

PANTHEON  BOOKS

WORLD WAR II  
BEHIND  
CLOSED DOORS

STALIN, THE NAZIS AND THE WEST

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LAURENCE REES



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## INTRODUCTION

When do you think the Second World War ended? In August 1945 after the surrender of the Japanese?

Well, it depends how you look at it. If you believe that the end of the war was supposed to have brought ‘freedom’ to the countries that had suffered under Nazi occupation, then for millions of people the war did not really end until the fall of Communism less than twenty years ago. In the summer of 1945 the people of Poland, of the Baltic states and a number of other countries in eastern Europe simply swapped the rule of one tyrant for that of another. It was in order to demonstrate this unpleasant reality that the presidents of both Estonia and Lithuania refused to visit Moscow in 2005 to participate in ‘celebrations’ marking the sixtieth anniversary of the ‘end of the war’ in Europe.

How did this injustice happen? That is one of the crucial questions this book attempts to answer. And it is a history that it has only been possible to tell since the fall of Communism. Not just because the hundred or so eye witnesses I met in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe would never have been able to speak frankly under Communist rule, but also because key archival material that successive Soviet governments did all they could to hide has been made available only recently. The existence of these documents has allowed a true ‘behind-the-scenes’ history of the West’s dealings with Stalin to be attempted. All of which means, I hope, that this book contains much that is new.

I have been lucky that the collapse of the Eastern Bloc has permitted this work. It was certainly something I could never have predicted would happen when I was taught the history of the Second World War at school back in the early 1970s. Then my history teacher got round the moral and political complexities of the Soviet Union’s<sup>1</sup> participation in the war by the simple expedient of largely ignoring it. At the time, in the depths of the Cold War, that was how most people dealt with the awkward legacy of the West’s relationship with Stalin. The focus was on the heroism of the Western Allies – on Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and D-Day. None of which, of course, must be forgotten. But it is not the whole story.

Before the fall of Communism the role of the Soviet Union in the Second World War was, to a large extent, denied a proper place in our culture because it was easier than facing up to a variety of unpalatable truths. Did we, for example, really contribute to the terrible fate that in 1945 befell Poland, the very country we went to war to protect? Especially when we were taught that this was a war about confronting tyranny? And if, as we should, we do start asking ourselves these difficult questions, then we also have to pose some of the most uncomfortable of all. Was anyone in the West to blame in any way for what happened at the end of the war? What about the great heroes of British and American history, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt?

Paradoxically, the best way to attempt an answer to all this is by focusing on someone else entirely – Joseph Stalin. Whilst this is a book that is fundamentally about relationships, it is Stalin who dominates the work. And a real insight into the Soviet leader’s attitude to the war is gained by examining his behaviour immediately before his alliance with the West. This period, of the Nazi-Soviet pact between 1939 and 1941, has been largely ignored in the popular consciousness. It was certainly ignored in the post-war Soviet Union. I remember asking one Russian after the fall of the Berlin Wall: ‘How was the Nazi-Soviet pact taught when you were in school during the Soviet era? Wasn’t it a tricky piece of history to explain away?’ He smiled in response. ‘Oh, no’, he said, ‘not tricky at all. You see, I didn’t learn there had ever been a Nazi-Soviet pact until after 1990 and the collapse of the Soviet Union’.

Stalin’s relationship with the Nazis is a vital insight into the kind of person he was; because, at least in the early

days of the relationship, he got on perfectly well with them. The Soviet Communists and the German Nazis had a lot in common – not ideologically, of course, but in practical terms. Each of them respected the importance of raw power. And each of them despised the values that a man like Franklin Roosevelt held most dear, such as freedom of speech and the rule of law. As a consequence, we see Stalin at his most relaxed in one of the first encounters in the book, carving up Europe with Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Nazi Foreign Minister. The Soviet leader was never to attain such a moment of mutual interest and understanding at any point in his relationship with Churchill and Roosevelt.

It is also important to understand the way in which the Soviets ran their occupation of eastern Poland between 1939 and 1941. That is because many of the injustices that were to occur in parts of occupied eastern Europe at the end of the war were broadly similar to those the Soviets had previously committed in eastern Poland – the torture, the arbitrary arrests, the deportations, the sham elections and the murders. What the earlier Soviet occupation of eastern Poland demonstrates is that the fundamental nature of Stalinism was obvious from the start.

So it isn't that Churchill and Roosevelt were unaware in the beginning of the kind of regime they were dealing with. Neither of them was initially enthusiastic about the forced alliance with Stalin following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Churchill considered it akin to a pact with 'the Devil', and Roosevelt, even though the United States was still officially neutral in the summer of 1941, was careful in his first statement after the Nazi invasion to condemn the Soviets for their previous abuses.

How the British and Americans moved from that moment of justified scepticism about Stalin to the point immediately after the Yalta Conference in February 1945 when they stated, with apparent sincerity, that Stalin 'meant well to the world' and was 'reasonable and sensible', is the meat of this book. And the answer to why Churchill and Roosevelt publicly altered their position about Stalin and the Soviet Union doesn't lie just in understanding the massive geo-political issues that were at stake in the war – and crucially the effect on the West of the successful Soviet fight-back against the Nazis – but also takes us into the realm of personal emotions. Both Churchill and Roosevelt had gigantic egos and both of them liked to dominate the room. And both of them liked the sound of their own voices. Stalin wasn't like that at all. He was a watcher – an aggressive listener.

It was no accident that it took two highly intelligent functionaries on the British side – Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office, and Lord Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff – to spot Stalin's gifts most accurately. They saw him not as a politician playing to the crowd and awash with his own rhetoric, but more like a bureaucrat – a practical man who got things done. As Cadogan confided in his diary at Yalta: 'I must say I think Uncle Joe [Stalin] much the most impressive of the three men. He is very quiet and restrained.... The President flapped about and the PM boomed, but Joe just sat taking it all in and being rather amused. When he did chip in, he never used a superfluous word and spoke very much to the point'.<sup>2</sup>

Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke 'formed a very high idea of his [Stalin's] ability, force of character and shrewdness'.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Alanbrooke was impressed that Stalin 'displayed an astounding knowledge of technical railway details'.<sup>4</sup> No one would ever accuse Churchill or Roosevelt – those biggest of 'big picture' men – of having 'an astounding knowledge of technical railway details'. And it was Alanbrooke who spotted early on what was to be the crux of the final problem between Stalin and Churchill: 'Stalin is a realist if ever there was one', he wrote in his diary, 'facts only count with him... [Churchill] appealed to sentiments in Stalin which I do not think exist there'.<sup>5</sup>

As one historian has put it, the Western leaders at the end of the war 'were not dealing with a normal, everyday, run-of-the-mill, statesmanlike head of government. They confronted instead a psychologically disturbed but fully functional and highly intelligent dictator who had projected his own personality not only onto those around him but onto an entire nation and had thereby with catastrophic results, remade it in his image'.<sup>6</sup>

