

The Road Towards the Hitler-Stalin Pact and its Consequences

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Preface

Contrary to other anniversaries this event is to commemorate a sad date, namely 23 August 1999 which is the sixtieth anniversary of the treaty that was concluded between National-Socialistic Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union and which occupies a prominent place in the discussion of the break-out of World War II. It is namely the issue we want to focus our particular attention namely on from the perspective of six decades. We are not going to involve ourselves into the discussion on how the signing of the treaty took place, i.e. we are not to discuss Germany's Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop's visit to Moscow, yet we will make efforts to reveal those "giant" political steps which preconditioned the rapprochement of the stances of the "deadly enemies" thereby examining the motives of both the governments or their leaders - Hitler and Stalin.

First of all, we should discuss those factors of foreign policy that predetermined foreign policies of both the states and finally allowed to reach this astonishing as well as highly shocking agreement. The discussion on a geopolitical outline which became much clearer due to the particularly important Munich deal (and what is particularly characteristic to the position of the Soviet Union) will be followed by short comments on the text of the treaty and secret protocols. Undoubtedly, the issue on how the agreement between the two dictators contributed to the break-out of World War II is of enormous significance for our discussion. This report will leave aside direct military and political consequences of the pact, i.e. the fates of the states that were restored in Eastern Europe after 1919. The discussion of the treaties of 1939 and what well coincides with my primary thoughts manifest that their consequences even today are not a mere fact in history, but still remain a current problem of the present.

Foreign Policies of Both the States until 1938-1939

Hitler's programme and the role of the Soviet Union

Foreign policy of the National-Socialist Germany is considered to be the best topic for the research in modern history. Unsurprisingly, there would not have been the war that claimed for 55 million of human lives without it, however, today this is still hard to explain and understand. If we look at the personality of Adolf Hitler and his pursuits in the field of foreign policy today, this would be only for the reason that this man in particular predetermined Germany's foreign policy to a large extent. The crucial decisions were made namely by him, the Führer. The thesis of "Hitler-centrist" named and criticised by some historians is evidently manifested in the field of foreign policy. Alternative concepts, for example, those of Foreign Minister Ribbentrop or General-Colonel Jodl, were not realised due to the mere reason that Hitler did not support them.

What was the essence of Hitler's concept? The viewpoint that was developed during the imprisonment in Landsberg in the twenties and later modified in the "Mein Kampf" could be defined as follows: the rapprochement with England should give the German Reich possibilities of achieving theoretical victories in Eastern Europe, first of all, on the account of the Soviet Union. "Grand colossus in the East has ripen for the downfall. The end of the Jewish power in Russia would also mean the end of the Russian state" that is how the main cold-bloodedly formulated expansionist gibberish sounded. The fact that Hitler's aspirations extended behind the moods of the time which were restricted to the revision of the Treaty of Versailles has been proven by his following note that the borders of 1914 meant nothing. The putschists who experienced humiliating defeat did not care about the territories of the empire of Wilhelm era, however, according to the popular saying of those days he strove for "the living space in the East" ("Lebensraum im Osten"): "we will stop permanent onslaught of Germanic representatives on European South and West and focus their attention on the territory in the East." The essence of these viewpoints are best explained by the texts written "to Bormann's dictation" from February to April 1945 when "Grand Germany" was pressed in between the Order and the Rein, and having found himself in Berlin, the capital of the Reich destroyed by bombing, Hitler declared the "destruction of Bolshevism, in the meantime ensuring the future for our nation in the boundless living space of the East" as the "mission of National-Socialism and his own life."

The two-faceted motive embedded in these statements and being constituted of anti-Communism and living space (Lebensraum) calls for a short explanation. In my point of view these anti-socialist components had to place more emphasis on Hitler's anti-Semitic contents. Racial madness which was perceived through the expressions of the "noble race of Arias" and "international Jewry" turned into the horrible reality in Germany's occupational policy in the East, which killed millions of Jews and Gypsies. The aforesaid is the key to understand Hitler's policies. Due to this reason I consider that Hitler's policy was enriched with racial emotions where the motive of anti-Communism plays only a very insignificant role. This phrase is once again made more apparent by the definition of Socialism provided by Hitler, where he calls the latter the invention of the Jews. The Jewry and Bolshevism were synonyms for him, however, the latter was only the political form of racial degeneration.

