by her occupation of the Russian province of Bessarabia in 1920, a situation which still lacked Soviet sanction and recognition. Since the conclusion of the Franco-Russian alliance was dependent upon the drawing of other such pacts with Poland and Rumania, it was never terminated.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the Russo-European rapprochement, which has been called the "Eastern Locarno", continued to gather force, particularly so as the Disarmament Conference of June, 1934 met with dismal failure and Germany began to rearm at great pace.<sup>9</sup> Benito Mussolini, upon the occasion of Litvinov's visit to Rome, also signed with him a nonaggression pact.<sup>10</sup> However, the culmination of Litvinov's unceasing efforts was the Soviet Union's membership in the League of Nations, where she was elected to a permanent seat on the Council on September 15, 1934.<sup>11</sup>

With the enthusiasm of a convert and an energy born of a sense of urgency, the Soviet Union launched, through the League of Nations, a campaign for European unity against the increasing Nazi threat.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, this already shaky unity was now assailed from several directions. Italy, contemplating the invasion of Ethiopia, demurred at taking part in League sanctions against Germany's rearmament.<sup>13</sup> England appeared to be giving tacit consent to this rearmament by her participation in the Anglo-German Naval Conference in June, 1935.<sup>14</sup> In Paris on May 2, 1935, France and Russia signed a treaty of mutual assistance in the event of invasion, but its value was largely negated by the appendage, at France's insistence, of an invitation to Germany to enter the agreement as a contracting partner at any subsequent time. It was hoped that Germany's fears of encirclement might thus be allayed and the right wing in French politics appeased. The Soviet Union went on to make another and nearly identical treaty with Czechoslovakia; it provided that she would come to the aid of the smaller state, but only after France had implemented her own obligations to Czechoslovakia.<sup>15</sup> That the appended clause in the treaty with France did not have the desired effect

was soon evident as Hitler used this treaty as a pretext to renounce the Locarno Agreement and seize the Rhineland in March, 1936. Incredibly, there were no important repercussions as a result of this act.<sup>16</sup>

It was at this point at which a disillusionment with Western policy, already begun in June of the previous year with the conclusion of the Naval Conference, commenced in the Soviet Union in earnest. A conviction of the supineness of the Western powers toward aggression gained strength as both England and France registered no more than perfunctory protests at German and Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War. Italy, the erstwhile ally who was now firmly aligned with Germany, had already plunged into an invasion of Ethiopia the previous October. Again, the disciplinary action which Litvinov had once so confidently expected would be taken by the League of Nations did not materialize.<sup>17</sup>

Now Hitler, by assuming the role of champion of Western culture against the spread of Communism, made a bid calculated to isolate the Soviet Union and to neutralize the spate of treaties she had recently made. The Anti-Comintern Pact, which was drawn up in late 1936, stated that the signatories would take steps to curtail the activities of the Third International and would use stringent measures "against those who, at home or abroad, are engaged, directly or indirectly, in the service of the Communist International or promote its subversive activities."<sup>18</sup> Germany was eventually joined by both Japan and Italy in signing this pact.

In this way, Hitler was able to make a broad appeal to certain conservative elements in British and French society whose greatest fear was that the Communist Party might gain political power in their respec-

tive governments. The mutual assistance treaty between the Soviet Union and France, formulated over a year earlier, still had not been ratified as Premier Pierre Laval stalled Russia while he flirted with Germany.<sup>19</sup> It was just this anti-Bolshevist sentiment which gave rise in France to the cry, "Better Hitler than Blum!" as that country experienced a short-lived liberal government under the Socialist Leon Blum, until his Popular Front government met a swift demise at the hands of a conservative coalition.<sup>20</sup> The Socialists also felt that the Communists had perverted to their own uses the pure Marxist doctrine and declined to lend them any support.<sup>21</sup> As in Germany, however, those who manifested the greatest dread of Communism were, in general, drawn from among the landed gentry, factory owners, industrialists, bankers, as well as the shopkeepers and other property holders in the middle class. These groups were, of course, possessed of considerable political clout. Thus, the attitude which prevailed among those in positions of power precluded any easy cooperation with the Soviet Union to stem the rising tide of Fascism.

These developments did not go unnoticed in Russia and did much to reinforce in her an unconquerable distrust of the Western democracies, which amounted almost to a national paranoia. There was a deepening conviction that the ideological chasm between her and the bourgeois capitalistic democracies of the West was, after all, an unbridgeable one, Litvinov notwithstanding. The Soviets began more and more to feel that the Western nations would use Russia to their own advantage when they quarrelled among themselves; their temporary differences might prevent agreement for a time, but they would always reunite upon settlement of their disputes and discard their Russian alliances.<sup>22</sup>

Even more dampening to Russo-European relations was the steadily growing suspicion that the nations of Western Europe were not really averse to German expansion in the East as it served to deflect from themselves the Nazi menace and that they would be only too pleased to see the Communists and Fascists engage and exhaust one another and thus remove two enemies at one stroke. The Soviets began to conclude that the West was willing for them to fight any war which might result from Nazi rearmament and expansion.<sup>23</sup>

This idea gained force with the German annexation of Austria, again with a marked absence of League reaction, in March, 1938. At this time, the Soviet Union proposed, to no avail, an immediate conference which included England, France, Russia, Poland, Rumania and Turkey in order to discuss means of resistance.<sup>24</sup> It was not, however, until August of the same year that the Soviets were given positive proof of the small regard in which they were held in Paris and London. At this time and in response to the demands of the German Fuehrer, representatives of the British and French governments met with him and Mussolini in a conference at Munich. Here British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Premier Edouard Daladier of France, ignoring pledges explicit and implicit, acquiesced in the partition of Czechoslovakia, ostensibly in order to repatriate the German-speaking citizens of her Sudeten province.<sup>25</sup> With grim irony, the French and English issued a joint statement: "We are both convinced that, after recent events, the point has now been reached where the further maintenance within the boundaries of the Czechoslovak State of the districts mainly inhabited by the Sudeten-Deutsch cannot in fact continue any longer . . . and the safety of Czecho-

slovakia's vital interests cannot effectively be assured unless these areas are now transferred to the Reich."<sup>26</sup> The sovereign state of Czechoslovakia, stripped of three and one half million people, eleven thousand square miles, incalculable resources and defensible frontiers, was thus dealt a mortal blow; by March of the following year, Hitler was, again without effective opposition, able to proclaim the end of the Czechoslovakian Republic.<sup>27</sup>

The facts of the Munich Pact were in themselves evidence of Western willingness to see the East European nations sacrificed to the Nazi onslaught, but the manner in which this was accomplished outraged the already exacerbated sensibilities of the Russians. Czechoslovakia herself was denied any voice in the proceedings; nor was the Soviet Union, a guarantor of Czech security, invited to take a part in the conference.

Whether the Soviet Union was entirely sincere in urging Czechoslovakia to resist this death sentence is a point which has often been debated. The Soviet Ambassador to Czechoslovakia did assure President Eduard Beneš that Russia would fulfill her treaty obligations. She did, indeed, during the crisis, mobilize her fleet and send aircraft across Rumania to Prague.<sup>28</sup> But, of course, by the terms of the treaty, her actions must depend on those of France, and France was willing to assist in the offering up of Czechoslovakia in order to satisfy Hitler. This deliberate exclusion of the Soviet Union from the Munich Conference and the exhibition of apparent cowardice on the part of England and France confirmed the Soviets in their suspicions.<sup>29</sup>

To add further fuel to the rapidly kindling resentment which the Soviet Union felt at the developments of 1938, Prime Minister Chamberlain

stepped up the program of appeasement by which he sought to avert war. It was Britain's--indeed, Europe's--very great misfortune to be led at this particular time by such as Chamberlain, who was, by the most charitable interpretation of his character, a political ignoramus.<sup>30</sup> He fervently believed in a balanced budget and low taxes, which did not, therefore, permit an increase in armaments.<sup>31</sup> Upon one occasion, when Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden attempted to convey to him the gravity of England's situation, he was told to "go home and take an aspirin!"<sup>32</sup> Chamberlain prided himself upon being a practical man, one who could speak to good effect, even with "foreigners, who were just people."<sup>33</sup> By pointing out to them certain home truths, peace could be negotiated and the very considerable expense of building up armaments spared. He also felt that, prior to his ministry, British foreign policy had been oriented far too much in the direction of decadent and chaotic France and too little in the direction of Germany.<sup>34</sup> So ran Chamberlain's political philosophy. Refusing to be advised by those more expert in the field of foreign affairs and ignoring those in the government who opposed him, such as Eden and Winston Churchill, Chamberlain considered the Munich Pact to be a personal triumph.<sup>35</sup>

Now firmly committed to the path of appeasement, Chamberlain mounted his "campaign of optimism" as the settlement at Munich came under increasing fire in Parliament in the fall of 1938.<sup>36</sup> The Anglo-Italian Agreement, concluded in the spring and the occasion of Foreign Secretary Eden's resignation from the Cabinet, was now ratified through Chamberlain's efforts.<sup>37</sup> Hitler and Mussolini met in November in Vienna to award Czechoslovakian territory to Hungary in blatant defiance of the

Munich Pact; the governments of England and France chose to take no offense at being excluded from this meeting, although they had every right to expect to be invited as contracting members of the original agreement.<sup>38</sup> King Carol of Rumania, visiting Paris and London to beseech intervention in Eastern Europe, was given a very cold reception in those capitols.<sup>39</sup> Economic and trade missions to Germany were briefed in London in February, 1939, and diplomatic recognition was granted to General Francisco Franco's regime, which Russia had opposed.<sup>40</sup>

Chamberlain even went so far as to express to Hitler an understanding and sympathy with his views; he felt complimented at the omission of his own name as the Fuehrer continued to fulminate against British "war mongers," as he called Churchill, Eden, Lloyd George, and Alfred Duff Cooper.<sup>41</sup> He railed against critics of the Munich Agreement as performing "no service to democracy or to the chances of further international cooperation."<sup>42</sup> On the eve of the first of the Jewish pogroms in Germany, Chamberlain announced that "Europe is settling down to a more peaceful state."<sup>43</sup>

Although debate in Parliament now revealed a deep schism with regard to Anglo-German relations, Chamberlain's vanity in his statecraft did not permit him to alter his stance, even if had he wished to do so. He continued to oppose the demand for mobilization and increased armaments on the grounds that it would demonstrate a lack of confidence in Hitler's good faith at Munich.<sup>44</sup> With characteristic myopia, Chamberlain assured the nation, on March 10, 1939, that "the outlook in international affairs is tranquil."<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, Chamberlain had his counterpart in pacifism in France



in Georges Bonnet, Foreign Minister under Premier Daladier. Bonnet was annoyed at Chamberlain's slights to France during his courtship of Hitler. France was often informed of developments only after they had transpired. Now Bonnet embarked upon his own private negotiations with Hitler, without the knowledge of even the other members of the Cabinet. His motives were probably even less creditable than Chamberlain's, issuing largely from self-interest and hope of preferment. The negotiations conducted between him and the Nazi Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, resulted in the latter's visit to Paris and the open signing of a Franco-German Declaration of Friendship on December 6, 1938.<sup>46</sup>

As the tempo of Chamberlain's appeasement program quickened, to be echoed in Paris by Bonnet, there was a distinct and predictable chilling of relations between the Soviet Union and the Western nations. In January, Litvinov learned from the Polish Ambassador to Russia, who had been told by the Italian Ambassador to Germany, that Chamberlain had assured Mussolini of British disinterest in Nazi designs on the Ukraine.<sup>47</sup> Litvinov himself hardly ingratiated himself into the affections of these countries as he continued to denounce them in conferences at Geneva, Brussels and elsewhere for their spinelessness in failing to check Nazi aggression.<sup>48</sup>

On their part, the West began to suspect Russia of wishing to precipitate a general European conflict from which she would remain aloof; when the Western nations, exhausted and weakened by war, collapsed, the advance of Communism would be made much easier.<sup>49</sup> This view gained some credence as only the Communist Party voted against the Government as acceptance of the Munich Pact was debated in the French Parliament.

This was also seen as further evidence of the French Communists' subservience to Moscow, in total disregard of the best interests of their native state.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time, the internal struggles by which Russia had been recently rocked did little to reassure those in Europe who contemplated an alliance with her. Premier Joseph Stalin instituted in 1935 a massive reorganization of the Red Army in order to rid himself of all opposition, particularly any remaining supporters of his ousted enemy and onetime head of the Army, Leon Trotsky. The upheaval was also, to some extent, a reaction to German ambitions in the East; Stalin wished to rid the Army of German sympathizers. In the Treason Trials, carried out in Moscow between 1936 and 1938, perhaps as many as thirty thousand officers were executed, including three out of five generals of the highest rank and a majority of the senior officers, as well as many in administrative and political circles.<sup>51</sup> As the horrified West watched these proceedings, it seemed to many that the Red purges were exactly analogous to the Jewish pogroms in Germany and equally reprehensible. The question was debated whether there was indeed much to be gained by choosing one over the other as an ally, both situations being the product of dictatorships and entirely antipathetic to the democratic nations.<sup>52</sup> It was also believed that the purge had so entirely stripped the Red Army of leadership that she might in any case prove to be ineffective as an ally.<sup>53</sup>

With a typical lack of reticence, but expressing the sentiments of many of his countrymen, Chamberlain, in a letter written at this time, stated: "I must confess to the most profound distrust of Russia.