One of the problems was that Stalin in person was very different from the image of Stalin the tyrant. Anthony

Eden, one of the first Western politicians to spend time with Stalin in Moscow during the war, remarked on his return that he had tried hard to imagine the Soviet leader 'dripping with the blood of his opponents and rivals', but somehow the picture wouldn't fit'.<sup>7</sup>

But Roosevelt and Churchill were sophisticated politicians and it is wrong to suppose that they were simply duped by Stalin. No, something altogether more interesting – and more complicated – takes place in this history. Roosevelt and Churchill wanted to win the war at the least possible cost to their own respective countries – in both human and financial terms. Keeping Stalin 'on side', particularly during the years before D-Day when the Soviets believed they were fighting the war almost on their own, was a difficult business and required, as Roosevelt would have put it, 'careful handling'. As a result, behind closed doors the Western leaders felt it necessary to make hard political compromises. One of them was to promote propaganda that painted a rosy picture of the Soviet leader; another was deliberately to suppress material that told the truth about both Stalin and the nature of the Soviet regime. In the process the Western leaders might easily, for the sake of convenience, have felt they had to 'distort the normal and healthy operation' of their 'intellectual and moral judgements' as one senior British diplomat was memorably to put it during the war.<sup>8</sup>

However, this isn't just a 'top-down' history, examining the mentality and beliefs of the elite. I felt from the first that it was also important to show in human terms the impact of the decisions taken by Stalin and the Western Allies behind closed doors. And so in the course of writing this book I travelled across the former Soviet Union and Soviet-dominated eastern Europe and asked people who had lived through this testing time to tell their stories.

Uncovering this history was a strange and sometimes emotional experience. And – at least to me – it all seemed surprisingly fresh and relevant. I felt this most strongly standing in the leafy square by the opera house in Lviv. This elegant city had started the twentieth century in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, become part of Poland after the First World War, then part of the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941, then part of the Nazi Empire until 1944, then part of the Soviet Union again, until finally in 1991 it became part of an independent Ukraine. At various times in the last hundred years the city has been called Lemberg, Lvov, Lwów and Lviv. There was not one group of citizens I met there who had not at one time or another suffered because of who they were. Catholic or Jew, Ukrainian, Russian or Pole, they had all faced persecution in the end. It was the Nazis, of course, who operated the most infamous and murderous policy of persecution against the Jews of the city, but we are apt to forget that such was the change and turmoil in this part of central Europe that ultimately few non-Jews escaped suffering of one kind or another either.

I was fortunate to have a chance to meet these witnesses to history – all the more so since in the near future there will be no one left alive who personally experienced the war. And after having spent so much time with these veterans from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc I am left with an overwhelming sense of the importance of recovering their history as part of our own. Our nations were all in the war together. And we owe it to them, and to ourselves, to face up to the consequences of that truth.

*Laurence Rees*  
*London, May 2008*

## AN ALLIANCE IN

## ALL BUT NAME

### A SURPRISING FRIENDSHIP

Just before four o'clock on the afternoon of Wednesday, 23 August 1939, Stalin's personal car drove across Red Square. Inside was an unlikely guest of the Soviet leader. In one of the most remarkable turnarounds in the history of diplomacy, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany, the sworn enemy of the Soviet Union, was about to be welcomed into the Kremlin. As the car pulled past the domes of St Basil's cathedral and neared the Kremlin's Spasskaya gate, Ribbentrop was apprehensive. He had arrived in the Soviet Union only a few hours before and his unease had immediately been noted by the German General Ernst Köstring. 'I tried to calm him', recorded the general. '[But] Ribbentrop remained nervous and agitated'.<sup>1</sup>

The car was waved past the NKVD guards – the secret police – at the Kremlin gate and pulled up in front of the Senate building. There Ribbentrop, the German ambassador, Count Schulenburg, and Councillor Hilger from the German embassy (who was to act as interpreter) were escorted down a corridor to a shabby anteroom outside the office of Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister. After a few minutes they were ushered into a rectangular room that contained a conference table along one wall and a desk at the end. Like all the offices of the Communist elite in the Kremlin, this one resembled, as one British visitor was later to remark, 'a second class railway waiting room'.<sup>2</sup>

Standing waiting to greet them was Molotov. But next to him was someone Ribbentrop was surprised to see – a shortish, sixty-year-old man<sup>3</sup> with pockmarked skin and discoloured teeth who coolly appraised Ribbentrop with eyes that seemed to have a tinge of yellow about them. It was the supreme leader of the Soviet Union – Joseph Stalin. He rarely met foreigners, and so his presence in the room was a sign of great significance. 'It was a move', recorded Hilger, 'that was calculated to put the [Nazi] foreign minister off balance'.<sup>4</sup>

The contrast between the two most important people in that room could scarcely have been greater. Ribbentrop stood several inches taller than Stalin and was dressed – as he always was – immaculately. His perfectly cut, expensive suit contrasted sharply with Stalin's baggy tunic and trousers.

Ribbentrop was immensely pompous – ever conscious of the need to preserve his own dignity. Unlike the core of die-hard believers who formed National Socialism, Ribbentrop had joined the Nazi Party late, in 1932, only when it was clear that Hitler was a figure of real importance. In the 1920s, during the Weimar Republic, he had been a wealthy champagne importer. Many of the other leading Nazis had little respect for him. Joseph Goebbels, for example, the Nazi Propaganda Minister, alleged that 'he bought his name, he married his

money and he swindled his way into office'.<sup>5</sup> Hermann Göring, the commander of the Luftwaffe, told Hitler that Ribbentrop had been 'an ass' in his dealings with the British when he had been German ambassador in London. Hitler had replied, 'But he knows quite a lot of important people in England'. Göring responded: '*Mein Führer*, that may be right, but the basic thing is, they know him'.<sup>6</sup> Even some of the Nazis' own allies didn't think much of Ribbentrop. Count Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister, remarked with contempt that: 'The Duce [Benito Mussolini] says that you only have to look at his head to see that he has a small brain'.<sup>7</sup>

Ribbentrop may have elicited little respect from his colleagues, but Stalin was accustomed to creating another emotion entirely in those who encountered him – fear. 'All of us around Stalin were temporary people', said Nikita Khrushchev, later himself leader of the Soviet Union. 'As long as he trusted us to a certain degree, we were allowed to go on living and working. But the moment he stopped trusting you, the cup of his distrust overflowed'. Stepan Mikoyan,<sup>9</sup> son of the Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan, grew up in the Kremlin compound in the 1930s and confirms Khrushchev's judgement. '[Stalin] watched people's eyes when he was speaking', said Stepan Mikoyan, 'and if you didn't look him straight in the eye he might well suspect that you were deceiving him. And then he'd be capable of taking the most unpleasant steps.... He was very suspicious. That was his main character trait.... He was a very unprincipled man.... He could betray and deceive if he thought it was necessary. And that's why he expected the same behaviour from others...anyone could turn out to be a traitor'. Stalin was, of course, first and foremost a revolutionary – he had been a Marxist terrorist before the Bolsheviks came to power, involved in bank robberies, kidnappings and other nefarious activities, and had served several periods in exile in Siberia as a result.



