

The Double Game: The Great Powers in the Gathering Storm

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SO FAR HISTORIANS AND POLITICAL SCIENTISTS have failed to arrive at a more or less concerted opinion about World War II, which marked a turning point in the history of the 20th century. In recent years, the discussion has spilled beyond academic frameworks. It means that new eloquent facts and documents are no longer enough to uphold one's opinion: the entire ideological concept the Western experts apply when dealing with the events and evidence of the 1930s-1940s should be refuted.

Europe, the “freedom, honor and peace” of which was dearly paid for by Russian blood and the Soviet Army, calls the Soviet Union a totalitarian monster far more odious than the Third Reich. The PACE passed a resolution that condemned the “communist totalitarian regimes”; in June 2009, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly followed suite with a resolution that put “Stalinist totalitarianism” and the racist regime of Hitler on the same footing. In defiance of international laws and the UN Charter the European Parliament described the Kuriles as a “Russia-occupied” territory. The indefatigable media insists on the complete identity of Nazism and Communism: in the Cold War period, this would have caused a lot of amazement among the Western political and analyst communities convinced, with good reason, that they were antipodes.

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described, in defiance of the principle of historicism, as one of the causes of World War II — this never happened even at the height of the Cold War. History is falsified, important facts are suppressed, documents disregarded and the meaning and causes of the key events are distorted in front of our eyes. One can expect that a couple of decades later Western history textbooks will inform the students that the democratic U.S. and U.K. were fighting side by side against two totalitarian monsters. The consistent efforts to plant in the information expanse and the parliamentary circles an idea of the Soviet Union as a criminal state that should be brought to court even if post factum are obvious. This is probably done to revise the key facts and decisions of the last century to which Russia is a legal heir.

IT WAS GERMAN HISTORIAN Ernst Nolte who created the tradition of distorting the meaning and essence of World War II; in the 1970s, his ideas were vehemently rejected by the Western academic and political communities. His non-liberal ideas have pushed him outside the limits of political correctness; he was in fact the first to rehabilitate fascism in Europe and indirectly justify Hitler's conquests yet today the West capitalizes on his conception to relieve itself of the sin of Nazism by falsifying history.

In his *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg, 1917-1945* (The European Civil War, 1917-1945) he reached an apogee by interpreting the international relations between the wars as a clash of two ideologies equally dangerous to civil peace and society. For him World War II is not the boiling point of the urge toward territorial domination and a revision of the Versailles order but rather "a long-simmering civil war" into which the October revolution plunged Europe. Nolte prefers to ignore the facts; those that cannot be ignored are squeezed into his construct. It is a fact that Berlin fixed the date 1 September 1939 in the spring of 1939 and that the Soviet leaders knew that. Many Western politicians knew that the Munich deal had completely isolated the Soviet Union. This means that those who say that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact set Hitler against Poland distort history.

Ernst Nolte describes the pact as a "European prelude" to World War II. When analyzing the secret protocol which identified the sides' spheres of influence the German historian concentrates at the point which dealt with Poland and which said that future political developments alone

would show whether an independent Polish state fitted the interests of signatories and what kind of borders this state could have.

This coincides practically word for word with some of the notes Chancellor von Bülow made in 1890 about Kaiser Germany plans in a future war against the Russian Empire. Hitler, and NATO for that matter with its plans of eastward expansion, faithfully followed what the chancellor had written: "We should, in the final count, push Russia away from both seas, the Baltic and Pontus Euxine, on which its status of a world power rests." Seventy-five year old Bismarck offered his marginalia: "Eccentric thoughts should not be put on paper." ¹

Germany's concerns with the future of Poland testify to Berlin's consistency: in his time von Bülow believed that "the question of re-establishment of Poland in any form and of joining the Baltic provinces should be put aside" because, the German politician argued, defeated and pushed eastward "Russia will be a much more suitable neighbor than restored Poland." One feels that the Polish pan-Germans who intrigued against Russia on the eve of World War I and against the Soviet Union on the eve of World War II would have lost their gusto had they seen the price tag Berlin attached to their country.