I have no belief in her ability to maintain an effective defensive, even if she wanted to. I distrust her motives."<sup>54</sup> On March 10, 1939, Stalin reciprocated:

Britain and France have repudiated the policy of collective security, of giving a collective rebuff to aggressors, and have, in fact, taken up the position of non-intervention--the policy of neutrality . . . This policy leads to war and behind it one perceives the desire not to hinder the aggressors in their black business.<sup>55</sup>

So the first months of 1939 passed in mutual distrust and recrimination; hope of a closer rapprochement between Russia and Western Europe continued to be a mere chimera in the distance, a mirage on the diplomatic horizon.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henry L. Roberts, "Maxim Litvinov," The Diplomats, Ed. by Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 234-381, passim.

<sup>2</sup>Frank P. Chambers, et al, This Age of Conflict (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1943), pp. 632-633.

<sup>3</sup>John W. Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1948), p. 273.

<sup>4</sup>Craig, pp. 344-377, passim.

<sup>5</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, pp. 276-277.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 273-274.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 278-279.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 242-245, passim.

<sup>20</sup>Chambers, pp. 757-758.

<sup>21</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 389.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 392.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>25</sup>Paul H. Pegg, Contemporary Europe in World Focus (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1956), p. 262.

<sup>26</sup>Leonard Mosley, On Borrowed Time (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 45.

<sup>27</sup>Marvin Barrett, The Years Between (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1962), p. 185.

<sup>28</sup>Mosley, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 328.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Mosley, pp. 296-297, passim.

<sup>45</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 320.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., pp. 302-307, passim.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 389.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>50</sup>Chambers, pp. 640-644, *passim*.

<sup>51</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 280.

<sup>52</sup>Mosley, p. 206.

<sup>53</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 365.

## Chapter II

### OPENING MOVES IN THE RUSSO-EUROPEAN RAPPROCHEMENT

On March 22, 1939, the British Foreign Office sent to Moscow a communiqué in which it requested that the Soviet Union join with her and France in a declaration guaranteeing the security of Poland. Since the climate of the early months of 1939 had scarcely provided grounds for optimism in those who hoped for a Russo-European alliance, only a tremendous shock could have occasioned the volte-face now performed by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and other pacifists in the Cabinet. The events which had preceded this reversal in British foreign policy had removed any vestiges of uncertainty as to Hitler's future goals, and even those in the government who had been hitherto unmoved now clamored for action, with the comfortable knowledge that they had the full backing of public opinion.<sup>1</sup>

Wakening from a period of winter semi-torpor, Hitler began, in March, 1939, to move with a stunning rapidity, as one hammer blow followed another. On March 13, he called upon Slovak separatists to proclaim their independence; at the same time, Hungary was given the region of lower Carpathia-Ruthenia.<sup>2</sup> On the following day, the end of the already mutilated Czechoslovakian Republic was announced.<sup>3</sup> One day later, Prague was occupied by the German army and a German protectorate over Bohemia and Moravia was proclaimed.<sup>4</sup> On March 22, Memel, the territory awarded to Lithuania in 1919, was seized.<sup>5</sup> Rumania was, at the same time, relieved of her petroleum and other minerals in an involuntary trade agree-

ment designed to supply the Reich.<sup>6</sup> And finally, Hitler forcefully reiterated the demands he had made earlier on Poland: that she give up the German city of Danzig, permit the construction of an access to the city, and join Germany, Italy, and Japan in the Anti-Comintern Pact. In return, Hitler was prepared to renew for a period of twenty-five years the nonaggression treaty which existed between the two countries.<sup>7</sup> In early April, only three weeks after Germany began to expand in Eastern Europe, Italy moved to seize Albania for strategic reasons and perhaps in fear that Germany herself might have designs on it.<sup>8</sup>

Appeasement was now no longer a viable issue in Paris and London, as Chamberlain quickly perceived what Daladier had already long suspected. Chamberlain was moved now by what was probably less an honest sense of outrage than an accurate gauging of the pitch of public indignation at having been duped by Hitler and at having witnessed national honor being compromised.<sup>9</sup> The rising temper of the time was forcibly brought home to the still equivocating Chamberlain when Sir John Simon, Chancellor of the Exchequer, was savagely attacked in the House of Commons when he stated that one could hardly guarantee that which did not exist in the first place.<sup>10</sup> Presumably, Chamberlain profitted from Simon's discomfiture. At any rate, in a speech delivered in Birmingham on March 17, he jumped on the already moving bandwagon when he declared that Hitler was trying to "dominate the world by force."<sup>11</sup> He also pointed out the necessity of "dealing in a different way with a man who does not hesitate to break even the most solemn pledges."<sup>12</sup> In Paris, in addressing the Chamber of Deputies, Daladier agreed that "the time for talk had passed."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, when the Soviets renewed the proposal for a six nation con-



ference which they had made the previous year, it was again rejected by the West as being "premature."<sup>14</sup>

The Poles, who had watched with great attentiveness the political acrobatics taking place in the Western capitols, took this to be a propitious moment to request their assistance in resisting Germany's demands. Chamberlain and Daladier were now stampeded into a rash assurance to Poland of their full military support in the event of "an action which clearly threatened Polish independence."<sup>15</sup> By its wording, the unilateral guarantee removed from the British and French any discretion or judgment in the matter. It also placed decision-making squarely in the hands of a man second only to Hitler in lack of scruples or principles, Colonel Jozef Beck, the chief of the military junta by which Poland was governed in 1939. A dishonest and alcoholic egomaniac, the nonetheless patriotic Beck had for some years used one shift and another to keep Poland from being drawn into the spheres of either of its powerful neighbors, Communist Russia on one side and Nazi Germany on the other.<sup>16</sup> Now the wily Beck, by unvarnished lies in which he denied the growing Polish-German tensions, enlisted the sponsorship of the ever naive Chamberlain.<sup>17</sup> Chamberlain proposed that France and Russia join in a Tri-Partite agreement to aid Poland.<sup>18</sup> However, Colonel Beck flatly refused to participate in any defensive pact which included the Soviet Union. Like most of his compatriots, he was entirely convinced that Russia waited only for an opportunity to pounce upon an unwatchful Poland in order to retrieve territory lost when she had been recreated by the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>19</sup> He feared that Russia would, in protecting Poland from Nazi aggression, herself invade and occupy his nation in the name of defense. A Polish

adage stated, "With the Germans we risk losing our liberty, with the Russians, our soul."<sup>20</sup> This apprehension was heightened by the readiness with which the Soviets agreed to Chamberlain's overtures on March 22.<sup>21</sup>

Chamberlain, anxious to make the political gesture which the times seemed to demand and not overly aware of the realities of the Polish military situation, fell into Beck's snare. He allowed negotiations with the Soviet Union to lapse and on March 31, the unilateral guarantee of Polish security by the two Western powers alone was announced, exactly as the gleeful Beck had wished.<sup>22</sup> Very shortly, Chamberlain compounded his error by giving pledges of military aid to Rumania, Greece, and Turkey as well, in an effort to establish a Peace Front in Eastern Europe.<sup>23</sup> The Soviets were intensely annoyed at the suddenness of the announcement and that it had been made without previously informing them, as Litvinov gave the British Ambassador in Moscow to understand. Sir William Seeds' suggestion that Litvinov be invited to London as a means of mollification was ignored.<sup>24</sup>

Still, the growing agitation in both England and France kept alive an effort to reach some rapprochement with the Soviet Union. A French plan, presented to the English on April 15, proposed that Russia should provide military aid to France and England if they became engaged in a war in the defense of Rumania and Poland. The British agreed in principle to the plan but demurred at its reciprocity, maintaining that a guarantee of Poland's borders was necessarily one of Russia's borders; it was, however, eventually offered to the Soviets in that form.<sup>25</sup> On April 17, the Soviets replied making their acceptance of the pact conditional upon

its extension to include a guarantee of Finland and the Baltic states. The Soviet Union was adamant in demanding that they be guaranteed by what she termed a new Triple Alliance. She considered them essential to her own security, fearing that they might be used by Germany as access to Russia herself.<sup>26</sup> The smaller states in their turn now objected on the same grounds that Poland had earlier: Russia, entrenched as a defender, might never be ousted again.<sup>27</sup> The British felt that Hitler would certainly renew his claims that Germany was being threatened by "encirclement by her enemies" in response to such large-scale pledges.<sup>28</sup> As Sir Alexander Cadogan of the British Foreign Office observed, such an alliance "may alienate our friends and reinforce the propoganda of our enemies without bringing in exchange any real material contribution to the strength of our Front."<sup>29</sup>

Another impediment to the agreement, and a serious one, was found by the British in the phrasing of the Soviet counterproposal of April 17. It stated that only after a military agreement had been reached among the members of the proposed Triple Alliance would the political one become binding. This unusual stipulation raised in the British some suspicions that the Soviets hoped to extract from them military secrets without any real plans of allowing the agreement to be completed.<sup>30</sup>

Another and more idealistic consideration was that the Western democracies felt that they were, by the very nature of their being, unable to impose upon unwilling nations any guarantee of their security; Munich had been put behind them. Many Englishmen and Frenchmen felt that the fears of the smaller states were, if inconvenient, entirely justifiable.<sup>31</sup> Altogether, the Foreign Office managed to find twenty-

two objections to the Soviet proposal.<sup>32</sup> Despite the presentation of alternate plans, such as a scheme for "preventing any modification by force to the status quo in Central or Eastern Europe," and renewals of their proposals by both sides, negotiations between Russia and Europe again withered by early May.<sup>33</sup>

It was at this time that there was a dramatic change in Soviet foreign policy. Having made repeated overtures in recent years and having been continually rebuffed, especially ignominiously in the Polish crisis, Russia was presently able to assume a new stance, that of the courted rather than suitor. The full extent of Neville Chamberlain's diplomatic ineptitude was now revealed. He had failed see that in making a unilateral guarantee of Polish borders, the Western powers were also guaranteeing the Soviet border from Nazi invasion. Though she did not realize it, the West had lost the initiative in negotiations; she had freely given all she had to offer and now had nothing with which to bargain.<sup>34</sup> The shrewd Russian dictator, Joseph Stalin, was not slow to appreciate this changed situation.

Even those in the British Foreign Office most ostrichlike in attitude were unable to overlook the significance of the dismissal of Maxim Litvinov as Commissar for Foreign Affairs on May 3, on the day following British rejection of the Soviet counterproposal. It was also announced that Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin's closest and most trusted advisor, would replace Litvinov as Foreign Minister.<sup>35</sup> The Soviet Ambassador in London, Ivan Maisky, took pains to reassure the British that "contrary to what often happens in the West, individual ministers in the Soviet Union do not conduct their own policy . . . the foreign policy of the

Soviet Union remains the same."<sup>36</sup> Few were convinced by his assurances or by more official pronouncements from Moscow.

