# Monkey in the Middle:
# Lithuania's Role in Nazi-Soviet Relations



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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Most western histories of the Nazi-Soviet Pact have focused on the horrors inflicted upon the population of Lithuania as a result of the German and Soviet invasions. The final legacy of the Nazi-Soviet pact was the deportation, enslavement and murder of untold numbers of Lithuanians, and it took more than seventy years in this century for Lithuania to finally consolidate its independence. Socialist historians, on the other hand, have explained the pact as the result of western mistakes, saying that Stalin was attempting to save the Baltics from the threat of a German invasion. In general, histories of the Nazi-Soviet pact from both sides of the Cold War have overlooked the role that the victims played in shaping the relationship of their oppressors.

The nation of Lithuania had a brief life in the interwar years. Spawned by the Treaty of Versailles, it survived being overrun by German, Polish and Russian armies in the early twenties, only to be annexed by the Soviet Union, occupied by Nazi Germany and then permanently absorbed by the Soviet Union in the early forties. Despite its small size, Lithuania found itself the victim of the territorial ambitions of major industrialized nations because it lay in the fulcrum of an important geo-military power struggle. Caught between the ambitions of Hitler and Stalin, the Lithuanian government in 1939 could do nothing to prevent being invaded, but the choices that Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona made in 1939 led to key revisions of the Nazi-Soviet pact.

From a narrative point of view, this paper is concerned with the impact of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on Lithuania. From an analytical point of view, it is also concerned with the role that the Lithuanian question, or questions, played in shaping Nazi-Soviet relations from 1939 to 1941. Much has been written on the former from politically motivated historians and other observers on both sides of the Cold War. Virtually no consideration has been given to the latter, for the simple reason that Hitler, Stalin, and other political leaders in the twenties and thirties apparently considered Lithuanian sovereignty to be irrelevant. Most historians have therefore assumed that Lithuania was a passive victim, which overlooks the fact that territorial questions in Lithuania played an important role in both the origins of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and in the eventual dissolution of that

agreement. The key factors to be considered in this story are not the presidents or foreign ministers of Lithuania; they are the economically and militarily valuable regions of Vilna, Memel and Suwalki.

From the first negotiations in June 1939, to the invasion of Russia in June 1941, the Nazi-Soviet pact was revised several times. Most of these revisions focused on Lithuania, as the Vilna, Memel and Suwalki regions became problematic for Nazi-Soviet relations. In the first year of the pact, disputes were easily resolved through compromise, but in the second year, as the relationship began to dissolve into rivalry, the question of where to draw the dividing line between German and Soviet spheres of influence became nearly impossible to resolve. Problems soon became interlinked, as each country resorted to economic blackmail against the other. Both Germany and the Soviet Union were dependent upon the physical manpower and Baltic seaports that Lithuania possessed.

The three major stages of the Nazi-Soviet pact period were the signing of the pact in the summer of 1939, the Soviet invasion of the Baltic states and subsequent revisions of the pact in the summer of 1940, and Hitler's decision to end the pact by invading Russia in the summer of 1941. The signing of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact on August 23, 1939, only one week before Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, was traditionally interpreted by western historians as an imperialistic alliance between two ambitious and powerful nations. Socialist historians, both inside and outside of the Soviet Union, traditionally viewed the pact as the result of the failure of League of Nations and western appeasement in the interwar years. Since the early sixties, and especially now that recent events in eastern Europe have increased the availability of documents, traditional interpretations of the pact are being reevaluated. The Nazi-Soviet pact, designed to facilitate first and foremost the annexation of the Baltic states, was the product of national self-interest, which is at the heart of all international decision making. It can be argued that any two leaders, under the circumstances, might have made similar decisions.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact, and the accompanying partition of the Baltic states into spheres of influence, officially began on August 23, 1939, when the German foreign minister, Joachim von

Ribbentrop, and the Soviet Commissar for foreign affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov, signed the secret additional protocol to the treaty of nonaggression between Germany and the USSR. On the surface, the pact was a standard nonaggression treaty, similar in wording to many of the other international agreements of the twenties and thirties. It guaranteed, for a period of ten years, that both sides would "desist from any act of violence, any aggressive action, and any attack on each other." It also prohibited both parties from participating "in any grouping of powers whatsoever that is directly or indirectly aimed at the other party."[1]

The significance of the pact, to many, lies in the attached secret protocols that divided eastern Europe into spheres of influence between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. A sphere of influence is an area in which an imperial power holds political and economic hegemony. At the center of this political rearrangement was the Baltic state of Lithuania. The Lithuanian question, and the roots of the 1939 pact, began during the first World War, as part of the problems between Poland, Germany and Russia. A brief look at the history of independent Lithuania up to 1939 and its relationship with Germany, Russia and Poland in the twenties and thirties will illustrate the origins of the pact and of the disputes which later complicated the Nazi-Soviet pact period. These difficulties contributed to Hitler's decision to end the Nazi-Soviet pact forcefully by invading Russia on June 22, 1941.

One can not assert that Lithuanian questions were the most important factors in determining the changing relationship between the various German and Russian governments in the interwar years, but one can see how Lithuania served as an important litmus test for international trends. In 1939, a mutual interest in the need for a Baltic security zone led Stalin and Hitler into a tenuous alliance, tied closely to the military objectives and expectations of the war. But because it hinged on the progress of the war, their relationship changed frequently, and their interests in the Baltics were at odds within two years. When the Russo-Finnish War, the fall of France and the Soviet occupation of the Baltics all went contrary to military prognostications, the Baltic ambitions of Hitler and Stalin were challenged and revised.

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[1] Nazi-Soviet Relations (Washington DC, 1948), 76-78.

The Nazi-Soviet pact has been the focus of many historical and political debates. The American publication, in 1948, of the complete documents of the German foreign office became a highly politicized problem. According to Socialist historians, the American release of those documents pertaining to Nazi-Soviet relations amounted to an attempt by propagandists to pin the blame for the outbreak of war on the Soviet Union. German-American political philosopher Hannah Arendt tried to use the Nazi-Soviet pact as proof for her theory that Communism and Nazism, despite ideological differences, were drawn together because they were both totalitarian. As the history of the pact became a political tool, the underlying rationales behind the pact became obscured. Although the theory that Stalin wanted a European war was for some time held in disregard by historians, it has, in just the past year, been reasserted by three respected American historians: Alan Bullock, Robert Conquest and Robert Tucker. This paper is not designed to critique the validity of these historical interpretations, but to contribute a new angle which has been so far overlooked.

There are two schools of historical interpretation of Hitler. The intentionalist view assumes that most of what Hitler did was consistent with his earliest plans. Most historians agree that Hitler was probably just stalling for time in August of 1939, concerned with the possibility of another two-front war, but since the pact was broken in 1941 by the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the question naturally arises, was Hitler's Russian invasion planned from the beginning, or did Hitler change his mind about keeping the peace with Russia? Intentionalist historians look at Hitler's proclamations in 1923 as proof that his Baltic ambitions were long-lived. The functionalist interpretation, however, is that Hitler's decision making was based upon immediate concerns, not long-term planning. The pact was broken when it was no longer beneficial for Germany to continue it. As evidence, functionalist historians look at numerous revisions of the pact that were made from 1939 to 1941, many of which were based upon the unpredictable tide of events during the early part of the war. While Lithuania only played a part in shaping the changes in the Nazi-Soviet relationship, an analysis of the changing attitudes towards Lithuanian problems reveals a

great deal about how quickly the complexion of the Nazi-Soviet relationship changed and at what points in the war. A close study of Lithuania is a valuable tool for both schools of interpretation.

A similar dual interpretation is often applied to Stalin. Some western historians view Stalin as a manipulator who forced Hitler to make concessions at a time when Hitler desperately needed Soviet support. It therefore follows that Stalin could have stopped Hitler's invasion of Poland if he had refused to sign the pact. Advocates of this interpretation point out the significance of Stalin's replacement, on May 3, 1939, of foreign Commissar Maxim Litvinov, a man committed to building an alliance with France and Great Britain, with Vyacheslav Molotov, who had experience dealing with Hitler. This change in Soviet foreign policy led directly into negotiations for a Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact. The opposing interpretation of Stalin, generally presented by socialist historians, paints Stalin as helplessly pushed into a corner by circumstance. Hitler, they say, knew that the officers corps of the Red Army had been decimated by the Blood Purges of the thirties. Stalin was in no position to wage a war in 1939, as illustrated by the embarrassing defeat of the Red Army in the Winter War against Finland. According to this view, Stalin's signature of the Nazi-Soviet pact amounted to an eastern version of appeasement. Stalin himself later claimed that he had signed the pact only to give the Soviet Union more time to prepare for war. As evidence for this view, historians look at the way that Hitler pressured Stalin to sign the pact before the end of August, and the insincerity of Hitler's negotiations with Stalin in the last six months of the pact, after he had already planned his invasion of Russia. Again, by tracing the progress of the Lithuanian question one can find evidence to support either school of interpretation.

For the purposes of this study, we will approach Hitler and Stalin with a third interpretation, namely that both men were, to an important degree, concerned about Baltic security. Although there were many factors which contributed to the origins of the pact, it can, in part, be easily be traced to mutual interests in the Baltics. The relationship between Hitler and Stalin was, therefore, contingent, in part, upon the situation in the Baltics, and especially in Lithuania. While Estonia and Latvia were quickly and easily conceded to the Soviet Union's sphere on influence, the question of where to draw the dividing line between German and Soviet interests in Lithuania was difficult to resolve. In

the first two years of the second World War, Hitler and Stalin's interests in Lithuania rapidly drew them together and pushed them apart.

## Chapter 2: Interwar Lithuania

In the interwar years, Lithuania shared borders with Germany, Poland and Russia, and possessed many important ports along the Baltic Sea. Because of its location, Lithuania had, for centuries, been the battlefield for many of the wars of its larger neighbors. As the twentieth century began, Lithuania was under Russian rule, but during the first few years of World War I, Lithuania was taken by German forces fighting on the eastern front, and during the Russian Revolution, it remained under German occupation.

