

**INTERWAR EUROPE  
(1919-1939): NAZI-  
SOVIET PACT OF 1939**



# INTERWAR EUROPE (1919-1939): NAZI-SOVIET PACT OF 1939

## Description

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the provisions of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, why the two ideological enemies signed the pact, and what the consequences were for Eastern Europe as a result of the pact.

## Subjects

European History  
World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Kremlin, Moscow
- Monuments in Warsaw, Poland

## Essential Questions

What were the provisions of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939? Which provisions were made public?

Which ones were kept secret?

Why did each side desire the agreement in 1939?

What were the consequences for Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939?

## Academic Summary

### Agreement Concluded at Moscow, 23 Aug 1939

The Government of the German Reich and The Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics desirous of strengthening the cause of peace between Germany and the U.S.S.R., and proceeding from the fundamental provisions of the Neutrality Agreement concluded in April, 1926 between Germany and the U.S.S.R., have reached the following Agreement:

Article I. Both High Contracting Parties obligate themselves to desist from any act of violence, any aggressive action, and any attack on each other, either individually or jointly with other Powers.

Article II. Should one of the High Contracting Parties become the object of belligerent action by a third Power, the other High Contracting Party shall in no manner lend its support to this third Power.

Article III. The Governments of the two High Contracting Parties shall in the future maintain continual contact with one another for the purpose of consultation in order to exchange information on problems affecting their common interests.

Article IV. Should disputes or conflicts arise between the High Contracting Parties shall participate in any grouping of Powers whatsoever that is directly or indirectly aimed at the other party.

Article V. Should disputes or conflicts arise between the High Contracting Parties over problems of one kind or another, both parties shall settle these disputes or conflicts exclusively through friendly exchange of opinion or, if necessary, through the establishment of arbitration commissions.

Article VI. The present Treaty is concluded for a period of ten years, with the proviso that, in so far as one of the High Contracting Parties does not advance it one year prior to the expiration of this period, the validity of this Treaty shall automatically be extended for another five years.

Article VII. The present treaty shall be ratified within the shortest possible time. The ratifications shall be exchanged in Berlin. The Agreement shall enter into force as soon as it is signed.

[The section below was not published at the time the above was announced.]

Secret Additional Protocol.

Article I. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and U.S.S.R. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is recognized by each party.

Article II. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San.

The question of whether the interests of both parties make desirable the maintenance of an independent Polish States and how such a state should be bounded can only be definitely determined in the course of further political developments.

In any event both Governments will resolve this question by means of a friendly agreement.

Article III. With regard to Southeastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterestedness in these areas.

Article IV. This protocol shall be treated by both parties as strictly secret.

Moscow, August 23, 1939.

For the Government of the German Reich v. Ribbentrop

Plenipotentiary of the Government of the U.S.S.R. V. Molotov

23 Aug 1939 ...

News out of Moscow flashed across the wires and radio broadcasts. Europeans around the continent read their daily newspapers in stunned disbelief. Early that morning, Hitler's Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, countries that by all accounts were ideological opposites, had signed a non-aggression pact, supposedly guaranteeing peace and security in Eastern Europe. As the British and French tried to make sense of the pact, millions of Poles braced for an invasion they were sure was coming.

What the world didn't know was that there was also a secret second part of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, one that essentially split Eastern Europe between Germany and the USSR. The Baltic States (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania) were given to the USSR. Germany was granted a "sphere of influence" west of the Vistula River in Poland. The USSR was given a "sphere of influence" east of the same river. Hitler's motives for signing a pact of non-aggression with Stalin were clear. Weeks earlier, the fuhrer had told his top military men that an invasion of Poland would be necessary as Germany strove to right the wrongs of Versailles. Unlike his previous moves in Austria and Czechoslovakia, Hitler knew that any invasion of Poland would bring a British and French response. On 31 May 1939, after the Germans had violated the Munich Agreements and had occupied all of Czechoslovakia, British and French ministers had issued a joint statement guaranteeing Polish independence and promising to intervene if the Poles were invaded.

