HITLER-STALIN PACT
(GERMAN-SOVIET NON-AGGRESSION TREATY)

TREATY AT A GLANCE

Completed
August 23, 1939, at Moscow

Signatories
Germany and the Soviet Union

Overview
Culminating a period in which the Soviet Union concluded a series of nonaggression treaties with its neighbors, the German-Soviet nonaggression pact, apparently reconciling the two great ideological poles of world politics, sent shock waves across the globe, setting the stage for Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II.

Historical Background

As Adolf Hitler came to dominate more and more of Europe in the late 1930s, Stalin lost all desire to oppose this ideological antithesis of communism, especially after the Great Powers' appeasement of Hitler at Munich. When Britain guaranteed Polish security, which meant that Hitler—facing the possibility of war from the West if he invaded Poland—now had a reason for treating with the USSR in the east, Stalin replaced his Jewish and pro-Western foreign minister Litvinov with Vyacheslav Molotov. Stalin approached Hitler, proposing and concluding a Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact, guaranteeing that neither nation would act against the other.

The pact stunned Stalin's apologists in the West, mostly intellectuals and others who forgave Stalin his excesses—the deadly consequences of forced collectivization of Soviet farmlands, the purges of 1936–38—because he was leader of the only ideology actively and aggressively opposed to fascism. Now, it seemed, Stalin had shirked his historical duty and indeed had climbed into bed with the enemy. In many ways, however, Stalin was merely following a Soviet foreign policy traditional since the day Lenin formed the Soviet Union in 1922: preach revolution, led by the USSR, and communist unity for the world at large, but work diplomatically to further Russian expansion.

But it was not merely Western communists and fellow travelers but virtually the whole world that reeled in shock that the vehemently anticomunist Germany had come to terms with the resolutely antifascist USSR. It was as if the scales had fallen away from eyes beclouded since 1933 with the rise of Hitler and the birth of the notion of appeasement. The truth was, of course, that ideology was yielding to pragmatic maneuver on the eve of World War II: Hitler saw nonaggression with the Soviet Union as a necessary preliminary to attacking Poland. Stalin, having been rebuffed in his attempt to achieve a working relationship with Britain and France, had no desire to be isolated in the war he knew would come. Made the arbiter of Europe by the British guarantee of Poland, he therefore chose to wing a deal with the Nazis.

Terms

Unlike the nonaggression treaties the Soviet Union had signed with other powers, this one went beyond the mere declaration of nonaggression. It was associated with a trade agreement concluded a few days earlier, on August 19 (see TRADE AGREEMENTS BETWEEN THE SOVIET UNION AND GERMANY), which effectively exchanged German industrial products for Soviet raw materials. As part of the August 23 treaty, a secret protocol provided for a German-Soviet partition of Poland and cleared the way for the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states.
The Government of the German Reich
and
The Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist
Republics
Desirous of strengthening the cause of peace
between Germany and the U.S.S.R., and proceeding
from the fundamental provisions of the Neutrality
Agreement concluded in April 1926 between Germany
and the U.S.S.R., have reached the following Agree-
ment:

Article I
Both High Contracting Parties obligate themselves to
desist from any act of violence, any aggressive action,
and any attack on each other, either individually or
jointly with other Powers.

Article II
Should one of the High Contracting Parties become
the object of belligerent action by a third Power, the
other High Contracting Party shall in no manner lend
its support to this third Power.

Article III
The Governments of the two High Contracting Parties
shall in the future maintain continual contact with one
another for the purpose of consultation in order to
exchange information on problems affecting their
common interests.

Article IV
Neither of the two High Contracting Parties shall par-
take in any grouping of Powers whatsoever that is
directly or indirectly aimed at the other party.

Article V
Should disputes or conflicts arise between the High
Contracting Parties over problems of one kind or
another, both parties shall settle these disputes or con-
licts exclusively through friendly exchange of opinion
or, if necessary, through the establishment of arbitra-
tion commissions.

Article VI
The present Treaty is concluded for a period of ten
years, with the proviso that, in so far as one of the
High Contracting Parties does not denounce it one
year prior to the expiration of this period, the validity
of this Treaty shall automatically be extended for
another five years.

Article VII
The present Treaty shall be ratified within the shortest
possible time. The ratifications shall be exchanged in
Berlin. The Agreement shall enter into force as soon as
it is signed.

Secret Additional Protocol
On the occasion of the signature of the Nonaggression
Pact between the German Reich and the Union of
Socialist Soviet Republics the undersigned plenipoten-
tiaries of each of the two parties discussed in strictly
confidential conversations the question of the bound-
ary of their respective spheres of influence in Eastern
Europe. These conversations led to the following con-
clusions:

Article 1
In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement
in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland,
Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of
Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres
of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. In this con-
nection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is
recognized by each party.

Article 2
In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement
of the areas belonging to the Polish State the spheres
of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. shall be
bounded approximately by the line of the rivers
Narew, Vistula, and San.

The question of whether the interests of both par-
ties make desirable the maintenance of an indepen-
dent Polish State and how such a State should be
bounded can only be definitely determined in the
course of further political developments.

In any event both Governments will resolve this
question by means of a friendly agreement.

Article 3
With regard to south-eastern Europe attention is
called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia.
The German side declares its complete political disin-
terestedness in these areas.

Article 4
This Protocol shall be treated by both parties as strictly
secret.

Moscow, August 23, 1939

For the Government of the German Reich:
V. RIBBENTROP
Plenipotentiary of the Government of the U.S.S.R.
V. MOLOTOV

Consequences
The nonaggression pact gave Hitler license to invade
Poland, actively abetted by Soviet forces invading from
the east, on September 1, 1939. Stalin also decided to
increase Soviet influence in the west by invading Fin-
land, which had been "lost" to mother Russia during
World War I, on November 30, 1939. This ignited a
short but costly war that resulted in securing Finland's
surrender on March 12, 1940.

For the Soviet Union, the nonaggression treaty
proved to be a pact made with the devil. On June 22,
1941, Hitler's armies invaded Soviet territory, abrogat-
ing the treaty and bringing to Stalin's people the worst
devastation they had ever known.