This contrast between the self-important Ribbentrop and the shrewd and cynical Stalin manifested itself immediately in Molotov's office that August afternoon when Ribbentrop began the meeting by portentously announcing that: 'The Führer has authorized me to propose a non-aggression agreement between our two countries that will last for a hundred years'.

'If we agree to a hundred years', replied Stalin, 'people will laugh at us for not being serious. I propose the agreement should last ten years'.<sup>10</sup> So, with this none too subtle pull down, the negotiations between the Nazis and the Communists began.

These were discussions that would shock the world: a coming together of two ideologies opposites; a meeting, as one Nazi put it, between 'fire and water';<sup>11</sup> a marriage at first sight that made little sense. Indeed, how was it possible that Ribbentrop was ever admitted into the heart of the Kremlin in the first place? The Nazis, after all, had never hidden their hatred for the Soviet Union. During a speech at the Nuremberg rally in 1937, Hitler had referred to the country's leaders as 'an uncivilized Jewish-Bolshevik international guild of criminals' and stated that the Soviet Union was 'the greatest danger for the culture and civilization of mankind which has ever threatened it since the collapse of the states of the ancient world'.<sup>12</sup>

In *Mein Kampf* [My Struggle] Hitler had explicitly written that he believed Germany should covet the agriculturally rich land of Russia and the rest of the Soviet Union: 'We are putting an end to the perpetual German march towards the south and west of Europe and turning our eye towards the east.... However, when we speak of new land in Europe today, we must principally bear in mind Russia and the border states subject to her [the Soviet Union]. Destiny itself seems to wish to point the way for us here'.<sup>13</sup>

But for the Nazis, by the summer of 1939 pragmatism had taken precedence over principle. Hitler wanted the German army to invade Poland within a matter of days. As he saw it, there were German territories to retrieve – the city of Danzig, West Prussia, and the former German lands around Poznań – as well as the rest of Poland's valuable agricultural land to conquer. But he knew that any move into Poland risked war with Britain and France. In March 1939 the British had promised to try to protect Poland from foreign aggression after Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, had finally realized when Hitler invaded the Czech lands that the promises the German Führer had made in the Munich Agreement the year before were worthless. Moreover, from the Nazi point of view, a vast question – the answer apparently unknowable – hung over their plan to invade Poland; what would be the reaction of the Soviet Union, Poland's neighbour in the East? If the Soviet Union formed an alliance with the French and British, the Germans would be surrounded by enemies.

So in the summer of 1939, off the back of trade talks that were taking place in Berlin, the Germans began to sound out the Soviets about a possible treaty of convenience. To begin with, not surprisingly, the Soviets were sceptical. During one discussion earlier that summer the Soviet trade negotiator, Astakhov, remarked to Schnurre, his opposite number on the German side, that his colleagues in Moscow were not 'certain that the hinted changes in German policy are of a serious and non-conjunctural nature and are calculated for a long period'. Schnurre replied: 'Tell me what proof you want. We are ready to demonstrate the possibility of reaching agreement on any question – to give any guarantees'.<sup>14</sup> By 2 August the urgency of the Germans was palpable. Ribbentrop himself said to Astakhov that 'there was no problem from the Baltic to the Black Sea' that could not be resolved between them. The economic treaty between Germany and the Soviet Union was signed on 19 August in Berlin. Ribbentrop then pressed the Soviets to allow him to come to Moscow to sign a non-aggression treaty. When the Soviets seemed to dither for a moment, Hitler himself stepped in and wrote a personal appeal to Stalin to allow Ribbentrop to come. The Soviets relented and Ribbentrop, with alacrity, arrived in Moscow on the 23rd.

The motivation of the Germans is thus not hard to read. Hitler's long-term policy – almost messianic vision – remained clear. The Soviet Union was his ideological enemy – an enemy, in addition, that possessed rich farmland its people were not 'worthy' of owning. One day there would be a new German Empire on this land. But now was not the moment to pursue these visions. Now was the moment to deal with the urgent and practical problem of neutralizing a potential aggressor. The Nazi regime was nothing if not dynamic. And the speed at which the Nazis moved to instigate and then close this deal astonished and impressed the Soviets. 'The fact that Mr Ribbentrop acted at a tempo of 650 kilometres an hour called forth the Soviet government's sincere admiration', said Molotov in a speech in September 1939. 'His energy and his strength of will were a pledge to the firmness of the friendly relations that had been

created with Germany'.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst it is relatively easy to see what the Germans were getting out of the deal, it is initially less simple to explain the attitude of the Soviets; because, unlike the Germans, the Soviets had a choice of partners. They could have rejected the Germans and decided to form an alliance with the British and the French. At a cursory glance, that would seem to have been the logical course of action; not least because in July 1932 the Soviets had signed a non-aggression treaty with Poland. In addition, neither the British nor the French were as vehemently opposed to the Soviet Union as the Nazis, and the British had already made peaceful overtures towards Moscow. But Stalin knew that Britain in particular had previously preferred a policy of appeasement to the Germans, rather than alliance with the Soviets – a policy symbolized by the fact that the Soviet Union had not even been consulted about the Munich Agreement of September 1938 when Chamberlain signed away the ethnically German Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia to the Nazis.

When Chamberlain returned from Munich he had quoted Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1*: '... out of this nettle danger, we pluck this flower, safety'. But in a scathing article in *Izvestiya* the Soviets responded with a quote of their own from the same play: 'The purpose you undertake is dangerous; the friends who you have named uncertain; the time itself unsorted and your whole plot too light for the counterpoise of so great an opposition'.<sup>17</sup>

And the fact that it had taken the Nazi invasion of the remainder of the Czech lands on 15 March 1939 to make the British suddenly realize the possible benefits of an arrangement with the Soviet Union did not impress Stalin, who five days earlier had made a bitter speech to the 18th Party Congress in Moscow. He talked of a 'war' that was being waged by 'aggressive states who in every way infringe upon the interests of the non-aggressive states, primarily Britain, France and the USA, while the latter draw back and retreat, making concession after concession to the aggressors. Thus we are witnessing an open redivision of the world and spheres of influence at the expense of the non-aggressive states, without the least attempt at resistance, and even with a certain connivance, on their part. Incredible, but true'.<sup>18</sup> It was partly this contempt for the passivity of the 'non-aggressive' states that led Stalin, in the same speech, famously to warn that the Soviet Union was not prepared to 'be drawn into conflict by warmongers who are accustomed to have others pull their chestnuts out of the fire for them'.

