

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 313

“What Guarantee Is There?”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

[Some] think that war should be organized by a “superior race,” say, the German “race,” against an “inferior race,” primarily against the Slavs; that only such a war can provide a way out of the situation, for it is the mission of the “superior race” to render the “inferior race” fruitful and to rule over it...What may be the result of that? It is well known that ancient Rome looked upon the ancestors of the present-day Germans and French in the same way as the representatives of the “superior race” now look upon the Slav races...But what was the upshot of this? The upshot was that the non-Romans, i.e., all the “barbarians,” united against the common enemy and brought Rome down with a crash. The question arises: What guarantee is there that the claims of the representatives of the “superior race” of today will not lead to the same lamentable results? What guarantee is there that the fascist literary politicians in Berlin will be more fortunate than the old and experienced conquerors in Rome? Would it not be more correct to assume that the opposite will be the case?

Joseph Stalin, in his report to the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 313. What Guarantee Is There?

It’s been a while since I talked about the Soviet Union, back in episode 275, and a lot has happened in Europe since then, so let’s check in and see how Russia is dealing with it.

The Great Depression was seen by the Marxist-Leninist theoreticians at Comintern as an unmistakable sign that the final collapse of capitalism, long predicted yet equally long delayed, was finally at hand. In Germany, the country with the second-largest Communist Party, the Communists refused to make common cause with the Social Democrats, deeming lukewarm leftists a bigger impediment to the revolution than the political right. Alas, the ascendance of Adolf Hitler led to the rapid and brutal destruction of the socialist movement, in both its

lukewarm and boiling-hot varieties. The good news is: no leftist movement will ever make that miscalculation ever again.

[Ironic pause.]

In Moscow, Comintern responded to this disaster by reversing its policy and encouraging Communist parties in other countries to work in coalition with other left-leaning parties to oppose fascism, and possibly even bring about socialism through the democratic process. Who knows? It could happen.

In the US, the Communist Party dropped its opposition, supported Roosevelt and the New Deal, and tried to build a coalition with the Socialist Party. The result was a boom in Communist Party membership, at least by American standards. In China, Communists set aside their differences with the Nationalist Party and made common cause against the Japanese.

In France, Spain, and Chile, leftist governments were actually brought to power with the support of Communist votes in their respective parliaments. But as you know, in Spain, the new leftist government elected in 1936 soon found itself facing a military revolt. In France, the Popular Front made Léon Blum France's first Jewish and first socialist prime minister. Domestically, the French Popular Front introduced reforms such as recognizing the right of workers to bargain collectively and to strike, pay raises for government employees, and imposing a 40-hour work week.

But the rise of the Popular Front provoked a right-wing backlash in France, as it had in Spain, not to the point of civil war, but close enough to make more than a few people nervous, including Léon Blum, who was beaten almost to death by a right wing gang in 1936, shortly before becoming prime minister, an incident that he no doubt remembered well. The French Popular Front found itself, for the most part, unable to aid the Spanish Republic's Popular Front, despite their ideological affinities, owing to opposition from the French right wing and the British government.

Following the lead of Comintern, Communists everywhere, from New York to Paris to Hong Kong, were banging the drum and warning democratic nations of the threat of fascism. And as you know from our episodes on Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany, the fascist right had its own drums that it was banging just as hard, warning everyone about the insidious threat of Bolshevism.

The fact that the Communists were forever denouncing the fascists and the fascists were forever denouncing the Communists put the democratic world in a peculiar place. It was almost as if you were required to take sides in this grand ideological battle. If you rejected Hitler's anti-Semitism or Mussolini's war against Ethiopia or Franco's brutal repression, you felt as if you had to stand up for Stalin. Or, if you believed the stories coming out of the Soviet Union about mass

starvation and brutal purges, then maybe you had to stand up for, well, Franco and Mussolini at least, and maybe even...the other guy.

One major difference between Hitler and Stalin was that Hitler was open about what he believed. It was all laid out in *Mein Kampf*, after all. And it was all playing out in public: his anti-Semitism, his arrests and disruptions of the socialist and Communist parties, his distasteful racial theories, the book burnings, Germany's most famous artists and scientists turned away and made refugees.

These unprecedented and shocking developments grabbed the attention of the world, and diverted it away from Russia. The famine in Ukraine was unfolding just as Hitler became chancellor. The purges took place during German rearmament, the march into the Rhineland, the *Anschluss*, and the Sudetenland Crisis.