The idea of a modern, independent Lithuanian state actually had a dual birth. In March 1917, after the first Russian Revolution, a National Council of Lithuania in exile was formed in Russia, with the support of the Bolsheviks. In the Lithuanian capital city of Vilna, however, an anti-Communist Lithuanian National Conference was held September with the support of the occupying German army. These two competing bodies set the groundwork for what was to become a civil war in Lithuania. Both groups issued resolutions demanding self-determination for the Baltic states. Self-determination was one of the cornerstones of the New Diplomacy of the twenties, based upon Woodrow Wilson's proposal that in areas of geographic dispute after World War I, the people living in any given region should be allowed to choose their own government.

The Russian army was forced to surrender when German forces, pushing through the eastern front near Lithuania, came dangerously close to the Russian capital in Petrograd. The new Bolshevik government in Russia was then in a weak position, and had little choice but to accept the German terms of surrender. At Brest-Litovsk, in March 1918, the Russian delegates gave up all claims to the Baltic territories, and promised to withdraw all remaining Red Guard detachments. This was the first of several politically disastrous retreats from the Baltic region, a pattern which influenced Stalin's decisions in 1939 and 1940.

Russia's defeat on the eastern front taught its leadership that the Baltic region was vital for military and economic security. The loss of Lithuania was an especially sensitive issue, because many top Bolshevik party members came from there. No Russian leader had faced such a devastating invasion since Napoleon, and the Bolsheviks were willing to pay nearly any price in order to prevent it from happening again. This fear of foreign invasion dominated Soviet foreign policy in the interwar years and influenced Stalin's attitude towards Lithuania.

On November 9, 1918, Emperor William II of Germany abdicated, and on November 11 an armistice was signed. Two days later, the Bolshevik government revoked the Brest-Litovsk treaty, saying that it was signed under duress, and the Red army marched into the Baltics directly behind the evacuating German troops in November and December of 1918. Throughout 1919, both the occupying Soviet Lithuanian Government, and its rival, the Provisional Workers' and Peasants' Government of Lithuania claimed legitimate authority. Aided by the Allied Powers, and with volunteers from Finland, Norway, and Sweden, the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were able to expel the Red Army the next year. Soviet troops lost Vilna, the capitol of Lithuania, on April 19, 1920. The Soviet Lithuanian government failed in 1919 because it failed to build a strong union between the workers and the peasants. It also failed to redistribute nationalized estates among small farmers, and withheld voting privileges from medium-size farmers, alienating both the rural sectors. In the countryside, the Red Army was universally detested because it demanded food and looted farms. In the cities, the administrative organs of the Soviet government were poorly run, and did not set up an effective secret police. Urban workers were generally uninterested in ideology, and so remained politically uninvolved and apathetic. For the second time in two years, Russia troops were forced to retreat from the Baltics. The Soviet invasions in 1940 and 1944 both corrected the mistakes made in 1919.[2]

At the same time that it was expelling the Russian Army, the fledgling independent Lithuanian government was also resisting a Polish invasion in the South. On July 10, 1920, the Polish government promised to withdraw as well, and by signing the Spa Protocol, it recognized

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[2] Albert Tarulis, Soviet Policy Towards the Baltic States (Notre Dame, 1959), 52.

Lithuanian independence. On July 12, the Russo-Lithuanian Peace Treaty was signed, granting full sovereignty to Lithuania, and renouncing all of Lithuania's former obligations to the Russian state.[3]

The peace was short lived. After the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Lenin faced a devastating civil war. The White armies, attempting to remove the Bolsheviks from power, attacked from all sides. For the second time in a decade, western enemies launched an attack on Russia through Lithuania, thus emphasizing for the Bolsheviks the vital importance of Lithuania for Russian national security. A mere two days after signing the Russo-Lithuanian Peace Treaty, the Red Army entered Vilna on July 14, 1920 as part of a counter-offensive against the Polish White Army. Unfortunately for the people living in Vilna, their city lay in the path between Poland and Russia, and was considered the gateway to Petrograd. An agreement for the withdrawal of Russian troops was not reached the end of August.

As the tide changed, and the Polish Army pushed back Trotsky's Red Army, the Poles signed a pact with Lithuania on October 7, which guaranteed that Vilna belonged to independent Lithuania. Two days later, however, Polish troops reoccupied Vilna, and maintained more than a third of eastern Lithuania for years despite the protests of the Lithuanian government and that of Russia as well. The League of Nations did not intercede on Lithuania's behalf, thus undermining the League's value as an arbiter of international crises.[4]

Despite these crises, Lithuanian nationalism flourished in the early twenties, and memories of Lithuania's fifteenth century glory were reborn. During the reign of King Vytautas the Great, who ruled from 1392 to 1430, the kingdom of Lithuania had stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and from Moscow to the Bug and Dneister Rivers.[5] The emergence of Lithuanian nationalism was viewed with trepidation by Poland, Russia and Germany. In Russia, Trotsky carried on a literary debate in the early twenties with the Russian historian Pokrovsky which centered on the role which the Lithuanian kingdom had played in the origins of the Russian state. According to American historian Robert Tucker, Stalin was strongly influenced by these debates. Tucker writes,

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[3] Tarulis, Soviet Policy, 18.
[4] Tarulis, Soviet Policy, 61.
[5] Vytautas Vaitiekunas, Lithuania (New York, 1965), 12.

"Stalin saw a likeness in the country's situation now and in that former hostile encirclement of Tartars, Swedes, Polish-Lithuanian nobles and other foreign enemies."[6] Stalin's paranoid policy towards Lithuanian security in 1939 was probably influenced by this early impression.

Territorial disputes in Lithuania were not easily resolved. The German government was interested in the Memel region on the West coast of Lithuania, which contained a concentration of ethnic Germans, and the prosperous Memel sea port. The modern and wealthy city of Vilna in the South-East, cultural and intellectual capital of eastern European Jewry, was a tempting prize for Poland. Russia was particularly interested in Baltic sea ports situated in Lithuania, and in Lithuania's status as a buffer state. Lithuanian self-determination was treated as if it were of secondary importance to all the major powers in Eastern Europe, yet they all signed treaties guaranteeing Lithuanian security in order to exclude the others from gaining a foothold in the Baltics.

The Soviet-Lithuania treaty of nonaggression, signed in September, 1920, stated that the Bolshevik government supported Lithuanian claims to Vilna and eastern Lithuania. The Polish government felt that this violated the spirit of the Russo-Polish Peace Treaty, thus straining an already tenuous agreement. The Soviet government did not want the Baltic buffer zone to become an armed camp, so when Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland formed a casual alliance in March 1922, Russia felt that its treaties were being broken. An international disarmament Conference held in Moscow in December failed, mainly because of the territorial disputes between Poland and Lithuania.[7]

As part of the Treaty of Versailles, which Germany was forced to sign after the first World War, Germany renounced its claim over the Memel region in western Lithuania.[8] This was one of the regions where the question of nationalities after the war became complicated. Germans constituted the majority of the population in Memel, but geographically, Memel contained a vital Baltic sea port, which the Lithuanians and Germans both wanted to control. The small, prosperous

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[6] Robert Tucker, Stalin in Power (New York, 1991), 58.
[7] Tarulis, Soviet Policy, 67-68.
[8] Trial of the Nazi War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal (Nuremberg, 1947), vol. 3, 179.

strip along Lithuania's eastern coast had the additional complication of being predominantly Protestant, while Lithuania was a Catholic nation. Religious differences served to aggravate sensitive, nationalistic tensions.

In January 1923, Lithuanian troops seized the Memel territory, which had been placed under League of Nations jurisdiction. After four months of negotiations, the Memel Statute was signed by Britain, France, Italy and Japan, recognizing Lithuanian sovereignty over Memel, but also making Memel an autonomous region within Lithuania. Many ethnic Germans in Memel favored a Pan-German movement, but they were suppressed under the policies of the new Lithuanian President, Antanas Smetona.

Seldom does a dictator announce his intentions beforehand as plainly as Adolf Hitler. In Mein Kampf, Hitler made it clear that German living space required eastward expansion. Hitler said that German leaders had made the mistake of trying to expand into the West and the South, when Germany's true destiny lay in the East: "If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her vassal border states."[9]

Historians have argued over the degree of continuity in Hitler's policies. From the intentionalist point of view, Hitler eventually accomplished his goal of Baltic conquest in 1941. Functionalist historians, however, argue that Mein Kampf, published in 1923, advocated an unrealistic and radical approach to international politics, ostensibly to attract nationalistic support for the Nazi movement. In 1933, when Hitler was appointed Chancellor, many observers noted that he had calmed down his rhetoric and earlier extremism. In January 1934, Hitler told the Reichstag, "We welcome the desire for a stabilization in the East through a system of pacts."[10] Observers in 1934 hoped that Germany was on the road towards international reconciliation. The bottom line is that Hitler's attitude towards Lithuania throughout the Nazi-Soviet pact period indicates that he tended to assume that Lithuania was a useful tool, not a sovereign nation.

The security of the newly created Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia was a sensitive issue for the Soviet Union in the thirties. Not wanting to repeat the horror of the World

[9] Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf (Boston, 1943), 652.
[10] Pritt, Light on Moscow (New York, 1939), 19-21.

War I German invasion, and desiring a foothold on the Baltic Sea, the Soviet government considered the future of the Baltic states to be essential to its interests. The fear of German expansion into this region was a central concern of Stalin in all of his international negotiations during the inter-war period, and relations between the Soviet Union and Germany in the early thirties floundered, at least in part, on the Baltic question.

According to Reich foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, "The small territory of Memel, being the land mentioned in our National anthem, was always very dear to the hearts of the German people."[11] According to Hitler, there were 140,000 ethnic Germans living in Memel in the thirties, whose rights were being violated by the Lithuanian government, in spite of the Memel Statute. At several party rallies in the early thirties, Hitler referred to the situation in Memel to support his claim that all German people wanted to be part of the Reich, and that they needed German protection from foreign oppressors.[12] Since 1923, the Lithuanian government had suppressed German nationalist movements in Memel, but Memel Nazis, led by a Dr. Ernst Neumann, grew in popularity in the thirties.