Within the context of these views the role that was assigned to the Soviet Union becomes evident. It was considered to be the target of Hitler's predatory policy and its territory should have served the place for the noble race of the Germans to establish itself since half-humans Slavs as less adorned race were deprived from any signs of culture by the Jewish-Bolshevik parasites. The mere speech requires no explanation that obtaining the living space (Lebensraum) was understood not as a simple territorial victory on the USSR account, but as the task for extermination of people carried out from the very beginning. That was a short comment on Hitler's programme outline which had been generated until 30 January 1933, i.e. before he "was let to power" (R. Löwenthal) which enabled him to engage into the realisation of his own ideas thoroughly.

Realisation of Hitler's ideas during the thirties

The foreign policy of Germany's Reich is known to develop in a different way than Hitler wanted. Apart from the policy of appeasement, England tried to escape the union with National-Socialist Germany. From 1933 to 1939, Hitler determinedly strove for a possibility of the open hand policy in the East to be granted from London, however, he failed for this did not correspond with the British policies. Of course, the British tried to escape a military conflict by making concessions which as they thought would soften the harshness of Hitler, yet, that policy of appeasement did not mean a total indifference to Central and Eastern Europe. Due to that fact even the minimalist plans of Hitler - either with England or not against England - turned out to be chimerical, and that country could not remain neutral in case of the break-out of a military conflict in Eastern Europe owing to fairly understandable interests of its own.

Depicted in general terms, these relations between Berlin and London should have made Hitler aware that that was the verge of his possibilities, even if he was not satisfied with the British concessions which in their own turn also reached their climax (Munich deal). This situation arose soon after the attack against Prague and annexation of certain areas of Czechoslovakia which almost fell apart after the Munich deal. By that time and before the aggression against Poland the British government had not finally lost hope to find a political and peaceful solution to the then circumstances in Europe. Later, however, London saw no other alternative but war.

Foreign policy of the Soviet Union prior to the Munich deal

The foreign policy of the only state which perceived itself as socialist was marked on the one hand by the experience which the Soviet government accumulated after the October Revolution and by the internal reshuffles of the twenties and thirties on the other hand if that could serve the definition of such political brutality. The civil war that sprang up just after the October Revolution could be attributed to the first experience whose consequences included not only the Polish-Russian War, but also the intervention of Western victors into political and ideological isolation of the Soviet Union. Due to its ideological confrontation this Eastern state became even a bigger pariah than revisionist the German Reich in the eyes of politicians round the globe. The foreign policy of the Soviet Union was marked with such a limitation that stirred up the feeling of threat to withstand the unified front of Western capitalist states and enabled it to use the situation to execute internal reforms in the country.

As we have already mentioned, on the other hand, external isolation was used for the internal consolidation of power. During the fight for power after the death of Lenin, which crowned Stalin with victory, the objective was raised to enforce socialism all over the country. That meant not only the refusal of the idea of a global revolution, but also became the first, yet not last effort of Stalin to develop specific Soviet-nationalism. First stated in the twenties, the assertion that the war of the capitalists against the Soviet Union could be expected at any time allowed to form the Soviet society marked with Stalinism. That period of formation was stamped with brutality, forced collectivisation which claimed for millions of lives during the first

term of five years that was to speed up the development of heavy industry irrespective to anything and make the underdeveloped Russia on equal footing with the Western states. Characterised with humiliating processes, the murderous cleansing of the party machinery were still carried out in the Soviet Union in the thirties.

These external and internal components required to ensure further existence of the only Socialist state and simultaneously meant that more offensive rather than defensive forms were to be expected in the efforts to consolidate it. Indeed, the foreign policy of the Soviet Union between 1938-1939 could be interpreted namely within that framework. The confrontation among the capitalist states which was due to the German reaction to the Treaty of Versailles gave the first underpinning for the Soviet Union in blocking the way for the formation of a united front. Good relations of the Weimar Republic with Moscow were also based on anti-Polish moods, i.e. the existence of Poland was a mote in the eye for both the states. Despite the secret military co-operation and disregarding radical statements, there were no detailed plans for collaboration and co-operation between Germany and Russia. At the end of the twenties, the Soviet Union refused its orientation towards Germany and turned its policy of collective security towards the old pursuits. The disappearance of clear dividing lines between the Versailles fronts during the period in question was undoubtedly the reason for the increase in the field of action (Stresemann's policy and Locarno Treaty could serve as an example). Collective security first of all meant that the Soviet Union concluded the non-aggression treaty with its Western neighbours and France, so-called patron of small Entente. In May 1935, Moscow concluded the mutual assistance pact with Paris, however, it had no real contents due to the restraint of both the sides. Such policy did not mean full retreat from Germany, and for the meantime the Soviet Union made efforts to defend itself from all the sides. At first nothing changed by 30 January 1933 when Hitler came to power. In Moscow's view the German card finally lost its value only after January 1934 when Hitler signed the non-aggression treaty with Poland and when the military German-Soviet co-operation was disrupted the same year.