Nonetheless, Stalin and the Soviet leadership were still prepared to consider a possible treaty of mutual assistance with Britain and France. But there were problems from the very start. In sharp contrast with the '650 kilometres an hour' attitude of the Nazis, the Western Allies were perceived as dawdling through the discussions. On 27 May the British and the French proposed a military and political alliance, but Molotov dismissed the plan. It was vague and lacked the necessary detail, especially when it came to explaining just how the Soviet Union would be expected to respond to a German attack on Poland.

As far as the Soviets were concerned, the British lack of commitment to a serious alliance was crystallized in their mission to Moscow that summer, led by the splendidly named Admiral the Hon. Sir Reginald Aylmer Ranfurly Plunkett-Ernle-Erle-Drax. The Soviet ambassador to London, Maisky, had previously asked whether the British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, would come to Moscow that summer to discuss matters directly with Molotov.

Instead the British despatched first the more minor head of the central department of the Foreign Office, and then this obscure quadruple-barrelled admiral. To make matters worse Drax and his team displayed no sense of urgency, leaving England on 5 August on a merchant ship that took four days to reach Leningrad.

Once the British delegation arrived in Moscow, the Soviets soon found evidence to confirm Maisky's intelligence report from London that 'the delegates will not be able to make any decisions on the spot.... This does not promise any particular speed in the conduct of the negotiations'.<sup>19</sup> In fact, before he left for Moscow Drax had been specifically told by the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary that in case of any difficulties with the Soviets he should try and string the negotiations out until October, when winter conditions in Poland would make a Nazi invasion difficult.<sup>20</sup> The British hoped that the mere threat of an alliance with the Soviet Union might act as a deterrent to the Germans.

It is not hard to see what caused the British to take this lackadaisical approach in the discussions with the Soviets. In the first place, British foreign policy had been predicated for years on the basis that a friendly relationship with Germany was of more value than an accommodation with the Soviet Union. Not only did many British loathe Stalin's Communist regime for ideological reasons, but there was also little respect for the power and usefulness of the Soviet armed forces. Moreover, there was a further, intensely practical reason why the British found it hard to reach a comprehensive agreement with the Soviet Union that summed up the question of Poland. Difficulties of policy over this one country, which will haunt the entire history, were evident even before the war began. The British knew that in order for any military treaty to have meaning, the Soviets would have to be given permission to cross the Polish border to fight the Germans if, as looked likely, the Nazis decided to invade. But the Poles were against any such idea. In the face of this impasse the British delegation adopted the understandable – but ultimately self-defeating – tactic of simply ignoring the subject whenever the question of Poland and its territorial integrity came up in discussion. When the Soviet Marshal Voroshilov asked directly on 14 August if the Red Army would be permitted to enter Poland in order to engage the Nazis, the Allied delegation made no reply.

However, we must not run away with the idea that Stalin and the Soviet leadership were somehow driven into the hands of the Nazis by British and French misjudgement. Ultimately the Western Allies had very little to offer the Soviets at the bargaining table. Why, Stalin must have been thinking, should the Red Army be 'drawn into conflict' in order to help other unsympathetic regimes out of their self-created difficulties? Stalin was just as ideologically opposed to Britain and France as he was to Nazi Germany. Each of these countries, according to Marxist theory, was dominated by big business and oppressed the working people. Only the Soviet Union, which proposed free education, free healthcare, 'votes for all' and communal ownership, was a 'proper' state in Stalin's world view. And Lenin's own teachings called for the Soviet state to stand back in such circumstances and let the capitalists fight between themselves. So, dealing between these equally unpalatable other countries, it remained far more sensible from Stalin's perspective to consider an arrangement, albeit a potential temporary one, with Nazi Germany. For as well as offering the Soviet Union a seemingly secure way out of any forthcoming war, the Nazis could offer something the Western Allies never could – the prospect of additional territory and material gain for the Soviet Union. S

the meeting on the afternoon of 23 August 1939 between Ribbentrop and Schulenburg for the Germans, and Stalin and Molotov for the Soviets, was, whilst not a meeting of mind, certainly a meeting of common interests.

## THE NEGOTIATIONS BEGIN

A sign of the intensely practical nature of the talks was the swiftness with which the discussion turned to what was euphemistically described as 'spheres of influence'. The deliberately innocuous phrase could mean as little or as much as each of the participants wished. Eventually, of course, after the Nazi invasion of Poland it was used to determine who should exercise control over various eastern European countries.

Ribbentrop announced: 'The Führer accepts that the eastern part of Poland and Bessarabia as well as Finland, Estonia and Latvia, up to the river Dvina, will all fall within the Soviet sphere of influence'.<sup>21</sup> Stalin objected at once to the German proposals, insisting that the *entire* territory of Latvia fall within the 'Soviet sphere of influence'. Ribbentrop felt unable to agree to Stalin's request without contacting Hitler. So the meeting was adjourned until he had received instructions directly from the Führer.

Hitler was waiting for news of the negotiations at the Berghof, his retreat in the mountains of southern Bavaria. That morning there had already been a commanders' conference in which Hitler had notified senior army figures that Ribbentrop was on his way from Königsberg to Moscow in order to sign a non-aggression pact. 'The generals were upset, they were looking at each other', said Herbert Döring, the SS officer who administered the Berghof, who witnessed events that day. 'It took their breath away that such a thing could be possible. Stalin the Communist, Hitler the National Socialist, that these [two] would suddenly unite. What was behind it, nobody knew'.<sup>22</sup>

As the talks continued in Moscow, the atmosphere at the Berghof grew strained. 'It was sultry, hot summer evening', recalled Döring. 'Groups of ADCs, civilian staff, ministers and secretaries were standing around the switchboard and on the terrace, because the first call would come to the switchboard. And everybody was tense, and they waited and waited. Suddenly the call from Moscow came through with news of Stalin's demand. 'Hitler was speechless during the phone call, everybody noticed', said Döring. 'Stalin had put a pistol to his head'. And with this 'pistol to his head', Hitler agreed to grant Stalin the whole of Latvia as part of his 'sphere of influence'.

Once the main issues around the 'spheres of influence' were decided, and then enshrined in a secret protocol to the pact, the conversation in Moscow became more discursive. Stalin revealed his frank views on the nation that would, by the summer of 1941, be his ally: 'I dislike and distrust the British; they are skilful and stubborn opponents. But the British army is weak. If England is still ruling the world it is due to the stupidity of other countries which let themselves be cheated. It is ridiculous that only a few hundred British are still able to rule the vast Indian population'.<sup>23</sup> Stalin went on to assert that the British had tried to prevent Soviet-German understanding for many years, and that it was a 'good idea' to put an end to these 'shenanigans'.