Although Hitler hoped to eventually incorporate Memel into the Reich, he was concerned in 1938 that an overly zealous and violent movement in Memel might jeopardize Germany's diplomatic maneuvering in Czechoslovakia, So he urged Neumann to keep things quiet. By the end of 1938, however, it was clear that neither Neumann nor the Lithuanian government could control the region. In local parliamentary elections in December, the Nazi party in Memel received over 87 per cent of the vote.[13] Hitler waited until he had secured Bohemia and Moravia before he pursued the Memel question, but he instructed the military to make plans for a Lithuanian invasion as early as March 1938. On March 20, 1939, Ribbentrop gave the Lithuanian foreign minister an ultimatum, and two days later Hitler peacefully acquired the Memel territory from Lithuania. It was his last bloodless acquisition.[14]

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[11] Trial of the Nazi War Criminals, vol. 5, 279.
[12] N.H. Baynes, The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, vol. 2 (New York, 1969), 1236.
[13] Norman Rich, Hitler's War Aims (New York, 1973), 119.
[14] Rich, Hitler's War Aims, 119-120.

At the time of the Memel acquisition, Ribbentrop promised the Lithuanian government that Germany's territorial ambitions in Lithuania were completely satisfied. As a show of good faith, he guaranteed that Lithuanian merchants could retain uninhibited access to the Memel Free Port Zone, which was the source of most of Lithuania's Baltic trade. In exchange, Ribbentrop negotiated commercial agreement at that time which provided Germany with more than half of Lithuania's exports. Ribbentrop also attempted to get a commitment from the Lithuanian government that Lithuanian troops would assist in the upcoming German invasion of Poland. Hoping to put pressure on the Lithuanian government, the State secretary in the German foreign office, Baron Ernst von Weizsäcker, approved the distribution of eight to twelve thousand marks a year for a pro-Nazi political group in Lithuania called the Woldermas supporters.[15] German involvement in Lithuanian politics is characteristic of Hitler's overall attitude towards the importance of Lithuania to German security, and proves that Hitler's ambitions in Lithuania did not end with the Memel acquisition.

Hitler needed to have a stronghold in Poland and a peaceful eastern front before he could attack France. He hoped that Britain and France would be less likely to react immediately to the Polish invasion if they could not count on Russian support, but it is clear that Hitler planned on invading Poland in September, regardless of how negotiations went with Stalin. Stalin knew about Germany's planned Polish invasion, and also probably guessed that delaying an alliance would not delay that invasion. From a strategic point of view, Stalin was in a better bargaining position before war began than he would be afterwards, especially if he wanted to protect his interests in the Baltics. The Memel situation had already shown Stalin that Hitler was possibly looking to absorb Lithuania into the Reich.

Fruitless research has been done for many years, attempting to prove whether it was Germany or the Soviet Union who initiated negotiations for a pact, and which side held the upper hand. Unfortunately, this chicken and the egg type debate has overshadowed the more important conclusions that can be drawn from the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact. For both Hitler and Stalin,

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[15] Trial of the Nazi War Criminals, vol. 4, 565.

the importance of having a Baltic agreement before the outbreak of war warranted immediate action in 1939.

## Chapter 3: Negotiating a Devil's Bargain

After Hitler's incorporation of Czechoslovakia in 1938, the British and French governments decided that their policy of appeasement was flawed, so they courted better relations with Stalin as a means of containing Nazi expansion. The Soviet Commissar for foreign affairs, Maxim Litvinov, who had been the architect of the Franco-Soviet Pact of 1934, attempted to reach a new anti-Hitler arrangement. Stalin, however, apparently distrusted the sincerity of the British mission, and believed that he had less to gain from an alliance with the West than he would from an alliance with the Nazis. Negotiations for a triple alliance between England, France and the Soviet Union thus reached an impasse in 1939, and on May 3, Litvinov was replaced by Vyacheslav Molotov. Molotov was a loyal supporter of Stalin's policy approach, and his appointment brought foreign policy more completely under Stalin's direct control.

The major obstacle to a British-French-Soviet alliance was the animosity between Poland and Russia. The Polish government refused to allow Soviet troops to enter Poland in order to help fight off a Nazi invasion. The Polish government feared exactly what later came to pass, that is, that once the Red Army entered Poland, they would never leave. Furthermore, the British and French were unwilling to guarantee the independence of the Baltic states, even though they expected Stalin to guarantee the independence of Poland and Rumania . In a speech before the third session of the Supreme Soviet on May 31, 1939, Molotov complained about the inadequacies of British and French negotiations with the Soviet Union, saying,

> The English and French left open the question of whether the USSR in its turn could count on their help if it became the object of direct aggression, just as another question was left open, whether they could take part in guaranteeing the small states bordering on the USSR, covering the

> north-western Soviet frontier, if these should prove unable to defend their neutrality against attack by the aggressors.[16]

Because, in part, the Baltic question had created a conflict of interests between England, France and the Soviet Union, Stalin sent out diplomatic feelers for a Nazi-Soviet arrangement based upon their mutual interests in Baltic security. In June, it was reported to the German foreign office that Georgei Astakhov, the Soviet ambassador to Germany, had discussed with the Bulgarian minister in Germany the possibility of a Nazi-Soviet nonaggression treaty: "The fear of a German attack, either via the Baltic states or via Rumania was an obstacle. In this connection the Chargé [Astakhov] had also referred to *Mein Kampf*..... If Germany would declare that she would not attack the Soviet Union or that she would conclude a nonaggression pact with her, the Soviet Union would probably refrain from concluding a treaty with England."[17] Although the Bulgarian minister was an odd choice for a messenger, the information got through to Hitler that the Soviet Union was now interested in pursuing the possibility of an agreement at the expense of British-French negotiations.

In Moscow, Molotov met with the German ambassador to the Soviet Union, Count Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg, and discussed at length the significance of the Baltic states to Germany and the Soviet Union. Molotov reflected Stalin's suspicion of German intentions in the Baltic region, but at the same time invited German assurances that a peaceful and permanent arrangement could be achieved. Commenting on the German-Lithuanian nonaggression pact, signed at the time of Germany's forced annexation of Memel, Molotov said he believed that "Germany had concluded them in her own interest, and not out of love for the Soviet Union. He had to doubt the permanence of such treaties after the experience which Poland had."[18] Schulenburg replied that, "our treaties provided the Baltic countries with additional security, in which the Soviet Union was very much interested."[19]

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[16] Jane Degras. Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy, vol. 3 (London, 1953), 336.
[17] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 21.
[18] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 27.
[19] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 29.

The Baltic question came up again very openly in a meeting between Astakhov and Dr. Karl Schnurre, head of the eastern European and Baltic section of the commercial policy division of the German foreign office. Astakhov twice returned to the subject of spheres of influence in the Baltics as an issue which might prevent a Russo-German nonaggression pact.[20] Schnurre reported to his superiors, "Our assumption that the Baltic countries and Finland, as well as Rumania, were in our sphere of interest completed for the Soviet Union the feeling of being menaced."[21]

Schnurre's report also illustrated the importance of the Baltic question in the origins of the Nazi-Soviet pact. Here, only one month before the signing of the pact, territorial questions in Lithuania seemed to be the major source of Astakhov's hesitation:

> During the subsequent discussion Astakhov came back again to the question of the Baltic countries and asked whether, besides economic penetration, we had more far-reaching political aims there... After describing our commercial relations to the Baltic countries, I confined myself to the statement that no German-Russian clash of interests would result from all these questions.[22]

Anxious to take advantage of this change in Soviet foreign policy, the German foreign office worked quickly to appease Soviet concerns. Baron Ernst von Weizsäcker, State secretary in the German foreign office, then sent instructions to Schulenburg, in Moscow: "If the talks proceed positively in the Baltic question too, the idea could be advanced that we will adjust our stand with regards to the Baltic in such a manner as to respect the vital Soviet interests in the Baltic."[23] Reich foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop also told Astakhov in Berlin, "There was no problem from the Baltic to the Black Sea that could not be solved between the two of us. I said that there was room for the two of us on the Baltic and that Russian interests by no means needed to clash with ours there."[24] Ribbentrop used Baltic cooperation as the foundation for establishing closer German-Soviet ties.

German and Soviet propaganda during the first two years of the war repeatedly referred to "western containment policy" to explain the origins of the pact. After the war, socialist historians

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[20] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 33-35.
[21] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 33.
[22] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 34-35.
[23] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 36.
[24] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 38.

focused on western appeasement policy and the exclusion of the Soviet Union from the Munich conference to explain the pact. Western historians, even now, still tend to focus on the personal ambitions of Hitler and Stalin to explain the pact, but Ribbentrop's repetitious reference to the Baltics indicates that the Baltic questions played a central role in the origins of the Nazi-Soviet pact, a fact which has been generally overlooked by many historians of this period.

Schulenburg met with Molotov in Moscow on August 4 to discuss the future of Nazi-Soviet relations. The two men discussed at length the question of the Baltic states, and Schulenburg "stressed the absence of opposition of interests in foreign policy and mentioned German readiness so to orient our behavior with regards to the Baltic states, if occasion arose, as to safeguard vital Soviet Baltic interests." The question then arose as to what did Germany consider the boundaries of the Baltics? Molotov, "was interested in learning what States we meant by the term and whether Lithuania was one of them."[25] The question of Lithuanian boundaries remained problematic throughout the Nazi-Soviet pact period. In the early summer of 1939, the German government wanted Lithuania in its sphere of influence because Ribbentrop was in the process of courting Lithuanian support in the upcoming German war against Poland. Ribbentrop promised the Lithuanian government that if the Lithuanian army participated in the conflict, the German government would arrange for the city of Vilna to be returned to Lithuania.

Immediately after Schulenburg's discussion with Molotov, the possibility of a nonaggression pact was already influencing German foreign policy, although no concrete discussion of the terms had begun. In a letter to the German foreign office, Schulenburg implied that Germany would reject the Estonian suggestion that Germany unilaterally guarantee the independence of the Baltic states, because, "The Soviets no longer want such a guarantee to be given by us."[26]

Germany's Baltic policy changed rapidly in 1939 as a result of Hitler's hope for a Nazi-Soviet alliance, but an internal memoranda of the German foreign office shows that Hitler's enthusiasm was not shared by the old bureaucracy. They believed that the Soviet Union was

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[25] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 40-41.
[26] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 43.

unreliable, and its goals incompatible with German policy. Others wondered about the progress of Russian negotiations with England, which were continuing in Moscow simultaneously with German-Soviet negotiations. Still, as the orders of the Führer came down from above, negotiations continued. This hard-line approach to negotiations shows that German interests in the Baltic states were indispensable to Hitler, and that it was essential to his plans that a Nazi-Soviet declaration on the future status of the Baltics be established prior to his planned invasion of Poland.

