



The Molotov–Ribbentrop pact in Russia: 'gradual resurgence' of the Soviet version of events or unchallenged continuation of it?

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This year marks the 85th anniversary of signing the Soviet–German non-aggression pact in Moscow on August 23rd, 1939 (commonly referred to as the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, hereafter MRP). Still today, after 10 years after Russia's war against Ukraine and more than two years into the full-scale invasion, the following view, both outside and inside of Russia, prevails. Firstly, that the MRP and the secret protocols (the MRP contained one protocol but consequent treaties also contained some) on division of Central and Eastern Europe were condemned by the decision of the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR (the highest legislative body at that time, hereafter Congress) 'On the political and legal assessment of the Soviet–German non-aggression pact of 1939' on December 24th, 1989. Secondly, that the official position of Russia on those documents has been 'gradually returning' to the Soviet version of events prior December 1989 that justified the MRP while denying existence of the secret protocols.

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For example, on the official EU level, the December 1989 decision is still viewed as an act of 'condemnation' of the MRP¹. From this perspective it can be argued that 'gradual resurgence' of the version of events prior December 1989 in Russia

started 15 years ago. On August 31st, 2009, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published Vladimir Putin's letter in which he stated, that in December 1989 his country had deemed the MRP 'immoral'². The day later, on

¹ See, for example: European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe. Paragraph K. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html

² List Putina do Polaków – pełna wersja. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 31.08.2009. <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,6983945,list-putina-do-polakow-pejna-wersja.html>



Westerplatte, he stressed again that decision had meant 'condemnation' of the pact³. Until recently, some observers viewed those statements as a genuine attempt to reconcile with Poland and, more generally, the West. Supposedly, by deliberate opposition of Poland and some other Eastern European countries, the West ignored that approach that left Russia with no choice but to 'return' to the version of events prior 1989⁴.

Unfortunately, this view has very little in common with reality, but it represents some fundamental problems with how the period of 'perestroika' under Mikhail Gorbachev is perceived, and the ways how Russia has been dealing with its past are interpreted. I argue that there was never a genuine attempt to take responsibility for the Soviet crimes on the highest level of the USSR. Moreover, Russia as a legal successor of the USSR continued in the same way.

The case of the MRP perfectly exemplifies this situation. Firstly, it is sufficient to look at the text of the December 1989 decision to understand that it did not get close to condemnation of the pact. The secret protocols were 'condemned' in a way that it did not change the policy. Secondly, that decision was perfectly in line with the already existing Soviet version of events that had been

created by Stalin. As a result, that decision cannot be seen as a watershed between the Soviet version of events prior December 1989 and any other because the document itself was perfectly in line with that version. Therefore, Russia has never been 'gradually returning' to the version of events prior 1989 because nothing substantively changed back then.

THE MRP, THE SECRET PROTOCOLS AND THEIR REALISATION

It is important to remember that the MRP as such was not anything extraordinary in the international context of that time because non-aggression treaties had been signed between different parties before (for example, Poland signed a non-aggression treaty with the USSR in 1932 and with Germany in 1934). However, the MRP included a secret protocol in which the Soviet Union and Germany divided Central and Eastern Europe into two. The parties agreed that Germany was to receive Western Poland and Lithuania, while the USSR could take the rest of Poland as well as Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Bessarabia (back then a part of Romania, today the biggest part of Moldova). It meant restoration of the pre-Versailles-treaty borders in Central and Eastern Europe, at least for Germany and the USSR,

³ However, by mistake he referred to the State Duma of the Russian Federation but not the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3VMV1slrCg&list=Wl&index=68&t=18s>

⁴ See, for example: Geoffrey Roberts. Poles apart: Putin, Poland and the Nazi-Soviet pact. <https://www.hnn.us/article/poles-apart-putin-poland-and-the-nazi-soviet-pact>; Alexei Miller at the roundtable: «Историческая память – еще одно пространство, где решаются политические задачи». К 75-летию окончания Второй мировой. <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/istoricheskaya-pamyat-eshhe-odno-prostranstvo-gde-reshayutsya-politicheskie-zadachi/>



which both acted as successors of their empires⁵.

If the pact itself was officially announced, the protocol was kept secret because both parties recognised it contradicted the international treaties they had previously signed. Firstly, the secret agreement could have been implemented only by force, which was in contradiction to the General treaty for renunciation of war as an instrument of national policy (commonly referred to as the Kellogg-Briand pact). Germany was among the signatories of that treaty on August 27th, 1928, and the USSR accessed the treaty a month later. Secondly, it went against the already existing bilateral treaties that Germany and the Soviet Union had previously signed with the countries affected by the secret protocol. Such treaties did not only include non-aggression pacts but also, more importantly, peace treaties from the early 1920s which had established international borders. The MRP with its secret protocol clearly exemplified the nature of both the national socialist and the communist regime: international treaties were respected only as long as it was necessary, the secrecy of the agreement clearly showed that both parties knew perfectly well that their intentions were wrong and illegal.

On September 1st, 1939, Germany started the implementation of the secret protocol attacking Poland. That

day is recognised as the beginning of WWII. On September 17th, the USSR joined the process by also attacking Poland. On September 28th, having divided II Rzeczpospolita, the two aggressors signed the Boundary and friendship treaty with other secret protocols which partially amended the original one. Germany ceded Lithuania to the Soviet Union in exchange for some of the territory of Poland. In September-October by threat of force the USSR imposed the 'Mutual assistance treaties' on Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which meant establishing military bases in those countries. On November 30th, the USSR attacked Finland. In June-August 1940, while the world was following the German blitzkrieg in Western Europe, the Soviet Union issued the Baltic states ultimatums to change governments, staged 'public support' to 'free' parliamentary election, which paved way to annexation by the USSR. At the same time the Soviet Union annexed two parts of Romania: Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. The German attack on the USSR on June 22nd, 1941, ended cooperation of the two regimes.