But at the talks in Moscow there was no open discussion of the Nazis' immediate plan to invade Poland – nor, of course, of what the Soviet response to it was expected to be. The nearest Ribbentrop came to outlining Nazi intentions was when he said: ‘The government of the German Reich no longer finds acceptable the persecution of the German population in Poland and the Führer is determined to resolve the German-Polish disputes without delay.’ Stalin's response to this statement was the noncommittal ‘I understand’.

A draft communiqué announcing the pact was shown to both Stalin and Ribbentrop. The Soviet leader seems to have found the flowery language of the first draft rather comic. ‘Don't you think we have to pay a little more attention to public opinion in our countries?’ he said. ‘For many years now we have been pouring buckets of shit over each other's heads and our propaganda boys could never do enough in that direction; and all of a sudden are we to make people believe that all is forgiven and forgotten? Things don't work so fast’.<sup>24</sup> And with that, Stalin began to tone down the words of the statement.

At midnight, a woman wearing a red headscarf brought in first tea and then sweets, caviar sandwiches and copious amounts of vodka, Russian wines and finally Crimean champagne. ‘The atmosphere’, recalled Andor Hencke, a German diplomat who acted as an additional translator, ‘which had already been pleasant, became warmly convivial. Stalin and Molotov were the most welcoming hosts imaginable. The ruler of Russia filled his guests' glasses himself, offered them cigarettes and even to light them. The cordial and yet at the same time dignified manner in which Stalin, without losing face, attended to each one of us, left a strong impression on us all.... I translated what was probably the first toast that Stalin ever made to Adolf Hitler. He said: “Because I know how much the German people love their Führer, I want to drink to his health”!’<sup>25</sup>

The Non-Aggression Pact between the Soviet Union and Germany was finally signed in the early hours of 24 August 1939. German and Soviet photographers were allowed into the room to immortalize the unlikely friendship that had blossomed between the two countries. Stalin remarked that he had only one condition for any photographs: ‘The empty bottles should be removed beforehand’, he said, ‘because otherwise people might think that we got drunk first and then signed the treaty’.<sup>26</sup> Despite Stalin's – albeit jocular – concerns about hiding the evidence of alcohol in the room, one of the German photographers, Helmut Laux, took a picture of Stalin and Ribbentrop each with a champagne glass in his hand. Stalin remarked that publishing a photo of the two of them drinking together might give the ‘wrong impression’. Laux started to remove the film from his camera in order to give it to Stalin but the Soviet leader gestured to him not to bother, saying he trusted the word of a German that the photo in question would not be used.<sup>27</sup>

Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's personal photographer, was also present, and with his innate sense of German superiority recalled the ‘antediluvian’ camera equipment of the ‘Russians’. He also approached Stalin directly: ‘Your Excellency’, he said, ‘I have the very great honor of conveying to you the hearty greetings and good wishes of my Führer and good friend Adolf Hitler! Let me say how much he looks forward to one day meeting the great leader of the Russian people in person’. According to Hoffmann these words ‘made a great impression on Stalin’, who replied by saying that there ‘should be a lasting friendship with Germany and

her great Führer'.<sup>28</sup>

The party lasted into the small hours, and when the Germans finally took their leave Stalin was, according to Hoffmann, 'well and truly lit up'.<sup>29</sup> The Soviet leader clearly understood the incongruity – almost the comic nature – of this pact with his former enemy. 'Let's drink to the new anti-Cominternist', he said at one point, 'Stalin'.<sup>30</sup> But his last words to Ribbentrop were spoken with apparent sincerity: 'I assure you that the Soviet Union takes this pact very seriously. I guarantee on my word of honour that the Soviet Union will not betray its new partner'.<sup>31</sup>

Back at the Berghof, the atmosphere grew ever more anxious in the hours before news of the signing of the pact came through. Herbert Döring watched that evening as Hitler and his guests stared at a dramatic sky over the high mountain peaks. 'The entire sky was in turmoil', he remembered. 'It was blood-red, green sulphur grey, black as the night, a jagged yellow glow'. Everyone was looking horrified – it was intimidating.... Everyone was watching. Without good nerves one could easily have become frightened'. Döring observed one of Hitler's guests, a Hungarian woman, remark: 'My Führer, this augurs nothing good. It means blood, blood and again blood'. 'Hitler was totally shocked', said Döring. 'He was almost shaking. He said, "If it has to be, then let it be now". He was agitated, completely crazed. His hair was wild. His gaze was locked on the distance'. Then, when the good news that the pact had been signed finally arrived, Hitler 'said goodbye, went upstairs and the evening was over'.

The reaction of the British public to the rapprochement between Germany and the Soviet Union might have lacked the drama on the terrace at the Berghof, but it was certainly one of immense surprise. 'This is a new and incomprehensible chapter in German diplomacy', declared one British newsreel. 'What has happened to the principles of *Mein Kampf*? Equally, what can Russia have in common with Germany?'.<sup>32</sup>

All over the world individual Communist parties struggled to make sense of the news. In Britain, Brian Pearce,<sup>33</sup> then a devoted follower of Stalin, simply fell back on straightforward faith: 'We did have this idea that Stalin was a very clever man, a very shrewd fellow, and when the pact came I think the attitude of most Communists – those that were not absolutely shocked by it, even in some cases to the point of leaving the party – was, well, it's hard to understand but after all it is a complicated situation...maybe Comrade Stalin, with all that he must know through his intelligence sources, thinks that this is the best way to keep Russia out of a situation in which he [Stalin] would be just let down by the Western allies'.

In Germany, SS officer Hans Bernhard<sup>34</sup> heard the news of the signing of the pact as he waited with his unit to invade Poland. For him the signing of the pact 'was a surprise without doubt. We couldn't make sense of it... in German propaganda for years it had been made clear that the Bolsheviks were our main enemy'. As a result, he and his comrades saw the new arrangement as 'politically unnatural'.

But Lord Halifax, the British Foreign Secretary, was not so taken aback. Four months before, on 3 May, he had warned the British Cabinet of the possibility of a deal between Stalin and Hitler.<sup>35</sup> Both the British and French governments now realized that the agreement between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany freed Hitler's hands for an invasion of Poland

and so it proved. On 1 September German troops crossed into Poland and two days later Britain, in accordance with its treaty obligations with Poland, declared war on Germany. The Second World War had begun.