The drama of the country found at the borderline of two rival geopolitical complexes at the height of an all-out struggle was predetermined, to a great extent, by its hatred of Russia rooted in the past and the short-sighted Germanophilic politics of its leaders in the 1930s and especially 1938-1939. The recently declassified materials confirm information published earlier: "Poland remained absolutely negative in relation to multi-sided anti-German combinations." ² The leakage to the press after an important Anglo-French meeting of Bonnet, Chamberlain and Halifax that took place in London on 22 March 1939 indicated that "Poland obstructs, in the most serious way, everything intended to contain Germany. It is afraid to abandon Colonel Beck's policy of maneuvering between the Soviet Union and Germany; on the other hand, it is too afraid of Germany to join any declaration against aggression." ³

The recently declassified archival materials leave no doubts about Poland's position: it did not merely consistently and deliberately avoid any involvement in a front together with the Soviet Union but also looked at Ukrainian and Lithuanian lands. This explains its otherwise unexplainable faith in Hitler's loyalty and the attempt at haggling with him in an effort to obtain a chunk of Ukraine in exchange for Danzig. Warsaw invited Berlin to stake on Poland rather than "Greater Ukraine" and promised

“to side with Germany in its march against Soviet Ukraine.”⁴

In the 1930s, the general political trends revealed, with clarity, opposite interests: the Western powers led by Britain, the Hitler Germany together with the other fascist regimes, and the Soviet Union. In an effort to channel the German aggressive potential against Russia Britain followed the patterns it had tested before World War I. It was becoming increasingly clear that Europe was rapidly approaching radical changes. All countries, Eastern Europe in the first place, tried hard to disentangle; they tried to use rivals to improve their chances of realizing the so far unrealized historical ambitions.

In the fall of 1938, Ambassador of Italy in Moscow Augusto Rossi revealed how the West responded to Kremlin's disappointment with the Munich Deal: “It seems that in his yesterday's speech Litvinov accepted that the collective security policy (which for several years served the cornerstone of Moscow's foreign policies) had failed ... *This cannot but suggest a conclusion that the Soviet Union has relieved itself from responsibility for the future of Europe to guide itself exclusively by its interests and its ideals.*”

Britain seemed to be stirred up into action when Hitler captured Prague and set up a puppet state of Slovakia; the political crisis of 14-15 March 1939 urged London to extend some sort of guarantees. Later the guarantees to Poland developed into a mutual assistance agreement which fitted the logic of gaining control over the Baltic-Black Sea line. If Germany could have been detracted from its aggressive intentions in the West through its consecutive successes in the east of Europe and be incited against the U.S.S.R. (the Baltic nations were sacrificed without qualms) the British guarantees to Poland would have allowed London to enter Eastern Europe ostensibly to protect Poland and to remove it, in the final analysis, from German or Soviet influence; in any case those two countries would have been mutually exhausted.

The West rejected the Soviet Union's insistent efforts to conclude a broad agreement that would involve Poland and the Baltic countries not only because of Britain's dual policies but also because of Poland. In April 1939, Berlin sat down to business of planning a war against Poland codenamed Case White. The plan and the date (1 September the latest) were no secret in Moscow.

The Soviet leaders well aware of the talks behind the scene had recognized that procrastination might accelerate Germany's eastward movement and make it irreversible. A broad and mutually binding multisided

international agreement alone and the guarantees to the German neighbors and Europe's strategically important points alone could have delayed aggression. This never happened; the German aggression was looming on the horizon. It was clear that the Western countries would have been watching the destruction of Russia until "structural changes took place." This was what President Roosevelt told his Cabinet about America's complete neutrality in a possible war between Germany and the Soviet Union if the West European states remained outside it. Which structural changes were expected?

One can surmise that Germany would be rapidly defeating the still unprepared Soviet Army bled white by the repressions; it would have pushed the Soviets beyond the Volga and the Urals; the Soviet Union would be driven away from the oil-rich Caucasus and the Black Sea coast. Britain acting in the Mediterranean and as true as ever to its geopolitical practices would have closed the Black Sea Straits and sided with Poland in the Baltic and North Sea shores. Having lured Hitler deep into the Soviet territory by their inaction and having abandoned the Russians to their fate until they were pushed far east the Anglo-Saxons would have never allowed Germany to rule Eurasia. They would have attacked him in the west fighting on the Russian territory cutting Russia off the Baltic and Black Sea and pushing it away from Eastern Europe. Japan would have inevitably rushed to the Russian Far East to start another war. Very much like during the Civil War in Russia the United States would have moved in: back in 1919, they had landed in Vladivostok to keep Japan away from the trans-Baikal territory. Together Britain and the United States would have seized the opportunity to push Russia up the Eurasian continent as far away from the seas as possible. The Soviet Union treated as an expendable element would be left in the tundra and its history would come to an end.