Litvinov had for almost a decade advocated collective security and done all he could to advance a closer collaboration with England and France while determinedly preaching resistance to Germany. Molotov, in contrast, was thought to incline toward Germany in the Soviet quest for allies.<sup>37</sup> The fact that, unlike Litvinov, he was not a Jew seemed an indication of Russian willingness to propitiate Germany; also unlike Litvinov and Chicherin, the new Foreign Minister was, for the first time since 1918, a member of the Politburo. Indeed, Molotov occupied a position second only to Stalin's, which signalled to the rest of the world that foreign policy had gained a new importance in the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup> Molotov also enjoyed the advantage of being little known outside Russia and was therefore free of any encumbrances in the form of previous speeches or commitments or associations; he was thus able to move in whatever direction or employ whatever means seemed to serve the best interest of Russian security.<sup>39</sup> It was immediately clear that the uncompromising personality of the dour, pedantic Molotov would give a new turn to Soviet-European relations. Churchill, who later endured many encounters, described him as a man without a chink, one who gave no sign that he was subject to ordinary human emotion, in short, a robot in service to the State.<sup>40</sup>

The more acute observers of Soviet affairs, and they were few indeed in France and England, had already discerned several steps toward a Russo-German understanding by the time of Litvinov's dismissal; seemingly minor, they assumed importance only in retrospect. The first of

these was an abatement of press and radio attacks in Russia and Germany on the policy of the other as a result of a verbal understanding arrived at in October, 1938, between Litvinov and his German counterpart.<sup>41</sup> In December, the two nations signed a trade agreement with fewer than the usual preliminaries or delays; talks continued, although still confined to commercial affairs.<sup>42</sup> At a diplomatic reception on January 12, 1939, Hitler pointedly spoke longer to Russian Ambassador Alexei Merekalov than he did to anyone else and showed him other marks of deference.<sup>43</sup>

Of even greater significance, perhaps, was Stalin's speech at the Eighteenth Congress of the Soviet Party on March 10, 1939, when he warned the Party that Russia must "be cautious and not allow our country to be drawn into conflicts by warmongers who are accustomed to have others pull the chestnuts out of the fire for them."<sup>44</sup> He also called for a normalization of relations with Germany, saying that ideological considerations need not stand in the way. Hitler, while still as distrustful as the West of Russian motives, took immediate note of this first hint that Stalin might be willing to consider other alternatives to collaboration with the still vacillating West. Anti-Bolshevik propaganda was toned down even further and was soon met by a reciprocal absence of criticism of the Nazi regime.<sup>45</sup> In April, Soviet Ambassador Merekalov was invited to visit with Secretary of State Ernst von Weisacker; simultaneously, the Russian military attaché was summoned to the offices of the German General Staff.<sup>46</sup> Following these calls, both returned to Moscow, presumably to report to Stalin and to await his further instructions; Ivan Maisky, Soviet Ambassador to England, was also called home.<sup>47</sup>

A new German Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Count Werner von

der Schulenburg, was appointed at this time. Schulenburg was a diplomat of the old school and was known to be opposed to the anti-Soviet policy and the general handling of diplomatic affairs by the Nazi regime.<sup>48</sup> Dedicated to the principles by which Chancellor Otto von Bismarck had once shaped German foreign policy and by which the Rapallo Treaty of 1922 had been forged, probably Schulenburg alone in the Nazi hierarchy was at this time genuinely pro-Russian.<sup>49</sup> The Nazis were glad enough now, in the name of expediency, to make use of his sincerity. Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop was particularly enthusiastic at the idea of check-mating the West by a *démarche* with Russia.<sup>50</sup>

There were others of Schulenburg's and Ribbentrop's persuasion among the General Staff. There was, in fact, besides an understandable aversion to fighting a two-front war, the Seeckt school which had long favored a rapprochement with the Soviets. Some of the more vocal adherents of General Hans von Seeckt, such as Generals Werner von Blomberg and Freiherr von Fritsch, had been relieved of their commands in the Reichswehr purge of 1938, but Hitler had failed to eradicate all support of this military tradition.<sup>51</sup>

Hitler himself remained the greatest obstacle to a Soviet-German understanding. He felt a deep spiritual aversion to Bolshevism and considerable distaste for the prospect of the explanation which would have to be made to the German people as well as to Germany's Anti-Comintern partners. He later commented that this collaboration with Russia was "the most humiliating thing I ever did."<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Hitler did realize the necessity of preventing an agreement between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. In early May, it became known that Germany

had offered Russia a twenty-five year nonaggression pact; the price was her neutrality and an agreement to supply Germany with foodstuff and military equipment in event of war.<sup>53</sup> Hitler also now authorized through Schulenburg an approach to Moscow on an even broader basis than the talks heretofore conducted.<sup>54</sup>

Still, there appears to be little doubt that the initial approaches came from Stalin, and his motives were as usual less than clear. Probably, at the outset, he did not prefer an agreement with the Germans over one with the Anglo-French contingent. He could not delude himself as to the cordiality with which he was regarded by either group or that their collaboration arose from other than sheer necessity.<sup>55</sup> It seems certain that he viewed them with a distrust equal by this time to their own and would have very much preferred total neutrality to any other alternative. Circumstances had, however, forced him to see that Russia was going to be inevitably drawn into the European conflict which was fast approaching; Stalin saw his choice as being less one of allies than enemies. It was not difficult for Stalin to find support for a rapprochement with Germany despite the recentness of the Treason Trials, when such sentiments would have been found heretical. Molotov's first official act as the new Commissar for Foreign Affairs was a frank announcement, in response to Schulenburg's proposal that the continuing talks be used to bring about closer economic and trade ties between Russia and Germany, that what Stalin really desired was closer political relations. Even Hitler was somewhat taken aback by this and the month of June passed in commercial negotiations alone.<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile, the British Foreign Office had been warned of the



German-Soviet talks by several sources. William Seeds, the Ambassador in Moscow, had sent several messages to that effect back to London. Hermann Goering, Ribbentrop's rival in the top Nazi hierarchy, jealous of the approaches being made by the Foreign Minister to Russia, countered with his own to Britain.<sup>57</sup> There was also a group of German conspirators who were in secret contact with certain British politicians; they believed Hitler's actions would lead to Germany's certain defeat and this they sought to avert by overthrowing the Nazi government.<sup>58</sup> Daladier, as well as others in the French government, had by now become convinced that the West's best course lay in cooperation with the Soviet Union. But still the French deferred to the British leaders, who blithely dismissed all such warnings of a German-Russian rapprochement as "inherently improbable."<sup>59</sup>

Churchill and Eden and Lloyd George continued to upbraid Chamberlain for his failure to reach an understanding with the Soviets. As Lloyd George said in parliamentary debate on May 19, "Russia offered to come in months ago. For months we have been staring this powerful gift horse in the mouth." When the arch Conservative Archibald James replied, "And we have seen its false teeth!", he expressed the fears of Chamberlain, Halifax, and others of the same political genre.<sup>60</sup> Far from stirring the British Foreign Office to greater interest in negotiations as Stalin had probably hoped, the Soviet-German approaches only served to increase the West's already strong conviction of Soviet duplicity and to confirm them in their feeling that no trust or reliance could ever be placed in such an ally.<sup>61</sup>

During April and the early part of May, Soviet Ambassador Ivan

Maisky was in close contact with the Foreign Office where their exchanges were cordial and unavailing.<sup>62</sup> By May, the Soviet Union was sufficiently discouraged by the apparent failure of all her diplomatic endeavors that she withdrew her delegate, Vladimir Potemkin, from a long-scheduled Foreign Ministers' Conference meeting in Geneva on May 15, with an excuse of illness.<sup>63</sup>

Oddly enough, it was this conference that Russia boycotted which broke the impasse in her relations with the West. The British returned from Geneva with an impression of a slight thawing in the attitudes of Poland and Rumania.<sup>64</sup> Inquiries produced moderately favorable replies from both Warsaw and Bucharest. Neither would oppose an Anglo-French alliance with Russia that would also guarantee their own borders although they still declined to become a party to such an agreement.<sup>65</sup> On this basis, negotiations with the Soviets were re-opened on May 26. There can be no doubt that the Foreign Office, already under pressure from the public and the Opposition, found additional reason to renew its efforts to reach an understanding in the "Pact of Steel" which Germany and Italy had signed five days earlier.<sup>66</sup> Even now, however, England proceeded with reservations. For instance, one stipulation she made was that in the event that the Baltic states were used by Hitler as an invasion route to Russia, the Western powers were thereby relieved of any obligation to go to her aid.<sup>67</sup> Molotov replied that the proposal for a Tri-partite Agreement fell short of reciprocity, but the Soviets, as well as the West, had been moved from their former position by the "Pact of Steel."<sup>68</sup> Russia was also rendered more than usually amenable to diplomatic overtures from any direction by the fact that she now faced a threat on her

Eastern flank, as Japan continued her expansion in China. Russia and Japan had met in early May in a clash on the Russo-Mongolian border.<sup>69</sup>

Not until June 7 did Chamberlain announce the composition of the negotiating team to be sent to Moscow to supplement the diplomatic skills of Ambassador Seeds. The British contingent, which was to be joined by representatives from France, was led by William Strang, a junior official in the Foreign Office of only slight diplomatic experience and quite unknown to the general public.<sup>70</sup> Strang had been part of the delegation which had called upon Hitler at Berchtesgaden the previous year.<sup>71</sup> His appointment was much criticized; many found it hard to forget that Chamberlain himself had three times flown to meet Hitler.<sup>72</sup> These critics believed that a mission headed by an official of greater stature would have been looked upon more favorably by the Soviets. Halifax received an invitation to visit Moscow, transmitted through the Soviet Ambassador on June 12, which he declined in a singularly noncommittal manner.<sup>73</sup> It was feared that failure to reach a satisfactory conclusion with the Soviets would redound more irradicably to the Conservatives if a ranking Party member were included in the delegation.<sup>74</sup> At this point Anthony Eden offered to go to Moscow but the plan was promptly vetoed by Chamberlain out of suspicion that credit for a possible diplomatic success would be usurped by his critics in the Conservative Party. If, as Churchill informed the House of Commons, he did not know what to make of "all these refinements of diplomacy and delay," Stalin did.<sup>76</sup> The inferior status of the men attached to the mission seemed to the Soviets to reflect the little importance with which it was regarded by the British. It was scarcely a propitious beginning for earnest negotiation.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Pierre Renouvin, World War II and Its Origins (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 148.
- <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 145.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup>Alan Bullock, Hitler: A Study in Tyranny (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 392.
- <sup>8</sup>Renouvin, p. 145.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 147.
- <sup>10</sup>John W. Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy (New York: Viking Press, 1946), p. 355.
- <sup>11</sup>Renouvin, p. 147.
- <sup>12</sup>Carl H. Pegg, Contemporary Europe in Focus (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1956), p. 267.
- <sup>13</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, pp. 367-368.
- <sup>15</sup>Pegg, p. 268.
- <sup>16</sup>Leonard Mosley, On Borrowed Time (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 201-212, passim.
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid., 209-211, passim.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 200.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 201-205, passim.
- <sup>20</sup>Winston S. Churchill, The Gathering Storm (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1948), p. 391.
- <sup>21</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 367.

- <sup>22</sup> Mosley, pp. 206-207.
- <sup>23</sup> Renouvin, p. 149.
- <sup>24</sup> Sidney Aster, 1939 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), p. 160.
- <sup>25</sup> Renouvin, p. 149.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, p. 396.
- <sup>28</sup> Raymond J. Sontag, A Broken World (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 362.
- <sup>29</sup> Aster, p. 164.
- <sup>30</sup> Sontag, p. 362.
- <sup>31</sup> Renouvin, p. 149.
- <sup>32</sup> Aster, p. 164.
- <sup>33</sup> Renouvin, p. 149.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 150.
- <sup>35</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, p. 397.
- <sup>36</sup> Aster, p. 168.
- <sup>37</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, p. 397.
- <sup>38</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 233.
- <sup>39</sup> Churchill, pp. 368-369.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 366.
- <sup>41</sup> Robert D. Warth, Soviet Russia in World Politics (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963), p. 222.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 223.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> Walter Lacqueur, Russia and Germany (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1965), p. 253.

<sup>46</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 400.

<sup>47</sup>Aster, pp. 168-169.

<sup>48</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 399.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 398.

<sup>52</sup>Lacqueur, p. 257.

<sup>53</sup>David J. Dallin, Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 1939-1942 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1942), p. 26.

<sup>54</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 400.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 407.

<sup>56</sup>Aster, pp. 276-277.

<sup>57</sup>Arnold and Veronica Toynbee, eds., Survey of International Affairs: The Eve of War, 1939 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 212-220.

<sup>58</sup>Joachim C. Fest, Hitler (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), pp. 558-560.

<sup>59</sup>Taylor, p. 229.

<sup>60</sup>Dallin, p. 32.

<sup>61</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 400.

<sup>62</sup>Dallin, p. 19.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Warth, p. 226.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>71</sup>Mosley, p. 244.

<sup>72</sup>Warth, p. 226.

<sup>73</sup>Mosley, p. 243.

<sup>74</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, pp. 403-404.

<sup>75</sup>Mosley, pp. 243-244.

<sup>76</sup>Warth, p. 226.

