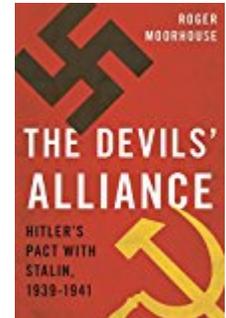


Roger Moorhouse. *The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact With Stalin, 1939-41.* New York: Basic Books, 2014. 432 pp. \$29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-03075-0.



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Seventy-five years after it was signed in August 1939, the Nazi-Soviet Pact has lost none of its allure for historians and readers alike. Little wonder. The pact was the great pivot point of the twentieth century and thus of modern history: in a secret protocol, the signatories divided east-central Europe into spheres of influence between their two totalitarian empires, Nazi Germany and the Communist USSR. The agreement assured Adolf Hitler that Moscow would not ally with the British and French to thwart his plans to redraw the European map by force, but that the Red Army would instead connive in the dissection of Poland. For twenty-two crucial months at least, the Führer thereby avoided Kaiser Wilhelm II's fatal blunder of fighting a great-power war on two fronts. With the invasion of Poland, the conflict already raging in China thus spread into the heart of Europe to become the Second World War.

Although no serious historian has disputed Hitler's ultimate responsibility for the war, arguments about the role played by Iosif Stalin began

in August 1939 and continue to the present day. Soviet historians and a dwindling band of Western scholars contend that Stalin was compelled to sign his deal with Hitler: the Western democracies through their policy of appeasing Nazi Germany had rejected Soviet efforts to organize "Collective Security" against Nazi, Italian Fascist, and Imperial Japanese aggression and were ostensibly driving Hitler eastward, against the USSR. Stalin merely turned the tables on London and Paris, enmeshing them in a fight with Nazi Germany while he bought time to bolster the USSR's defenses for an inevitable showdown with Nazism. No less a figure than Vladimir Putin has recently revived this line, telling a gathering of young Russian historians in November 2014 that Poland has no grounds for complaint about its vivisection at the hands of the Nazis and Soviets, since Warsaw had itself participated in the division of Czechoslovakia following the Munich Conference the previous year. As for the pact itself, Putin argued that war with Hitler was unavoidable, but that the USSR wished to remain out of the conflict for as long as

possible. He asked rhetorically: “What is so bad here if the Soviet Union did not want to fight?” Echoing Soviet-era histories, Putin claims that Stalin used the interval bought by the pact to prepare for a showdown with Hitler: “Every day was significant,” Putin claimed.[1]

Among the virtues of Roger Moorhouse’s lively popular history is that he gives his reader a sense of how historians’ understanding of the pact has changed over time as new sources have slowly emerged. In his own telling, he effectively refutes what he calls “the Kremlin’s postwar exculpatory line that Stalin was merely buying time by signing the pact.” In Moorhouse’s portrayal, “Stalin was much more proactive and anti-Western,” intentionally setting the imperialist powers at one another’s throats in the hopes of gain for the Communist, or more precisely the Soviet imperial cause (p. xxiv). “The Soviet Union,” Moorhouse writes, “saw the spreading of Communism as part of its *raison d’être*” (p. 15). He does not go so far as “Viktor Suvorov” (pen-name for Vladimir Rezun), who has argued in several discredited works that Stalin was actually preparing to launch his own preventative war against Nazi Germany once the latter was sufficiently bogged down and weakened by its conflict with the British empire.[2] In Moorhouse’s view, Stalin was an opportunist who sought to expand at the expense of the imperialist powers but if possible without actually having to fight them.

Moorhouse is no apologist for what he judges to be the maladroit diplomacy of France and Great Britain in 1939. He accurately describes Neville Chamberlain’s distaste for and distrust of the Communist state and his reluctance to sign a pact with Stalin. He carries this argument too far, however, when he claims that London and Paris dragged their feet during the failed negotiations of summer 1939. He also repeats the old Soviet canard that Britain demonstrated its insouciance about a defensive alliance by dispatching a military delegation to the USSR in August via a slow

ship, rather than airplane (p. 20). In fact, Britain and France had made a firm offer of an alliance more than a month earlier, and the Soviets, not the democracies, strung out negotiations, raising numerous objections and obstacles in hopes that Hitler would suggest a better deal, as he did. Moorhouse makes little use of Russian documents. These show that even before the hapless Allied delegation appeared, Stalin decided to grasp Hitler’s offer to negotiate a grand territorial bargain. Soviet foreign commissar Viacheslav Molotov informed the Germans of this on August 11, the very day the slow-boat Allied representatives arrived in Moscow.[3]