However the Soviet Union showed its interest not only in the situation at its European borders. A severer situation was brought about in Eastern Asia. By occupying Manchuria in 1931, Japan gave rise to forced annexation. Since 1937 the empire had been involved in fighting with China, whereas a year before the European dictator Adolf Hitler and the aggressor of the Pacific Ocean had concluded anti-Comintern pact whose contents covered only general statements (yet Italy became a party to the pact only the following year). This pact was solely targeted at the Soviet Union and just with the break-out of World War II the Japanese government gave the preference to Southern direction, although its prior focus had been on Siberia. The threat to the Asian areas of the Soviet Union manifested by frequent armed conflicts between the Russian and Japanese units at the end of the thirties. Considering our topic it is important to note that so-called Nomohan conflict broke out in summer of 1939. Military confrontation was hidden behind that innocent description and involved tens of thousand troops, heavy artillery and tanks. However, the Red Army did not get out as the winner of these battles, thereby causing more suspicion of Stalin. Although the Soviet Union was not to face similar dangers from the side of

Europe, the situation became aggravated due to the Sudeten crisis and particularly by the ways of its solution.

From Munich to the British guarantees to Poland

The Munich deal occupies a significant role within the context of the events which were in the pipeline. Although the Soviet Union itself proposed to call for the conference of power states during the Sudeten crisis, it was not invited to the meeting of democratic states with dictators Hitler and Mussolini. This fact of closing the eyes in the sight of the threat of confrontation from the side of the West was appraised by Moscow as the event causing anxiety. Although until today we have no sources to prove such a consideration, similar presumptions of Stalin seem to be quite logical. The policy of collective security which was developed by Litvinov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, was subjected to a death blow. Based on the co-operation with the West in an effort to stop Hitler, the policy was lost its foundation; moreover, the refusal to invite the Soviet Union to Munich meant isolation of this Communist state. Under such circumstances the possibilities of confronting Hitler's Germany were just a wishful thinking. It should be questioned whether Western states which let the German dictator have Prague were going to make a sacrifice in favour of the state which promoted global revolution, made declarations on ideological antagonism and discredited itself with its bloody cleansing abroad. According to my hypothesis, the Soviet Union found itself in a very difficult external situation just after the end of the civil war. The most important problem, i.e. its insecurity, seemed to have become the reality. Stalin had no any possibilities of changing the course of events: he could neither exert pressure on the West nor get closer to Hitler. He could not propose anything either. This undefined situation was retained until 31 March 1939 when British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced British unilateral guarantees to Poland. At the same time, London did not only refuse to engage Stalin into the game, but also gave him a chance to choose one of the possible ways which consequently turned into the reality on 23 August 1939.

To have a better understanding on how the British guarantees influenced the occurrence of the Hitler-Stalin Pact we have to return to the Reich. After Munich Conference Hitler concealed his plans. Prague operation, i.e. the occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia, was followed by the start of intensive contacts with Warsaw. The aspirations of the German side proved that Moscow's fears had background: Poland received the proposal to take a joint action against the Soviet Union. As soon as this country refused to become a junior partner in the aggression plotted by Hitler, the latter made instrumental the issues of the corridor and Danzig thereby aspiring to find a pretext for a conflict. At the beginning of April 1939, Führer signed the instruction for Wehrmacht under the code name *Fall Weiss*, in preparation for the attack against Poland. The preparations should have come to an end by 1 September. Since Poland refused the partnership, in Hitler's point of view, there was no way left but wipe out that country. According to the words of the dictator expressed in the meeting of heads in May 1939, Danzig was not "the object which we would care for, since our objective is the living space (Lebensraum) in the East". Yet a common border with the real victim, i.e. the Soviet Union, was needed at first, and the existence of Poland was the obstacle.