The Soviet government suppressed information about its own misdeeds and failures, insisting that the Soviet Union was a workers' paradise and these were vicious slanders spread by unwitting stooges of the fascists. Or maybe even witting stooges. Hitler played his expected role; one of his earliest speeches as chancellor was a denunciation of the famine in Ukraine. Here was a nation that should be the world's breadbasket, he declared, and its own farmers were starving. He argued this was clear proof of the failure of Bolshevism. But if Hitler was saying it, didn't that prove it was fascist propaganda?

By the way, please note that Adolf Hitler's preferred solution to the Ukraine famine would have been to expel everyone living in Ukraine and repopulate the place with Germans.

I talked about the First Five-Year Plan, the collectivization of agriculture, and that catastrophic famine of 1932-33 in episode 235. That famine led to the starvation deaths of millions of people, which in turn led to reforms to prevent a repeat of that catastrophe. Peasant farmers in collectives were each permitted a small plot of ground to grow crops for themselves and their families, as a way of guaranteeing a certain minimum supply of food for the farmers, and the state dialed back its exorbitant quota demands.

But it was impossible for Stalin or the Party to concede that Communism itself was responsible for mass starvation. The easiest alternative explanation was that it was foreign sabotage. The USSR was the world's only socialist state; it was simple and consistent with Communist theory to argue that capitalists around the world saw the very existence of the Soviet Union as a threat. First of all, it deprived the capitalists of access to the resources and production of the USSR itself, the largest nation in the world by land area, and that represents a lot of lost income. Second, the Communist Party in the Soviet Union was committed to sharing the blessings of socialism with oppressed workers and peasants everywhere, which inevitably meant it was a threat to capitalists everywhere.

So when things went wrong in the Soviet Union, the go-to explanation was never bad luck or bad planning, it was always sabotage, driven by foreign capitalists bent on destroying the Soviet system. There was no plot so insidious the capitalists would not resort to it. In 1937, the head of the NKVD, Nikolai Yezhov, the man in charge of carrying out the purges, told the Central Committee that saboteurs were surreptitiously castrating the Soviet Union's finest sheep, leaving only the inferior specimens to breed.

At least 600,000 people were executed during the purges, and many more were sentenced to imprisonment, forced labor, or exile to Siberia. As I noted before, if all the charges against all the accused were true, it would mean that 2% of the population of the Soviet Union were knowingly and willingly working on behalf of foreign interests to undermine the Soviet system. It's hard to take that claim seriously.

It's worth noting here that the Soviet Union is a multicultural state, and when these suspicions were raised concerning traitors working for foreign interests, the accused were disproportionately those who were members of ethnic minorities, especially, though not exclusively, to minorities who had compatriots living beyond the borders of the USSR. Ethnic Poles and Germans and Balts and Finns were obvious targets, but so were the Soviet Union's small Korean and Chinese minorities, not to mention Azeris, Armenians, Ukrainians, Jews, Belarusians...I could go on.

Of course, there were Jews and Ukrainians and Poles and Balts and so on among Party members, too, and even among the NKVD officials who were carrying out the purges. But remember too that being one of the officials conducting the purges did not make you immune from being purged yourself.

As a result, when the purges finally wound down in 1939, the Soviet government and the Communist Party were distinctly more ethnically Russian than before. In fact, the only Soviet minority that *didn't* come out of the purges with substantially reduced representation in the Party was Georgians. Need I point out that Stalin himself was Georgian?

Here's a striking historical fact: although the bigotry of Nazi Germany was drawing the world's attention from 1933-1938, during that same period, hundreds of thousands of people representing ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union were executed based on claims they were acting as foreign agents. In comparison, Germany saw fewer than 300 executions in total over the same period. I say this not to excuse Germany; things got much worse beginning with *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, but it's hard to miss the irony that during this period the Soviet Union was holding itself up as the antidote to fascist nationalism.