Hitler did not fear the British and the French. What he feared was a two-front war with Germany caught in the middle between an Anglo-French alliance and the Soviet Union. That same strategy had doomed German war efforts twenty-five years earlier. Hitler knew he would eventually go after all three, but he needed to do it piecemeal. Securing his eastern flank in the upcoming war with Poland was priority #1 to the Nazi leader.

Stalin also needed a non-aggression pact. Soviet society was hardly prepared for a war with his ideological nemesis to the west. The "purges" of the previous decade had decimated the Red Army officer corps. There were plenty of "volunteers" to wear the uniform, but how would Stalin equip them? Soviet spies in Germany had reported that the Wehrmacht soldiers were equipped with the best and latest weapons. The Luftwaffe was reported to be the best air force on the continent. What the USSR needed above all else was time to build its stockpiles. A buffer zone on his western flank would be nice as well. Stalin realized that war with Germany was inevitable, but the Soviets stood a better chance of winning one that started in 1941 or 1942 than they did one that started in 1939. Perhaps the British and the French would tie down Germany in Western Europe (such as they had done in 1914) until the Soviets were ready.

Two days after the Nazi-Soviet Pact was announced, Britain publically reiterated its commitment to Poland, hoping to give Hitler a moment to pause. It did, but not for long. Satisfied that his pact with Stalin was secure, one week after the signing of the pact, on 01 Sep 1939, the first German panzer divisions crossed the Polish border at 4:40 a.m. Luftwaffe dive bombers struck at various Polish towns. By 5 a.m., German battleships had opened up on Polish vessels and forts. The Second World War had begun.

Britain and France declared war on Germany on 03 September, but neither could help Poland in her hour of need. German dominance over the Polish military was immediate and decisive. Warsaw was surrounded by 13 Sep.

Suddenly, at daybreak on 17 September, over 800,000 Soviet Red Army troops began pouring across Poland's Eastern border. Stalin's justification for the invasion was that he was protecting Ukrainians and Belarusians in Western Poland. Warsaw held out until the 28th and by the end of the month Hitler was in Danzig proclaiming that Poland would never rise again. The last elements of the Polish army surrendered on 06 October.

Soviet troops met German troops in the city of Brest (on the new border) to commemorate their joint victory. Stalin chose the location carefully, as the city of Brest had been the site where Bolshevik Russia had surrendered to Imperial Germany in March 1918.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact provided each side exactly what it wanted. After building back up his supplies, Germany attacked France on 10 March 1940. The French and British armies were no match for the German Blitzkrieg, and Paris was captured on 14 Jun and the French surrendered on 22 Jun. The British army barely escaped the continent.

In the east, Soviet troops quickly completed the occupation of Eastern Poland before turning on the Baltics and Finland (both in the Soviet sphere according to the pact). The Russo-Finnish war would be a thorn in Stalin's side, but the pact gave the USSR time to rebuild its military and supplies for the eventual invasion.

As France fell, Hitler began planning for the invasion of the USSR. Over the course of months, the Germans moved millions of troops to the new border in Poland, and on 22 Jun 1941, Operation Barbarossa began.

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the provisions of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, why the two ideological enemies signed the pact, and what the consequences were for Eastern Europe as a result of the pact.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the points of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why Hitler and Stalin, two ideological enemies who had earlier sworn to destroy each other, each wanted and needed the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the consequences for Eastern Europe as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 and its separate secret protocols.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Was Germany in any way justified in going after German areas of Eastern Europe in 1938-39? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 (20 min)
- Video – Nazi-Soviet Pact (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework.
- Suggestion: AP / Advanced students should focus on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. (20 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay: Explain in detail the provisions of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939, why the two ideological enemies signed the pact, and what the consequences were for Eastern Europe as a result of the pact.
- Alternate Assessment – Compare and contrast the takeover of Eastern Poland and the Baltics in 1939 with the current events unfolding in the Crimea. Are the Russians today justified in extending their “influence” into Eastern Europe?