### Chapter III

#### ANGLO-FRENCH NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION

The British and French delegations, having made their leisurely way to Moscow, arrived there on June 14 and were met by British Ambassador William Seeds and French Ambassador Paul Émile Naggiar. They were granted an interview by Molotov on the following day. Seated at a desk on a raised dais well above those of the other negotiators, Molotov was cold and distant as he interrogated the Western diplomats.<sup>1</sup> He was deeply incensed at the fact that the British and French had come to Moscow without full plenipotentiary powers and were essentially lacking in any real authority to conclude negotiations without consultation with London and Paris.<sup>2</sup> Not pleased with their responses, Molotov retired to consult with his colleagues. On the next day, he opened proceedings by launching an attack on the West, who, he said, "must think we are simpletons and fools." The Soviet press reported on June 16 that "the talks were not regarded as entirely favorable."<sup>4</sup>

Chamberlain's anti-Soviet inclinations had been evident in his instructions to Strang and his assistant in the Foreign Office, Frank Roberts, "to drive a hard bargain."<sup>5</sup> His natural feelings about Russia had been reinforced by William C. Bullitt, American Ambassador to France and former Ambassador to the Soviet Union, visiting London at this time. Bullitt had expressed his conviction that the British would never reach an agreement with the Soviets if they gave them the impression that they were "running after them."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Strang's cardinal instructions



had been to conclude a treaty "as short and simple in its terms as possible," and as quickly as possible rather than that "time should be spent in trying to cover every contingency."<sup>7</sup> As soon as the British made known their intentions, the Soviets were at once suspicious and determined to leave no loopholes in the treaty through which they could be exploited.<sup>8</sup>

The next few days saw no departure from this inauspicious beginning on June 15. Almost immediately it became obvious that concessions would have to be made by the West if any conclusion was to be reached. By the 19th, certain changes in wordings of the text had been conceded, including the omission, at Soviet insistence, of any reference to the League of Nations and its principles.<sup>9</sup> On June 20, it was decided to agree to the proposed clause which forbade the making of a separate peace.<sup>10</sup> The Soviets were scarcely placated by these small items and the haggling continued, amid repeated Russian threats to fall back on a simple mutual assistance treaty which would include only Russia, France, and Britain.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the second week, Strang had been given grudging instructions by the Foreign Office to meet the Soviets' most insistent demand. The British were now willing to abandon the Baltic states and to enter into a Tri-partite agreement with Russia which would guarantee mutual assistance to any one of the three nations in a situation in which that nation felt its security threatened by aggression. In order to circumvent the usual objections, it was agreed that a direct enumeration of the states to be guaranteed would be avoided, although this was tacitly understood to include the Baltic states.<sup>12</sup> Chamberlain and Daladier were puzzled that this very great concession on what they had thought to be a

major point did not now lead to the immediate conclusion of an agreement with Russia. Instead, his initial price having been met, Stalin increased his demands.

The Soviets now insisted upon the right to regard "indirect aggression" in the Baltic states, such as might occur through a Nazi-engineered coup d'etat against one of their governments, as reason to invoke the treaty.<sup>13</sup> Molotov proposed that this be embodied in a secret annex. The British and French believed that this proviso was far too ill-defined and that its acceptance might lead in turn to Soviet subversion of the Baltic governments.<sup>14</sup> They countered on June 29, with a proposal which contained a provision that the Soviet Union would guarantee Holland, Switzerland, and Luxembourg.<sup>15</sup> This was declined in short order by Molotov on the grounds that two out of the three states did not even maintain diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R.<sup>16</sup>

Another crucial point at this stage of negotiations was the question of the manner in which the treaty should be invoked if the need arose. The Soviets insisted upon a clause which provided that immediate action might be taken by the nation faced with aggression, after which the other partners would come to her assistance.<sup>17</sup> The British were unwilling to agree to such precipitate action and held that consultations must first take place among the treaty members. A slight concession was evidently made in agreeing that the three powers should, in case of aggression, take immediate consultation to decide what action should be taken.<sup>18</sup> The Soviets, however, remained adamant in their demand for immediate action. At bottom, of course, was the question of who would decide when the moment for implementation of the treaty had arrived. When Seeds

raised the objection that these issues were not even mentioned in the original Soviet draft of the treaty which had been forwarded to the British on June 2, Molotov retorted that he had the right to raise new points during discussions.<sup>19</sup>

During the month of June, almost every day brought from all quarters new rumors of German-Soviet talks being secretly conducted. These reports came from British Naval Intelligence, the Soviet Embassy in Berlin, Goering's indiscreet comments to Sir Nevile Henderson, England's Ambassador in Berlin, and the German conspirators who were in touch with the Foreign Office.<sup>20</sup> Military attachés in European capitols dropped hints to their British counterparts.<sup>21</sup> It was known definitely that economic talks between the two nations were now taking place in Moscow.<sup>22</sup>

Chamberlain was not unduly disturbed at the early reports of these talks. He was secure in the illusion that an unfathomable gulf separated Nazism and Bolshevism. He was, however, genuinely baffled, as well as intensely annoyed, at the turn Anglo-Soviet negotiations had taken. His uncertainty and a lack of any sense of urgency led him to allow, despite his instructions to the contrary, the talks to proceed in what the Soviets came to feel was an insultingly languid fashion. The Soviets' resentment at the desultory nature of the negotiations came to the surface on June 29 in an article in Pravda. Andrei Zhdanov, one of Stalin's younger and most trusted colleagues, as well as a possible successor, wrote:

The English and French governments do not desire the only kind of agreement that a self-respecting government could enter into. The Anglo-Soviet negotiations have already been in progress seventy-five days, out of which the Soviet Government required sixteen days to prepare replies to the various British proposals and the remaining fifty-nine days were expended in delay and redtape on the part of the British and French.<sup>23</sup>

It is probable, despite Zhdanov's disclaimers that he expressed only a personal opinion, that in reality he spoke for Stalin.<sup>24</sup> There is little doubt that this was a deliberate move in the diplomatic chess game he was playing with London and Berlin.

Still, the resentment was real enough, and as records of the diplomatic exchange between Russia and the West show, justifiable. The exchange began on April 15 when the British made a first tentative proposal; the Soviets made a counterproposal on April 17. The British did not reply for three weeks, on May 9; the Soviets took only five days to answer. Again, the British needed thirteen days to formulate an answer, the Soviets twenty-four hours. The pace quickened in June but still when the British took five days, the Soviets answered overnight. Then the British took nine days to the Russians' two, five to one, eight to the same day, six to the same day.<sup>25</sup> If dates and numbers have meaning in diplomatic exchanges, and the Soviets evidently felt they did, then it appears that the Russians were eager to proceed with negotiations while the British regarded them more casually. Indeed, the Soviets suspected, probably correctly, that Chamberlain's policy was designed only to propitiate the public and Opposition rather than to come to any understanding with them.

The Soviet dissatisfaction at the course of negotiations was by this time paralleled in the irritation felt in certain circles in the British and French Governments at having been forced to make one concession after another to the Russians. On July 1 and 3, Molotov again received Strang, Seeds and Naggiar and out of these meetings was forged the reluctant agreement by the Anglo-French delegations that the proposed guarantees would operate automatically in the event of a direct attack on

the Baltic nations.<sup>26</sup> Still they refused to accede to any provisions for automatic action in the case of indirect aggression there and continued to insist on preliminary consultation.<sup>27</sup> Alarm was now general in London and Paris as it was realized how far Western capitulations had surpassed the Soviet demands of April.<sup>28</sup> It had already been agreed that the guarantee would be extended to include the Baltic states, and that no separate peace would be concluded. Still no conclusion was in sight.

On July 4, the Foreign Policy Committee met in London to hear a report into which the mass of rumors about German-Soviet talks had been correlated.<sup>29</sup> In the atmosphere of annoyance and cynicism bred by a month of negotiation in which every point had been lost, there was a strong feeling that much might now be gained by delivering an ultimatum to Moscow.<sup>30</sup> Surprisingly enough, in view of all that had transpired in June, Lord Halifax had now become a convert to the school of thought which held that a rapprochement with the Russians must be secured, however distasteful and whatever the cost.<sup>31</sup> He had, on an earlier occasion, expounded to the Prime Minister on Russian psychology, pointing out that the Russians were a suspicious people who feared a British trap. They suffered acutely from an inferiority complex and considered that ever since the Great War the Western Powers had treated Russia with haughtiness and contempt.<sup>32</sup> Now Halifax renewed his effort to press for an understanding with the Soviets. Chamberlain, as well as several other members of the Committee, were unimpressed by his reasoning.<sup>33</sup> Chamberlain himself wrote at this time, "I am so skeptical of the value of Russian help that I should not feel our position was greatly worsened if we had to do without them."<sup>34</sup> It was decided that Moscow must be dealt

with along other and stiffer lines than had been followed in the first weeks of meetings. Strongly worded communiqués were telegraphed to Strang on June 6.<sup>35</sup>

Their effect was both unexpected and unpleasant. Not only did the weary negotiators fail to win points already raised, but Molotov, in talks held on July 8 and 9, dropped another bombshell as he now peremptorily stated that any political agreement could not exist as a valid document until parallel military talks had been concluded.<sup>36</sup> This was a serious setback indeed and the discouraged Anglo-French contingent continued to wrangle through the night with the obdurate Molotov, whose ability to outsit all others had gained him the name "Stonebottom" in diplomatic circles.<sup>37</sup> At last, at three in the morning, the British were forced to say that they could proceed no further on their instructions.<sup>38</sup>

It was obvious that the instructions Strang and Naggiar awaited must necessarily authorize further concessions to the Russians unless the West was prepared to abandon all hope of reaching an agreement. The concession which was now made was an empty one. The British and French had earlier made the proposal that the Soviets guarantee Holland, Luxembourg, and Switzerland in return for the guarantee of the Baltic states to which they had already agreed.<sup>39</sup> This was apparently not a serious requirement but one made only to be withdrawn when a concession must be made; now the occasion for its use had arisen. It was not enough, however, and on July 18, the Western powers were, in addition, forced to accept the Soviet definition of indirect aggression, a technical distinction on which they had not yet been able to agree.<sup>41</sup> According to Molo-

tov, "an internal coup d'etat or a reversal of policy in the interest of the aggressor" constituted indirect aggression.<sup>42</sup>

The British and French hoped by conceding these points to deflect Molotov from that more serious obstacle to agreement, the relation between the political treaty and the military convention. Despite those concessions by the West, the meetings conducted on July 17 and 18 were marked by a curtness on the part of Molotov and Vice-Commissar Potemkin greater than at any time in the past.<sup>43</sup> The manner in which Molotov sat "aloft and enthroned with the two Ambassadors on a much lower level" was found by them to be particularly galling and added greatly to the difficulties of sustained argument.<sup>44</sup> Molotov himself was quite unmollified by the concessions made in these meetings. As he said on the 17th, the Western powers were "swindlers and cheats and were resorting to all kinds of sharp practices and unworthy subterfuges."<sup>45</sup> The British had hardly deceived Molotov by the false concession they had made.

The Soviets' skepticism about the sincerity of British intentions gained strength in the third week of July. It was learned that Hitler's top economic advisor, Dr. Helmut Wohltat, had been in London between the 18th and 21st to confer on commercial matters with Robert Hudson, Secretary of the Department of Overseas Trade.<sup>46</sup> In the course of his stay, he had also met frequently with Sir Horace Wilson, another member of Chamberlain's Cabinet and one of his closest confidantes.<sup>47</sup> Out of these conferences came a plan for a general settlement of European problems. Some of its chief features included a British loan of one billion pounds sterling to Germany in return for the restoration of Czechoslovakia and a limitation of arms.<sup>48</sup> When the details of the plan became known,

there was a resultant furor in the House of Commons. Chamberlain defended himself by declaring that Hudson had acted on his own initiative and without Chamberlain's prior knowledge. He went on to say that he himself considered "this kind of settlement reasonable provided it be linked to disarmament and a general restoration of confidence."<sup>49</sup> His disavowals were met in Parliament with a disbelief which was echoed in Moscow. Stalin stated that he believed that "Great Britain was still willing to abandon the 'security bloc', for a direct understanding with Germany."<sup>50</sup> If, as seems most likely, the Wohltat-Hudson conference was a Nazi plot designed to strip the Soviets of any remaining confidence in Britain, it succeeded brilliantly.<sup>51</sup>

The Soviets also found disquieting several other more or less secret activities in which the British were engaged during the Russo-European negotiations. At the time of the Wohltat affair, there was a widely circulated rumor that, under British auspices, an economic mission to Danzig would attempt to effect a compromise between Poland and Germany.<sup>52</sup> Throughout the summer of 1939, members of the British Foreign Office were in touch with Goering, who appears to have genuinely wanted to negotiate a settlement with Britain and thereby avoid war; Goering and the British politicians carried on this exchange through the offices of a Swedish businessman, Birger Dahlerus.<sup>53</sup> To the eyes of the Russians, all of these diplomatic items added up to a renewed effort on the part of the British Government at an economic appeasement of Germany. The Soviets were also scarcely pleased to learn that the British had, on July 22, reached an accommodation with Japan, the enemy on the other flank, concerning the latter's expansion in China.<sup>54</sup> In retaliation, the Soviets



announced on July 21 that trade negotiations with Germany had been reopened; actually, they had never been entirely abandoned.<sup>55</sup>

The uproar in Parliament over the Wohltat-Hudson Conference, Russia's new intransigence and the Soviet announcement combined to force Chamberlain and the Foreign Office to pursue a more energetic course. The British now agreed that a military conference would be held simultaneously with the political talks.<sup>56</sup> Further discussions were held, in the meantime, on July 23, July 27 and August 2.<sup>57</sup> While there was no discernible change in former positions, there was a general feeling of guarded optimism among the Western diplomats. On July 29 Georges Bonnet declared, in the Chamber of Deputies, that agreement had been reached on all points but one, the stubborn question of indirect aggression.<sup>58</sup> It was thought by both the French and British governments that a conclusion to negotiations was now close enough that a military mission could be sent to Moscow without any great risk. As Chamberlain admitted, although he greatly disliked sending the mission, to refuse to do so "would only cause endless trouble."<sup>59</sup> In any case, he "personally did not attach any great importance to it."<sup>60</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sidney Aster, 1939 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), pp. 267-268.
- <sup>2</sup> Leonard Mosley, On Borrowed Time (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 285.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 268.
- <sup>4</sup> Max Beloff, The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1949), p. 254.
- <sup>5</sup> Aster, p. 267
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 268.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 269.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 268.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 270-271.
- <sup>13</sup> David J. Dallin, Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 1939-1942 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1942), p. 43.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-50, passim.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 44.
- <sup>16</sup> Aster, p. 271.
- <sup>17</sup> Dallin, p. 43.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Aster, p. 272.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 273.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 274.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Dallin, p. 44.