Just to give you an example, in 1936 the film *Tsirk*, or *Circus*, was released in the Soviet Union. It was written and directed by Grigori Aleksandrov, based on a stage play by Soviet writers and satirists Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov. You may recall I previously mentioned those two in connection with their 1928 satirical novel *The Twelve Chairs*. *Circus* was a musical comedy-drama about an American circus performer named Marion Dixon. The film opens with Dixon,

who is white and played by Lyuba Orlova, Aleksandrov's wife and one of Soviet cinema's biggest stars, fleeing a lynch mob with her infant son, who is Black. Presumably, the child's father died at the hands of this same mob. A German theatrical agent—who bears a striking resemblance to Adolf Hitler—helps her escape from the United States but abuses and exploits her. Finally, while performing in Moscow, she falls in love with a Russian man and finds happiness at last. The scheming German tries to force her to leave the Soviet Union with him by revealing to the Soviet public her shameful secret: that she has an illegitimate Black child, but the audience just laughs at him. The Russian characters lecture the Hitler stand-in on how matters of race or racial purity mean nothing in the Soviet Union and then force him to leave. Representatives of various Soviet nationalities then take turns singing a socialist lullaby to the small child, each in the language of their people: Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Uzbek, and Georgian.

So, no primitive racism or nationalism in the socialist state. Get it?

The film was the biggest hit Soviet cinema had yet seen—it has been called the Soviet *Wizard of Oz*—and was a personal favorite of Joseph Stalin. Here was the Soviet Union as Stalin and the Communist Party wanted the world to see it. And not only them, it seems. The film is still fondly remembered in the Russia of our time.

Anyway, even though the Soviet Union celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution in 1937, this fear that it might yet be brought down by counterrevolutionary enemies was not too farfetched. Consider the fates of the French Revolution, or the Revolutions of 1848, or the Paris Commune of 1870, or the Communist revolutions that broke out in Germany and Hungary and elsewhere at the end of the Great War. The lesson of history was that the struggle was not over when the revolution finally came. It was just beginning.

And history taught another lesson of which Stalin was only too aware. The October Revolution had only been possible because of Lenin, and Lenin had only been in Russia because Imperial Germany had allowed him to return, and of course, Imperial Germany had not done that out of any sense of proletarian solidarity; it had sent Lenin home to sabotage the Russian government and thus advance its own interests. The Soviet Union had many foreign enemies, and Stalin might have been the Lenin of today, as the slogan of the time asserted, but Stalin worried that in fact Trotsky might be the Lenin of today: in exile, but waiting for the right moment, when some imperialist or capitalist—or fascist—government sent him home to do to Stalin what Lenin did to Kerensky.

For years now, Trotsky had been criticizing Stalin and deploring Stalin's control over the Third International, while calling for a new, anti-Stalin socialist movement. In 1938, this call became official when a conference in France formed the Fourth International.

At this same time, Hitler's staunch opposition to Communism became official when Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936. Under the terms of this pact, Germany and

Japan would work together to oppose the spread of Communism, by sharing information about international Communist activities and coordinating anti-Communist operations.

The beauty of the Anti-Comintern Pact, from the German point of view, was this: the 1935 agreement between France and the Soviet Union revived the old alliance that had contained Germany in the old days by threatening it with a two-front war. The Anti-Comintern Pact now turned the tables. It implicitly threatened the Soviet Union with a two-front war, should it make aggressive moves against either Germany or Japan.

Italy would join the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1937. Spain and Hungary would join in 1939.

Soon after the creation of the Fourth International, the purges in the Soviet Union began winding down. The purges had been useful to Stalin; they had made him the undisputed ruler of the USSR and the iron fist of the Communist Party, but by 1938, it would have been difficult even for Stalin to miss the fact that these endless purges and terrors were disrupting Soviet society, the Soviet economy, and the Soviet military, damaging the Soviet state far worse than any conceivable network of spies and saboteurs could have done.

Stalin ended the purges in the most Stalin way imaginable: by purging the guy in charge of the purges, NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov, in November 1938, and replacing him with Yezhov's deputy, 39-year-old Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria. Beria had previously been Party leader in Georgia; he was an ethnic Georgian, like Stalin. Yezhov had attempted to purge Beria in early 1938, but Beria was warned and immediately flew to Moscow to plead his case before Comrade Stalin. Stalin was not only convinced of Beria's innocence, but it seems Yezhov's move against Beria might have been the last straw for Stalin, the final bit of evidence that persuaded him it was time to rein in the NKVD.

