

The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of the Second World War

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In June 2020 the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, wrote a long article in the American magazine *The National Interest* on the 'Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II'. In the article he tried to show among other things that Western historians and journalists regularly dismiss the decisive role played by the Red Army in defeating Hitler, and place blame on the Soviet Union for the pact with Hitler that led to the division of Poland. Putin claims that it was Poland's fault that war broke out in 1939 and blames Britain and France for the 'Munich betrayal' of the Czechs and the later abandonment of Poland, which collaboration with the Soviet Union would have avoided. These claims are examined in what follows to show that in many respects they are not the 'real lessons' but a distortion of reality.

The 'Importance of European Remembrance'

The decision of President Vladimir Putin to publish a lengthy article in the American conservative magazine *The National Interest* in June 2020 was prompted by a resolution on the 'Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe' agreed in the European Parliament on 19 September 2019. This resolution was itself a response to the Russian claim in August 2019 that Poland, the Baltic States and the Western Allies were the instigators of war in September 1939. The resolution rejected these claims and instead argued that the German–Soviet Pact (or [Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact](#), named after the two ministers of foreign affairs) signed on 23 August 1939 'paved the way for the outbreak of the [Second World War](#)'. The pact, the resolution continued, 'divided Europe into two zones of influence', both to become dominated by totalitarian dictatorships. Putin was right to contest this claim, since the pact made almost no difference to the earlier decision of the British and French governments to declare war if Germany invaded Poland. It was also incorrect

to claim that Europe was divided into two zones of influence. The secret protocols to the pact agreed only to divide part of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia into zones of influence, not Europe as a whole. But to argue instead that the blame for the war lies entirely with Poland and its unfaithful allies, Britain and France, is to turn historical reality on its head.



Joachim von Ribbentrop signing the non-aggression pact. Standing behind him are Vyacheslav Molotov (left) and Joseph Stalin (right).
Moscow, 23 August 1939.

Who caused the war?

It is remarkable how little Germany features in Putin's analysis of what caused war in 1939. Yet the answer to the question of who caused the war is straightforward: Germany's National Socialist leader, Adolf Hitler. Without his decision, taken in April 1939, to attack and destroy the Polish state in the late summer, there would have been no war. Right up to the German invasion on 1 September 1939, Hitler thought he could fight a local war against the Poles rather than a European war. The pact with the Soviet Union was designed to ensure that Britain and France would not intervene,

but Hitler miscalculated. The subsequent invasion triggered the guarantees both states had made and on 3 September the German–Polish war developed into a European war. **The 'blame' for war lies not with the Polish leadership but with Hitler and his armed forces.**

The answer is, of course, more complicated than just Hitler, but Putin has argued that there would have been no war at all if Poland, Britain and France had agreed a collective military pact with the Soviet Union to deter German aggression. This is a well-known argument, but it takes little account of historical realities. A military pact with the Soviet Union was not such a simple solution. The Soviet Union was a revolutionary communist state, hostile to Western capitalism and one keen to gain revenge for defeat by Poland in 1920. For Poland to allow the Red Army on to Polish soil was a great risk and not one the Polish government was prepared to make. In the event the Poles were right: when the opportunity came, Stalin invaded eastern Poland and incorporated the former Russian region into the Soviet state. Britain and France also had reason to distrust Soviet good faith in 1939 because both states were anti-communist and feared Soviet ambitions in Eastern Europe and those directed against their empires. The Soviet Union could pose as the 'honest broker' whose willingness to agree a military alliance was misunderstood, but Stalin had no desire to face war in 1939 against Germany that an alliance might have provoked. He preferred an agreement with Hitler because that would ensure that the Soviet Union faced no risk of being drawn into a war between 'capitalist' powers, and discussions with Germany were already going on while the military talks were taking place.

