The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was signed in Moscow nine days before the beginning of the Second World War in Europe. It is named after the Soviet and German foreign ministers who signed it.

Officially it was a treaty guaranteeing peace between two nations that had previously shown great antagonism towards one another. However, it also included a secret protocol outlining the parts of Europe that each country wished to control.
1918
At the end of the First World War, Europe is in turmoil. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland declare their independence. Romania seizes Bessarabia from Russia.

1918–22
After a series of independence wars, the borders of Poland and the Baltic States become fixed.

1922
Germany and the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic sign a treaty at Rapallo in Italy. It re-establishes and strengthens military and economic relations between two nations.

1926
Treaty of Berlin, the first non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union.

1926
A police officer (left) and an SA brownshirt (right), one of 50,000 Nazis in Prussia appointed by the Nazi Party as a Hilfspolizei (auxiliary police) officer.

1933
Nazi Party comes to power in Germany.

1936
Spanish Civil War begins. German troops fight on the Nationalist side, while Soviet troops fight alongside the Republicans.

1939
April–July
Soviet Union calls off talks with Britain and France on the other.

21 August 1939
The Soviet Union calls off talks with Britain and France.

23 August 1939
Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact is signed.

21 August 1939
General Francisco Franco, leader of the Nationalists in Spain.
KEY FIGURES

Soviet side

Vyacheslav Molotov
Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs. His predecessor, Maxim Litvinov, had preferred a treaty with Britain and France, rather than with Germany. Soviet policy changed after Molotov replaced him in May 1939.

Joseph Stalin
Dictator, leader of the USSR. Stalin always was the real driving force behind Soviet foreign policy.

Count Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg
German Ambassador to the USSR. It was Schulenburg who did much of the diplomatic work to prepare the way for a pact.

German side

Joachim von Ribbentrop
German Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Count Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg
German Ambassador to the USSR. It was Schulenburg who did much of the diplomatic work to prepare the way for a pact.

Joachim von Ribbentrop
German Minister of Foreign Affairs.
THE AGREEMENT

Both sides agreed to desist from any act of violence, any aggressive action, and any attack on each other.

If one were to become involved in a war with another country, the other promised to remain neutral. In case of dispute, they would seek arbitration if necessary.

The treaty was to last ten years.

In a secret additional protocol, both countries declared which parts of Eastern Europe they wished to control.

The treaty was to last ten years.

The secret protocol

The Soviet Union declared its interest in regaining control of Finland, Estonia and Latvia.

Lithuania would fall within the German ‘sphere of influence’. (A later amendment would give the USSR control of Lithuania.) Both sides agreed that Vilnius should be included as part of Lithuania.

In the event of a ‘territorial and political rearrangement’ of Poland, the country would be split between Germany and the USSR.

The Soviet Union also declared its interest in Bessarabia, at that time, a region of Romania.

Stalin and Ribbentrop after the signature of the Soviet–Nazi German Pact. 23 August 1939.
The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact gave Nazi Germany the confidence to invade Poland without fear of reprisal from the Soviet Union. It attacked on 1 September 1939, thus beginning the Second World War.

The pact frustrated British and French plans to encircle Germany with hostile nations, as they had during the First World War. From 1939 to 1941, the Soviet Union provided Germany with large quantities of vital raw materials, which helped it to continue the war. Communists throughout Europe also followed the Soviet lead, and stopped criticizing Germany.

The end of the pact
The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact came to a sudden end on 22 June 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. German troops marched almost all the way to Moscow, before eventually being turned back.

Long-term consequences
The creation of German and Soviet ‘spheres of influence’ brought devastation to the whole region. Thousands of ‘political enemies’ were killed, and hundreds of thousands were deported to prevent them resisting. The pact paved the way for the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe after the Germans were defeated in 1945.

Europe
areas of influence in the agreement:
- German
- Soviet
The mission of the ‘Hi-story lessons’ project is to show European history of the 20th century from different perspectives. Underlining the need to teach history with an awareness that neighbouring countries may have a different viewpoint on the same historical fact is the project’s main aim. With ‘Hi-story lessons’ we strive to challenge how teachers and their students see the history of Europe – its diversity and complexity – even when there are conflicting opinions.

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ENRS is funded by:

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland

Ministry of State for Culture and the Media

Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic

Ministry of Human Capacities

Ministry of Culture