Stalin began by appointing Beria to be deputy leader of the NKVD under Yezhov. This tactic, of appointing a new deputy to someone about to be purged, purging them, and then giving their job to the deputy, was well known to Yezhov, the purger-in-chief, and the fact that Stalin had made the guy Yezhov was trying to purge into his own deputy was a sure sign that his days in the NKVD were numbered. Yezhov was already known to be a heavy drinker; after the appointment of Beria, he went from heavy drinker to reckless souse. He was never sober and seldom showed up at work, which conduct provided Stalin with just the excuse he needed for relieving him and appointing Beria in his place.

In April 1939, Yezhov was secretly arrested. The arrest was concealed not only from the public, but from most of the NKVD. As was standard practice in the Soviet Union, Yezhov was forced to confess to a litany of crimes, including incompetence, deliberate sabotage of the Soviet state on behalf of the German government, embezzlement of state funds, adultery, and homosexuality. Those last two charges might even have been true. He was executed in February 1940.

The Soviet government acknowledged that there had been excesses and injustices committed during the Great Purge, but blamed all of that on Yezhov. Afterward, NKVD repression lightened up, some, but for the rest of Stalin's tenure as leader of the USSR, purges and arrests and torture and forced confessions and imprisonment and exile to Siberia and execution would remain features of Soviet life, now overseen by Lavrentiy Beria.

Beria would remain head of the NKVD until Stalin's death in 1953, giving him the longest tenure as head of the secret police in the USSR's history and also making his one of the most infamous names in Soviet history, second only to that of Stalin himself.

[music: Khachaturian, *Sabre Dance*.]

One might reasonably ask, in view of this widespread paranoia in the Soviet Union regarding domestic spies and saboteurs working on behalf of hostile foreign countries, which foreign countries did Stalin and his government view as threats?

The United States and the United Kingdom, of course, since they were the world's two largest capitalist powers. Relations between the USSR and the US warmed a little during the Great Depression, when the Soviets were able to buy up American industrial equipment at Black Friday prices and jobless Americans were lining up to apply for work in Russia, helping to build the workers' paradise. But as the American capitalist machinery recovered, relations became strained once again.

France was just another imperialist, capitalist power; Italy was a fascist state that arrested Communists, but the nations Stalin and his government saw as the biggest threats were Poland, Germany, and Japan.

Poland, Germany, and Japan. It is likely not a coincidence that these are three countries that defeated Russia on the battlefield at one time or another in the twentieth century. On the other hand, you might be surprised to find Poland included on this list. I mean, Germany and Japan, sure, but Poland?

Nazi Germany was vocally anti-Communist, but in 1938, Germany and the Soviet Union did not share a common border. Germany was rebuilding its armed forces, but so was the Soviet Union in its Second Five-Year Plan. Most important, Germany had a lot of potential enemies, including Britain and France. How could Germany represent a threat to the USSR? The Germans would have to attack Poland first, and maybe Czechoslovakia as well, which would surely draw the British and French into the conflict, since France had formal alliances with both Poland and Czechoslovakia. It was hard to imagine Germany taking on another two-front war, after their experience in 1914.

On the other hand, one way a hostile Germany might escape these constraints is by allying with Poland against the USSR. As unlikely as this scenario might seem in hindsight, in the 1920s and

1930s, it definitely kept Soviet officials up at night. Poland had won a war against the USSR in 1920, episode 180, and it still held a chunk of territory in the east where the inhabitants were mostly Belarusian or Ukrainian, and not Polish. It had also aided Ukraine in that country's unsuccessful war for independence, and during the 1920s, Poland hosted Ukrainian freedom fighters on its territory, fighters who planned for the day when they would return to liberate their homeland.

On the Polish side, although they were hosting those Ukrainian rebels, the Polish government fully understood the risks of poking the bear. Poland's foreign policy during the Jazz Age was based on a realistic appraisal of the nation's geography, wedged as it was between Germany and Russia, two nations historically hostile to Polish independence, and so Poland sought amicable but arm's-length relations with both countries; hostile toward neither, but not too friendly to either one, lest the other take umbrage.

But it takes two to tango, and as you already know, throughout the Twenties and early Thirties, Germany would not recognize Poland or Poland's borders and trade between the two countries was limited. The USSR did have diplomatic relations with Poland, but these were often strained. In 1927, as the USSR and Poland were negotiating a non-aggression agreement, the Soviet ambassador in Warsaw, 38-year-old Pyotr Lazarevich Voykov, was shot and killed by a 19-year-old anti-Communist Russian living in exile in Poland named Boris Sofronovich Kowerda. He told police afterward that he had murdered Voykov to "avenge Russia." Voykov had taken part in the decision to execute the Russian Emperor, Nikolai II, and his family in 1918. In 1927, it was widely believed that Voykov had actually been one of the executioners. That was not true, but young Kowerda probably believed it was.