In this way the war with Poland in autumn 1939 was quasi-programmed, however, the calculations of Hitler contained different uncertainties which were not dependant upon him and were firstly related to Great Britain. Referring to the latest research we are now aware that the policy of appease came to an end not with the occupation with Czechoslovakia on 15 March 1939. The famous speech by Chamberlain in Birmingham where he promised determined reaction to other acts of aggression by Germany was directed at the internal opposition rather than the German Government. However, the nerves of London broke down on 15 March 1939 in the presence of the situation that was hardly forecast both inside the country and in foreign policy.

As soon as rumours about Romania as the next victim of Hitler's aggression started to spread in Whitehall, the Foreign Office also planned to issue guarantees to this country of Eastern Europe. Although soon after these signs appeared to be ungrounded, it was the first time when the British Government rested its interest on Eastern Europe. When news on the threat to Poland followed in due course, Chamberlain pronounced the well-acclaimed sovereignty guarantee to Poland (it should be also noted that London did not guarantee Poland its territorial integrity, which meant that the policy of appeasement had not been finally renounced by that time). This unilateral statement included elements of a catastrophe: how the existence of independent Poland could be guaranteed when at least none of the powerful neighbours had a common border with the country. In short, without the support of Moscow, the step of Chamberlain was a risky manoeuvre which obliged the country without possessing what could threaten Hitler. Due to the isolation of the Soviet Union that has just been briefed about and that occurred after the Munich deal, Stalin would not have been inclined to do anything but share the British guarantees to Warsaw if such a request had reached Moscow. In that way the Soviet Union would have received other freedom of action, i.e. it would have become "the judge to predetermine the fate of Europe". One of the scenes on the decision making on the eve of 31 March 1939 manifests that Stalin considered such a possibility and made active efforts that London gave unilateral guarantees: in the afternoon British Foreign Officer Lord Halifax received Soviet envoy Ivan Maisky and informed him about the intentions of Chamberlain. The Officer also asked about the stance of the Soviet Union regarding the issue of guarantees and whether the Prime Minister could announce about Moscow's support to such a British policy in the afternoon session of the parliament. Although diplomatic strata and the English press expected such a step to be made, Maisky announced that he had to receive instructions from Moscow. However, since peaceful policy of the Soviet Union caused no doubts to anybody, the Prime Minister could announce about the Russian support. And so Chamberlain did. The following day TASS denied this statement and noted that the Soviet politicians had no obligations.

In his first comments on these circumstances, my teacher Prof. Karl Heinz Ruffmann concluded that:

- Stalin understood fairly well the possibilities that were provided to him by unilateral guarantees of the British;

- the behaviour of Maisky shows that Moscow cared a lot about the British commitment to Poland without undertaking any commitments itself;
- in this way Stalin acquired a strong argument which allowed him to become Hitler's partner in negotiations;
- apart from such behaviour the possibility of joining Western states still remained;
- there was basically no difference for the Soviet security which partner should become the partner in union;

In other words, the Soviet policy had two alternatives. Further development of events related to the future alliances of the USSR depended on others, particularly on Hitler.

Pact

It is not difficult to define that Hitler was the partner of Stalin's dreams. Without furthering analysis of diplomatic actions, it could be stated that Stalin made efforts to start more extensive negotiations with the Reich since autumn of 1938 (i.e. since Munich) in terms of economic issues. His famous speech on 10 March 1939 ended with these words: "We have to continue acting carefully and do not leave war for provocateurs who like to pull chestnuts out of fire bear-handed and involve our country into the conflict..." Apart from the fact that this speech was called chestnut speech for this sentence, it was later described by Stalin and Molotov as a proposal to Germany to negotiate, and we have to understand that Stalin still had not become Hitler's partner by 10 March. With the British guarantees and more freedom of action that the former predetermined, the Soviet Union noted indirect signs which reflected Moscow's intentions. The main of them was the dismissal of Foreign Minister Litvinov who fought for collective security and who was called by the Nazi propaganda as the "Jewish Finkelstein" as well as the appointment of Molotov to this post, whose proposal on economic negotiations soon after he occupied the post should have created political base for both the states. This paved a new way out of the situation.

