# THE MOLOTOV– RIBBENTROP PACT

Also known as the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the USSR
23 August 1939

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.
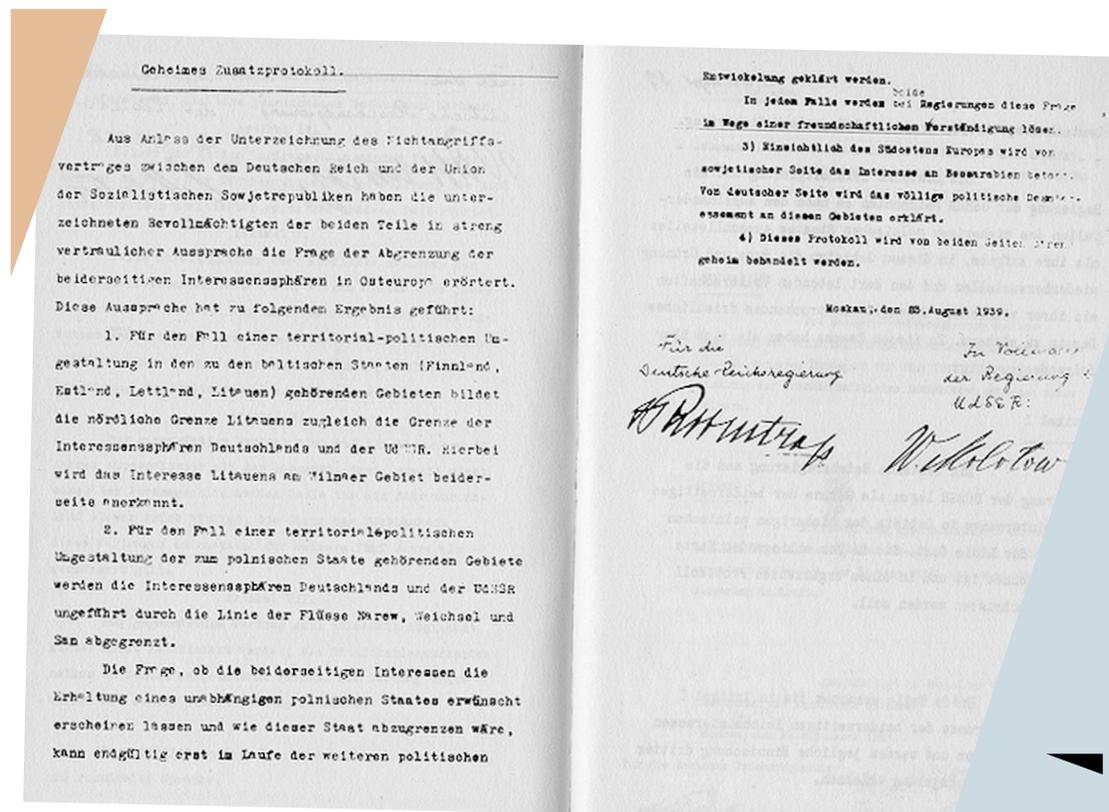
The secret appendix to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact naming the German and Soviet spheres of interest. This photo of the document was made by the defence of Joachim von Ribbentrop and Hermann Göring in the Nuremberg Trials in 1946.[1]

CIRCUMSTANCES

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.[3]

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.

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.

1933

Nazi Party comes to power in Germany.

April–July 1939

Soviets open simultaneous treaty talks with Germany on the one hand, and Britain and France on the other.

1918–22

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

Polish–Soviet War. Polish defences with a machine gun position in the village of Janki, near Miłosna, August 1920.[2]

1936

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

General Francisco Franco, leader of the Nationalists in Spain.[4]

21 August 1939

The Soviet Union calls off talks with Britain and France.

23 August 1939

Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact is signed.

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.[5]

Joseph Stalin

Dictator, leader of the USSR. Stalin always was the real driving force behind Soviet foreign policy.[6]
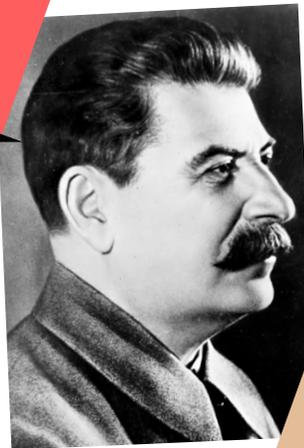
Count Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg

German Ambassador to the USSR. It was Schulenburg who did much of the diplomatic work to prepare the way for a pact.[7]
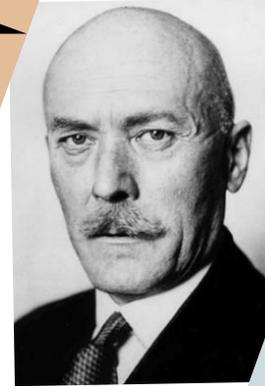
Joachim von Ribbentrop

German Minister of Foreign Affairs.[8]

German side

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.