The Polish government expressed its condolences to the family and to the Soviet government and prosecuted Kowerda for murder. But despite the Polish government's official position, the Polish public applauded the killing and pressed for leniency for the killer. A Polish court tried Kowerda and sentenced him to life in prison; Polish President Ignacy Mościcki commuted the sentence to 15 years. He was eventually released in 1937, after just ten years in prison.

The Soviet government was sufficiently displeased with Kowerda's light sentence and the way so many Poles were treating him as if he were a hero, to break off those negotiations. They resumed four years later, in 1931—I'll tell you why in a minute—and this time led to the signing of a Soviet-Polish non-aggression pact in 1932.

The existence of a non-aggression treaty between Poland and the Soviet Union was cause for concern in Germany. As you already know, in 1934, the Hitler government surprised a lot of people by signing its own non-aggression declaration with Poland.

The agreement between Germany and Poland was useful for German propaganda purposes. Hitler liked to point to it whenever he was accused of preparing for war, which happened frequently. From Poland's point of view, it now had non-aggression agreements with both of its

larger neighbors and a security guarantee from France. So Poland was feeling pretty confident after 1934. Perhaps too confident.

For starters, the German-Polish non-aggression agreement was viewed with suspicion in Moscow. There was nothing wrong with the agreement itself, but the Soviets wondered if it perhaps it included a secret anti-Soviet alliance. In fact, it didn't, but it might have. Treaties with secret terms were a staple of old school diplomacy. Remember how Woodrow Wilson wanted to outlaw secret treaty agreements at the Paris Peace Conference?

In 1930, Maxim Litvinov was appointed People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, that is to say, Soviet foreign minister. We've met Litvinov before, but let me introduce him formally. He was born Meir Henoach Wallach on July 17, 1876, to a Jewish Lithuanian family in Bialystok, in what was then the Russian Empire. He was discharged from the Russian Army in 1898 after refusing an order to shoot striking workers, and afterward joined the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. You'll recall that Party membership was illegal in Russia and so he adopted Maxim Litvinov as a pseudonym. He was arrested, served time in prison, escaped, and fled to the West, where he lived as a revolutionary exile in Switzerland, France, and finally Britain. In the course of his life in exile, he hobnobbed with Lenin and Stalin and other Russian socialist leaders. He was present at the London conference in 1903, where the SDLP split into its Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. Litvinov sided with Lenin and the Bolsheviks, meaning he was as old a Bolshevik as an old Bolshevik could be.

He lived ten years in Britain and married a British woman named Ivy Low. After the Revolution, Litvinov became a deputy commissar of foreign affairs, under Georgy Chicherin, whom we've also already met, and then Commissar himself in 1930.

Litvinov was a committed Bolshevik, but he was also a believer in normalizing the Soviet Union's relations with the rest of the world. Because Stalin had known him for a long time and his Bolshevik credentials were unimpeachable, Stalin trusted him and gave him considerable leeway in conducting Soviet foreign policy.

In 1933, Litvinov scored an important diplomatic win in normalizing the Soviet Union's relations with the United States. I told you about that in episode 290. Litvinov supported the Kellogg-Briand Pact and Soviet membership in the League of Nations. And Litvinov had been instrumental in restarting those peace talks with Poland, the talks that had led to the 1932 Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.

The peace agreement with Poland left Germany and Japan as the two biggest threats to the USSR. Litvinov accepted the Wilsonian principle of opposing aggression through collective security agreements, and sought to build collective security arrangements with the Western powers as a way of containing Germany and Japan.

In 1935, Litvinov secured a treaty with France. If you think back to the early days of the podcast, you will recall that the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1894 helped keep Germany restrained for twenty years, by threatening to meet any German aggression with a two-front war. That agreement was broken by the Bolsheviks when they quit the war in 1918. A revival of the agreement could potentially restrain Germany once again.

But this agreement was not embraced by the French nearly as enthusiastically in 1935 as it had been in 1894, for one big reason: Russia was a Communist state now. French foreign minister Pierre Laval, among others, had reservations about this agreement. It might one day force France to go to war to defend the Soviet Union, the very same revolutionary state that had betrayed France during the last war, supported the French Communist Party, and explicitly called for worldwide revolution.

