

## The Nazi-Soviet Pact: The Better of Two Deals

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On 11 August 1939 an Anglo-French delegation arrived in Moscow to discuss a possible tripartite agreement. It was hoped an agreement with the Soviet's would deter Nazi Germany from invading Poland. Twelve days later, however, on 23 August, a Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact was signed between Joachim von Ribbentrop, Germany's Foreign Minister, and Jozef Stalin's regime. The Soviet Union had guaranteed Germany she would not get involved if Poland was invaded. The parties then dispersed and returned home to prepare for war.

A tempting question to ask is, quite simply, *why?* Why did the Soviet Union agree to Ribbentrop's offer of noninvolvement when her support could conceivably have stopped Hitler in the early stages of World War II—if not prevented him from invading Poland? A clue to the answer is evident in a question Marshal Voroshilov, the Soviet Commissar of Defense, asked the Anglo-French delegation on 14 August 1939: "Do the French and British General Staffs think that the Soviet land forces will be admitted to Polish territory in order to make direct contact with the enemy in case Poland is attacked?"<sup>1</sup> The delegation had no adequate reply. Poland, when consulted, informed the beseeching French that Soviet troops were absolutely not allowed on Polish territory. They resisted French pressure, according to P. H. M. Bell by "explaining simply that if the Red Army entered Polish territory it would stay there."<sup>2</sup> Despite their fears, the British and French respected Poland's autonomous decision, and assured them they would fight Germany without Soviet assistance. Meanwhile, the delegation had nothing to offer the Soviets that would make their participation worthwhile—

not even the assurance of Polish complicity.<sup>3</sup>

Legitimately, the Soviets were reluctant to accept a deal requiring them to enter Polish territory if Germany invaded. The Red Army would have to face Polish hostility while trying to defend them from the Germans. D.C. Watt asks a crucial question: "How could the Soviet Union, lacking a common frontier with Germany, make any serious plans for action without knowing whether they were allowed to operate in Poland[.]"<sup>4</sup> Another deterrent was simple geography. Britain and France were able to sustain a war from behind defenses, using blockade and air warfare. The Soviets, however, would not be in a position to utilize a navy, nor had Soviet airmen any experience with carrying war to the enemy's industrial strongholds. The Red Army would need to enter Polish territory—where they were not welcome—and engage in the bulk of the fighting with no reimbursement for their efforts.<sup>5</sup> One can hardly blame Marshal Voroshilov and Stalin for their half-hearted, dawdling interest in the delegation's offer.

The arrival of Joachim von Ribbentrop, however, re-ignited Soviet interest in the affairs of Western Europe. Bell points out that "[i]nstead of risk a war, [Germany] could offer certain neutrality. In terms of territory and spheres of influence, they came bearing gifts, ready to carve up Poland and to yield at once when Stalin asked for the whole of Latvia."<sup>6</sup> The Anglo-French delegation was severely restricted in what they could offer the Soviets, as they respected Poland's autonomy in her decision not to admit Soviet troops if Germany attacked. Ribbentrop, however, had no qualms about dismissing Poland's apprehension. Hitler was intent on destroying her, and the Soviet's were welcome to help. In fact, as far as

Germany was concerned, the Soviets could share in the spoils when Poland was conquered.<sup>7</sup> James L. Stokesbury also suggests that "[Stalin] could make a deal with Hitler, they could divide Poland between them, Hitler would (probably) turn west, and Germany, France, and Britain would fight it out, after which Stalin would move in and pick up the pieces."<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to blame Stalin for accepting Ribbentrop's offer. He offered what the Anglo-French delegation could not: Poland and non-involvement. The answer to the question, "Why

did the Soviets accept Ribbentrop's offer of Poland and noninvolvement?" is simply: "It was better." The Anglo-French delegation could not even guarantee Poland's cooperation with the Red Army. If Stalin had any hopes of remaining in Poland after assisting her, they were not sufficient enough to form an alliance with France and Britain. The drawbacks far outweighed any beneficial outcome for the Soviets.

Consequently, Ribbentrop's offer appeared the better of the two, and the Soviet's seized the fact while Ribbentrop seized the day.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anthony P. Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War* (London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1992), 218.

<sup>2</sup> P. M. H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe*, 2nd ed. *Origins of Modern Wars* (London: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997), 292.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-1939* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 463.

<sup>4</sup> Watt, 456.

<sup>5</sup> Watt, 451-2.

<sup>6</sup> Bell, 296.

<sup>7</sup> Watt, 457.

<sup>8</sup> James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War II* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980), 65.

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