By August, the suggested Nazi-Soviet commercial agreement was rapidly taking the form of a nonaggression pact. Ribbentrop wrote directly to Molotov,

> The Reich government is of the opinion that there is no question between the Baltic and the Black Seas which cannot be settled to the complete satisfaction of both countries. Among these are such questions as: the Baltic Sea, the Baltic area, Poland, Southeastern questions, etc. In such matters, political cooperation between the two countries can have only a beneficial effect.[27]

Molotov replied that he "was interested in the question of how the German government was disposed to the idea of concluding a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union... and whether a possible joint guarantee of the Baltic states was contemplated by Germany."[28] The Soviet Union quickly took advantage of this opportunity to guarantee its security interests and territorial ambitions in the Baltics.

Ribbentrop asked for an invitation to Moscow to negotiate the terms of an agreement. At the top of the agenda was the Baltic question, and how Russia and Germany could divide the region into spheres of influence. Ribbentrop wrote, "I am also in a position to sign a secret protocol regulating the interests of both parties in questions of foreign policy of one kind or another; for instance, the settlement of spheres of interest in the Baltic area, the problem of the Baltic States, etc. Such a settlement too, which seems to us of considerable importance, is only possible, however, at an oral discussion."[29] Therefore, the Baltic question, and the problem of where to draw the dividing line between spheres of influence, was tightly linked to the settlement of the entire pact. A

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[27] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 50.
[28] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 52.
[29] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 63.

nonaggression pact in 1939 between Germany and Russia was impossible until the Baltic question had been satisfactorily resolved.

It was important that Ribbentrop himself arrive in Moscow in order to facilitate a quick arrangement. Although the Soviet government had initiated discussion of an arrangement, it was Germany now that pushed to speed up the negotiations. Hitler wanted to invade Poland by the end of August, which meant that he only had a month to secure relations on the eastern front. He was, therefore, quite generous in his concessions to Stalin at this early stage in Nazi-Soviet relations, and as a result, the Soviet Union was able to push for Soviet hegemony in the Baltics.

The pact was signed in Moscow on August 23, 1939 by Molotov and Ribbentrop. Stalin attended all of the negotiations, and Ribbentrop regularly called Hitler for instructions. The final agreement included a secret additional protocol which, as planned, divided up eastern Europe and the Baltic states. It stated: "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 the U.S.S.R. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is recognized by each party."[30]

Despite pledges which had been made to the Lithuanian government for years by both Germany and the Soviet Union, the terms of the nonaggression pact placed Vilna in the Soviet sphere of influence, while Lithuania lay in the German sphere. This awkward arrangement only lasted until September, when the realities of warfare corrected the mistakes of diplomacy. Despite its convenience for both parties, the Nazi-Soviet pact had problems from the beginning when it came to deciding upon exact borders.

The period of negotiations ended with a promise of Soviet noninvolvement in Hitler's upcoming war with Poland at the expense of Baltic independence. Both Hitler and Stalin believed that a pact was, at this point, in the best interests of both Germany and Russia. Hitler hoped that the surprise announcement of a Nazi-Soviet pact would prevent the British and French from declaring war to save Poland, and Stalin, in one move, had eliminated Polish competition in the Baltics and

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[30] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 78.

appeased the threat of German expansion. Despite assurances made to Lithuania in the thirties, Germany and the Soviet Union freed themselves from moral and diplomatic constraints in August, 1939. Lithuanian independence was sacrificed for the cause of German-Soviet peace in a time of imminent war.

## Chapter 4: Trading Pieces

On September 1, The German army invaded Poland, thus initiating World War II. As the German army marched East, towards Warsaw, the Soviet army was supposed to invade from the East and march West. The Red Army however, delayed its attack by several weeks in order to better prepare. As the Polish army retreated from the German onslaught in the early days of the war, it was pursued by the German army into an area of Poland that had been promised to the Soviet Union by the August 23 pact. Even from the first days of the war, military events forced a change in the original plans for the Pact.

The collapse of the Polish government raised several questions for Nazi-Soviet relations. In mid-September, "Molotov urgently asked for an explanation of what was to become of Vilna. The Soviet Government absolutely wanted to avoid a clash with Lithuania and would, therefore, like to know whether some agreement had been reached with Lithuania regarding the Vilna region, particularly as to whom was to occupy the city."[31] Although the pact had recognized Lithuanian claims to Vilna, it had not set up how such an exchange was to take place. As a result of these questions, and the *de facto* occupation of Vilna by Soviet troops entering eastern Poland, it was decided in late September to officially revise the Nazi-Soviet pact. This second pact was the one which was in effect up until the German invasion of Russia in 1941.

As the war with Poland continued, Hitler was even more desperate to have Soviet support. Stalin exploited Hitler's desperation to get even more out of the Nazi-Soviet pact. World War II historian Alan Bullock, in his recent autobiography of Hitler and Stalin, writes, "To Stalin, control

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[31] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 96.

of Lithuania would allow the Russians to close the Baltic corridor leading to Leningrad to which he attached so much importance."[32] The September revision of the pact was the perfect time for Stalin to gain back the one Baltic concession he had made to Hitler in August.

In addition to his continued neutrality, Hitler also wanted Stalin's assistance in the war. It was important that the Soviet Union occupy the Baltic states in order to prevent a British-French invasion force, launched from Finland or Sweden, from landing in the Baltics. As long as Germany was at war with France, it was, in fact, essential to Germany's war plans that Russia occupy the Baltic states. Despite its promises at the time of the August pact, the Soviet Union had, by the end of September, made no move towards occupying Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia. Stalin, in pushing for a re-negotiation of the pact, sweetened the offer with veiled promises to "immediately take up the solution of the problem of the Baltic countries in accordance with the Protocol of August 23, and expected in this matter the unstinting support of the German Government."[33] This meant, in effect, his annexation of the Baltics as discussed in August.

Bullock, in discussing the September revision, also emphasized the importance of Stalin's long range plans for acquiring Lithuania.

> If he had asked for Lithuania in August, Stalin believed that Hitler would almost certainly have refused to agree: instead he had made sure that the provisional division of Poland gave him a large part of central Poland.... This part, occupied by ethnic Poles, he was now prepared to cede to Germany as a quid pro quo for Lithuania, moving the dividing line between the two occupation zones eastward from the Vistula to the River Bug.[34]

The significance of this pre-planning is that it shows how central Lithuania was to Stalin's ambitions. Not wanting to repeat the mistakes made in the twenties, and in a better position to negotiate, the Soviet government insured this time that it would have a security perimeter in the Baltics. The invasion of Lithuania was not only a byproduct of the Nazi-Soviet pact; it was one of the underlying motivations.

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[32] Alan Bullock, Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives (London, 1991), 713.
[33] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 103.
[34] Bullock, Hitler and Stalin, 713.

The Nazi-Soviet pact was officially revised by the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship treaty, which was hurriedly signed on September 28, 1939, in the midst of the war. It contained more corollaries than the original August pact, including two specifically dealing with Lithuania. The first revised the August nonaggression pact by placing Lithuania in the Soviet sphere of influence in exchange for which Germany received a larger portion of eastern Poland, including Warsaw. The second reserved for German a small strip of land in southwest Lithuania, which formed the so-called Suwalki triangle, bordering on eastern Prussia and Poland. Furthermore, the secret supplementary protocol declared, "Economic agreements now in force between Germany and Lithuania shall not be affected by the measures of the Soviet Union referred to above."[35] Germany insisted on this clause to protect the trade agreements it had made with Lithuania at the time of the Memel acquisitions.

The question of previous economic agreements came up time and again in the two years of Nazi-Soviet cooperation, especially towards the end. In the first month of the war, it is apparent that the Lithuanian territory was important enough to warrant a revision of the pact. Hitler reluctantly gave up his claims to Lithuania in September because it was a crucial time for the Reich, and he needed continued Soviet support.

A confidential protocol was also signed in September, dealing with the question of nationalities and emigration. This, as we will later see, became a major concern after the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in June, 1940, and was later manipulated by both sides in order to arrange for the deportation of Jews, and the protection or extradition of important Lithuanian officials. It stated:

> The government of the U.S.S.R. shall place no obstacles in the way of Reich nationals and other persons of German descent residing in the territories under its jurisdiction, if they desire to migrate to Germany or to the territories under German jurisdiction. It agrees that such removals shall be carried out by agents of the government of the Reich in cooperation with the competent local authorities and that the property rights of the emigrants shall be protected. A corresponding

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[35] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 107.

> obligation is assumed by the government of the German Reich in respect to the persons of Ukrainian or White Russian descent residing in the territories under its jurisdiction.[36]

From October to the following June, relations between Germany and the Soviet Union normalized. The Baltic states, however, were unknowingly in their death throes. The German government actually improved its relations with Lithuania, posing as an impartial arbiter of Lithuanian-Soviet relations, never admitting that it had, through secret treaties, already agreed to the destruction of Lithuanian sovereignty.

The war in western Europe dominated the politics and economics of the Baltics: Poland, once a major presence in the Baltics, was by this time completely incorporated into the Reich; Germany relied on its commercial treaties with the Baltic states to provide much of its raw material to support the war with France; and the Soviet Union began its Baltic siege in November by attacking Finland. An embarrassing defeat for the Red Army, the Winter War revealed to the world the weaknesses in Stalin's recently purged officers corps.

At the same time, however, the disposition of Lithuanian territories was a major point of contention between the Soviet Union and Germany. As long as both parties were busy at war, and were thus interdependent, Lithuanian questions were easily resolved through compromise. The atmosphere of compromise surrounding the September revision of the pact was discouraging to France and Great Britain who hoped that the pact would not survive its first real test. In Germany and Russia, the state press used the September revision as evidence that the Nazi-Soviet pact was permanent and mutually beneficial. The ease with which the Lithuania question was resolved in September 1939 cemented the Nazi-Soviet relationship, but this conciliatory tone faded rapidly after June, 1940 when France fell to Germany. The last months of Lithuanian independence were therefore the high point of Nazi-Soviet cooperation.