In the end, the agreement with the Soviet Union was made contingent on the Locarno agreements that France had signed with Britain and Italy, which meant that the mutual assistance pledged by the treaty would only come into force if the British and the Italians also agreed. Still, the threat was out there, and it might restrain Germany a little bit, maybe? Although, as you'll recall from episode 286, when Hitler ordered German soldiers into the Rhineland, he used the Franco-Soviet agreement as his justification, so there's also that.

Shortly after the French agreement, the USSR and Czechoslovakia agreed to their own Treaty of Mutual Assistance. France and Czechoslovakia were already allied, so in principle, all three countries were now in a network of mutual alliances that meant war against any one of them would mean war against all three.

You might think that means Czechoslovakia is pretty secure. But if you've been paying attention, you know that Germany seized first the Sudetenland, and later Bohemia and Moravia, without a single shot fired, by the Czechoslovak military or by anyone else's. How'd that happen?

Well, as you know from episode 305. Czechoslovakia was under considerable pressure, primarily from Germany, but also from Poland and Hungary. British prime minister Neville Chamberlain arranged the Munich Conference, where the leaders of Britain, France, Italy and Germany decided that Czechoslovakia must cede the Sudetenland to Germany.

When this story of the Munich Conference is told, it is often noted that representatives of Czechoslovakia were not invited to the conference that decided their nation's fate. Less often noted is that the Soviet Union was not invited to the Munich Conference either, even though the Soviet Union had this bi-lateral mutual assistance agreement with Czechoslovakia.

Now, since the Soviet Union was not a party to the Munich Agreement, it could have chosen to uphold its treaty obligation and take military action in defense of Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, the Czechoslovak government itself reluctantly acceded to the Munich Agreement; it would have been hard for the Soviet government to justify military intervention in defense of a

nation that was not defending itself. On the other other hand, if the USSR had offered to intervene, that offer might have stiffened Czechoslovakia's resolve.

But look at it from Stalin's point of view. The liberal-capitalist democratic governments of Britain and France, faced with brazen German aggression, decided they would rather throw Czechoslovakia to the wolves than see German bombers drop explosives on the lovely little bourgeois homes of Paris or London. That would have left the USSR facing the German war machine alone. No one in the Soviet government had forgotten what happened the last time Germany went to war against Russia, and that was when Germany was fighting a two-front war. Imagine what a one-front war against Germany would look like.

And then there was Poland, a nation whose government might have decided as a matter of policy that it was in its own self-interest to deter Germany from picking on smaller Eastern European countries. Instead, Poland joined in, making its own demands on Czechoslovakia. Hungary did the same.

The Soviet government did go so far as to send the Polish government notice that it would regard the Soviet-Polish non-aggression agreement nullified if Poland moved against Czechoslovakia, although the USSR did not follow through on that threat when Poland went ahead and moved against Czechoslovakia anyway.

In Moscow, Maxim Litvinov continued to believe that the best way to restrain Hitler's Germany was a three-way alliance between the USSR, Britain and France. In April 1939, a month after Germany occupied the rest of Bohemia and Moravia and declared them a German protectorate, Litvinov made a proposal to that effect to Joseph Stalin: a three-way alliance that would also guarantee the borders of those European nations that bordered on the Soviet Union, especially Poland, Finland, and the Baltic States. Stalin approved the proposal.

The Soviets opened talks with the British and the French, but the Soviet proposal was not greeted with enthusiasm by the British, who also persuaded the French to hold back. For one thing, there was the problem of Poland. If, say, Germany attacked France and the USSR was to come to France's defense, that would require Poland to grant permission for the Red Army to move through its territory. The Polish government refused to consider any such arrangement, and without it, how much assistance could the Soviet Union realistically offer?

Also, there were many people in Britain and France, particularly on the political right, who well remembered how the Bolsheviks had disregarded Russia's alliance commitments in 1918 and made a separate peace with Germany. Given that history, how can you trust the Bolsheviks now? Not to mention twenty years of Communist efforts to export the October Revolution to the rest of the world. The Bolsheviks were loyal only to the Revolution, and would happily leave Britain and France hanging, if it would bring their precious Revolution one day closer.