## Extension

### **On tour: Monument to the Heroes of Warsaw (also known as the “Warsaw Nike”)**

While on tour, students in Warsaw can see the monument dedicated to Polish patriots who died in the occupied city during the war with Germany, especially those who fought during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. The monument was unveiled in 1964 in Theatre Square (now the Jablonski Palace).

### **On tour: Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East, Warsaw**

While on tour, students in Warsaw can visit the Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East, a memorial to the victims of Soviet aggression. Discussion of the Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland in 1939 was illegal during the Communist Era, but after Poland’s communist party fell from power in the late 1980s, new government officials endorsed a project to memorialize Polish victims of Soviet rule. The monument was unveiled on 17 September 1995, the 56th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of 1939.

### **On tour: Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, Warsaw**

While on tour, students in Warsaw can visit Monument to Ghetto Heroes, a memorial to the victims of the Nazi Holocaust. Located in a square in what was once the edge of the Warsaw Ghetto, the monument was raised in 1946 in tribute to over 400,000 Polish Jews who were executed in the Ghetto or sent to extermination camps during the Second World War. In April 2013, the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews was opened across the street from the monument. According to published sources, an estimated 2.9 million Polish Jews died during the Nazi occupation of Poland (approximately ½ of all Jews killed in the Holocaust).

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1939pact.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1939pact.html)  
Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, 1939 (primary source) – from the Modern History Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject\\_menus/nazsov.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/nazsov.asp)  
Nazi-Soviet Relations 1939-1941 (primary sources) – from the Avalon Project at Yale University, this website has links to dozens of primary sources relating to the relationship between the two countries. Highly recommended for AP / Advanced students.
- [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/ns057.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/ns057.asp)  
Letter from Hitler to Mussolini, 25 Aug 1939 (primary source) – from the Avalon Project at Yale University, this letter outlines Hitler's motives for signing the pact. Highly recommended for AP / Advanced students.
- [www.johndclare.net/RoadtoWWII8.htm](http://www.johndclare.net/RoadtoWWII8.htm)  
Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 (website) – from John D. Clare, retired Modern History teacher from Greenfield School (UK) and author of over 70 history books.
- [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSnazipact.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSnazipact.htm)  
Nazi-Soviet Pact (website) – from Spartacus Educational (UK)
- [www.hfcsd.org/ww2/ww%202%20timeline/road%20to%20war/the%20nazi%20soviet%20pact.ppt](http://www.hfcsd.org/ww2/ww%202%20timeline/road%20to%20war/the%20nazi%20soviet%20pact.ppt)  
Nazi-Soviet Pact (PowerPoint) – from the Living History Project at Hudson Falls High School (NY)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai0oucZiG1M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai0oucZiG1M)  
The Nazi-Soviet Pact: Russia's 5 year plans and World War (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukUw3RHIBrY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukUw3RHIBrY)  
Nazi Soviet Non-aggression Pact (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB00lk9rQq8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB00lk9rQq8)  
Portents in the Sky during the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact (video)

### Background Information

- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molotov-Ribbentrop\\_Pact](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molotov-Ribbentrop_Pact)  
Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – Wikipedia article

### Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/czech/munich-accords-of-1938](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/czech/munich-accords-of-1938)  
Interwar Europe – Munich Accords of 1938
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/interwar-france-maginot-line](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/interwar-france-maginot-line)  
Interwar France – The Maginot Line
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/interwar-europe-remarque-all-quiet](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/interwar-europe-remarque-all-quiet)  
Interwar Europe – Remarque: All Quiet on the Western Front
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/interwar-europe-rome-berlin-pact-of-steel-1939](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/interwar-europe-rome-berlin-pact-of-steel-1939)  
Interwar Europe – Pact of Steel: The Rome-Berlin Axis Alliance
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/poland/interwar-europe-nazi-soviet-pact-of-1939](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/poland/interwar-europe-nazi-soviet-pact-of-1939)  
Interwar Europe – Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939: Dividing Poland
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/poland/nazi-invasion-of-1939](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/poland/nazi-invasion-of-1939)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Nazi Invasion of Poland 01 Sep 1939

## Key Terms

- Germany
- Hitler
- Mussolini
- Nazi
- Pact
- Poland
- Reich
- Soviet