But as the Germans invaded Poland from the west, the Soviet Union made no move to invade from the east. Consequently, Ribbentrop was concerned about Stalin's reaction to any German incursion into eastern Poland, the region that adjoined the Soviet Union and that had just been agreed was within the Soviet sphere of influence. He cabled Schulenburg, the German ambassador in Moscow, on 3 September: 'We should naturally, however, for military reasons, have to continue to take action against such Polish military forces as are at that time located in the Polish territory belonging to the Russian sphere of influence. Please discuss this at once with Molotov and see if the Soviet Union does not consider it desirable for Russian forces to move at the proper time against Polish forces in the Russian sphere of influence and for their part, to occupy this territory. In our estimation this would not only be a relief for us, but also, in the sense of the Moscow agreements, be in the Soviet interest as well'.<sup>36</sup>

The Soviet leadership did not respond immediately to the German suggestion. Stalin was never a man to act on impulse. And there were important issues to consider. What, for example, would be the likely British and French response to any Soviet incursion? The Western Allies had just declared war on Germany because they had agreed by treaty to protect Poland against aggression. If the Red Army moved into eastern Poland, would they now decide to fight the Soviet Union as well? In fact, was the pact of 'non-aggression' with the Nazis about to drag the Soviets into the very war it had been designed to exclude them from?

But there remained strong arguments in favour of military action. The Soviets didn't just recognize the obvious material benefits to be gained from annexing a large chunk of another country – they were motivated by powerful historical reasons as well. Not least because Stalin felt he had a score to settle with the Poles. He still remembered with bitterness the war the Bolsheviks had fought with the Poles between 1919 and 1920 (most often called the Polish-Soviet war, although the 'Soviet Union' was only agreed in principle in 1922 and was not formally recognized until 1924). Poland, which had vanished as an independent country in the eighteenth century, carved up between its more powerful neighbours, was reconstituted by the Versailles peace treaty at the end of the First World War. And whilst the Polish leader Józef Piłsudski wanted to push the border as far east as possible, Lenin saw Poland as an obstruction on the road the Communists needed to take in order to spread the revolution into Europe, particularly into a postwar Germany that he believed was ripe for Marxist conquest.

Initially the Bolshevik army performed well, advancing by the summer of 1920 almost to Warsaw. But then the Poles counter-attacked and defeated them at the battle of the river Niemen. Subsequently, through the Treaty of Riga, which was signed in March 1921, the Poles gained western Ukraine and western Belarus and this new border was ratified at an Allied conference in 1923. (It was this tortuous history that lay behind Molotov's infamous remark that Poland was 'the monstrous bastard of the Peace of Versailles'.)<sup>37</sup> Significantly, this whole Polish affair was not just a general humiliation for the Bolsheviks but an individual humiliation for the Commissar of the South-Western Front – a man called Joseph

Stalin. When Marshal Tukhachevsky, the Bolshevik commander, called for reinforcement Stalin had failed to send them. In 1925 Stalin even attempted to conceal this blot on his early career by removing the relevant documents from the Kiev archives.<sup>38</sup>

But although he felt a strong antipathy towards the Poles, in September 1939 Stalin was about to let his emotions decide his next move. He also knew that the Soviets could attempt to legitimize any incursion into Polish territory with propaganda, hiding behind a proposal that in 1919 Lord Curzon, then British Foreign Secretary, had put forward as the border between Poland and its eastern neighbours – the so-called ‘Curzon Line’. This suggestion was rejected by the Bolsheviks at the time, but it was, as it happened, broadly similar to the border that Stalin and Molotov had just agreed with Ribbentrop would divide their ‘sphere of influence’ in Poland. Moreover, the Poles were not in a majority in these eastern territories. Whilst around 40 per cent of the population were of Polish origin, 34 per cent were Ukrainian and 9 per cent Belarusian. This, the Soviet propagandists realized, allowed any incursion to be couched as an act of ‘liberation’ – freeing the ‘local’ population from Polish domination.

A combination of all these factors meant that on 9 September, six days after Ribbentrop had sent his original cable, Molotov replied to say that the Red Army was about to move into the agreed Soviet ‘sphere of influence’ in Poland. At a meeting in Moscow the following day with the German ambassador, Molotov told Schulenburg that the pretext for the invasion would be that the Soviet Union was helping Ukrainians and Belarusians. ‘This argument’, he said, ‘was to make the intervention of the Soviet Union plausible and at the same time avoid giving the Soviet Union the appearance of an aggressor’.<sup>39</sup>

## THE SOVIETS INVADE POLAND

On 17 September six hundred thousand Soviet troops crossed into eastern Poland, led by Marshal Kovalov in the north on the Belarusian front and Marshal Timoshenko in the south on the Ukrainian front. In a radio broadcast that same day, Molotov justified the Soviet action by relying on the ‘plausible’ argument he had outlined to Schulenburg. He announced that this military action was necessary in order to save the ‘blood brothers’ of the Soviet people who lived in eastern Poland. Not to have taken action would, according to Molotov, have been an act of ‘abandonment’.

‘We officially extended the hand of friendship to our brother Russians and Ukrainians’, said Georgy Dragunov,<sup>40</sup> one of the Soviet soldiers who entered former Polish territory that September. ‘Our military propaganda literature and our political officers tried to brainwash us into believing that the workers needed our help and that they were being exploited by the Polish bureaucracy’. The Red Army was initially welcomed in many places. Indeed, there was confusion as to whether this was actually an invasion at all. Perhaps, some thought, the Soviet troops had really come to ‘help’. Maybe they would just motor through the flat countryside of eastern Poland and confront the Germans, who had already captured most of the west of the country.

Boguslava Gryniv<sup>41</sup> and her family lived near Lwów,<sup>42</sup> one of the major cities of southeast

Poland. They were of Ukrainian descent, so felt they had little to fear from the Soviet 'People welcomed them [the soldiers] by waving at them', she says. 'People also sometimes welcomed them with flowers and also with the [Ukrainian] blue-yellow flag.... All they [the Red Army soldiers] did was open up the hatches on their tanks and smile at the population. That was how they arrived.... We didn't expect anything terrible to happen.... My father said so himself when my mother asked to leave. He said: "These are not the same Bolsheviks as 1919. After twenty years there is already culture, there is already a state, there is already a justice system". In other words, he hoped that...well, that they would not be bandits'.

'When the Red Army arrived in 1939, people, me included, did not feel negatively towards them but nor was there any love', says Zenon Vrublevsky,<sup>43</sup> who was a twelve-year-old schoolboy at the time. 'People really were very divided. You know, we lived on the same floor as a number of other families. Some of them were glad that [the Red Army] had come. And others said: "Just you wait, they will show you! Siberia is really big, they will take you away to Siberia!" And I didn't really feel either of those things. Neither love nor hate. I just accepted them as a new army, a new government, a new power'.

The Polish army was initially ordered by their government to pull back and not confront the Soviets – though some clashes did occur, notably at Grodno – but it quickly became clear to the Polish leadership that the Red Army had not come to 'help'. However, the Poles knew they had no hope of surviving against the combined aggression of the Germans and Soviets. They realized that, just as Poland had been swallowed up by its mighty neighbours at the end of the eighteenth century, it was about to be swallowed up once again.