Territorial disputes in Lithuania continued to haunt the Nazi-Soviet relationship from September 1939 to June 1940. Two prominent border issues in Lithuania were linked together by diplomatic arrangements. One was the city of Vilna in eastern Lithuania, formerly controlled by

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[36] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 106.

Poland; the other was the small strip in southwest Lithuania which formed part of the Suwalki triangle. It had been agreed in August that regardless of where Lithuania fell into the spheres of influence, both sides would recognize that Vilna belonged in Lithuania. Ribbentrop had promised Vilna to Lithuania at the time of the Memel acquisition in 1938, and had used that promise to guarantee Lithuanian neutrality in the Polish invasion. The Soviet Union had been making guarantees to Lithuania for years, and now used Vilna as a gift to facilitate a new Soviet-Lithuanian commercial agreement.

Correspondences between the German and Soviet foreign ministries often focused on this Vilna question. Since the Soviet Union now controlled Vilna, the question arose as to how it could best be returned to Lithuania and still benefit the Soviet and German positions. This issue was complicated by the Suwalki question. When the pact was revised in September, and the German government agreed to forego its claim to Lithuania in exchange for more Polish territory, it reserved its claim to Suwalki. It did this because geographically, the Suwalki triangle was surrounded on two sides by East Prussia and Poland, which were now both incorporated into the Reich. It was militarily foolish to leave an exposed, indefensible hump of Suwalki in Soviet controlled Lithuania. Therefore, the German government insisted that an arrangement be made by which the southwestern strip of Lithuania would be given to Germany.

In October, word came from Molotov that the Soviet government planned on a straightforward approach to the Lithuanian question. They would simply trade Vilna for Suwalki. Molotov informed Schulenburg,

> The Soviet government would tell the Lithuanian foreign minister, who arrives today, that, within the framework of an amicable settlement of mutual relations... the Soviet government was willing to cede the city of Vilna and its environs to Lithuania, while at the same time the Soviet Government would indicate to Lithuania that it must cede the well known portion of its territory to Germany. Molotov inquired what formal procedure we had in mind for carrying this out. His idea was the simultaneous signing of a Soviet-Lithuanian protocol on Vilna and a German-Lithuanian protocol on the Lithuanian area to be ceded to us.[37]

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[37] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 112.

Although the war had already begun, Hitler was still very concerned with the public appearance of his actions. He did not want to look like the aggressor in any of his diplomatic and military expansions. Molotov's original plan to plainly announce the Nazi-Soviet land deal in Lithuania was quickly rejected by the German government because it lacked finesse. Schulenburg, asking for instructions, wired the following analysis to Ribbentrop:

> It seemed to me more logical that the Soviet government should exchange Vilna for the strip to be ceded to us and then hand this strip over to us.... Molotov's suggestion seems to me harmful as in the eyes of the world it would make us appear as "robbers" of Lithuanian territory, while the Soviet Union figures as the donor.... I would ask you to consider whether it might be advisable for us, by a separate secret German-Soviet protocol, to forego the cession of the Lithuanian strip of territory until the Soviet Union actually incorporates Lithuania, an idea on which, I believe, the arrangement concerning Lithuania was originally based.[38]

This brief message, especially the last line, emphasized the point that the secret protocols of the Nazi-Soviet pact were signed, more than anything else, for the purpose of arranging for the annexation of the Baltic states. The Soviet invasion of Lithuania in June 1940 was not just an indirect byproduct of the pact, it was part of the fundamental intentions of the pact. This is one of the few places in the official documentation where one can clearly see the underlying importance of the Lithuanian territories. Ribbentrop responded,

> I, too, do not consider the method Molotov suggested for the cession of the Lithuanian strip of territory as suitable. On the contrary, please ask Molotov not to discuss the cession of territory with the Lithuanians at present, but rather to have the Soviet government assume the obligation towards Germany to leave this strip of territory unoccupied in the event of a posting of Soviet forces in Lithuania, which may possibly be contemplated, and furthermore to leave it to Germany to determine the date on which the cession of the territory should be formally effected.[39]

Ribbentrop's message did not reach Molotov in time, so Molotov told the Lithuanian representative everything, as planned. The resulting diplomatic reaction put Germany in an awkward position, as Schulenburg had predicted. It was important for Germany to maintain a positive relationship with Lithuania in order to guarantee continued exports of raw materials, and to maintain as much cooperation as possible on the eastern front. Molotov's blunt announcement that

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[38] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 112.
[39] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 113-114.

Lithuania had to relinquish Suwalki came as a shock to the Lithuanian government. According to the report sent to Berlin,

> The Lithuanian delegation had been extremely dismayed and sad; they had declared that the loss of this area in particular would be especially hard to bear, since many prominent leaders of the Lithuanian people came from that part of Lithuania.... Stalin personally requested the German government not to insist for the moment upon the cession of the strip of Lithuanian territory.[40]

Lithuanian concerns over German ambitions in the Suwalki triangle were quieted, however, when Soviet demands on Lithuania became an even more serious threat. Despite the fact that Germany was demanding its second land concession from Lithuania, the Lithuanian government turned to Germany for advise on how to handle the threat of Soviet expansion. Like Poland, Lithuania considered the Soviet Union to be the more serious, long term threat to independence. Kazys Skirpa, the Lithuanian ambassador to Germany, informed Weizsäcker in early October that, "The Russians expected to get an assistance pact with Lithuania as well as permission to station Russian garrisons, at the same time agreeing in principle to the joining of Vilna and environs to Lithuania."[41]

The German foreign office tried to quiet fears of the Lithuanian government, and offered vague promises of protection. At the same time, however, Schulenburg continued his secret negotiations with Molotov. An early agreement on Suwalki strip was reached in late October between the two men: "The Lithuanian territory mentioned in the protocol...shall not be occupied in case forces of the Red Army should be stationed [in Lithuania]."[42] Thus, while the German government posed as a friend to Lithuania, German officials behind the scenes traded Lithuania with the Soviet Union territory for territory, and planned for the upcoming Soviet invasion of the Baltics.

The Soviet Union appeased Lithuanian concerns by signing over Vilna in exchange for a Soviet-Lithuanian mutual assistance treaty. Molotov and Jouzas Urbsys, the Lithuanian minister for foreign affairs, agreed to the stationing of Soviet troops along the Lithuanian-German border for

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[40] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 114.
[41] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 117.
[42] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 118.

fifteen years. The treaty also guaranteed "the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs."[43] Despite these assurances, the progress of the war and Stalin's own ambitions betrayed this treaty in June, 1940.

The question of how to deal with ethnic minorities, especially Jews, was a pronounced problem in Lithuania. There was a large Jewish population in eastern Poland and Lithuania, especially around Vilna. Although the German-Soviet Border and Friendship treaty of September 28 had guaranteed the unrestricted emigration of German and Russian people, it did not apply to Jews. Although the worst horrors were still a year away, problems were already appearing on the new German-Soviet-Lithuanian border. On December 5, 1939, General Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the High Command of the German Armed Forces sent in the following report to Weizsäcker:

> The expulsion of Jews into Russian territory, in particular, did not proceed as smoothly as had apparently been expected. In practice, the procedure was, for example, that at a quiet place in the woods, a thousand Jews were expelled across the Russian border; fifteen kilometers away, they came back, with the Russian commander trying to force the German one to re-admit the group."[44]

The influx of impoverished immigrants exacerbated the tension between Jews and the Catholic majority in Lithuania, and may have contributed to the ease with which Nazi officials were able to incite pogroms during the German occupation. By the end of December, 1939, approximately fifteen thousand Jews had arrived in Vilna, escaping from the German war machine. In the months preceding the German invasion, Lithuania became the main departure point for Jews *en route* to Palestine. The Japanese ambassador to Lithuania, Sempo Sugihara, actually helped thousands of Polish Jews emigrate to Palestine before the German invasion in 1941, although little research has been done on his personal motivations. Interestingly enough, The Nazi-Soviet pact period in Lithuania influenced the origins of the modern state of Israel.[45]

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[43] Degras, Soviet Documents, p. 380.
[44] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 128.
[45] Yitzhak Arad, The Pictorial History of the Holocaust (New York: 1992), 66.

## Chapter 5: Invasion!

Stalin's plans and expectations were upset in June, when the news came that Hitler had succeeded in conquering France. A prolonged stalemate on the western front would have given Stalin more time to build up his strength, while Germany and France wore each other out. Instead, Germany had quickly and decisively defeated its arch rival on the continent, which implied that Hitler would soon turn his attentions to the East, once England had been eliminated.

Stalin had been stalling his planned invasion of the lower Baltic states after his fiasco in Finland, but as a result of the fall of France, he sped up his plans. Stalin's anxiety at this time illustrates the importance to him of the Lithuanian invasion. He apparently believed that it was essential to Soviet security that he invade Lithuania before Hitler turned his attention, once again, to the East. Molotov contacted the Lithuanian ministry of the interior with a complaint about the lack of Lithuanian protection for Soviet soldiers garrisoned on the Lithuanian-German border: "Molotov had in particular maintained persistently that Butayeff, a member of the Red Army, who according to Lithuanian reports had committed suicide, had been shot by Lithuanians. He had expressed his dissatisfaction very plainly and stressed that the Lithuanian ministry of the Interior was not equal to its task."[46] These accusations were later used to justify the complete annexation of Lithuanian by the Soviet Union.

In response to these accusations, the Lithuanian government again turned to Germany for assistance. Not realizing that it was already a sacrificial lamb, the Lithuanian government thought that it could find allies in the German foreign office. Skirpa sent a desperate message to Ribbentrop, saying "The Lithuanian government still did not know what the intentions of the Soviet Union might be. The Lithuanian government was prepared to do even more for the safety of the garrisons than it had done so far. If the Soviet Union now made broader political or military demands, the Lithuanian government could not take the responsibility for their acceptance."[47]

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[46] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 146.
[47] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 147.