At the same time, Moscow tried to enhance its position without tearing apart the relations with the West. Meantime in London Chamberlain was forced to start negotiations with Stalin due to the active demands of the opposition to grant guarantees to Poland and the Soviet Union. The discussions revealed new thinking of the Russians where they requested the right for intervention to Eastern European states and concluding an efficient military convention. This once again shows how the situation of the Soviet Union regarding the guarantees by the British had changed. Moreover, if it had not been for such a low ranking delegation sent to Moscow by Western states (for what the latter were often reproached), I do not believe that the treaty with Stalin would have been signed. The negotiations with England and France was only a cover for the Soviet Union: it waited for Hitler and he did not let to wait for too long.

The British guarantees was a painful blow to the German dictator. It should also have been considered that the intervention to Poland on his march to the East could have involve him into the war with Western states. Simultaneously, the minimum plan - at least against England - also

remained poised in mid-air. However, as Hitler was in a white rage merely for the fact that the Sudeten crisis was managed peacefully, the refusal of Poland was not an alternative for him. A couple of days before 1 September 1939 he was tortured by anxiety that any “swine would invite him to negotiations” which could intervene with his efforts to eliminate Poland. Although the German Government longed for the war, the possibility for choice remained. Considering that the behaviour of Western states in case of the aggression against Poland was clear, Hitler applied to Moscow regarding potential assistance of the Soviet and Western states to Poland in case of the aggression against Germany. On that late summer day Jakob Burckhardt, the Commissioner of the League of Nations in Danzig, retold the statement by Hitler which well reflected the intentions of the latter: “All I undertake is directed against Russia, but if the West is too silly and not sharp-sighted to understand, I would be forced to enter into agreement with the Russians, defeat the West and after their surrender accumulate all the forces and turn against the Soviet Union again.” According to his own words, Hitler concluded the pact with “the Satan as he wished to drive the Devil out.”

Indeed, he was in the situation which did not allow him to act otherwise. With his non-compromise stance regarding Poland in 1939 he pushed himself into the corner. Moreover, having engaged himself into chronological routine and being disappointed with the information that often reached him that England and France would treat his aggression as *casus belli*, he had nothing to do but make the decisions which were not pleasant for himself: eliminate the Soviet Union from the possible confrontation. He should have done that at least for strategic reasons. That would have been the most optimum choice in Hitler’s point of view if this had helped to keep the Western states from interference.

It is often debated whether Hitler intended to settle accounts with Poland by the pact with Stalin or he made a mistake in thinking that it was only the supposed problem that Western states would not react or react only in a diplomatic way with respect to the Soviet rear provided to Germany. Hitler wanted Stalin’s help only for military purposes; he started World War II not for the erroneous calculations but for the fact that he both aspired for and wanted the conflict with Western democracies if they stood on the way of his march to the East. Hitler calculated that the most probable consequence of the operation *Fall Weiss* was the risk to end at waging war against England and France.

The German side was relatively late to draw attention to what the Soviets pointed with their finger (which only proves that it was very difficult for Hitler to make that step). However, some time later the German diplomacy accelerated everything what was known to have interrelated with the aggression against Poland. This circumstance was also noted by Hitler in his personal telegram to Stalin, where he requested that his Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop was received on 23 August at the latest instead of the proposed 26 or 27 August. The request was based on the following: “for the tension between Poland and Germany [...] became unbearable” and “now all necessary measures should be taken for the interests of the Reich”. Even if Stalin had had any doubts regarding the intentions of Hitler, all those statements fully revealed the plans of Germany: just hours remained for the peace in Europe. The non-aggression pact between

Germany and the Soviet Union only allowed for Stalin to switch on the green light, and Europe entered the darkness for the second time in this century.

The part of the Hitler-Stalin Pact which has been made public contains seven items. Both the states agreed to take no hostile actions against each other and refuse to enter any pact directed against any of the states, and solve conflicts, if any, by the way of negotiations. The main item was the death sentence to Poland which sounded as follows: “in case one of the parties to the agreement become a military target of the third state the other party to the agreement shall grant no assistance to the third party”. It is not difficult to notice the qualitative difference of this formulation in comparison to other pact on neutrality concluded in the twenties and thirties: the Soviet Union guaranteed its neutrality not only in case of the aggression against Germany, but also in case of that by the latter. Contrary to the law of nations which was in force during those days, the agreement entered into force soon after signing it rather than after ratifying it, which once again showed that Hitler was in a hurry.