Moorhouse does not suggest what the Allies might have offered to induce Stalin to sign a defensive alliance. Their best hope was that an East-West pact might deter Hitler from launching a war to destroy a worldwide status quo that Stalin had repeatedly and openly denounced. Hitler, by contrast, gave Stalin the chance to remain on the sidelines of a fratricidal intra-capitalist war, and he was ready to consign to the Soviet sphere territory containing more than twenty-three million souls. This was a deal that Stalin could not refuse. A year later, the Soviet dictator explained to Britain’s ambassador why he had signed his pact with Hitler: “During the pre-war negotiations with England and France, the USSR had wanted to change the old equilibrium *for which these countries stood* [emphasis added], but ... England and France had wanted to preserve it. Germany had also wanted to make a change in the equilibrium, and this common desire to get rid of the old equilibrium had created the basis for the rapprochement with Germany.”[4]

Moorhouse describes in vivid and unsparing detail the consequences of the Nazi-Soviet bargain: the dismemberment of Poland and the violent murders, arrests, and deportations the Nazis and Soviets inflicted on their respective occupation zones. He provides a clear description of Stalin’s war against Finland, the occupation of the

Baltic States and Bessarabia (the core of current-day Moldova). He also delights in recounting the pretzel-like contortions of the international Communist community as it struggled to justify their idol's pact with the Nazi devil and to support Soviet expansionism and violence.

Moorhouse misses details at times. Regarding Soviet territorial gains during the pact, he writes: "all of them were long-standing Russian irredenta with some tradition of rule from Moscow" (p. 95). In fact, the far western portion of Polish Ukraine had never been part of the Tsarist empire, nor had the Romanian province of North Bukovina. He also argues that "the degree of premeditation and conspiracy involved in the Soviet subversion of the Baltic States is traditionally exaggerated" (p. 80). In his view, although Soviet forces occupied Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1939, Stalin only decided to incorporate them into the USSR in the spring of 1940. To support this contention, Moorhouse cites an October 25, 1939, entry in the diary of Georgi Dimitrov, the head of the Communist International, where Stalin says of the Baltics: "*We are not going to seek their sovietization. The time will come when they will do that themselves* [italics in original]."[5] A month before his comment to Dimitrov, however, Stalin revealed his intentions to Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, telling him that in Estonia and Latvia "the present governmental system, ministers and so forth will nevertheless *temporarily* remain in place [italics added]."[6] Moorhouse underestimates Soviet ability to organize seemingly spontaneous popular demonstrations at will.

Regarding Nazi-Soviet trade, Moorhouse corrects the general belief that only the Germans benefited, describing in detail the naval equipment and machine tools that the USSR received from the Reich. He rightly points out that this very industrial equipment later helped to construct the tanks and artillery that defeated the Wehrmacht. Moorhouse is less convincing when he downplays the significance of Soviet raw materials supplied

to Hitler's war machine. He contends that Soviet shipments to Germany were not critical during Hitler's defeat of France, becoming so only in the spring of 1941 when the prospect of an impending German invasion caused Stalin to accelerate deliveries in a vain attempt to appease Hitler. Here, Moorhouse benefits from hindsight. German planners lacked the luxury of knowing that France would capitulate as quickly as it did; in the event of a protracted war that virtually everyone expected in 1940, the Soviet lifeline would have been critical. This was certainly the view of the quartermaster general of the German army who wrote: "the conclusion of this [February 1940] treaty [with the USSR] has saved us."[7]

Moorhouse writes that "it is often lazily assumed" that Soviet petroleum supplies were vital to Germany, writing dismissively: "the idea that Hitler was dependent on Soviet oil between 1939 and 1941 simply does not withstand scrutiny" (pp. 180, 181). He correctly points out that Romania supplied four times more oil to Germany than did the USSR, and he notes that the German army "confiscated around 1 million tons of French oil stocks following the fall of France in 1940" (p.181). French oil was a one-time windfall, however, since that country had no domestic sources of petroleum. Ironically, a substantial portion of French supplies actually originated in the USSR. [8] As Adam Tooze points out in his brilliant study of the Third Reich's wartime economy, Hitler's conquest of western Europe actually worsened his energy situation, since he now had to supply the needs not only of Germany itself but also those of the Czech lands, France, the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and the Balkans. Moorhouse neglects the importance of marginal supplies. True, Romania sold Hitler more oil; but the Führer could scarcely do without Soviet shipments. Germany did not yet possess large-scale capacity to convert coal into fuel for vehicles.

Stalin was aware of Hitler's dependence on Soviet supplies, as he received regular and accu-

rate reports from his agent in the German Ministry of Trade, Arvid Harnack. Moorhouse mentions this key figure only once in passing, and he does not cite the many documents that Harnack passed to the Kremlin, some of which have been published in Russian. Stalin was also aware of another vital Soviet economic asset, which Moorhouse neglects: namely, given the British blockade of Germany, the USSR was the only route to the Reich for supplies from the Middle East, the Western Hemisphere, and Asia, including Berlin's ally Japan. Before Stalin sent his deputy Molotov to Berlin to negotiate with the Führer in November 1940, he reminded his emissary that this was the Soviet trump card.