No German assistance came, of course, and on June 14, the Soviet government issued an ultimatum to the Lithuanian government. According to Skirpa, the ultimatum contained three unacceptable points: "1. that the constitutional government of Lithuania be forced to resign immediately; 2. that the Ministry of the Interior and the Chief of the State Security Police be tried without preferring charges based on law; and 3. that free and unlimited entry of Soviet military forces into Lithuania be granted."[48]

The Soviet ultimatum was more of a declaration of war than a diplomatic demand. It clearly violated, on every point, the Soviet-Lithuanian mutual assistance treaty which had been signed in October 1939. The two main justifications that the Soviet Union gave for the invasion were the wrongful death of Butayeff and the creation of a military alliance of Baltic states in violation of the Soviet-Lithuanian mutual assistance treaty. The Lithuanian government denied that it had entered into anything other than a diplomatic entente, but its futile protest was ignored by Stalin.

Top Lithuanian government officials responded in the only way that they could, by trying to flee the country. Ribbentrop received a message on June 16 from the night guard on the German-Lithuanian border that Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona and General Stasys Rastaikis both sought asylum in Germany. The border guard, unsure of what to do in this unexpected situation, wired the German foreign office for instruction. "The question arises in particular whether former Interior Minister Skucas and the former director of the State Security Department, Powelaitis, who were tried in accordance with... the Soviet ultimatum, can be allowed to enter.[49]

Ribbentrop, under the questionable auspices of the Border and Friendship treaty, allowed for the panicked migration of Lithuanian officials across the border. The issue was further complicated, however, because Smetona, before his escape, "had given orders to the Lithuanian garrisons of Mariampol and Tauroggen to cross the frontier into Germany fully equipped and armed."[50] Ribbentrop, still on the same day, issued new instruction for the handling of Lithuanian troops. Since a German invasion of Lithuania was still the probable direction of Nazi ambition,

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[48] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 169.
[49] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 149.
[50] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 149.

Ribbentrop recognized the advantage of extending aid to Lithuanian troops who could later be used to help expel the Red Army. Ribbentrop's orders of June 16, 1940 were his most manipulative move in the Nazi-Soviet pact years:

> I have already given instructions through the Gestapo to intern the Lithuanian president, Smetona, with family and other functionaries who have crossed the 'green border.' This will be done by the Gestapo.... If Lithuanian troop contingents ask permission to cross the German border, this request may be granted. The troops are to be disarmed and likewise interned.... It is to again be pointed out that border crossings are to be permitted only upon the request of the Lithuanians, and that we, for our part, must not do anything to encourage such requests.[51]

Ribbentrop, while allowing the Lithuanian army to cross the border for protection, made sure that he would not be blatantly violating the Nazi-Soviet pact. It was important that the emigration be voluntary, with no encouragement on the part of Germany, so that it could later, if challenged, be justified under the Border and Friendship treaty which guaranteed the movement of nationals. At the same time, however, Smetona and his officials were interned by the Gestapo despite assurances that they would be granted free asylum. Thus Ribbentrop betrayed the Soviet government and the Lithuanian government in one move. The opportunity to gain a potential edge on Lithuania was so important to German officials that they were willing to risk the diplomatic wrath of the Soviet Union.

A report was then completed by Schnurre in the German foreign office on the economic importance of the Baltic states to the German war effort. Because it was released the day after the Soviet invasion, this report became a major concern to both Ribbentrop and Hitler:

> The economic importance of the three Baltic states for our supply of food and raw materials essential to the war has become quite considerable as a result of the commercial treaties concluded with these three states during the last year. In the course of the last six months, we have furthermore concluded secret agreements with all three states whereby the entire export of these countries, except for the small part going to Russia and another small portion which goes to neutral countries, will be sent to Germany. That means that for all three states about seventy percent of their total exports.... In contrast, the economic interests of the Soviet Union in the three

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[51] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 150.

> Baltic states are of minor importance. The Soviet Union was able to secure only about ten percent of the export trade of these countries for itself by means of the treaties it recently concluded.[52]

The immediate concern was how these economic arrangements would be affected by the annexation and potential incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union. The Border and Friendship treaty had guaranteed that pre-existing economic arrangements would not be affected, but such a declaration could be easily circumvented, just as Germany had found loopholes in the migration of nationals. Fear of economic estrangement from Lithuania now influenced the Nazi-Soviet understanding. Schnurre told Ribbentrop in his report:

> The consolidation of Russian influence in these areas will seriously endanger these necessary imports. For one thing, the Russians will do their utmost to keep the raw materials, and especially food, at home for their own use. On the other hand, if part continues to go to Germany, they will make quite different demands in regards to deliveries of German products from those made in the past by the Baltic states, so that in effect the previous exchange of goods will break down.[53]

In Berlin, Lithuanian ambassador Skirpa still hoped that Germany would come to Lithuania's rescue. He submitted a letter to the German foreign office, asking them to not recognize the new Soviet Lithuanian government, but Ribbentrop politely refused. The incident shows, however, that until late June, the Lithuanian government-in-exile still trusted the Nazi's guarantees to Lithuania. Despite the Suwalki and Memel questions, Smetona still believed that Hitler was his only protection against Stalin. This dependency was clearly noted by analysts in the German foreign office:

> There can be no question -- during the last few months -- of dependence in foreign policy on Germany by the Baltic states. The Lithuanian government, to be sure, has probably not been quite certain until the last few days whether or not we were politically completely disinterested in Lithuania, so that in many circles, as for instance in the case of the Lithuanian minister here [Skirpa] there was perhaps some hope that Germany would, in case of further Russian demands, put in a good word for Lithuania in Moscow.[54]

Soviet aggression in the Baltics continued, and Germany, by the terms of its agreement, did nothing to hinder Soviet expansion. The loss of Lithuania for Hitler was a minor price to pay for a

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[52] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 153.
[53] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 153.
[54] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 152.

secure eastern front. As long as England remained an enemy, Hitler needed Stalin's cooperation. Despite the territorial ambitions that he had declared in Mein Kampf in 1923, Hitler willingly granted the Soviet Union free reign in the Baltics in 1940. The functionalist versus intentionalist debate on this point is secondary to the fact that Baltic security was clearly more important to Hitler in June 1940 that his long term aspirations in the Baltics. Despite British hopes that the Soviet invasion might create a rift between Germany and Russia, the German government's official position recognized the "right" of the Soviet Union to invade the Baltic states. Weizsäcker, in a memo, stated:

> The unresisted reinforcement of Russian troops in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and the reorganization of the governments of the Baltic states, sought by the Russian government to bring about more reliable cooperation with the Soviet Union, are the concern of Russia and the Baltic states. Therefore, in view of our unaltered friendly relations with the Soviet Union, there is no reason for nervousness on our part, which some of the foreign press has tried to impute to us in only too transparent a manner.[55]

It was important, from the Soviet point of view, to maintain a strong coalition with Germany. Unofficially, Molotov told Schulenburg, "It had become necessary to put an end to all the intrigues by which England and France had tried to sow discord and mistrust between Germany and the Soviet Union in the Baltic states."[56] England's hope that the Baltic question could create a rift in the Nazi-Soviet pact illustrates the importance of this region in diplomatic discussions during the war.

The one issue that nearly caused a rift between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany was the escape of Smetona and several Lithuanian regiments across the German-Lithuanian border. Schulenburg reported to Ribbentrop, "In connection with the escape of Smetona and the possible crossing of the frontier by Lithuanian army units, Molotov stated that the Lithuanian border was evidently inadequately guarded. The Soviet government would, therefore, if requested, assist the Lithuanian government in guarding its borders."[57]

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[55] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 154.
[56] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 154.
[57] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 154.

The German government was in an awkward position. It could not officially admit that it had granted asylum to Smetona and the Lithuanian soldiers, but it could not deny the accusations either. Stalin took advantage of their situation by using the escape of Lithuanian soldiers as a pretext for the further reinforcement of the Lithuanian-German border. Although a friendly relationship was still in effect, the fear of an eventual invasion was now visible. England hoped that this movement of Russian troops would frighten Hitler, and force him to commit more troops to the eastern front, but Stalin moved quickly to allay German fears. The Soviet government press agency, Tass, published a communiqué probably written by Stalin himself:

> In connection with the entry of Soviet troops in the Baltic countries, rumors have recently been spread to the effect that 100 to 150 divisions have been concentrated at the Lithuanian-German border, that this concentration of Soviet troops was due to the Soviet Union's dissatisfaction with Germany's successes in the West, and that this revealed a deterioration in Soviet-German relations, and is designed to exert pressure on Germany.... In the Baltic states there are actually... no more than eighteen to twenty divisions, and these divisions are not concentrated on the Lithuanian-German border but in the various districts of the Baltic republics, and their purpose is not to exert 'pressure' on Germany, but to provide a guarantee for the execution of the mutual assistance pacts between the U.S.S.R. and these countries."[58]

It is clear that events in Lithuania were considered indicative of Nazi-Soviet relations. The Soviet Union and Germany resolved their conflicts of interest in Lithuania in June, 1940 because it was still in their best interests, but in the following year Hitler's ambitions began to outweigh his patience. The understanding reached in June, 1940 was the last instance of any real cooperation between the Soviet Union and Germany in the Nazi-Soviet pact period. Meanwhile in Lithuania, the population was left unprotected against the policies of Stalin.