But as the Red Army marched into eastern Poland that September, they did not resemble the mighty army of an immense power. In fact, they stank. 'The smell that came off them', says Zenon Vrublevsky, 'to us it was like the smell of toilet disinfectant. The type we used in public toilets'. 'They smelt rather odd', confirms Anna Levitska,<sup>44</sup> another inhabitant of Lwów. 'It was a kind of distinctive, sharp smell'. Many locals remarked on the contrast between the 'elegant' and 'well turned out' soldiers of the Polish army with their shiny leather and immaculate uniforms, and the malodorous, tattered rag-bag of a force that now entered their towns and villages. 'Many people used to laugh at them', says Zenon Vrublevsky. 'Look at what they're wearing! Look at these beggars who have come!'

'As we moved ahead we saw that [Polish] people were much better off, both in military life and in everyday life', says Georgy Dragunov, who was astonished to witness the disparity in wealth between the Communist Soviet Union and the capitalist Poland. 'We saw beautifully furnished houses – even peasant houses. [Even] their poorest people were better off than our people – their furniture was polished. Only later did we start to furnish our apartments with similar sorts of furniture. Each poor peasant [in eastern Poland] had no less than two horses and every household had three or four cows and a lot of poultry. This was so unexpected for us because of the propaganda – which was [now] wasted on us because we could see electricity in the peasants' houses whereas in Soviet Belarus we didn't have electricity'.

Wiesława Saternus, a Polish schoolgirl who lived with her family near the border with the Ukraine, was surprised at her first sight of a soldier of the Red Army: 'This Russian soldier was running through this empty field and he was shouting that we should give him

something to eat. And he came into our house and he wasn't dressed well, in proper dress and his weapon was hanging on a string. And my mother said that he would get some food. [Then] this Russian soldier got a small clock which sat on the table and he put it in his pocket without even asking whether he could take this clock or not, and he was just [still] shouting "Give me some food," and my mother gave him lots of food and he was [also] packing the food in his coat'.

In a cultured city like Lwów, which had once been a jewel – albeit a provincial one – in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, many of the new arrivals from the Soviet Union felt as if they had entered a kind of fairyland. Much was strange to them. Anna Levitska saw the wife of a Red Army officer wearing a nightgown she had found, calling it a 'pretty dress'; and on a visit to the market the same woman bought a chamber pot and announced that she had purchased a nice 'bowl'. Elsewhere there were reports of Red Army soldiers wearing bras as earmuffs.

Not surprisingly, many of the Soviets felt insecure in this bourgeois wonderland and took to vainglorious boasting about what they had left behind. "They would say: "We have so much", remembers Zenon Vrublevsky. "Jobs? We have so many jobs!" "Do you have such and such?" "Yes! We have so much of that!" But people guessed that these things were not true'.

Once, in the centre of Lwów, Vrublevsky watched as one of the locals teased two Red Army soldiers: 'He said: "Comrades, do you have typhus back home?" And the soldiers said: "Of course we do – we have loads of it. We'll be bringing you two trainloads of it soon!" The people burst out laughing, and the soldiers realized they had said something stupid and left'.

Anna Levitska witnessed a similar conversation between a Red Army officer and his mother. 'He said: "Everything here is for the bourgeois. Everything is for them and the simple people cannot obtain anything. But in our country, the Soviet Union, these things are available to anyone who works. We have a surfeit of everything, you know. Oranges which are made in a factory. You can get as many as you want. Caviar of the finest quality. From a factory. It is being sent out. It is all being sent out, so soon we will have it here too.... That's what it is like in our country. We manufacture oranges, tangerines, caviar – it's all made in the factories. So everyone can afford it". This really made us smile! How could these things possibly be made in factories'?

But a far darker side to the Soviet occupation quickly became apparent. It ranged from casual theft – there were cases of Soviet soldiers simply taking any jewellery they fancied from passers-by – to more serious crime. Anna Levitska knew of two school-friends who were raped by Red Army officers: "Those two girls were shaking the entire time that they were telling me about what had happened. They were in tears. They simply did not understand how this could have happened. They were dreadfully affected by it, and, of course, I too was affected when they told me about it'.

And though theft and rape were officially crimes in the Red Army, there was a sense from the very beginning of the occupation that the Soviets were intent on despoiling eastern Poland – despoiling property, despoiling people, despoiling ideas. In pursuit of the Marxist ideal of 'equality', the Soviet authorities turned conventional values upside-down. To be rich was no longer pleasurable but dangerous. Whereas before it had been acceptable to stro

smartly dressed, down the central promenade in Lwów past the ornate opera house, now was evidence of 'bourgeois' behaviour and rendered you liable to arrest. It is often forgotten that just as the Nazi occupation of western Poland in 1939 was driven by ideological beliefs, so was the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland.

The shops of Lwów and the other towns and cities in eastern Poland soon emptied of goods because in the early days of the occupation the Soviet authorities instituted a novel way of robbery. They set an exchange rate of one Soviet rouble for one Polish zloty – whereas in reality the zloty was worth far more. This meant that Red Army soldiers could 'buy' whatever they wanted from the shops. The consequence, of course, was that the zloty became worthless. Boguslava Gryniv witnessed the catastrophic effect of this development on her neighbour, a teacher of Latin and Greek at a prestigious Lwów school: 'State employees were well paid and he had put all his money in a savings bank. At the first intimation of war he had withdrawn all his money from the bank. He had a suitcase full of money.... One day [his nephew] came round and said: "We are having a fire today. Uncle is burning his suitcase". He went and got the suitcase and then he emptied the banknotes on the fire, saying: "This is my thirty years of service – these are my savings". It was mere paper now'. A primitive barter economy soon replaced the sophisticated previous world of banks, paper money and cheques. People would 'give away their fur coats in exchange for three to five litres of petrol', or take a sweater to the green grocer's to buy 'a bucket of potatoes'.

And the Soviets didn't just destroy previous certainties, such as the security of currency; they swept away the whole concept of ownership of personal property. Red Army soldiers looking for somewhere to live, merely walked down a street until they saw a house they liked, and then banged on the door and announced they were moving in. The first that Anna Levitska and her family knew about the appropriation of their comfortable villa in the suburbs of Lwów was when two Red Army officers appeared on their doorstep and announced: 'We are going to be billeted with you'.

Each Red Army officer then took several rooms in the house and moved in with his wife. 'They took over the furniture and all the other things', says Anna Levitska, 'which meant that everything was now theirs.... It was a small house which had five rooms – they occupied four of the rooms.... We no longer had any right to any of it.... Even the clothes: "This dress would really suit my wife," he [one of the officers] would say [as he took it]...'.