Stalin and Ribbentrop after the signature of the Soviet–Nazi German Pact. 23 August 1939.[9]

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.

AFTERMATH

Germany

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.

USSR

On 17 September the Red Army also invaded Poland. Two months later, it also attacked Finland. In the following months, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Bessarabia were occupied, and incorporated into the Soviet Union.

Europe

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.

Finland

Estonia

Latvia

Lithuania

Free City of Danzig

Vilnius

Moscow

Soviet Union

United Kingdom

Berlin

Warsaw

Nazi Germany

Poland

Bessarabia

France

Romania

Spain

Europe in August 1939

Areas of influence in the agreement:

- German
- Soviet
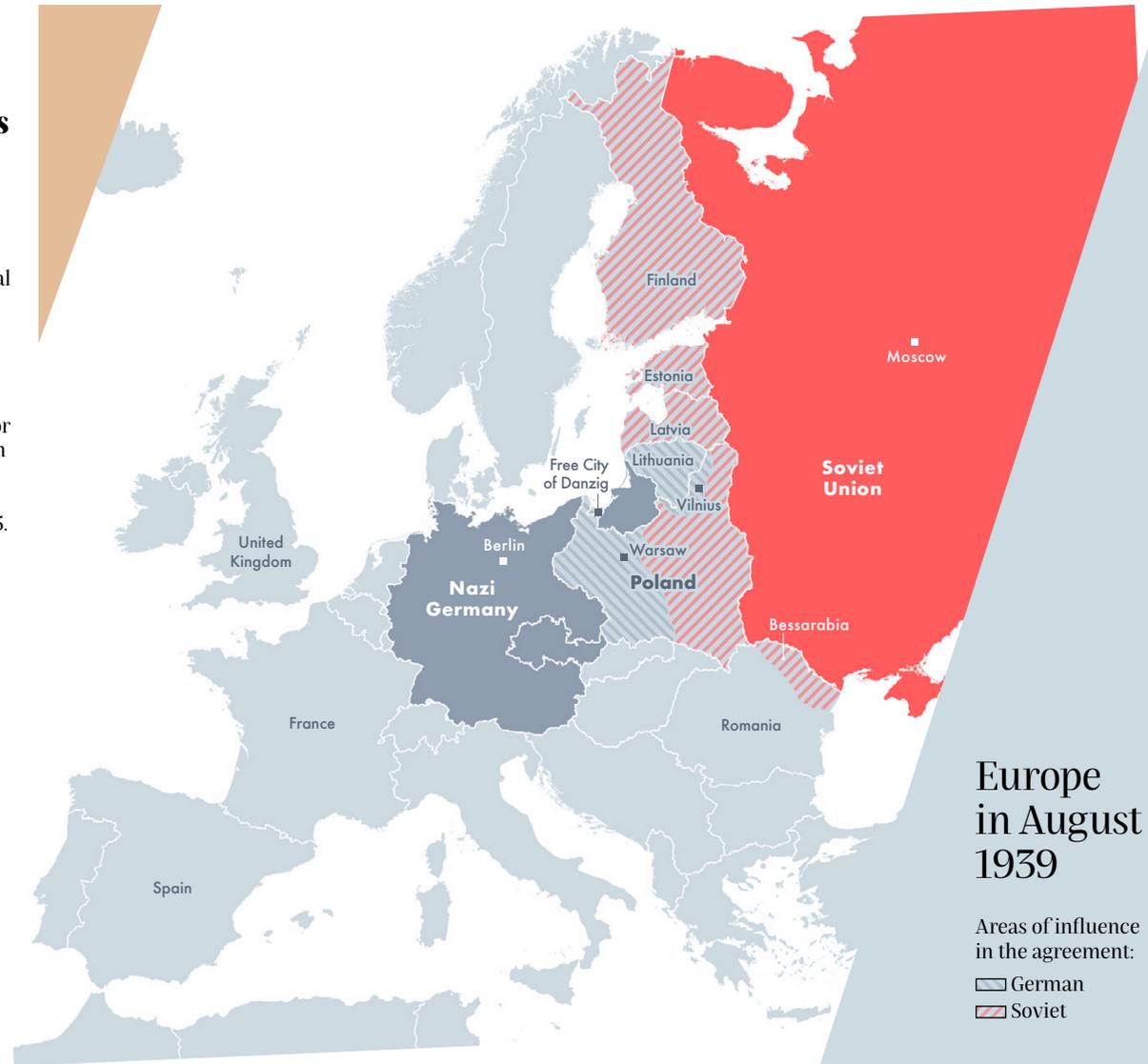
European Network Remembrance and Solidarity

Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact

Infographics prepared for the project 'Hi-story lessons. Teaching & learning about 20th-century European history'.

https://hi-storylessons.eu/
https://enrs.eu/

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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