According to American historian Robert Tucker, the brief Soviet occupation of Lithuania from June, 1940 to June, 1941 was marked by the unmitigated horrors of Stalinism. So much so that when the Nazis invaded Lithuania, they were welcomed by enormous crowds as liberators from oppression. Sadly, the most important commodity that Lithuania had to offer both the Soviet Union and Germany was its human resources. The Soviet Union, in its one year occupation, deported

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[58] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 156.

approximately 1,200,000 Lithuanians to Siberia where, "it is estimated that about one quarter of these died in exile or in concentration camps by the end of the summer of 1941." Tucker, in his study of Stalinist atrocities, writes,

> The newly acquired territories were all scenes of coercive revolutions from above, complete with nationalization of banks and plants, confiscation of landowner estates, collectivization, and repression of 'socially alien' elements. The stark savagery of Stalinism found reflections in the scope and character of these repressions, which took diverse forms: mass arrests in what had been eastern Poland... arrests and deportations in the Baltic states.... The victims numbered, all told, about two million.[59]

## Chapter 6: Crumbling Alliance

The remainder of the summer of 1940 was spent consolidating the Russian hold on the Baltic states. With Smetona in exile, and the rest of the Lithuanian government in custody, the Soviet Union held mock elections in Lithuania. Schulenburg, analyzing the situation in Lithuania, sent word to Weizsäcker in July that,

> Most people here believe that the three Baltic states will be changed into entities completely dependent on Moscow, i.e., will be incorporated into the Soviet Union. The Legations of the three Baltic states here in Moscow expect to be completely dissolved and to disappear in a very short time. It is generally believed that the Soviet government will demand the withdrawal of all foreign missions in Kaunas, Riga and Reval.[60]

There was little shock in Berlin that Stalin planned to incorporate the Baltic states. The original intent of the Nazi-Soviet pact was to permanently set up spheres of influence in the Baltics and Eastern Europe, and the incorporation of Lithuania fit with Schnurre's earlier analysis of what would likely happen after the planned Soviet invasion. What did change was possession of the questionable strip in southwest Lithuania which had been reserved by Germany in October, 1939. On July 13, 1940 Schulenburg sent a disturbing message to Ribbentrop, reporting on his most

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[59] Tucker, Stalin in Power, 611-612.
[60] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 165.

recent meeting with Molotov in Moscow. It acknowledged all of the underlying, unresolved issues between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

> Molotov summoned me today and stated the following: Stalin had carefully re-examined the situation with respect to the strip of Lithuanian territory and has concluded that our claim to this strip of territory is incontestable. Under the present circumstances, however, the cession of this strip of territory would be extremely inconvenient and difficult for the Soviet government. Therefore, Stalin and he [Molotov] himself earnestly request the German government to consider whether, in conformity with the extraordinarily friendly relations between Germany and the Soviet Union, a way cannot be found which would leave this strip of territory permanently with Lithuania. Molotov added that we could of course move the population of German origin out of Lithuania, as well as out of this strip of territory. Molotov stressed again and again the difficulties which would at present result for the Soviet Union from the cession of this strip of territory, and he made his and Stalin's request seem very urgent by repeatedly expressing hope of a German concession. Request instructions by wire. Perhaps, the Soviet request can be used to put through our economic and financial demands with respect to the Baltic states.[61]

There can be little doubt that this document drastically changed the Nazi-Soviet relationship. The last time Stalin had revised the pact, Hitler was still in the midst of a desperate war with France, but by July, Hitler no longer needed Stalin as much as Stalin needed continued peace. The degree of desperation in Molotov's request was obvious.

The German response was telling. Schulenburg's last sentence noted the possibility that this could be used as a bargaining chip to insure that the much needed German-Lithuanian export treaties were maintained. Ribbentrop told to Molotov that the Soviet proposal, "Would represent a rather considerable change in the Moscow treaty to the disadvantage of Germany. Before the Reich government can consider the matter in detail, therefore, I should be interested in hearing what *quid pro quo* the Soviet government would propose."[62]

In Berlin, the German reaction to the Soviet occupation of the southwest strip of Lithuania was far from conciliatory. Hitler, now less patient and turning his attentions towards the threat of Soviet expansion once again, decided to curb Soviet use of the Memel Free Port Zone. As part of the Memel acquisition in March 1939, Germany had guaranteed to Lithuania unrestricted use of the

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61 Nazi-Soviet Relations, 166.
62 Nazi-Soviet Relations, 174.

essential Memel port on the Baltic Sea. Schnurre, on August 9, 1940, rescinded that agreement based upon the Soviet incorporation of Lithuania. The orders went out secretly:

> The incorporation of Lithuania into the territory of the Soviet Union creates a completely new situation for the Memel Free Port Zone. The Free Port Zone represented an international obligation, made to facilitate the return by Lithuania of her most important port to Germany. For Russia, which has expanded and has at her disposal a great number of Baltic Sea ports, it has lost its real significance; its continued existence would lead to politically dangerous Russian privileges on German territory. If Russia should demand the continuance of the Free Port Zone in Memel, the position taken here will be that the promises given in the German-Lithuanian treaty of March 22, 1939, are no longer applicable to a Lithuania which has been incorporated into the Soviet Union. The competent officers will initiate the necessary steps for terminating the present state of affairs.[63]

This declaration violated the Border and Friendship treaty of September 1939 which guaranteed the preservation of economic agreements between Germany and Lithuania after the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. It was a blatantly hostile move against the Soviet Union, and it was made secretly, with the expectation that the Soviet Union would be shocked and disturbed. The Soviet occupation of Suwalki and the corresponding German closure of Memel were the first two signs of strain and incompatibility in the Nazi-Soviet pact, and both centered around controversial territories in Lithuania. The diplomatic crisis of August 1940 highlights the dual importance of Lithuania in both the formation and disintegration of the Nazi-Soviet pact.

Molotov offered Schulenburg 3,860,000 gold dollars in exchange for the Suwalki strip, but the German government stalled its response, while it initiated its new policy in Memel.[64] The Soviet response to the closing of the Memel Free Port Zone was immediate and emphatic:

> The attention of the German government is called to activities of German authorities in the Memel Free Port Zone which violate rights and interests of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic. Disregarding the rights fixed in the German-Lithuanian Treaty of May 20... German authorities had ordered German troops to invade the territory of the Free Zone, had discontinued the activities of the Customs Office, and had declared that all Lithuanian goods in the zone were to be removed..... The Soviet government was of the opinion that the Lithuanian Soviet Republic was entitled to all the rights and privileges granted by the German-Lithuanian treaty as well as by the letters exchanged

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[63] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 175-176.
[64] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 176.

> by Schnurre and Norkaitis on May 20, 1939, and that their validity could not be terminated by a unilateral act. Molotov added orally that just as the German government takes for granted fulfillment of the commercial treaties concluded between Germany and the Baltic countries, so also must the Soviet government demand the observance of the German-Lithuanian Treaty with regards to the Memel Free Port Zone which was likewise a commercial treaty.[65]

As the summer of 1940 came to and end, the Nazi-Soviet relationship began to crumble. Germany, shocked by Stalin's occupation of Suwalki, retaliated by closing down the Memel Free Port Zone. The Soviet Union, angered by this move, threatened Germany's economic relationship with Lithuania. Meanwhile, Adolf Hitler, finished with his French campaign, but still dependent on Baltic exports for his war economy, began to reconsider this extraordinary and uncomfortable coalition of Nazis and Communists.

For the remainder of 1940, the Nazi-Soviet pact deteriorated. In early September 1940 Schulenburg reported to Ribbentrop, "The question of the Free Port Zone of Memel was taken up with Schnurre... in a manner which leaves no doubt as to the resentment felt by the Soviet government, and makes much more difficult the further pursuit of our interest in the Baltic states."[66] Ribbentrop responded, "I request you not to broach the question of the Free Port of Memel on this occasion. We must persist in our view that we cannot grant the Soviet government a free port zone in Memel."[67]

The Memel Free Port question was a serious problem for the Soviet Union. The terms of the Nazi-Soviet pact clearly recognized Germany's claim to the Memel territory, but the port in Memel was indispensable to Lithuanian trade. If the Soviet Union was to take advantage of its incorporation of Lithuania, it needed the same free access to Memel that Lithuania had enjoyed since 1939. The Memel problem also meant that Germany was flexing its muscle in the Baltics, making the Stalin painfully aware of the fact that Germany still held the upper hand militarily.

The Soviet occupation of the Suwalki strip further complicated discussion of the Memel question. Schulenburg, after stalling almost a month, told Molotov in September, "The government

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[65] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 177-178.
[66] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 184.
[67] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 187.

of the Reich is prepared in principle, against adequate compensation, to forego the cession of the strip of Lithuanian territory which was agreed upon in Moscow." The sum proposed by Molotov in August, however, was unacceptable.[68]

Hitler spoke to Molotov in person in November when the Foreign Commissar traveled to Berlin, and they discussed at length the future of Nazi-Soviet relations. The problems which had plagued them in recent months were generally avoided, but Hitler talked at length about the need for cooperation in Lithuania as a means of preserving a positive relationship between Germany and the Soviet Union. Hitler's focus on Lithuania in these discussions illuminates just how important the Lithuanian questions were to both sides. According to the record of their conversations, Hitler told Molotov,

> In a number of cases, he (the Führer) had not been ready to make concessions, but he had realized that it was desirable to meet the needs of Russia half-way, as, for instance, in the case of Lithuania. From an economic point of view, Lithuania had, it is true, had a certain importance for us, but from a political point of view, we had understood the necessity of straightening out the situation in this whole field in order thereby to prevent in the future the spiritual revival of tendencies that were capable of causing tension between the two countries of Germany and Russia.[69]

These discussions, while fairly positive in tone, touched on some sensitive issue for Germany. On the second day of discussions, Hitler told Molotov that he still resented the September revision of the pact which he had felt forced into, and he was particularly resentful about losing the Suwalki strip in spite of Soviet promises. Hitler's fateful decision to invade Russia was based on many considerations, but the importance of the resentment built up by Soviet actions in Lithuania should not be underestimated. Hitler argued with Molotov, saying:

> Germany had lived up to the agreements, which was not quite the case on the Russian side. At any rate, Germany had not occupied any territory that was within the Russian sphere of influence.... There could be no doubt that... the changes from the original German-Russian agreement were essentially due to Russian initiative. Whether the difficulties -- to avoid which the Russians had offered their suggestion -- would actually have resulted from the partition of Poland, could be left

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[68] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 188.
[69] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 228.

out of the discussion. In any case the Voivodeship of Lublin was no compensation, economically, for Lithuania.[70]

Molotov responded to the latter accusation defensively, saying, "The Soviet Union would not have insisted on that revision if Germany had not wanted it. But he [Molotov] believed that the new solution had been in the interests of both parties."[71] In reference to the Suwalki strip in southwest Lithuania, Molotov was more careful so as to not incur Hitler's wrath. The Soviet government knew that it was in a weak position diplomatically and militarily by November 1940. They hesitated to take any abrupt action which might shatter the now tenuous peace between the now nearly victorious Nazi German war machine, and the still unprepared Red Army. Molotov's inquiries on the status of Nazi-Soviet negotiations for Suwalki compensation were met coldly by Hitler, who preferred to stall the issue because it continued to embarrass the Soviet Union.[72]

By November, Hitler had probably already decided to break the Nazi-Soviet pact, but the talks with Molotov strengthened his resolve. His discussions with Molotov in November were not intended to save the pact, as much as preserve it a little longer so that England could not recruit the Soviet Union to its side. In Lithuania, Soviet control over the population continued to expand at an alarming rate. Livestock and agricultural production dropped drastically from its 1939 levels. The corresponding decline in exports, in addition to the new restrictions created by the Soviet government in Lithuania, had adverse affects on the dependent German war economy. Germany's economic dependence on Lithuania was the final straw in the death of Nazi-Soviet peace.