- <sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 45.
- <sup>25</sup>A. J. P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 231.
- <sup>26</sup>Aster, p. 277.
- <sup>27</sup>Dallin, p. 46.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 49.
- <sup>29</sup>Aster, p. 277.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 270.
- <sup>32</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 278.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 273.
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 279.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 280.
- <sup>37</sup>Robert D. Warth, Soviet Russia in World Politics, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963), p. 225.
- <sup>38</sup>Aster, p. 280.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 279.
- <sup>40</sup>Dallin, p. 40.
- <sup>41</sup>Beloff, pp. 258-259.
- <sup>42</sup>Aster, p. 271.
- <sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 283.
- <sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 286.
- <sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 283.
- <sup>46</sup>Dallin, p. 47.
- <sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 47-48.
- <sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>John W. Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy (New York: Viking Press, 1946), p. 406.

<sup>53</sup>Aster, pp. 339-367, passim.

<sup>54</sup>Beloff, p. 259.

<sup>55</sup>Dallin, p. 48.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>59</sup>Aster, p. 282.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

## Chapter IV

### MILITARY MISSION TO MOSCOW: AUGUST, 1939

The attitude with which the British Foreign Office approached the launching of the military mission was a reflection of the confusion which reigned within the ministry itself. The first problem to which they addressed themselves was the composition of the mission; a rumor was circulated that it was to be "a party of military, naval and air Strangs."<sup>1</sup> William Strang himself had advised as early as July 20 that at least one officer of high rank should be sent to Moscow.<sup>2</sup> Ivan Maisky had tried, through his contacts in the Labour Party in England, to convey the same message to Chamberlain.<sup>3</sup>

General Edmund Ironside, who had very recently returned from a widely publicized tour of Poland, felt that the appointment of an officer of lesser stature than he would be certain to offend the Soviets.<sup>4</sup> Ironside himself was for a time considered for the mission but his having served as Commander-in-Chief of the Allied intervention forces at Archangel in 1919 precluded his being warmly welcomed in Moscow.<sup>5</sup> Chamberlain believed the international situation was sufficiently tense that high ranking British generals could now hardly be spared to languish in Moscow if negotiations were prolonged, simply to satisfy a Russian whim.<sup>6</sup>

In time, a compromise was reached with the appointment of Admiral Sir Reginald Drax to head the mission. This appointment was made over the protests of Lord Chatfield, Minister for the Coordination of Defense, who felt that the appointment of an Admiral to this position would raise

false hopes among the Soviets as to the role of the British fleet in the Baltic.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Drax had several qualifications to recommend him. He had been a steadfast and outspoken opponent of appeasement and an advocate of the military conscription finally begun in May. In most other respects, his attitudes and outlook were very like those of Chamberlain and his colleagues. Unfortunately, Drax was almost unknown outside naval circles and was not even on the Naval Staff, although he had served on several Admiralty advisory boards. He was as typical an example of the British upper class as might have been found: scrupulous, utterly honest, pompous, frank and thoroughly unintellectual.<sup>8</sup>

Drax was to be joined on the mission by Air Marshal Sir Charles Burnett and Major General Thomas G. G. Heywood who represented the other two forces.<sup>9</sup> Upon learning of these appointments, Maisky informed his government that these were men who "would be able to stay in Moscow indefinitely. This does not promise any particular speed in the conduct of the military negotiations."<sup>10</sup> Molotov himself made no secret of his contempt when Seeds read their names to him.<sup>11</sup>

The French now submitted the names of those officers who had been named to head their delegation: General Joseph Doumenc, a member of the Supreme War Council; General Valin, Commander of the Third Air Force Division, and Captain Willaume of the French Naval Academy.<sup>12</sup> Yakov Suritz, Soviet Ambassador to France, was struck by the fact that these men were "narrow specialists" in their respective fields.<sup>13</sup> His fear was that they had been appointed to serve as "inspectors" who were instructed "to find out, above all else, the condition of our army."<sup>14</sup>

In London, the general policy on which the military mission was

to be predicated was considered by Chamberlain and his Cabinet to be of greater importance than its constitution. As early as July 26, at Chatfield's instigation, preliminary planning began even before the members of the delegation had been chosen.<sup>15</sup> On July 31, the delegation now appointed met at Whitehall to examine the very detailed instructions which had been prepared for them. They were admonished "to go very slowly with the conversations and to treat the Russians with reserve until the political agreement was concluded."<sup>16</sup>

The French delegates were given contrary advice by Daladier who told them to arrive at a military convention as quickly as possible and at all costs.<sup>17</sup> Actually, the Soviet ultimatum with regard to the military discussions had been viewed with some relief by the French, who were as anxious as the Soviets to conclude a military accord and who agreed that anything less was meaningless. For all that, as usual in a difference of opinion, the French deferred to the lead of the British Foreign Office.<sup>18</sup>

Even when a political agreement had been reached, the British and French delegates must, according to their instructions, confine themselves to the broadest general terms. Major issues were to be referred to London.<sup>19</sup> These instructions arose from suspicion that the contacts between the U.S.S.R. and Germany might possibly be used to transmit confidential information about Western military capability.<sup>20</sup>

The Drax delegation was also to learn what might be expected of the Russians on land, sea and air, what economic help could be rendered Poland and Rumania by them and what war materiel they could supply. In short, Drax was supposed to learn "what the Russians had and what they

were prepared to do" but without revealing Allied war plans.<sup>20</sup> Halifax, in the final briefing, did foresee that there might be "some difficulty in this" because the Russians would surely seek concrete results from the military mission before allowing the political agreement to be concluded.<sup>21</sup> The lengthy briefing completed, the delegation was dismissed and sent on its way with the vague hope that it "would do something to encourage and expedite" the negotiations.<sup>22</sup>

By the time the mission departed, however, these negotiations were at an end. On August 7, having accomplished all that was possible under the circumstances short of a successful conclusion, the Strang delegation left Moscow at Chamberlain's order and Molotov's manifest wish.<sup>23</sup> The Cabinet, in a search for a scapegoat on whom to place the blame for its failure, settled upon the unfortunate Seeds, whom they accused of having failed to argue Britain's case fervently enough.<sup>24</sup> Chamberlain concurred, saying that records of the Ambassador's conversations had left the Russians with the impression that the British "had been weak-kneed and feeble" in confrontations.<sup>25</sup> Seeds, thus discredited and in some measure incapacitated by a severe bout of influenza, was left to face Molotov alone as Strang and his colleagues departed.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time that the diplomats, weary and defeated, were returning to London, the military mission was at last on its way to Moscow. The mode of transport for the thirty or forty officers, officials and clerks had been a matter of serious debate in Whitehall.<sup>27</sup> There was an early suggestion that the most spectacular way of showing Stalin and Hitler that "we really mean business by these conversations" was to send the mission to Moscow with an escort of cruisers and destroyers." Halifax



vetoed this proposal; it was, he said, too "provocative to send a cruiser into the Baltic at the present time."<sup>28</sup> It was also thought to be unwise to tie up a war vessel for any extended time. Chamberlain's trips to Berchtesgaden by plane were recalled by some at this point. Incredibly, it proved impossible to find a plane of sufficient range and capacity which could be spared; commercial flights were of course unsuitable for the purpose.<sup>29</sup> The German Air attaché in London warned that his government was sensitive to flights by planes of the Royal Air Force over German territory.<sup>30</sup> A similar objection was raised to the proposition of railway travel, which would have necessitated crossing German borders.<sup>31</sup> Eventually it was decided that the combined Anglo-French delegation would travel by chartered merchant ship. The City of Exeter was selected, an old and very slow ship, capable of moving at a rate of only thirteen knots in contrast to the twenty-seven knots expected of a large cruiser.<sup>32</sup> The mission, leaving London on August 5, required almost an entire week to reach Moscow, a week which was occupied most agreeably by curry banquets, deck tennis and tea dancing.<sup>33</sup> Seventeen days had now elapsed since the British and French governments had agreed to open immediate military talks.

The atmosphere of ponderous cordiality by which the mission was greeted quickly evaporated on the morning of August 12 as the first of the talks began. The French and British officers were paying the heavy price of a most elaborate three-hour banquet followed by many toasts at which they had been entertained the previous evening. The Soviet officers appeared to be quite unaffected.<sup>34</sup> Molotov's place had now been assumed by Marshal Klement Voroshilov, who served as chairman. Voroshilov, in

opening the conference, exhibited the document by which he was empowered to negotiate and sign a military agreement on behalf of the Soviet government.<sup>35</sup> General Doumenc was able to provide corresponding credentials.<sup>36</sup> Admiral Drax, unfortunately, had nothing on paper which he could show. His explanations that the situation lacked precedent and that military agreements did not ordinarily take the form of treaties were in vain.<sup>37</sup> The lameness of his protests was underlined by fits of uncontrollable coughing, as the Admiral's chronic respiratory ailment was much aggravated by the clouds of cigar smoke in which the Conference was conducted. As the meeting progressed, Drax's voice grew weaker and weaker.<sup>38</sup> Voroshilov, though obviously shocked by such serious negligence, magnanimously agreed to a continuation of the discussions while an urgent message was telegraphed to London.<sup>39</sup> The Soviets had won an easy psychological victory in the opening minutes of the Conference.

Even more unnerving to the Western delegates was an encounter on the following day. Responding to Drax's and Doumenc's question about "general principles of common action," Voroshilov retorted that those were self evident; only plans of action were now important.<sup>40</sup> The rest of the day's meeting was spent under the most uncomfortable circumstances possible as the indefatigable Voroshilov probed for precisely the information the Western delegates had been expressly forbidden to divulge. General Doumenc, as a result of Drax's incapacitation and his own determination to press for an agreement with the Soviets, assumed the thankless task of speaking for the delegation.<sup>41</sup> At length it was so obvious that General Doumenc had skirted the truth and Admiral Drax had confined himself to assurances of the strength of the British Navy, that Voroshilov

replied angrily, "Your talk is meaningless!"<sup>42</sup>

Following these two short sessions on August 13, Voroshilov continued on the 14th to press relentlessly for specific information as to what land forces the British and French would field in the event of conflict. The Soviets revealed that their own capability stood at 120 infantry divisions, 16 cavalry divisions, 5,000 medium and heavy guns, up to 10,000 tanks and whippets and 5,000 fighter planes.<sup>43</sup> Now they demanded a reciprocal disclosure. As the unhappy Doumenc and Drax were evasive on this point, Voroshilov continued to hammer away. Worse was to come.

On the afternoon of the 14th, Voroshilov raised the questions which the Western officers had most dreaded.