The German–Soviet Pact

Putin makes much of the argument that the Soviet Union had no alternative but to sign the German–Soviet Pact once Britain and France failed to agree a collective military alliance against Germany. Soviet motives were to achieve security against the German threat and to avoid involvement in the war, which is indeed the case. But although Putin acknowledges that the 'secret protocols', giving both sides agreed spheres in Eastern Europe, were condemned in December 1989 by the Supreme Soviet as 'an act of personal power' on Stalin's part, they were an integral part of the

agreement made between the two dictatorships. The key factor was the agreement on dividing Poland once Polish forces had capitulated and absorbing those parts of eastern Poland that had previously been part of Ukraine and Belorussia. Putin claims that the Red Army entered Polish territory only as a defensive measure once it was clear that Britain and France would not come to Poland's aid with military operations on the Western front, but it is evident that Stalin ordered the operation only once he could see that Germany would win quickly. He was happy to take back the 'lost' Russian territories with almost no effort.



A map attached to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, dividing Poland into German and Soviet occupation zones (28 September 1939). It was signed by Joseph Stalin and Joachim von Ribbentrop. It also features border corrections made personally by Stalin himself.



The map from the German-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Demarcation, 28.09.1939 [accessed 12 March 2021]. Available on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Mapa_2_paktu_Ribbentrop-Mo%5%82otow.gif

The secret protocols also permitted the Soviet Union to encroach on the sovereignty of the Baltic States. Putin's claim that this was part of the Soviet Union's 'defensive goals' is no justification for an act of naked territorial expansion; his assertion that the governments in the Baltic States consented on a 'contractual basis' is nonsense. With a gun held to their head, the Baltic States had no choice but to accept a Soviet presence and in June 1940 outright annexation. They found themselves, against the will of the great majority of the population, absorbed into a communist dictatorship.

Putin glosses over what these annexations in Poland, the Baltic States and, in June 1940, the Romanian provinces of Moldova and Northern Bukovina actually meant to the people who were forced to become citizens of the Soviet dictatorship. Soviet rule was harsh in the extreme, unquestionably violating existing ideas of human rights. In Poland more than 300,000 Poles were deported to Siberia, in the Baltic States over 50,000 more. Polish nationalists, intellectuals, priests and businessmen were rounded up and either murdered or sent to the Gulag. In the Katyn Forest thousands of Polish officers were murdered by the Soviet security forces in 1940; later when Poland was reoccupied in 1944 and 1945, the nationalist Polish Home Army was suppressed and its leaders sent to Siberia or killed. **Soviet rule meant extinguishing the national claims of the occupied populations.** The Western Allies agreed during the war that the Soviet Union could keep the territories it seized in 1939–40 only because there was no way of preventing a second Soviet occupation. Neither side emerged with much credit from the destruction of the independence and territorial integrity of these countries in 1945.

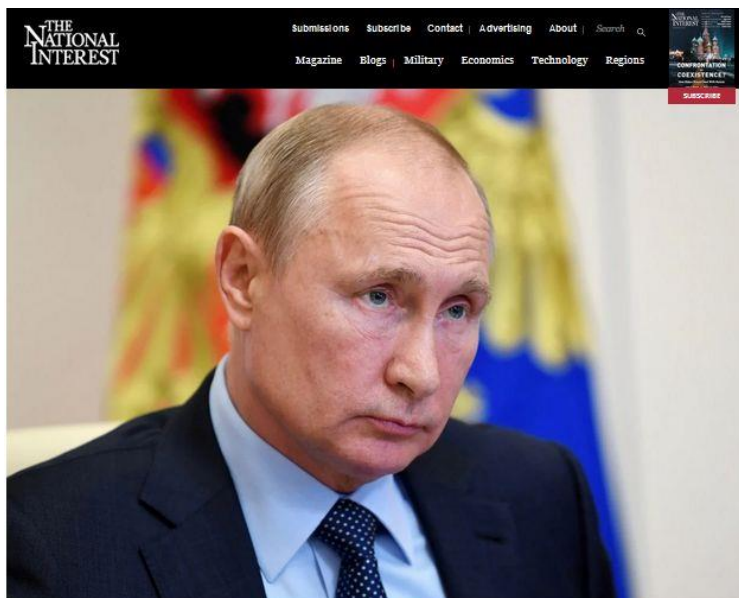
One of Putin's most remarkable claims to justify Soviet occupation of eastern Poland involves the Jewish population of the borderland areas, who were 'saved' from annihilation by the Nazis through Soviet expansion. It is important to recall the actual treatment meted out to the Jewish population in the Soviet-occupied areas was anything but benign. Rabbis were rounded up and shipped to the Gulag; synagogues were closed down and converted to warehouses; the Sabbath could no longer be held sacred; among the deportees around one-fifth were Jewish, that is an estimated total of 70,000 people. Jewish cultural and economic life was all but destroyed under Soviet occupation, as it was in the Soviet Union as a whole. Persecution of Jewish communities by the Soviet authorities was different from German only because there was no end goal of genocide.