Undoubtedly there were several factors which influenced Hitler's decision to terminate the Nazi-Soviet pact. It should be noted, though, that when Ribbentrop was asked in the Nuremberg trials after the war, "What further Russian measures caused Hitler anxiety as to Russia's attitude and intentions?" Ribbentrop's first response was "the occupation of the Baltic states."

On December 18, 1940, Hitler's issued secret orders to the chiefs of the military announcing the end of the Nazi-Soviet pact. He told them, "The German Armed Forces must be

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[70] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 234.
[71] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 236.
[72] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 237.

prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign (Operation Barbarossa) even before the conclusion of the war against England."[73] Despite this secret declaration, Nazi-Soviet negotiations continued. On January 10, 1941, Schulenburg and Molotov signed a secret protocol on the Suwalki strip, finally resolving the dispute at a cost twice as high as the original Soviet proposal. The Soviet Union agreed to pay 7,500,000 gold dollars for a tiny strip of land which it had already been occupying for six months.[74]

Also in January, a new agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union was reached on the repatriation of nationals and economic cooperation in Lithuania. The insincerity of all these arrangements is transparent in hindsight. Hitler actually convinced the Soviet Union to help pay for his preparations to invade Russia, while the guarantees on the emigration of German nationals out of Lithuania allowed German citizens to escape before Lithuania became a war zone.

On June 21, 1941, Ribbentrop wrote to Molotov for the last time, explaining the break in Nazi-Soviet relations and the end of the pact. In his letter, Ribbentrop denied that the German government knew that the Soviet Union had planned to incorporate the Baltic states when the pact was signed. The documentation from the two years of the pact clearly shows, however, that the Soviet annexation of Lithuania was a beginning assumption of the pact, one which had fit in conveniently with German plans at the time. Ribbentrop lied to justify the imminent German invasion of Russia:

> It became obvious that the U.S.S.R. -- contrary to the declarations made at the conclusion of the treaties that she did not wish to Bolshevize and annex the countries falling within her sphere of influence -- was intent on pushing her military might westward wherever it seemed possible and on carrying Bolshevism further into Europe. The action of the U.S.S.R. against the Baltic states... showed this clearly. The occupation and Bolshevization by the Soviet Union of the sphere of influence granted to her clearly violated the Moscow agreements, even though the government of the Reich for the time being accepted the action.[75]

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[73] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 260.
[74] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 267.
[75] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 348.

On that same day, Hitler wrote to Mussolini,

> Since I struggled through to this decision, I again feel spiritually free. The partnership with the Soviet Union, in spite of the complete sincerity of the efforts to bring about a final conciliation, was nevertheless often very irksome to me, for in some way or other it seemed to me to be a break with my whole origin, my concepts, and my former obligations. I am happy now to be relieved of these mental agonies.[76]

In Lithuania, the end of the Nazi-Soviet pact meant yet another invasion. In the three years of German occupation which followed, the Lithuanian people, especially the Jews, faced horrors far worse than anything they had experienced under Stalin's one year rule. Ironically, the Germans in 1941, like the Red Army in 1944, entered Lithuania posing as heroic liberators.

According to American historian Robert Conquest,

> Stalin's attitude towards the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 is one of the most peculiar things about his entire career. The man who never attached the slightest value to verbal or paper promises does really seem to have thought, or hoped, that Hitler would not attack Russia. Even when overwhelming evidence was sent to him, by Soviet intelligence, by the British, by German deserters, that the Nazis were massing for attack, he gave strict orders that such reports should be treated as provocations.[77]

Hitler's betrayal of the pact took Stalin almost entirely by surprise, and the Germany army quickly invaded Russia through the Lithuanian passage, just as Stalin had feared. Hitler then set up a civilian administration in the occupied eastern territories, to which he gave free reign over the population. Alfred Rosenburg, whom Hitler had appointed minister of the occupied eastern territories, instructed his staff, "The stipulations of the Hague Convention regarding land warfare, which deal with the administration of territories occupied be a foreign power, do not apply, since the USSR can be considered as nonexistent.... Therefore, all measures which the German administration deems necessary or suitable in order to carry out this extensive task are admissible."[78]

The worst horrors of the Nazi occupation were perpetrated against the Jews. Of the 80,000 Jews in Vilna, once the great center of Jewish culture and education in Eastern Europe, there were

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[76] Nazi-Soviet Relations, 353.
[77] Robert Conquest, The Great Terror: A Reassessment (New York: 1990), 453.
[78] Trial of the Nazi War Criminals, vol. 11, 574.

only 9,000 left by December 23, 1941, only six months after the German invasion. By the time the Soviets recaptured Lithuania in 1944, there were only 600 Jewish survivors in the Vilna ghetto.[79] Out of a total population of 200,000 Jews in Lithuanian, the Gestapo arranged for the murder of 170,000.[80]

In addition to the extermination of Jews, the occupying German government also pursued a policy of mass deportations and forced labor of non-Jews. In March 1943, instructions were given for the deportation of one million men and women from the eastern territories in the following four months.[81] This physical uprooting of Lithuanian people, along with the death toll caused by the war, permanently scarred the population.

The Nazi occupation of the Baltics ended in 1944, when the Red Army reoccupied Lithuania, and set up a permanent administration of the Baltic states. The Soviet Union's official justification for the reincorporating of Lithuania after World War II was based on the fact that Lithuania had been historically a part of the Russian empire from 1756-1916, and incorporated as one of the Soviet republics in 1940. Since that incorporation was based on the illegal arrangements made in the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact, it can be said that indirectly, the Nazi-Soviet pact was partially responsible for the incorporation of Lithuania from 1944 to 1991.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

Looking back at the whole period from 1939 to 1941, the Vilna, Memel and Suwalki questions clearly helped to shape the Nazi-Soviet pact. In 1939, it was not only the incorporation of Czechoslovakia, but also Germany's acquisition of Memel that shocked the Soviet Union into reconsidering its alliances. The Lithuanian government played no part in the negotiations between Germany and the Soviet Union, but the territories of Lithuania were a central concern to both Hitler and Stalin. In September, the Nazi-Soviet Border and Friendship treaty was signed specifically for

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[79] Trial of the Nazi War Criminals, vol. 8, 302-308.
[80] Izidors Vizulis, The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939: The Baltic Case (New York, 1990), 40.
[81] Trial of the Nazi War Criminals, vol. 3, 419.

the purpose of revising the dividing line between German and Soviet spheres of influence in Lithuania, which illustrates the centrality of Lithuania in the earliest Nazi-Soviet diplomatic arrangements.

By June 1940, the Germany Army was receiving approximately seventy percent of Lithuania's exports, and the records of the German foreign office indicate that the Lithuanian president and his ministers were clearly leaning towards Germany as an ally against Soviet encroachment. Stalin's concern that the Baltic states were aligning themselves with Germany contributed to his overall paranoia, and encouraged his invasion of the Baltics. Hitler's concern that the Soviet Union might cut off Germany's supply of raw materials contributed to his decision to exclude Lithuania from the Memel Free Port. By 1941, the Nazi-Soviet relationship had decayed to such a degree, in part because of tensions in Lithuania, that the German invasion of Russia was a foregone conclusion for many analysts at the time.

Analyzing the period of the Hitler-Stalin pact through the experience of Lithuania provides some new insights into the causes, and timing, of the rise and fall of Nazi-Soviet relations, but it leaves unanswered the traditional historical debates on the personal motives of Hitler and Stalin. The September revision of the pact in favor of the Soviet Union implies that Stalin held the upper hand originally, but the German invasion of 1941, and Stalin's lack of preparation, seems to indicate that Hitler fooled Stalin into trusting him. Hitler's fulfillment of the pledges he made in Mein Kampf implies a intentionalist perspective, yet Hitler's willingness to compromise in the first year of the pact implies more strongly the strengths of the functionalist interpretation. Although the Lithuanian perspective provides no new solutions to these debates, it does contribute to an overall understanding of the early years of the war.

It is important to take from the Lithuanian perspective an understanding that the Nazi-Soviet relationship changed as a result of the progress of the war. The history of territorial rearrangements in Lithuania from 1939 to 1941 coincided with the changes that took place in the Nazi-Soviet relationship. There is, however, an inherent danger in taking this perspective too far. It would be ridiculous to argue that Baltic interests single handily caused the Nazi-Soviet pact, or that the

Lithuanian questions were the primary cause for Hitler's decision to invade Russia. The economic and ideological factors which shaped the second World War are too numerous to be fully illustrated here. Rather the purpose of this study was to illuminate a factor which has been overlooked in most major studies of the Nazi-Soviet pact.

Trapped between the ambitions of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, there was nothing that the Lithuanian government could have done in 1939 to prevent being invaded. President Smetona hoped that if he agreed to send seventy percent of Lithuania's exports to Germany, Hitler would protect him from the Soviet Union. Instead, Lithuania was invaded by both countries in the following two years. Even if Smetona had chosen earlier to align Lithuania with the Soviet Union, it is unlikely that those invasions could have been averted. Although the Lithuanian question haunted Nazi-Soviet relations, Smetona was absolutely helpless, and acutely aware of his own helplessness in 1939.

Today, however, the major concerns of Lithuania are economic rather that military. On June 14, 1992, the people of Lithuania will have the opportunity to vote whether or not they want the remaining Russian troops to pull out of Lithuania. In a larger sense, Lithuania needs to decide in the upcoming years whether it will maintain its ties to the rouble, or move towards the European Economic Community. Unlike 1939, Lithuania now has an opportunity to develop its own national character, and to chose its own path.

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