Do the French and British General Staffs think that Soviet land forces will be admitted to Polish territory in order to make direct contact with the enemy in case Poland is attacked? Is it proposed to allow Soviet troops across Rumanian territory if the aggressor attacks Rumania?<sup>44</sup>

Drax and Doumenc indicated that their governments expected the Soviet Union to assume a somewhat less active role, principally that of supplier of raw materials and military equipment to Poland and Rumania. Voroshilov replied that this was a "trade matter for which no pact of mutual assistance was necessary."<sup>45</sup> He went on to say he failed to see how the Soviet Union, which had no common frontier with the aggressor, could extend aid to Poland other than by passage of Soviet troops through Polish territory.<sup>46</sup> Finally, Voroshilov offered the concession that the Soviets would, in order to overcome Polish objections, be willing to confine their passage to the Vilna Corridor, a narrow strip which separated Russia from East Prussia; similarly, Galicia might provide access to Rumania.<sup>47</sup>

Actually, the British and French position, as prepared by Chatfield's office, was essentially defensive. They believed, or pretended to believe, that Poland and Rumania, fortified by Russian supplies, could at least slow down a German advance, in which case the Red Army would have ample time to build up lines of defense after the war started. Thinking in terms of World War I, they expected a general entrenchment in the East, supported by a British blockade of the Baltic, to result in Germany's collapse.<sup>48</sup> The Russians, from their civil wars and war of intervention, had developed different strategic concepts. They believed strongly in the value of mechanized cavalry offensives; they expected to direct armoured columns into Germany itself, regardless of where else fighting was taking place.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, the discussions on the 14th reached an impasse; the British and French delegation could enlighten the Soviets no further on their plans nor could they provide any answer to the Polish question. At last, Voroshilov concluded, "Without an exact and unequivocal answer to these questions further conversations will not have any real meaning."<sup>50</sup> He could not, he said, "in all conscience recommend to his government that it should take part in an undertaking obviously destined to fail."<sup>51</sup> Drax later privately expressed his feeling that the mission had already failed. Most of the delegation agreed.<sup>52</sup>

Only Doumenc, having made a pledge to Daladier, still felt determined to conclude a convention with the Soviets. That evening he drew up and persuaded Drax to agree to a telegram which he sent to Paris; a copy was sent to London. It outlined the situation which had developed that day and requested new instructions.<sup>53</sup> Ambassador Seeds had already

sent a telegram, still unanswered, on the 12th in which he argued for greater flexibility and less reserve in the negotiations.<sup>54</sup>

The negotiations were much handicapped by the fact that major issues were to be referred to London but no one there was able to act upon these referrals. Over the protests of Churchill and some of his colleagues, Parliament had been recessed on August 2; Neville Chamberlain was grouse shooting in Scotland and other members of the Cabinet were similarly occupied. No contingency plans in case of emergency had been laid, and it was difficult indeed to get an answer for the negotiators in Moscow.<sup>55</sup> Halifax, who appears to have been left in London to attend to government business, was convinced by the telegrams that Drax's instructions were too rigid; he had always had doubts about them.<sup>56</sup> The telegrams were forwarded by Halifax to the Deputy Chiefs of Staff for "their urgent consideration."<sup>57</sup> The telegrams confirmed what they too had felt all along. Lord Chatfield, recalled to London for that purpose, authorized Drax to ignore the progress of the political negotiations. The order to spin out the military talks was rescinded.<sup>58</sup>

At the same time, both the British and French Chiefs of Staff, in rare and urgent agreement, advised the Foreign Office that the Polish and Rumanian governments be brought to the recognition that the Soviet Union must, in order to implement the guarantees already made, be allowed access to their respective territories.<sup>59</sup> This recommendation was telegraphed on August 17 to the Ambassador in Warsaw, Sir Howard Kennard, with the admonition that he attempt to induce Beck to see reality. The French Ambassador, Leon Noel, was likewise enjoined to support Kennard in convincing the Poles that the passage of Soviet troops was "vital for European secur-

ity."<sup>60</sup> Also on the 17th, Doumenc sent an aide de camp, the very person-  
able Captain André Beaufre, on a secret mission to Warsaw for the same  
reason.<sup>61</sup> All efforts were in vain. Kennard, himself in sympathy with  
the Polish Government, replied that Beck was "absolutely obdurate."<sup>62</sup>  
Beck took refuge in the rationalization that if Poland agreed to Soviet  
passage Hitler would seize this as the excuse he had been waiting for to  
precipitate a war.<sup>63</sup> The French officials' disgust with the romantic  
impracticality of the Poles was by this time so intense that they would  
have been quite willing to abandon Poland if they had been able to secure  
Soviet cooperation in exchange.<sup>64</sup> The British, reminded of the shame of  
Munich, refused to consider such an expedient; they could only hope to  
persuade Poland to change her position and in the meantime conceal her  
refusal from the Russians.

While issuing what amounted to an ultimatum on August 14,  
Voroshilov had coldly agreed to continue the talks. The meetings held  
on the 17th and 18th, as the Western delegation awaited replies to the  
desperate pleas they had directed to their governments, were at least  
as trying as the earlier ones. Voroshilov continued at each session to  
press his point that the Soviet Union must be allowed free passage through  
Poland and Rumania. Drax and Doumenc could only weakly reply that they  
believed those countries would petition Russia for help if they were  
attacked.<sup>65</sup>

The British made an extremely awkward situation much worse by  
their reply on August 17 to the Soviets' renewed demands for explicit  
information about their military capability. General Heywood was now  
able to provide these figures: England could supply two divisions at once

and two later.<sup>66</sup> Compared to the Soviets' 136 divisions and the 100 which the French had already guaranteed, this was such a ludicrous figure that Voroshilov asked incredulously if he had heard correctly.<sup>67</sup> It apparently did not occur to Heywood or Drax to enumerate the resources upon which England could possibly draw in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, India and the colonies, nor to point out her assets in the Royal Air Force or British Navy. Voroshilov and the other Soviet officers openly sneered as Heywood's estimates were confirmed to them.<sup>68</sup>

The conversation turned again to Poland. Admiral Drax contrived to compound one blunder by another. Anxious to assuage the Soviets' anger and retrieve a situation rapidly becoming disastrous, Drax reminded them, "Don't forget that Poland, if she is on her own, may be crushed in two weeks."<sup>69</sup> The fundamental decency of the man was obvious in this extraordinary statement but so was his total naiveté. It was an expression of the upper class British sense of fair play, of wishing to come to the aid of the underdog, an appeal to the better nature of the potential allies. It was also precisely the wrong tack to take with the coldly pragmatic Soviets. This was of course confirmation of what the Soviets already knew, that they would be faced by a victorious Germany at their border if Poland were attacked. Voroshilov, shocked into speechlessness by Drax's interjection, could only reply that he had no comment to make on that subject.<sup>70</sup>

The meeting of August 18 was the last held between the Anglo-French officers and the Soviet Staff. Voroshilov suddenly rose from his seat and said that there was no point in a further meeting until they had

an answer from Poland. He agreed reluctantly to schedule a meeting on the 21st and urged the delegation in the meantime to see the sights of Moscow and enjoy themselves.<sup>71</sup>

Voroshilov received the members of the mission on the morning of the appointed day. Drax excitedly read Voroshilov the English text of his official credentials which had arrived via airmail from London.<sup>75</sup> The delegates had little else to report other than their own willingness to allow the Red Army to take up positions along the frontier until such time as Poland herself should request Soviet aid.<sup>72</sup> Nothing said was now of interest to the Soviets, who asked that talks be indefinitely postponed.



## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Sidney Aster, 1939 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), p. 290.
- <sup>2</sup>Leonard Mosley, On Borrowed Time (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 301.
- <sup>3</sup>Aster, p. 290.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup>Mosley, pp. 301-302.
- <sup>9</sup>Aster, p. 291.
- <sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 291-292.
- <sup>11</sup>Mosley, p. 302.
- <sup>12</sup>Aster, p. 291.
- <sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 292.
- <sup>14</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 290.
- <sup>17</sup>A. J. P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 256.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup>Aster, p. 293.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 294.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup>David J. Dallin, Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 1939-1942 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1942), p. 50.

<sup>24</sup>Aster, p. 286.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 296.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Mosley, pp. 302-303.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 305-306.

<sup>35</sup>Aster, p. 301.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Mosley, p. 323.

<sup>39</sup>Aster, p. 302.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Mosley, p. 333.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>John L. Snell, ed., The Outbreak of the Second World War (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1962), p. 34.

<sup>44</sup>Aster, p. 303.

<sup>45</sup>Dallin, pp. 53-54.

<sup>46</sup>Aster, p. 303.

<sup>47</sup>Mosley, p. 333.

<sup>48</sup>Taylor, pp. 256-257.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>50</sup>Aster, p. 303.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Mosley, p. 335.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., pp. 335-336.

<sup>54</sup>Aster, p. 304.

<sup>55</sup>Mosley, p. 319.

<sup>56</sup>Aster, p. 304.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 305.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., pp. 306-307.

<sup>61</sup>Mosley, p. 353.

<sup>62</sup>Aster, p. 307.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Taylor, p. 258.

<sup>65</sup>Mosley, p. 352.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 353.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Aster, p. 309.

<sup>72</sup>Dallin, p. 52.

<sup>73</sup>Aster, p. 310.

## Chapter V

### RUSSO-GERMAN NEGOTIATIONS

When Neville Chamberlain remarked in a meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee on July 10 that "it would be quite impossible in present circumstances for Germany and Soviet Russia to come together," he would have been startled indeed if he had known the facts of the matter.<sup>1</sup> At exactly the same time that the British and French negotiators were exhausting themselves in futile discussions in Moscow, the German contacts with Russia were following their own hidden course.

Although both Russia and Germany had made moves, or at least gestures, toward a *détente* in the early spring of 1939, neither Hitler nor Stalin was ready to make any ill-considered commitment. It was most likely that Stalin, while refusing to burn any bridges behind him, was quite sincere in his negotiations with the West until August 12. Hitler, who saw many benefits in a rapprochement with Russia, was still unable to easily renounce the anti-Russian position set forth in Mein Kampf. May, 1939 saw several alterations of attitude and concomitant shifts of position in Germany, Russia and the West.

In May, the British Parliament voted to institute universal conscription and to encourage the expansion of the aviation industry.<sup>2</sup> The tone of the diplomatic communiqués from both England and France became firmer in tone as public opinion began to harden against Germany.<sup>3</sup> Gradually the realization began to dawn in Berlin that the Western powers really were determined to honor their guarantee of Poland and that their

negotiations with the Soviets might after all lead to an agreement. As Ribbentrop had often remarked, "You need never fear Britain until you hear her talking of Russia as an ally. Then it means she is really going to war."<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the Fuehrer began to formulate plans for "Operation White," the code name for an attack on Poland. These plans were made clear in a lecture he delivered to the German generals on May 23, in which he enlarged upon his goals for the future.<sup>5</sup> Hitler stated, "It is not Danzig that is at stake. For us it is a matter of expanding our living space in the East and making food supplies secure and also solving the problem of the Baltic States."<sup>6</sup> As he explained to the generals, this war in the East must be fought without Western intervention. (In another conversation, Generals Keitel and Brauchitsch gave Hitler their pessimistic views on the probability of German victory if the West did not remain neutral.)<sup>7</sup> Hitler declared that he believed that England and France would not fight in Poland's defense if Russia remained neutral. He considered that war with England was inevitable but believed that if Russia's neutrality could be secured, a victory in "the little war" in the East could be gained before it was necessary to deal with the British, who could then be defeated in their turn. France he recognized as a follower of England who would hardly march if England did not. These were Hitler's long-term plans.<sup>8</sup> Only one date was definite and that was September 1, 1939, by which time the attack on Poland must either have been made or abandoned for the winter; by the spring of 1940 when the weather would permit a renewal of attack, England and France and possibly Russia would have been able to increase their armaments and reinforce their de-

fenses to a point where victory would be far more difficult to attain.<sup>9</sup>

These plans could scarcely have been unrelated to instructions communicated to Ambassador Schulenburg in Moscow at the end of May. Hitler advised him, "Contrary to the policy previously established, we have now decided to pursue definite negotiations with the Soviet Union."<sup>10</sup> Obviously, Hitler had made a decision; repugnant as the idea of a rapprochement with Russia was, the end was worth the means. Schulenburg was asked to propose to Molotov a continuation of the suspended trade talks. The proposal was accepted and Molotov's reply included an allusion to a desire for the establishment of a "political basis" for the talks.<sup>11</sup> This conversation constituted something of a landmark in the transformation of German-Russian relations. Back in Berlin the hint was immediately taken up by Secretary of State Weizsacker who confirmed that the time for negotiations of a more serious nature had arrived by a talk held on May 30 with Georgii Astakhov, a Soviet chargé d'affaires.<sup>12</sup>

Stalin saw now that the Germans had taken the bait offered in early May in Litvinov's dismissal; it was this knowledge which led him in June to raise his price for an agreement with France and England. His hope for improved terms did not, however, preclude the genuineness of his preference for such an agreement over one with Germany.