And on the other side, Stalin had good reasons not to trust the West. Just within the past few months, the British and French had been willing to throw Czechoslovakia, a fellow bourgeois democracy, to the wolves to save their own skins and they had been willing to see the right-wing Nationalists crush democracy in Spain, rather than see Communism take root there. Given this history, could they really be expected to go to war in defense of the Soviet Union? That seemed unlikely. It seemed far more likely the British and French would be happy to watch from the sidelines while fascist Germany and Communist Russia fought to the death.

The Nazi government in Germany, meanwhile, was attacking Litvinov personally, making much of the fact that he came from a Jewish family, though he was not religious himself. The Nazis liked to call him Finkelstein, which was an insult as far as the Nazis were concerned.

On May 3, 1939, Stalin met with Litvinov and informed him that the Soviet government had decided to make an effort to improve relations with Germany, and since Litvinov was Jewish and his opposition to Germany was well known, he was not the right person to pursue this new policy. Litvinov then resigned at Stalin's request, although he remained a member of the Central Committee and retained a voice in government policy.

To replace him, Stalin appointed another Old Bolshevik, 40-year-old Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich Molotov. Molotov had served as Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, making him effectively the prime minister of the Soviet Union, since 1930. Now he would serve as foreign minister. Stalin would take over the premiership himself.

And so in May, after this reshuffle took effect, the Soviet government inquired of Berlin whether the German government would be willing to discuss a non-aggression agreement.

At first, the German Foreign Office rebuffed the Soviet initiative. Hitler had declared on a number of occasions that there could be no peace with Bolshevism, no truce with Bolshevism.

In fact, German diplomats had for five years now been querying the Polish government about the possibility of German-Polish alliance against the Soviet Union. Poland had a right-wing nationalist government wary of the Soviet Union as well as of its own Jewish community. So there seemed to be some common ground with the Nazis, but the Polish government, however fascist-curious it might have gotten, preferred to maintain that longstanding policy of amicable but even-handed relations with its powerful neighbors.

The German Foreign Office had proposed such talks with Warsaw as recently as January 1939. The Polish government declined, as it had on every previous occasion. But this time it was different, as far as Adolf Hitler was concerned. With Czechoslovakia now dispatched, he was keen to get on with it. If Poland would not assist Germany in seizing its next acquisition, then Poland would become its next acquisition.

The British and the French had vowed to go to war to defend Poland's borders, but Hitler didn't take these pledges seriously. Still, just in case they actually meant it, it would be crucial that Germany not be forced into another two-front war. That meant the Soviet Union had to be kept neutral.

In other words, and in Hitler logic, if a German-Polish alliance against the Soviet Union was out of reach, how about a German-Soviet alliance against Poland?

To the surprise of many, Germany and the USSR signed a trade deal in the summer of 1939; then on August 20, Hitler sent Stalin a message asking that the Soviet government receive the German foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, no later than the 23rd. Stalin agreed, and on the 23rd, Ribbentrop arrived in Moscow, where he was greeted with swastika banners decorating the capital of the state where the workers ruled.

When Ribbentrop met with Molotov, the two foreign ministers soon discovered they had something in common: a distaste for the existence of Poland. They agreed between themselves that Poland was an abomination, forced upon both their countries by the Western imperialists meeting in Paris. That same day, they signed an agreement.

At the time, it was announced as a treaty of non-aggression between Germany and the USSR. Who could possibly oppose such a thing? In principle, Poland, Germany, and the Soviet Union had now all made mutual commitments not to go to war with each other. In principle, the three agreements would secure peace in Eastern Europe.

Ah, but this agreement did have secret protocols. These secret protocols would not become public knowledge until 1945, and when they did, this agreement became infamous. Germany and the Soviet Union secretly divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence. Germany would get most of Poland and Lithuania. The Soviet Union would get eastern Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and Bessarabia.

In our time, this agreement is usually referred to as the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the Hitler-Stalin Pact, or the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and its signing opened the way for Hitler to make war on Poland, with Stalin's consent.

In the West, it is generally seen as a shameful betrayal on Stalin's part that led to the Second World War. It is interesting to consider the historical alternative, that is, that the Soviets and the British and the French had found a way to come together on a mutual assistance treaty. Certainly, the history of Europe in this era would have played out much differently, and probably for the better; not least for Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Alas, the three countries could not overcome their mutual distrust.