One of the wordings of the secret protocol whose cynic language would be hardly comprehensible for a modern reader was “on the change of territorial-political order”, with the same respect as regarding Poland whose “fate will be predetermined during the forthcoming political events” that meant a brutal conquer of all the neighbouring states. This protocol served as the agreement on the restriction of zones of influence. The Baltic states and Finland were attributed to the Soviet zone of influence. Poland should have been divided in between by defining a border according to the Rivers of Narva, Vistula and San. No rules of division had been foreseen for Southern Europe leaving aside Moscow’s interest in Bessarabia and Germany’s declared refusal of interests in this part of Europe.

The motives of Stalin are easily perceivable. It was clear for him that the aggression of Germany would wage war against the West. Therefore he succeeded in making this astonishing step. Hitler’s gigantic military rearrangement of the map of Europe started the other way round: the German troops started fighting with England rather than the Soviet Union. The fact that Stalin managed to set on to fight several capitalist states in purely Leninist manner played a secondary role as an ideological component. There was other aspect that mattered a lot and that became the basis of non-aggression pact: the Soviet Union not only set aside from involving itself into a military conflict, but its neutrality also allowed to break through its own isolation it had been exposed to after Munich and receive assurances; in addition, the pact itself enabled Stalin to reap a rich territorial harvest in the shade of *quasi* Hitler and confrontation which the latter started in the West. Moreover, such a policy decreased tension on Eastern border and to a large extent disappointed Japan. The Soviet foreign policy was significantly changed with the pact of August 1939. Repeating the thoughts of Ruffmann once again: the swing policy with aggressive expansionist elements was carried out instead of the policy for maintenance of a defence balance. The Soviet efforts for security now became very intense: the new formula meant security through expansionism.

Consequences

Adolf Hitler started World War II and Josef Stalin was his coupon. That was the fast evolving consequence of the pact. However, this idea should be expanded in terms of one aspect. Stalin's co-operation did not excuse the German dictator from fault. He and his armed aggression-directed policy allowed for Stalin to become a judge in a concrete historical situation. Due to this fact the stance of Stalin does not redeem the fault of the German Government; his policy only eliminated a possible obstacle for the breakout of World War II, and the freedom of action created by the British guarantees contributed to that immensely.

Be that as it may, the pact meant a catastrophe for East European neighbours of Germany and the Soviet Union. Stalin considered the zone of interest provided in the secret protocol. On 17 September, the Red Army marched into East Poland. Before starting the attack, Stalin was slow in acting despite the pressure from the Germans: he waited until the declaration of war from Western side and for the military defeat of the Polish. In winter of 1939-1940 the Soviets engaged themselves into a military conflict in Finland which due to its course (the USSR achieved only insignificant territorial victories) allowed this country to retain its sovereignty. Meantime, the Baltic states had no chances: under the Soviet pressure they had to agree on the deployment of military bases from the very beginning so that later they could join the SSSR upon "their own wish". Romania was forced to give Bessarabia and North Bukovina. Moscow's neutrality paid back in the true sense of the word.

Without any moral hustle for the policy analysts' evaluation this Soviet expansion could have been called "luck". However, we should not mislead ourselves; finally the pact bore to Stalin only sour fruit since August 1939 was also related to another date in history, namely 22 June 1941 where the act of aggression by Hitler Germany was directed at the Soviet Union. After the aggression, Stalin himself made explanations on the 1939 pact that it was the only chance to stop the German aggression and reserve some time for the Soviet Union to prepare for the unavoidable clash. However, facts witness the opposite on so-called respite that Stalin strove for. Despite the fact that Hitler was not ready to attack the Soviet Union in summer of 1939 from a military point of view, the Red Army faced the enemy in 1941 which had all the resources of Europe that it acquired after so-called victories in the West. Meantime, the Soviet Union had no allies after the defeat of France and extraction of Great Britain from the continent, i.e. it had to resist the attacks of the Germans alone as it had done before. Of course, Stalin thought that in case of Hitler's aggression, he would automatically find himself in the alliance with the West, however, the assistance from London and later from Washington became very noticeable only after the German defeat in Stalingrad. Therefore, the way out was even worse than that in 1939. The "respite" made the Russians involve into the brutal struggle and the war for their existence in the full sense of the word.