So confident was Stalin of Nazi Germany's reliance on the Soviet raw-materials lifeline that he ordered Molotov to take a hard line with Hitler. Moorhouse believes that Stalin was dissatisfied with Molotov's performance during these talks. In fact, the foreign commissar stuck carefully to the detailed script that his boss had given him, changing it only when Stalin ordered him to do so via coded cables. Far from being displeased, Stalin congratulated Molotov, writing: "Your conduct in the negotiations we consider correct."^[9] Moorhouse also repeats the argument made by those familiar only with the German documentary record: that Molotov rejected Hitler's offer to join the Axis and participate in the partition of Britain's empire, "a gigantic world-wide estate in bankruptcy" in Hitler's words.^[10] On the contrary, in a note of November 25, which Moorhouse misinterprets, Stalin offered to join the Axis if the Germans would honor their agreement that Finland fell within the Soviet sphere; that Japan would surrender concessions in Sakhalin Island gained in the 1905 war against Tsarist Russia; if Hitler would agree that Bulgaria fell within the Soviet sphere and that the USSR should have bases on the Turkish Straits; and finally that the area south of the Caucasus toward the Persian Gulf should be recognized as a region of Soviet expansion. It is clear from Soviet documents that

Stalin believed that these demands would be the basis for further high-level negotiations, perhaps in Moscow. Ribbentrop himself—not Molotov—suggested Soviet expansion into Iran and a revision in the USSR's favor of the convention governing the Turkish Straits. As for Soviet aims in Finland and Bulgaria, although Hitler told Molotov that he did not wish to see a renewed Soviet-Finnish war, and he dodged Molotov's questions about Bulgaria, he did not state outright that these areas fell outside the Soviet sphere. In short, far from rejecting Hitler's offer to join the Axis, Stalin instead believed that he had *accepted*, provided that his conditions were met. Moscow waited impatiently for a reply to Stalin's counter-offer. When one never materialized, this provided one of the clearest indications that the Nazi-Soviet honeymoon was over.

In his closing chapters, Moorhouse persuasively shows how the USSR did not effectively use the twenty-two months of their pact with Hitler to prepare for an invasion, and how Stalin misread the many intelligence warnings he received. The result was the disastrous performance of the Red Army during the summer and early autumn of 1941. Moorhouse argues that Stalin hoped to delay a German attack for at least another year through appeasement and diplomacy. Most contemporary leaders misread Hitler. Chamberlain and Daladier had tried and failed to appease the Führer. Learning little from their example, Stalin tried the same approach in 1941, with even more catastrophic results. The Soviet people paid a very high price for Stalin's miscalculations.

Moorhouse wrote this book for the general reader, and it succeeds on that level, providing an excellent and vibrant introduction to the subject. Although most of his sources have been well mined by other historians, and the specialist may learn very little that is new, Moorhouse issues lively and sometimes provocative opinions about all aspects of this violent and crucial period. These alone make this a book worth reading.

Notes

[1]. “Встреча с молодыми учёными и преподавателями истории,” <http://kremlin.ru/news/46951>, accessed November 23, 2014.

[2]. Viktor Suvorov [Vladimir Rezun], *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990); and more recently, Suvorov, *The Chief Culprit: Stalin's Grand Design to Start World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009).

[3]. Molotov to Astakhov, August 11, 1939, Ministerstvo inostrannykh del SSSR, *God krizisa 1938-1939*, vol. 2, 2 iunia 1939 g.-4 sentiabria 1939 g.: *Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow: A/O ‘Kniga i biznes’, 1990), 184.

[4]. Memorandum of conversation between Cripps and Stalin, July 1, 1940, The National Archives, Great Britain, N6526/30/38.

[5]. Diary entry for October 25, 1939, in *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, ed. Ivo Banac (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 120.

[6]. Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi federatsii, *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki: 1939 god Tom XXII, Kniga 2* (Moscow: 1992), 606-617.

[7]. Quoted in Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (Cambridge: Viking, 2006), 321.

[8]. Gregory P. Nowell, *Mercantile States and the World Oil Cartel, 1900-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), table on 217. I thank my colleague, Professor John Brobst, for suggesting this source.

[9]. Stalin to Molotov, November 13, 1940, in *1941 god: v 2-kh knigakh*, ed. A. N. Iakovlev, vol. 1 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnaia fond ‘demokratiia’), 374.

[10]. Schmidt record of Hitler-Molotov discussion, November 15, 1940, in United States Department of State, Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Series D (1937-1945) DGFP vol. 11,

(Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1960), 541-549.

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