The geopolitical strategy of putting pressure on Russia, albeit in different forms, is used today, at the turn of the 21st century when another attempt at pushing Russia back to the Eurasian northeast has become obvious.

In 1939, when the Soviet intensive and insistent efforts to come to an agreement with the West European partners had failed Moscow had to conclude the notorious pact with Germany.

Were these developments as unexpected for the West as it is presented today? The answer is No! In September 1938, Italian Ambassador Augusto Rossi having talked to Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign

Affairs V. Potemkin informed his superiors that the Soviet Union was bitterly disappointed. The Soviet leaders, wrote the Italian diplomat, were convinced that Poland would be next after Czechoslovakia: "I think that as a result of the recent developments the U.S.S.R. will be forced to abandon its attempts at cooperation with the bourgeois governments of the Western democracies to embrace *defensive policies of relative isolation*."⁵ The Western diplomat described as "*defensive policies*" the coming U-turn from seeking agreements with Britain and France to a neutrality pact with Germany.

Litvinov and Molotov repeatedly informed British Ambassador in Moscow Lord Seeds about the Soviet Union's disappointment with British policies. The Munich failure, they said, freed the U.S.S.R. of its earlier obligations.⁶ The West was well aware that this was the only option opened for Moscow and spared no effort to keep alive its false hopes for a collective security agreement. Britain, the heart and soul of these efforts used Poland as its key instrument.

Moscow knew that Hitler was contemplating a westward aggression — it remained to be seen where he would turn first. In fact it was an open secret that Hitler had already devised the plans of attacking, conquering and subjugating the East and the West.

What can be said about Stalin's readiness to turn a blind eye to Hitler's plans in Poland (which had been prepared to side with Germany to attack Ukraine) in exchange of a breathing space for his country? Did he intend to seize the opportunity to restore the Russian imperial territory lost after the revolution? He was as pragmatic, or as cynical, as Sir John Simon who had informed Hitler on the eve of Anschluss that Britain was much less concerned about Austria than about Belgium. Indeed, what other path was open to Moscow when it had become clear that the West had not been prepared to guarantee the Polish and the Baltic borders, which left the Soviet Union an obvious aim of German aggression?

The Baltic states, in their turn, took pains to avoid any involvement in anti-German coalitions. American chargé d'affaires in Lithuania informed the U.S. Department of State that "the Baltic States were very anxious not to be mentioned as guaranteed states in agreements between groups of other powers and that they were, therefore, not pleased by the suggestion made recently by the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs to the effect that Great Britain guarantee the boundaries of those states bordering on the Soviet Union." The representative of Lithuania "went on to say that he hoped, with good expectations that his hopes would be ful-

filled, that the Western Powers and the Soviet Union would arrive at some formula covering the situation in Eastern Europe without mentioning by name any of the states in this region." The Lithuanian also suggested how the British guarantees to Poland could be realized in relation to Lithuania: "The Poles must regard an attack by Germany on Lithuania as a move to encircle Poland since under the agreement with Great Britain, Poland has the right to determine when Polish independence is threatened." ⁷

It was Ernst Nolte who first called the Soviet-German treaty a "pact of the war" and a "pact of partition" with no analogues in the European history of the 19th and 20th centuries, the terms that gained currency in the West. ⁸ This cannot but amaze. Indeed, there was any number of bilateral and multilateral treaties concluded in the imperial past and the "democratic" present at all times between the Treaty of Westphalia and the Dayton Accords which set borders for smaller and weaker countries; more often than not border agreements were reached out of limelight.