Anna, her father and her mother had previously lived a happy family life in the house. Now they were all confined to one room: 'We were just astounded by it all, you know. It was simply incomprehensible that these strangers who had no relationship with us whatsoever could just come and take over somebody else's property and furniture and things and consider this to be normal behaviour...that this was how things ought to be. It seemed utterly outrageous to us. We could not understand it and we suffered because of it. We suffered because we didn't know if tomorrow they might not say to us: "Get out of here! You have no business being here!" It was just terrifying'.

People like Anna Levitska's family – the so-called 'bourgeois' intelligentsia – were particularly at risk. As the Soviet troops moved into eastern Poland, they had distributed leaflets calling on the inhabitants to turn against their so-called 'real' enemies – the rich, the landlords and the leadership and officer class. This was an invasion designed to reorder and

restructure Polish society. 'They ordered us to line up and they checked everybody's hands recalled one villager. 'And they ordered to step forward those whose hands were not worn out from physical labour and [then] beat them with rifle butts, and one policeman was shot with a revolver'.<sup>45</sup>

Casual abuse of the 'class enemies' of the Communist system soon turned into systematic arrest. On 27 September – just ten days after Red Army troops had crossed into Poland – the Soviets came for Boguslava Gryniv's father. He was a prominent lawyer and head of the regional branch of UNDO – the Ukrainian National Democratic Party. Because UNDO was a legally constituted organization he felt he had nothing to fear from the Soviet authorities. He was wrong.

That day was a church holiday, so when there was a knock at their door the Gryniv family were surprised to see a member of the local Soviet authority. He said that Boguslava Gryniv's father was 'invited' to come and visit the temporary government. 'And my mother said: "It's a church holiday – we're having a special dinner. Come back after dinner". I could tell by the expression on my father's face that he was a little bit nervous. He said to my mother, "As they are asking, I have to go". As soon as they took him away, my mother announced that every evening we would kneel down in front of the icon and pray for our father to be returned to us. I think that was the most we could do, turn to God and ask that such a good kind person as my father not be punished'. Boguslava Gryniv's father was one of the first to suffer at the hands of the Soviets in eastern Poland. Over the next months there would be many more.

## RIBBENTROP RETURNS

On the same day that Boguslava Gryniv's father was arrested in eastern Poland a very different human interaction was taking place in Moscow. In the light of the swift conquest of Poland, the Soviet government had asked their new friend Joachim von Ribbentrop to return to the Kremlin to finalize the exact borders that would now exist between them. The mood on both sides – was jubilant. The Soviets had occupied their 'sphere of influence' without meeting any significant military opposition – they hadn't even formally declared war on Poland. And, despite the Germans having faced fierce Polish resistance, they had by now almost completely consolidated their hold on western Poland – indeed, Warsaw would fall the next day, 28 September.

The contrast between Ribbentrop's first, almost furtive visit four weeks before and the grandiose second one could scarcely have been greater. Ribbentrop now needed not one but two Condor planes to deliver himself and his entourage. The reception at Moscow airport was, according to General Köstring who accompanied him, 'a ceremony of huge dimensions'.<sup>46</sup> There was a guard of honour and a band played the 'International'. Above the airport fluttered a number of Nazi flags. The fact that the crosses of the swastikas were hung back to front was dismissed by the arriving Nazis 'smilingly' as 'a little mistake', since the 'intention was good'.

Ribbentrop landed in Moscow at six in the evening, and by ten o'clock he was ensconced with Stalin and Molotov at the scene of their previous encounter – Molotov's office in the

Kremlin. Stalin expressed his 'satisfaction'<sup>47</sup> over the German success in Poland as well as the expectation that the collaboration between the Soviet Union and Germany would remain positive. Then, true to character, Ribbentrop began with a series of extravagant, vague statements about the immense value of the friendship between the two countries. He emphasized that the Germans wanted to 'cooperate' with the Soviet Union. But such was his pomposity and overblown eloquence that it wasn't completely clear what form he hoped the 'cooperation' would take. Stalin, who impressed foreign diplomats with his ability to cut through to the heart of any discussion, replied that 'the German foreign minister has hinted cautiously that by "cooperation" Germany did not imply any need for military assistance or an intention to drag the Soviet Union into a war. This was well and tactfully said'.

The Soviet leader then went on to make what, on the face of it, was an extraordinary statement (remarks, moreover, that remained secret until the 1990s when Gustav Hilger's detailed minutes of this meeting were discovered in Ambassador Schulenburg's papers).<sup>48</sup> 'The fact is that for the time being Germany does not need foreign help', said Stalin, 'and it is possible that in the future they will not need foreign help either. However, if, against all expectations, Germany finds itself in a difficult situation, then she can be sure that the Soviet people will come to Germany's aid and will not allow Germany to be suppressed. A strong Germany is in the interests of the Soviet Union and she will not allow Germany to be thrown down to the ground'.

Was Stalin really laying open the possibility of the Red Army offering military assistance to Germany if the Nazis ever found themselves in a 'difficult' situation? For the Western Allies this would have been a terrifying prospect. Of course, in the event, nothing came of Stalin's words. The Germans never found themselves in sufficient 'difficulties' to pursue any potential military alliance. But Stalin's statement still shows how far he might have been prepared to go in pursuit of his alliance with Hitler, and it remains, given what was to happen later, an enormously embarrassing comment for him to have made.

Stalin then moved on to discuss practicalities, and revealed that he wanted to revisit the question of the borders drawn up at the 23 August meeting. He now wanted to exchange some of Soviet-held Poland – the territory of Lublin and the southern part of the Warsaw region – for a free hand in Lithuania. That way, the Soviet Union would keep the eastern territories of Poland which contained significant numbers of Russians and Ukrainians, and give up those areas that were overwhelmingly Polish in ethnic origin. The discussion continued in this intensely pragmatic way. Ribbentrop announced that Germany wanted the forest of Augustova between East Prussia and Lithuania (apparently only because the area was supposed to offer good hunting), and Stalin revealed how the Soviets planned to put pressure on each of the Baltic states in turn to ensure that they complied with Soviet policy.

That night there was a lavish banquet in the Andreevsky Hall of the Kremlin. In contrast to the shabby utilitarianism of Molotov's office, the banqueting hall was 'decorated with flowers and covered with precious porcelain and gold-plated cutlery'.<sup>49</sup> Amidst this tsarist splendour members of Ribbentrop's extensive entourage mingled freely with the Communist leadership. Stalin introduced Lavrenti Beria, chief of the NKVD, to Ribbentrop with the memorable words: 'Look, this is our Himmler – he isn't bad [at his work] either'.<sup>50</sup> The atmosphere was friendly, and much alcohol was consumed. 'In terms of presentation, generous hospitality and

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