The German government entrusted Gustav Hilger, an economic counsellor assigned to the Embassy in Moscow, with taking the initial steps toward reaching an understanding with the Russians. Returning from a briefing in Berlin at the end of May, he contacted Anastas Mikoyan, the Soviet Trade Commissar.<sup>13</sup> Several talks on trade matters were held in June and the German Government renewed its earlier and yet unaccepted

offer of a twenty-five year nonaggression pact in return for supplies of foodstuff, raw materials and military equipment in the event of war.<sup>14</sup> By June 17, matters had progressed to a point where Hilger was able to inform Mikoyan that Hitler was willing to send to Moscow a high official with full powers to negotiate a commercial treaty.<sup>15</sup> At this point the Soviets abruptly drew back from further negotiations with Germany as the arrival of the Strang delegation in Moscow stimulated new hope of an understanding with the Western powers.<sup>16</sup> Although angered by this rebuff and the failure of a conciliatory effort made by Schulenburg, Hitler even now refused to move rashly. He felt that by pretending not to feel pressed he could obtain more favorable terms. On June 29, he issued orders to end negotiations with the Soviet Union. However, contacts at the lowest level were surreptitiously maintained by the German economic staff.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout June and into early July, London, Paris and Rome believed the international situation to be much improved and Hitler to be engaged in a diplomatic retreat.<sup>18</sup> This lull was shattered by news of the impending military mission and the galvanizing effect which it had on Hitler. On July 26, the day on which the press announced that military discussions would be held between the British, French and Russian General Staffs, he told his aides that he wanted no further delay in "clarifying the intentions of the Russians."<sup>19</sup>

Hitler was also by now convinced by the July crisis over the militarization of Danzig and certain retaliatory moves taken by the Polish Government that Poland must be crushed by war. No half-measures would suffice and her conquest by any means other than total war was unaccept-

able to the Fuehrer.<sup>20</sup> But first she must be isolated diplomatically. Steps toward this end had already been taken by a strengthening of ties with other East European states. There was an exchange of state visits in the early summer of 1939 with both Hungary and Yugoslavia.<sup>21</sup>

On the evening of July 26, Dr. Julius Schnurre, an economic expert attached to the German Foreign Office, dined in a Berlin restaurant with two Russian diplomats.<sup>22</sup> One of them was Astakhov, who pettishly remarked that they had never quite understood in Moscow the extreme hostility the National Socialists had shown them.<sup>23</sup> Schnurre replied that, far from posing any threat to Russia, "German policy is aimed at England."<sup>24</sup> Schnurre went on to say that "a far-reaching compromise of mutual interests" was quite conceivable, "that in spite of all the differences in their views, there is a common element in the ideology of Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union: opposition to the capitalist democracies of the West." Indeed, said Schnurre, there was no problem "between the Baltic and the Black Sea" where German-Soviet interests clashed or where a "new arrangement satisfactory to both governments" could not be made. "And what could Britain offer the Soviets in an alliance?" he asked. "At best participation in a European war and the hostility of Germany while Germany could offer neutrality and an understanding on mutual interests."<sup>25</sup>

Astakhov and his companion, Soviet trade representative Evgeny Babarin, promised to relay Schnurre's message to the Soviet Foreign Office.<sup>26</sup> They were excited but dubious--Schnurre's insinuations went far beyond what had been hoped. This was the first intimation the Soviets had had that territorial concessions might be made by the Germans. Unable to believe their luck, the Russian diplomats maintained such reserve of



attitude that Schnurre believed that he had failed in his mission.<sup>27</sup>

At the beginning of August, the Nazis abandoned all pretense of deliberation in their negotiations with the Soviet Union. Ribbentrop, while he had long urged that approaches be made, had kept aloof from the first moves made at a lower diplomatic level under the guise of commercial negotiations, as had Hitler himself. Now believing Schnurre's subtlety had fallen short of the mark, Ribbentrop invited Astakhov to the Wilhemstrasse for another conversation on August 2.<sup>28</sup> With characteristic bluntness, he asked if there was a possibility of Germany "coming to an understanding with Russia on the fate of Poland."<sup>29</sup> Astakhov informed the Narkomindel that Ribbentrop had also offered to sign a secret protocol defining the interests of the two powers "all along the line from the Black to the Baltic Sea."<sup>30</sup> This premature offer was rejected by the Soviets as they awaited the Anglo-French military mission, but it doubtless strengthened Stalin's resolve to withstand Western demands.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time that Ribbentrop stepped into the negotiations, he authorized Ambassador Schulenburg in Moscow to arrange an interview with Molotov in order to gauge the effect of Schnurre's hints to Astakhov and Babarin.<sup>32</sup> On August 3, this interview took place in Molotov's offices in the Kremlin; its outcome was neither entirely favorable nor definitely discouraging. Molotov's manner was, for him, one of unusual cordiality but his reply was equivocal.<sup>33</sup> While Germany's suggestion "had created great interest," the U.S.S.R. still had been given no "proofs" of a cessation of Nazi hostility.<sup>34</sup> Schulenburg, who had not been authorized to proceed further in dangling bait before the Russians, telegraphed to Berlin his belief that the Soviets were still determined to sign an

agreement with the Western powers.<sup>35</sup>

It was at this precise moment that Chamberlain announced in London the names of those officers heading the military mission. The omission of any leading military figures made the Kremlin doubt Western enthusiasm for the mission. The leisurely manner in which it was gathered, briefed and transported to Moscow confirmed the Soviets in this notion; so did the latest Anglo-French proposal presented to Molotov on the 2nd, the day before his conversation with Schulenburg. At some point in the next week, a historic decision was taken in the Kremlin. On August 12, the day which also saw the arrival of the Drax-Doumenc commission without the necessary authority to sign any agreement which they might formulate, Astakhov communicated to Schnurre that his government was ready for "a systematic discussion of all outstanding issues, including the Polish question and previous German-Soviet treaties."<sup>36</sup> It was preferred, he said, that a settlement should take place only by degrees and in Moscow.<sup>37</sup>

One of these conditions was quite agreeable to the elated Germans. There was no reason that discussions should not take place in Moscow but time was of the essence. Military planning was at a feverish pitch in Berlin and Obersalzberg. Hitler, frantic to proceed with "Operation White," had been advised by his generals that a Polish invasion must be concluded by the middle of October before autumn rains rendered roads impassable to motorized traffic; therefore, an attack could not be safely launched after the first of September. The commanders must have Hitler's final decision by August 25 if certain logistical difficulties were to be overcome in time to meet this deadline.<sup>38</sup>

Astonishingly, Hitler did not at once act upon receipt of the

message brought him on the 12th.<sup>39</sup> He thought that the Anglo-French mission arriving on that same day in Moscow would impel the Russians to drive a harder bargain. After two days of agonized deliberations, on the evening of the 14th, Hitler appeared to have made a decision, according to General Franz Halder, Chief of the General Staff and his constant companion in those desperate hours.<sup>40</sup> At last, it can only be conjectured, Hitler realized that what concessions were made to the Soviet Union at this time were really of very little consequence provided they allowed him to proceed with his primary objective.

At the very time this fateful decision was being reached, Mussolini's son-in-law and Foreign Minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano, was in Obersalzberg to see Hitler. The Italians were much alarmed by Hitler's apparent resolve to settle the Danzig question by war; Ciano was sent by Mussolini to propose a conference for a peaceful settlement.<sup>41</sup> As anxious to avoid war at this time as Hitler was to provoke it, he received a considerable shock at the turn events had suddenly taken. Ciano's entreaties, while receiving less than the full attention of Hitler and Ribbentrop, nevertheless influenced them toward acceptance of the Russian offer as a means of reassurance of the wavering ally.<sup>42</sup> It seems likely that the considerations pressed upon Hitler by the generals and Ciano, combined with his own furious eagerness to crush Poland, explain his acquiescence to the Russian proposal late in the evening of the 14th. As he himself remarked, "The great drama is now reaching its climax."<sup>43</sup>

But Stalin and Molotov, who were quick to perceive the advantage German impatience offered, maneuvered elaborately on questions of timing and agenda. Molotov suggested a "special protocol" which would "define

the interests of the contracting parties in various questions of foreign policy."<sup>44</sup> He hedged, however, at a proposal that Ribbentrop should visit Moscow to facilitate negotiations and asked if the German Government was interested in three proposals: a nonaggression pact, mediation in Soviet-Japanese relations, and a joint guarantee of the Baltic states?<sup>45</sup> Germany's affirmative reply gave Stalin reason to assume the attitude in which, on August 15, he demanded, through Voroshilov, that the dismayed Western powers guarantee the Soviet right of passage in Polish and Rumanian territory.<sup>46</sup>

But Molotov continued to insist that a visit from the German Foreign Minister required time for preparation and set the 26th or 27th as the earliest possible date Ribbentrop could be received.<sup>47</sup> Ribbentrop, on two occasions asked Schulenburg to explain to Molotov the desirability of a Russo-German understanding in the event of the outbreak of hostilities between Poland and Germany; he considered "previous clarification necessary in order to be able to take account of Russian interests in case of such a conflict."<sup>48</sup> Molotov was neither deluded nor moved by such pleasantries. He refused to budge.

Now it was up to Hitler. Since August 15 he had mobilized 250,000 men, concentrated rolling stock, ordered two battleships and part of the submarine fleet to prepare to sail.<sup>49</sup> In a most unconventional step, he dispatched, on the evening of August 20, a personal telegram to "Herr J. V. Stalin, Moscow." In it he asked the Soviet leader to receive Ribbentrop as early as the 22nd or 23rd. Ribbentrop, he added, had "plenipotentiary authority to draw up and sign the nonaggression pact as well the protocol" Stalin required.<sup>50</sup> For twenty hours, while Hitler fumed at

Russian stolidity and harangued his subordinates in an atmosphere of nearly unbearable tension, Germany's fate hung in the balance.<sup>51</sup> At last, on the evening of the 21st, on the day Voroshilov had summarily dismissed the Anglo-French military mission which had no new developments to report, Stalin's reply was received in Berlin: Stalin would be pleased to receive Herr von Ribbentrop in Moscow on August 23.<sup>52</sup>

On the following day, August 22, the French delegation bolted the British lead. General Doumenc called upon Voroshilov to inform him that his government had authorized him to conclude a military convention without further delay, one permitting passage of the Red Army through Poland and Rumania.<sup>53</sup> He could only evade questions put to him about the consent of those states, and the meeting ended without the immediate reinitiation of negotiations for which Doumenc had hoped.<sup>54</sup> Nothing at all the Western powers proposed could at that point have interested Voroshilov. At 5 P.M. on the same day, the Soviet Government announced its conclusion of a commercial agreement with Germany, signed two days previously, and the imminent arrival of the German Foreign Minister to work out a political agreement between the two powers.<sup>55</sup>

Ribbentrop arrived in Moscow at noon on the 23rd and was immediately taken from the airport to the Kremlin where he was received by Molotov.<sup>56</sup> In a conference of only three hours' duration, the final touches were put on the nonaggression pact already proposed.<sup>57</sup> A cabled inquiry by Ribbentrop about an unforeseen Soviet demand was answered by Hitler with a terse "Yes, agreed."<sup>58</sup> Ironically, Polish opposition had at last collapsed and their consent was frantically relayed by the French delegation to the Kremlin.<sup>59</sup> By this time, however, the Soviets had been promised

half of Eastern Europe, including Finland, the Baltic states, the eastern third of Poland, and Bessarabia.<sup>60</sup> Near midnight on August 23, the Pact and a secret supplementary protocol dividing Eastern Europe into two spheres of influence were concluded and signed by Ribbentrop and Molotov amid toasts and compliments.<sup>61</sup> The "war of nerves" had ended and Hitler was able to exult, "Now I have struck the instrument from the hands of the Western powers!"<sup>62</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Sidney Aster, 1939 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), p. 281.
- <sup>2</sup>David J. Dallin, Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 1939-1942 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1942), p. 35.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup>John W. Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy (New York: Viking Press, 1946), p. 388.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 385-386.
- <sup>6</sup>Raymond J. Sontag, A Broken World (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 367.
- <sup>7</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 400.
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 386.
- <sup>9</sup>E. M. Robertson, Hitler's Pre-War Policy and Military Plans (New York: Citadel Press, 1967), pp. 178-179.
- <sup>10</sup>Sontag, p. 367.
- <sup>11</sup>Pierre Renouvin, World War II and Its Origins (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 159.
- <sup>12</sup>Arnold and Veronica M. Toynbee, eds., Survey of International Affairs: The Eve of the War, 1939 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), p. 437.
- <sup>13</sup>Aster, p. 276.
- <sup>14</sup>Dallin, p. 35.
- <sup>15</sup>Aster, p. 277.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup>Sontag, p. 368.
- <sup>18</sup>Dallin, p. 37.
- <sup>19</sup>Renouvin, p. 159.
- <sup>20</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 405.
- <sup>21</sup>Alan Bullock, Hitler: A Study in Tyranny (New York, Harper & Row, 1962), p. 506.

- <sup>22</sup>Aster, pp. 276-277.
- <sup>23</sup>Joachim C. Fest, Hitler (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), p. 589.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup>Aster, p. 297.
- <sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 298.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 297-298.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 299.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 298-299.
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 299.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 300.
- <sup>37</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup>Robertson, p. 179.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup>Fest, p. 589.
- <sup>42</sup>Aster, pp. 324-325.
- <sup>43</sup>Fest, p. 589.
- <sup>44</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup>Aster, p. 307.
- <sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 308.
- <sup>47</sup>Robertson, p. 180.



<sup>48</sup>Fest, p. 589.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 590.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 591.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Dallin, p. 52.

<sup>56</sup>Fest, p. 591.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., pp. 591-592.

<sup>62</sup>Wheeler-Bennett, p. 415.