President Putin also makes little of the Soviet war of aggression against Finland. Soviet policy was to give Leningrad greater strategic security by forcing Finland to cede territory and bases and when the Finnish government refused, Stalin ordered invasion. Without Finland's success in the early stages of the war against an ineptly led Red Army, Stalin might have taken Finland too into the Soviet orbit, and eventually, like the Baltic States, have made Finland part of the Soviet Union.

The simple truth is that Stalin gained a great deal from the pact in extending the borders of the Soviet Union, improving the Soviet strategic position in Eastern Europe, and in addition sealing a useful trade deal with the Germans.

Putin argues that Stalin refused to be drawn into any further agreement with Germany and cites Molotov's visit to Germany in November 1940 as proof. He, however, chooses to forget that the failure of the talks was a result of further Soviet demands for concessions in the Balkans and the Turkish Straits, which Hitler rejected. If Stalin had been granted these new steps into Eastern Europe, then he would comfortably have accepted yet a further deal with Hitler. Stalin was a realist. Collaboration with fascist Germany was expedient because it strengthened the Soviet Union's position in Eastern Europe at the expense of its neighbours.

Vladimir Putin, *The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II*, 18.06.2020 [accessed 20 April 2021]. Available on The National Interest: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>



The article entitled 'The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of the World War II' by Vladimir Putin, published on the website of the American magazine *The National Interest*.

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Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II

The Russian president offers a comprehensive assessment of the legacy of World War II, arguing that "Today, European politicians, and Polish leaders in particular, wish to sweep the Munich Betrayal under the carpet. The Munich Betrayal showed to the Soviet Union that the Western countries would deal with security issues without taking its interests into account."

by Vladimir Putin

The legacy of the Soviet war effort

In the end, Soviet strategy was undone with the German invasion on 22 June 1941. Putin is on safer ground when he complains that Western historians and governments have failed to acknowledge clearly the essential role played by Soviet armed forces in defeating Hitler's Germany and 'saving the whole world'. Over the past twenty years this situation has certainly altered in favour of a greater acknowledgement of the Soviet war effort with numerous histories of the German–Soviet War, but there is still an argument in the West that American economic might and Allied air and sea power were the real reasons why the Allies won, an argument that fails to accept that most of the German war effort was devoted to the Eastern front.

It is without doubt that the Soviet people and armed forces, which experienced a colossal level of sacrifice compared with the Western Allies, produced the weapons, armies and air forces needed to defeat German armies and eventually to capture Berlin. **The Soviet war effort was exceptional, and it was bought at great human cost.** But this has little to do with the argument about the outbreak of war or the years of the German–Soviet Pact. The blame in this case, too, lies entirely with Adolf Hitler and his plans to build a vast imperial territory in the East-Central Europe. Soviet victory did help to lay the foundations for a more stable post-war order and end centuries of European empire building. But the cost for Eastern Europe was to remain under the domination of a communist dictatorship, and for the peoples absorbed into the Soviet Union a further 45 years of totalitarianism. The German–Soviet Pact did not 'pave the way' for the outbreak of war, but it did leave millions of Europeans crushed between two dictatorships. That is the meaning of the resolution on the 'Importance of European Remembrance' agreed by the European Parliament.

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