Keep in mind that Hitler never really believed Britain and France would go to war over Poland, but the beauty of this agreement for him was that even if they did, the Soviet Union had agreed

in advance to stay out of it, in exchange for some territorial concessions, which meant that Britain and France would be unable to give Poland any meaningful assistance. That alone would probably keep them from declaring war, but even if they did, Poland would still fall, and then Germany could turn its attention to the West.

Internationally, that earlier trade agreement between Germany and the USSR was a big surprise, and the non-aggression agreement positively shocking. Many Communists in Western countries saw the Soviet Union's staunch opposition to fascism as the very best argument for supporting Communism. Now, overnight, Stalin and the Soviet government had declared that fascism was no big deal. We can live with it. In the West, some Communists reversed course as quickly as Stalin had, and began defending the pact, defending Germany, defending Nazism. Many other Western Communists became disillusioned and left the Party. In many countries, Party membership numbers would never recover.

In Tokyo, the Japanese government regarded the agreement with alarm. The implicit German-Japanese alliance contained in the Anti-Comintern Pact was now gone. If the Soviet Union went to war against Japan, Japan would stand alone.

But from Stalin's point of view, there was much to like. Remember the Communists' historical puzzle: Why hadn't the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia spread across borders and engulfed the world? The best Marxist-Leninist theoreticians suggested that when revolution was imminent, the capitalists had shrewdly pulled back just in time and ended their destructive war.

But the fundamental contradictions of capitalism remained, the theoreticians said. The end of capitalism had merely been postponed. When the Great Depression struck, it sure looked as if those fundamental contradictions had reasserted themselves.

Now Europe was on the brink of war once again, not so much a new war as a resumption of the old one. The genius of the pact with the Germans was this: now the war would be fought between the liberal capitalists and the fascist capitalists, while the Soviet Union would reclaim most of the pre-war Russian territories it had lost in the last war. The capitalists could fight until their mutual destruction, while the Soviet Union would stand aside, continue to build its military, and wait for the return of the revolutionary moment.

That was Stalin's strategy, and it would remain Stalin's strategy for nearly two years. To be exact, until June 22, 1941.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Marek for his kind donation, and thank you to Axel for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Marek and Axel help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue this story thread. With the threat from the Soviet Union eliminated, Adolf Hitler promptly leads his nation into another international confrontation, this time over the Polish Corridor, and the Nazi id is unleashed. Here We Go Again, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In that 1936 Soviet film, *Circus*, the young child at the center of the story was portrayed by three-year-old James Lloydovich Patterson. His father, Lloyd Patterson, was himself just 22 years old in 1932, when he traveled to the Soviet Union along with Langston Hughes and a group of other African Americans to participate in a joint Soviet-German film project titled *Black and White*, which was meant to examine racism in the United States.

The film was never made, and most of these Americans returned home, but Lloyd Patterson had fallen in love with an ethnic Ukrainian Soviet artist named Vera Ippolitovna Aralova. They had three sons together. The eldest, born in 1933, was James Lloydovich Patterson. His appearance in *Circus* in 1936 made James Patterson famous, and he would remain the most famous Black Soviet citizen in the USSR.

His father, Lloyd, also appeared in a Soviet film that same year, *Tom Sawyer*, adapted from the book by Mark Twain. Lloyd Patterson was injured by a German bomb in Moscow in 1942, and subsequently died from his injuries, at the age of just 32.

Young James grew up a member of Komsomol, the Communist Youth League, and attended a naval academy in Riga, graduating in 1951 and receiving a commission in the Soviet Navy. He served as a submariner in the Black Sea Fleet from 1955-1960. While he was serving in the Navy, he began writing poetry. His first book of poems, *Russia. Africa*, was published in 1963. James Patterson left the Navy to study at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow, and published a number of books of poetry and prose over the next twenty years.

He remained close to his mother and his brothers and kept in touch with his American relatives, visiting the USA frequently. He also remained on close terms with Lyuba Orlova, the actor who played his mother in *Circus*. Orlova and Patterson performed together on tour. She sang; he read selections from his poetry.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and with his mother in poor health and circumstances in Russia difficult, James Patterson and his mother emigrated to the United States. He took care

of her, while still writing poetry in Russian and English. His mother, Vera Aralova, passed away in 2001, at the age of 90.

As of the release of this episode, James Lloydovich Patterson is still very much with us at the age of 89, though, alas, reportedly in poor health. He lives in Washington DC, and he still writes poetry.

[music: Closing Theme]

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