## Chapter VI

### THE NAZI-SOVIET PACT: AN ANALYSIS

Despite the numerous portents of a Russo-German *détente* which could be seen during the spring and summer of 1939, the announcement that Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a ten-year nonaggression pact on August 23 came to most of the world as a thunderbolt from a blue sky. Liberals and most of all Communists outside Russia were dumbfounded at the sudden transformation of the "beasts hearts" into allies. Conservatives and reactionaries, although equally disconcerted, were able to find a perverse satisfaction in the apparent fulfillment of their direct prophecies.

Hitler's motives, however, were crystal clear. The pact with Russia would permit Germany to gain the Lebensraum in Eastern Europe to which she believed she was entitled. If Western intervention there was not forestalled altogether, then at least Germany was relieved of the strategic nightmare of having to fight a two-front war. In addition, she would almost certainly be assured of economic aid from the Soviet Union, where such a formidable increase in industrial capacity had taken place in recent years that her production was surpassed only by that of the United States.<sup>1</sup> As Hitler explained with remarkable candor to Dr. Carl Burckhardt, League of Nations Commissioner, on August 11, he needed the Ukraine so that Germany could not be starved into defeat by a British blockade as they had been in World War I; he must obtain its use for Germany by one means or another.<sup>2</sup>

In the same interview, Hitler insisted, "Everything I do is aimed at Russia."<sup>3</sup> His intentions toward her were a theme on which he had expounded at great length in Mein Kampf and one constantly reiterated. Danzig and Poland were largely important to him in that they served as stepping stones to his ultimate goal. They and the other states which stood between Germany and the Soviet Union were necessary for the deployment of Nazi troops during a Russian invasion. A common boundary of hundreds of miles would offer opportunities and attack points which had not previously existed. By annexing or allowing the Soviet Union to annex vast territories in Eastern Europe and thus move her borders westward, Hitler had acquired this boundary. He regarded the pact as a second-best solution to which he had been driven by Poland's refusal to collaborate with him for Russia's defeat.<sup>4</sup> Although angered by her recalcitrance and demanding vengeance, Hitler still retained sight of his primary objective. As he himself put it, it was sometimes necessary to make "a pact with Satan to drive out the Devil."<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, Stalin felt much the same way about the pact. There is no reason to believe that either he or Hitler had abandoned to any degree their fundamental ideological beliefs. Ribbentrop's boast that in Berlin they placed bets as to when Stalin himself would sign the Anti-Comintern Pact was no more than an undiplomatic joke.<sup>6</sup> As consummate opportunists, neither Stalin nor Hitler felt any abashment in their momentary disregard for the rhetoric of ideology; nor can the sincerity of their own convictions be measured by their apparent deviation. This convoluted rationale enabled Molotov to announce with some degree of truthfulness that the Nazi-Soviet Pact was not inconsistent with established Soviet

policy.<sup>7</sup> Clearly a Western alliance had not been sought from any sense of attachment. Stalin's view was undeniably narrow and selfishly nationalistic but so was that of the Western democracies. His paramount consideration was his nation's security, and his actions were simply those by which he believed it could best be achieved. Stalin, as well as Hitler, recognized their alliance as a second-best solution to the Soviet dilemma. He recognized that it was a temporary expedient and would have preferred an alliance with the West as a more permanent resolution. The Anglo-French negotiations were conducted in good faith by the Soviets.

Those who suggest that Stalin was gulled into signing a nonaggression pact display a deplorable ignorance of Stalin's character. Stalin did not act out of faith that Hitler had renounced his often repeated desire for Lebensraum. He recognized perfectly that Hitler was driven by necessity to such an extremity, the necessity to avoid a two-front war. Stalin did not at all believe that the pact he signed had obviated the prospect of war with Germany, although he was unconvinced of its inevitability; the only certainty was its postponement and to the Soviets, this was justification enough for the pact. Nevertheless, nonaggression is not synonymous with friendship, and the Nazi-Soviet alliance came to be known as the Pact of Mutual Suspicion. It is probably that Stalin intended to adhere to the pact, provided Germany presented no threat to Russia. Had Hitler confined himself to Poland and the West, it is unlikely that Stalin would have felt an obligation to intervene. Soviet opposition to aggression had no idealistic basis.

Certainly idealism formed no part of Stalin's rationale. A coldly logical man, he did not turn to Germany out of pique, although he

undoubtedly felt extreme annoyance at the tepid nature of the Anglo-French negotiations. The absence of any well-known politicians or officers, the slow boat, the lack of full plenipotentiary powers were significant to Stalin but not decisive. He was too much the pragmatist, too empirical in his approach to statecraft not to use whatever material he found at hand, provided it suited his purpose. His resentment of Russia's exclusion from the Munich Conference had not precluded the possibility of her cooperation with the West. But while the slights she suffered during the Anglo-French negotiations were mere pinpricks, the diffidence with which they were conducted was important in that it demonstrated once more the lack of enthusiasm the West felt for a Russian alliance.

Stalin believed that the West would not hesitate even now either to sacrifice or exclude Russia if a peaceful settlement with Germany could be secured by other means. While Chamberlain's appeasement policy had been officially terminated March 17, as late as July 21 certain members of the Cabinet had attempted to bribe Hitler with an enormous loan, or so the Soviets believed. At an even later date, August 11, Count Ciano had proposed a four nation conference for the settlement of the Danzig question; this conference was to include France, England, Germany and Italy. Russia, at that moment engaged in negotiations with the West which asked her guarantee of Polish borders, was not among those nations to be invited and Stalin feared that Russia was in danger of being excluded from a second Munich. This was probably a major factor in his decision to accede to Ribbentrop's urgent requests that the conclusion of a Nazi-Soviet Pact be speeded up. With Hitler the Soviets at least knew where they stood and what might be expected; the cynical Stalin was a man

always more comfortable with avowed enemies than professed friends.<sup>8</sup> Most important of all, by such a pact, the paranoiac Soviets were assured that Russia would not stand alone outside an alliance which included all the other major European powers.

That Stalin did know very well the consequences of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, or at least that war would inevitably and immediately follow, is unarguable. Hitler did not disguise his intention of attacking Poland. The secret supplementary protocol attached to the pact, which was only revealed to the rest of the world after the Allied capture of the German archives in 1945, provided in Article One for "politico-territorial changes in the Baltic States," and in Article Two for a similar change in "territories belonging to the Polish State."<sup>9</sup> Its seventh and final article read, "The Pact comes into force as soon as it is signed," rather than when ratified, as is usual with treaties.<sup>10</sup> Another departure from established custom was the omission of the usual clause stipulating that if one of the contracting partners should commit an act of aggression against a third party, then the pact would be automatically abrogated.<sup>11</sup> Having been brought by their disparate needs to a common course, Stalin and Hitler were able, as the totalitarian rulers of Russia and Germany, to move with a dispatch and a freedom to dispense with the usual trappings and niceties of diplomacy which would have been impossible in the democracies of Europe.

Thus did Russia deliberately and knowingly consent to the destruction of the Polish State in order to buy a peace for herself. When the German Wehrmacht marched into Poland before dawn on September 1, exactly nine days after the pact was signed, Russia was attacked by the West with

a moral indignation and an acrimony which almost obscured her view of Germany. "To the Soviet Union," said the Times of September 18, "belongs the base and despicable share of an accessory before and after the crime and the contempt which even a thief has for a receiver who shares none of his original risks."<sup>12</sup> But to all her many critics in Britain and France, the Soviets could and did retort that they had only followed the grim example set by the West at Munich. What had constituted an honorable peace then could hardly be a dishonorable one now. They could also claim that Russia and Germany were merely recovering territories of which they had been unfairly dispossessed after World War I.

The Russians were also able to cite historical precedent for the pact. Alexander I had signed the equally cynical Treaty of Tilsit in 1807 with Napoleon, promising to close Russian ports to England, and had thereby gained five years of peace.<sup>13</sup> In 1917, Lenin had negotiated with Germany the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and traded territory for the peace Russia required to consolidate the Bolshevik Revolution. Stalin hoped to employ as successfully as they the peredishka or breathing space gained by this policy.

Stalin believed that the Soviet Union did gain by the postponement of her involvement in war. After the pact was broken by the German Wehrmacht as it poured across the Russian borders in the dawn of June 22, 1941, Stalin addressed the Soviet people in a radio broadcast. In it he boasted that the Nazi-Soviet Pact had "secured peace for our country for one and a half years as well as an opportunity for preparing our forces for defense . . . ." <sup>14</sup> The pact had also given Russia a defense in depth; in 1941 she occupied bases far beyond the frontiers which had existed in

1939 to provide a cushion against the actual invasion of the U.S.S.R. By her annexation of Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Bessarabia and part of Rumania, Russia had use of their resources; particularly valuable were the Rumanian oilfields and Baltic ports. Most important of all, from a Soviet point of view, was the fact that when the pact ended, the West was already committed to an armed resistance to Nazi aggression. The existence of a Western front guaranteed that the Soviet Union need not bear the brunt of fighting alone or that at the least the West would not be against her. Moreover, it might be hoped that Germany, weakened by the effort expended in the Western campaign, could be more easily defeated by a rearmed Russia. Stalin counted, of course, on a more vigorous French resistance to prolong this hiatus of peace.

Whether the Soviets derived more benefit than harm from the Nazi-Soviet Pact may be endlessly debated but it is clear that the advantages in postponing the conflict did not lie exclusively with the Russians. While the Soviets had gained time to arm and build up defenses, so had the Nazis. Tremendous advances were made in Germany during this interim. While the Soviet Union in 1941 could call upon the assets of their newly annexed territories, Germany had been able to overthrow France in only one month and after June, 1940, could draw upon her resources and those of the Low Countries. Furthermore, after France had fallen there no longer existed a Western front, as in 1939-1940, to divert Hitler's attention from Russia.

It is believed by some analysts of the Cold War that the consent given by Stalin and the Politburo to the Nazi-Soviet Pact represents a deliberate effort to extend communism to Western Europe, including Ger-



many.<sup>15</sup> Presumably, Germany and the Western powers would mutually exhaust one another in a protracted struggle. Debilitated by a war of attrition, the government of France would fall an easy prey to a Communist coup d'etat; or without her support, Britain would soon meet a similar fate and could then be subverted. Finally, Germany, weakened by a costly victory and preoccupied with the exigencies of dealing with her defeated enemies and administering newly acquired territories, would be unable to put down a Communist revolution which would overthrow the Nazi regime. In short, according to this plan, the U.S.S.R. would emerge as the single victor and dominant power in Europe at the conclusion of a general conflict. Thus would the war become one of liberation by which people might be freed from "capitalist slavery and the yoke of imperialism."<sup>16</sup> Those who espoused the theory of "revolution through war" maintained that it was entirely consistent with traditional Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist thought.<sup>17</sup> But this piece of sophistry about the ideologically sophisticated nature of Soviet plans in August, 1939 does not stand up to close scrutiny. It is much more probable that the Nazi-Soviet Pact was primarily an improvisation by which Stalin sought to checkmate Hitler.

It is fruitless, of course, to speculate whether war might have been avoided by an Anglo-Soviet alliance in 1939 but failure to achieve this alliance did much to cause it. Some historians have blamed Chamberlain and Bonnet for their obtuseness, while others have accused Stalin and Molotov of machiavellian insincerity. However, the calamitous failure of the Anglo-Russian negotiations seems due less to personalities than to a kind of historic inevitability. Alliances by their very nature presume a community of interests which simply did not exist at the time among Britain,

France, Poland and the Soviet Union. Finally, the Soviets, deprived of an alliance by which the spread of aggression could have been prevented, must turn to the aggressor in their desperate search for security. In doing so, they enacted a piece of Russian folk wisdom which advised, "If you cannot cut the enemy's throat, you must clasp him in your arms."<sup>18</sup> This diplomatic embrace was the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Pierre Renouvin, World War II and Its Origins (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 124.
- <sup>2</sup>Leonard Mosley, On Borrowed Time (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 320-322.
- <sup>3</sup>Joachim C. Fest, Hitler (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), p. 585.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 575-585, *passim*.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 585.
- <sup>6</sup>Arnold and Veronica Toynbee, Survey of International Affairs: The Eve of War, 1939 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), p. 502.
- <sup>7</sup>The Times, August 23, 1939, p. 121, col. 4.
- <sup>8</sup>George F. Kennan, Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin (Boston: Little Brown, 1960), p. 334.
- <sup>9</sup>Floyd A. Cave, The Origins and Consequences of World War II (New York: Dryden Press, 1948), p. 443.
- <sup>10</sup>David J. Dallin, Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 1939-1942 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1942), p. 56.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 55.
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 72.
- <sup>13</sup>John W. Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1948), pp. 407-408.
- <sup>14</sup>William L. Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1959), p. 721.
- <sup>15</sup>Cave, pp. 449-454.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 454.
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup>Robert D. Warth, Soviet Russia in World Politics (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963), p. 257.

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