In Tilsit, Napoleon in vain invited Aleksandr I to do away with Prussia; to keep certain countries in check, the Congress of Vienna transferred the strategically important mountain passes to Switzerland; let me remind you that in his time Lenin said that the Congress of Berlin "had plundered Turkey." In 1908, having received permission from the Powers Austria annexed Bosnia. In 1905, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt and Premier of Japan Tarō Katsura signed a secret agreement under which Japan renounced its "aggressive intentions" in relation to the Philippines in favor of the United States while the latter recognized the right of Japan to occupy Korea. In Versailles, the Anglo-Saxon part of the Entente divided Austria-Hungary to the accompaniment of Woodrow Wilson's deliberations about "democracy and self-determination" by prescribing borders and the statehood to some and depriving others (the Macedonians) of them; they saw it fit to decide which parts (Galicia) should change rulers and how and which peoples (Serbs, Croats and Slovenians) should *volens nolens* live under one roof. In Potsdam, the Council of Foreign Ministers busied itself with drawing borders for others and deciding the fate of former colonies. In 1993, George Kennan had prefaced the reissue of the 1913 Report of the Carnegie Endowment with a call to the West to create a new territorial status quo for the Balkan states and apply force so that they should adhere to it. This was done in Dayton.

Hitler's geopolitical designs repeated what the pan-Germans had planned on the eve of World War I; in 1914, the Berlin intellectuals suggested that Germany should receive a new border along the Volga thus

challenging Christian Russia rather than the “communist ideology of the civil war.”

The Soviet-German Treaty of 1939 did change Hitler’s “timetable” thus making it less acceptable for the West. Having changed “nothing” but the timetable it also changed the postwar political landscape: the Anglo-Saxons were isolated from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the war and after it. Their hopes of removing this part of the continent from the Soviet orbit proved vain.

This makes the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 the biggest flop of the British strategy in the 20th century which explains Britain’s never alleviated urge to demonize it.

Britain would have preferred to join the war after Hitler’s attack at the Soviet Union, at Ukraine via the Baltic states (much less valuable than the “anti-Soviet” Poland on which the Entente had staked in Versailles and later). Britain offered its support and moved in to help Poland in 1939 in a hope that it would be but the first stage of Hitler’s march to the East where he would be eventually drawn into a hopeless war with the Soviet Union while Western Europe would survive at lesser price and would enter Eastern Europe from the west allegedly to defend it.

In his fundamental and detailed *Diplomacy*⁹ in which the subjectivism of a historian clashed with the diligence of an erudite researcher Henry Kissinger treated himself to the statement that “Russia played a decisive role in the outbreak of both wars” (p. 348). In the section called “The Nazi-Soviet Pact,” however, he backs away from his words to betray unwilling admiration. He cites Hitler who said on 11 August 1939: “Everything I undertake is directed against Russia. If the West is too stupid and too blind to comprehend this, I will be forced to come to an understanding with the Russians, to smash the West, and then after its defeat, turn against the Soviet Union with my assembled forces” (p. 346). Kissinger agrees that this was a “statement of Hitler’s priorities: from Great Britain he wanted non-interference in Continental affairs, and from the Soviet Union he wanted Lebensraum, or living space. It was a measure of Stalin’s achievement that he was about to reverse Hitler’s priorities, however temporarily” (p. 346). The maximum of the possible achieved in the complex situation which threatened the state’s very existence should be described as successful diplomatic tactics. Kissinger does precisely this when he describes it as an “amazing achievement” which “could have been taken from a treatise on eighteenth-century statecraft” (p. 350). Kissinger laments that “the Versailles international order

required that Great Britain's course be sustained by essentially moral and legal considerations" (p. 348). After the Stresa Conference everything that could be said about the loyalty to the principle of Versailles lost its meaning; more than that: everything that could be said about Great Britain's "moral and legal considerations" no longer applied after Anschluss and Munich. Kissinger, on his side, admitted: "Great Britain's reluctance to guarantee the Baltic States was bound to be interpreted by the paranoid leader in Moscow as an invitation to Hitler to attack the Soviet Union by passing Poland" (p. 348).