In this way, Stalin's calculations turned to be erroneous in a variety of aspects. A rapid annexation of the West did not allow for instigation of a long-term conflict among the capitalist states, what Moscow strove for. Although England did not fully refuse further struggle, it was evident that the British could not return to the continent quickly. In 1940 Stalin informed Sir

Stafford Cripps, special envoy of Britain, that he never thought of the possibilities for Germany to win the war due to the British superiority at sea and economic potentials and foreseen USA enrolment into the war. This corresponded the reality although at the same time it allowed for better understanding of Stalin's self-deceit: he attributed his rationality to Hitler.

We should not forget that the latter also understood the pact as a provisional necessity predetermined by circumstances. The last proof of this standpoint was his preparedness to give all Europe, including Istanbul, to the Russian sphere of influence in exchange for the Soviet neutrality. Ribbentrop was delegated as the authority for that purpose. Since the Soviet side did not mention that, it was due to the fact that neither Stalin nor Molotov imagined what they could get from Hitler, as the territories were not mentioned in these treaties. Nothing reveals Hitler's *reservatio mentalis* better than the circumstances that have been discussed in this paper. Such concessions are made only when the treaty is considered provisional.

Stalin helped Hitler to realise the future plans embedded in the "Mein Kampf". "If Barbarossa (code-name of the aggression against the USSR) arises, the world will hold its breath" announced Hitler at the beginning of summer 1941. His real war started on 22 June 1941, and it meant the most fearful war of plunder, enslaving and devastation that the modern history had known.

World War II gave the Soviet Union the starring role twice. First of all, when it allowed the German dictator to start the war by concluding the pact and, secondly, when it became the real target of Hitler's aggression which stamped the whole military course of this war, particularly when Hitler determined himself to start the operation Barbarossa and when the *blitzkrieg* idea was ruined. As we will note, this serious academic discussion will never interpret the aggression against the Soviet Union of 22 June 1941 as the reaction to planned aggression by the Red Army. As a long-term product of Goebbels propaganda, this statement had no real basis. It was meaningless in view of military strategy, even though Hitler talked to his generals about the Soviet threat. The argument that that was the way to eliminate the British ally on the land and make Britain more peaceful was not without logic. Barbarossa allowed for this island to have some rest.

Nevertheless, discussion on the Hitler-Stalin Pact should define its relative significance in one point of view. Its significance for the beginning of World War II should not lead to a wrong conclusion that this war would not have broken out unless there had been for the pact. The dictators' deal opened the way for the first phase of the clash which limited itself to the continent of Europe. According to Hitler, it should have become world war only after his victory in the West. We are aware that the German Government, particularly the dictator himself, waited for the earlier or later entry of the USA into the war. In this way the European phase of the war in Hitler's view was marked with a geopolitical signal which predetermined all the terms of military actions. The real goal was the devastation of the Soviet Union, which should have been started as soon as possible. Under such circumstances it is clear why Wehrmacht confronted of the Red Army in 1941 without any efforts to defeat England. In December 1941 and with the

German declaration of war against the USA, this political decision finalised the grounds for a global conflict and predetermined the total defeat of the German Reich. The pact of August 1939 played no role with this respect.

It was significant for England (and later for the USA) after it became the ally of the Soviet Union. Already in December 1941, when the German troops were so close to Moscow, Stalin conversation with English Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden made it clear that he would not say “no” to the areas that he occupied on the basis of the pact. This problem was raised despite the fact that the British favoured the sovereignty of Poland and had made influence on the conferences of the allies until Potsdam and further influenced post-war order and the start of the Cold War. The famous Polish shift to the West and dependency of the Baltic states on the Soviet Union what was required by Stalin were the outcome of the deal with Hitler. Having become the point of departure in drawing the map of Europe until 1989-1991, the Hitler-Stalin Pact remains influential today.

Perspective

The pact was once again noted for its historical importance fifty years after signing it. It was covered with dead silence in the Soviet Union and freedom aspirations of the Baltic states were unavoidably related with political-historic appraisal of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. The pact became the symbol of the Baltic states annexation by the Soviet Union.

When commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of 23 August 1939, the explosive power of historical events manifested in an incredible event when a chain of people stretching over 600 kilometres joined Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and proved its topicality. Half a century after Stalin raised a glass to honour Hitler, the past finally caught up with the reality.