What were the territories the Soviet troops approached in the fall of 1939? Western Ukraine and western Byelorussia had belonged to the Russian Empire. In 1920, Józef Piłsudski captured them to be severely censured by the Entente vexed by his unbridled ambitions. This partly explains why on 4 October 1939 Lord Halifax speaking before the Lords said that even though he did not want to justify what the Soviet government was doing he deemed it necessary to remind the lords that, first, the Soviet government would have never gone to any length had not the German government set an example by invading Poland without a formal declaration of war; second, it should be borne in mind, said the British foreign minister, that the Soviet government merely moved the border to the line Lord Curzon had recommended at the Versailles Conference. Lord Halifax added that he was not in the habit of exonerating any government, the Soviet government in particular, except his own — he merely brought up indisputable historical facts.¹⁰ On 10 October, Churchill agreed with this.

Germany's warped aggressiveness and ambitions justified by semi-pagan Nazism were rooted in the humiliation at Versailles and the country's dismembering by the Anglo-Saxons; the Soviet Union had nothing to do with this. The Brits very much in the habit of lamenting Hitler Germany's economic upsurge should have looked back at their own tactics at Versailles which released Germany from economic reparations. This means that Germany's continuous economic progress was a direct outcome of Anglo-Saxon strategies, an object of Winston Churchill's incessant invectives between the wars.

A possibility of a Soviet-German stable *modus vivendi* was London's worst headache; in the early 1920s, the German society displayed a kind of Russophilia and a penchant for Russian culture. The specter of the Rapallo Treaty the Weimar Republic and the Soviet Union had signed in 1922 still bothered the British geopolitical strategists. Walther Rathenau

who had to disregard ideological differences for the sake of a way out of international isolation treated the Soviet Union differently from the mythical “kinship” the biased publicists ascribe to Hitler and Stalin in violation of historical truth. All responsible academics in the West likewise strongly object to the anti-scientific efforts to lump Nazism and Communist together.¹¹

In the heavily charged and rapidly changing atmosphere of the summer of 1939 when the war had been already unleashed on three continents the Soviet Union (like any other self-sufficient power) was engaged in a multi-vectoral foreign policy designed to achieve an acceptable security level. The Soviet leaders and diplomats gave the country two years to be prepared to the war. Moscow expected its much more active contacts with Berlin in August 1939 to add vigor to the talks with the democratic states. No matter how strange this may sound it was the contacts between Berlin and Moscow in August 1939 that forced Britain, France and the U.S. to pay more attention to the Soviet Union when dealing with international issues. This led to the anti-Hitler coalition when the Soviet Union entered the war.

NOTES

¹ *Die geheime Papiere F. von Holsteins. 3 Ausgabe*, B.3 Briefwechsel, Göttingen, Musterschmidt-Verlag, 1961, S. 213-216.

² “Posol Grzybowski — Litvinovu,” *SSSR v borbe za mir nakanune Vtoroy mirovoy voyny. Sentiabr 1938 g.-avgust 1939 g.*, Moscow, Politizdat Publishers, 1971, p. 265.

³ The document from the Secret TASS Bulletin of 23 March 1939 was declassified in the Archive of the RF Foreign Intelligence Service.

⁴ V.Ia. Sipols. *Tayny diplomaticheskie*, Moscow, Institute of Russian History, RAS, 1997, p. 39.

⁵ The document was declassified in the Archive of the RF Foreign Intelligence Service.

⁶ Foreign Policy Archives of the RF, Record group Molotov, Inventory 1 (b), por. No. 2, File 27, pp. 16-17.

⁷ “The Charge in Lithuania (Gufler) to the Secretary of State,” *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Soviet Union, 1933-1939*, Wash., D.C., the GPO, 1952, p. 936.

⁸ E. Nolte, *Der Europäische Bürgerkrieg, 1917-1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschevismus*, B., Propiläen, 1997, S. 310-311.

⁹ H. Kissinger. *Diplomacy* (A Touchstone Book). 1995.

¹⁰ Foreign Policy Archives of the RF, Record group 7, Inventory 4, ind. No. 19, File 27, p. 25.

¹¹ F-X. Coquin. “Europe,” Jan.-Fev. 2006; N. Narotchnitskaia. *Que reste-t-il de notre victoire? Russie-Occident: le malentendu*, P., Editions des Syrtes, 2008.