As a result of WWII Germany lost significant territories. On the other hand, the USSR not only retained the majority of the areas mentioned in the secret protocols (Finland did not lose its independence but substantial territories) but acquired new ones (Transcarpathia, part of East Prussia),

⁵ Lauri Mälksoo. The treaties of Brest-Litovsk, Versailles and Moscow: contesting sovereignty and hegemony in Eastern Europe in 1918-1939. *German Yearbook of International Law* 2021, vol. 62, no. 1, pp. 189-209.



and established control over certain countries in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. Six of them, East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria remained in the Soviet sphere of influence until 1989. As a result of the war, the national socialist ideology was unequivocally condemned, and Germany was held responsible for war of aggression, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. At the same time, communism as an ideology and the Soviet Union escaped condemnation and responsibility for similar actions. The USSR became one of the creators of the post-war international order (United Nations).

THE SOVIET VERSION OF EVENTS

Certain claims, that a secret agreement between Germany and the USSR concerning Central and Eastern Europe existed, were made by diplomats of various countries already in autumn 1939. The existence of the secret protocols was revealed by the US State Department in 1948. The Soviet Union could not hide the fact that the pact had been signed, however, it never recognised existence of the secret protocols until December 1989. In the 1948 brochure 'Falsifiers of history', which was edited by Joseph Stalin, the USSR laid foundation for its interpretation of the causes of WWII.

The MRP was justified in the following way. Firstly, the UK and France were blamed for isolation of the USSR that left the latter no choice but to sign a pact with Germany. Secondly, it was stressed that the pact was nothing extraordinary since even Poland had signed a non-aggression pact with Germany before. Thirdly, it was emphasised that the Soviet Union had been the last country to conclude any kind of agreement with Germany. That particularly meant that the catalyst of WWII had not been the MRP but the previous agreements between Western countries and Germany (for example, the Munich agreement of 1938).

The Soviet action in Central and Eastern Europe in the period between the MRP and the German attack in June 1941 was justified as following. The USSR did not invade any country but helped them avoid becoming German colonies. Additionally, the Western powers were accused of similar action in Northern Africa.

In the following decades, that version of the events was developed to the extent that Germany had merely been a tool in the hands of the West against the Soviet Union. The latter had had no choice but to prepare for the inevitable clash which forced it to acquire areas in Central and Eastern Europe for defence⁶. It is important to note that in the Soviet version of events there was

⁶ On the Soviet version of WWII, see: Elmar Gams. The resurgence of the Soviet version of history in Russia's current view of the Second World War. In: Saueauk, Meelis; Maripuu, Meelis (Ed.). Propaganda, Immigration, and Monuments: Perspectives on Methods Used to Entrench Soviet Power in Estonia in the 1950s–1980s. Proceedings of the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory; 3, 229–266.



never any connection between the MRP and the consequent expansion in Central and Eastern Europe as if the former had not been the reason for the latter.

THE DECEMBER 1989 DECISION

The document adopted on December 24th was based on the findings of the commission of the Congress formed in summer 1989. Notably, the majority of the commission were the deputies from the Soviet republics that completely or partially consisted of the territories annexed by the USSR as a result of the MRP and the secret protocols. For the representatives of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian SSR, which had already been making steps towards sovereignty within the USSR since autumn 1988, it was crucial to get the admission that the secret protocols had indeed been signed on the highest level to challenge the Soviet version of the events of 1940, accordingly to which the Baltic states had voluntarily joined the USSR⁷.

The December 1989 decision did not go further than merely confirming the already existing Soviet version of the events surrounding the MRP while admitting that the secret protocols had indeed been signed. The document⁸ consisted of eight articles. Article 1 stated that the Congress took into consideration the conclusions made by its commission. Article 2 stressed that the pact with Germany had been

signed in a 'critical international situation' and the USSR had tried to avoid the war but had not succeed. Article 3 noted that the non-aggression pact as such had not violated the already existing international norms, and the existence of the secret protocols was admitted. Article 4 confirmed the obvious that the MRP as well as the Boundary and friendship treaty had become void with the German attack in June 1941. Article 5 explained that the secret protocol from August 23rd, 1939, and consequent secret documents had signified 'departure from the leninist principles in the Soviet foreign policy' and had been in contradiction with the previous treaties between the USSR and the Baltic states, Poland, Finland. Articles 6 emphasised that Stalin and Molotov personally had negotiated the secret protocols, which had not gone through the process of ratification of the MRP. Thus, the secret protocols had not reflected the will of the 'Soviet people'. In Article 7 the Congress condemned the fact that the secret protocols had been signed and recognised them as 'legally invalid and void from the moment of signing'. The protocols had been used by 'Stalin and his circle' for ultimatums and force pressure on other countries, while it had been in contradiction to the previous agreements with them. Article 8 concluded:

⁷ On the commission work, see, for example: Heiki Lindpere. Molotov-Ribbentrop pact: challenging Soviet history. Tallinn: Eesti Välispoliitika Instituut, 2009.

⁸ As published in Pravda, 28.12.1989, nr 362 (26080), 3.



understanding the complex and contradictory past is a part of the process of perestroika which is designed to provide every people of the Soviet Union with the opportunity for free and equal development in conditions of an integral, interdependent world, and expanding mutual understanding.

As a result, the document contained features of the process how the central authorities of the USSR had been dealing with the past since Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech in February 1956. Firstly, Stalin was personally made responsible for the wrongdoing which allowed to avoid taking direct responsibility for the action of the state. Secondly, despite accusing Stalin, the decision still used the version of events approved by him in 'Falsifiers of history'. Thirdly, it failed to establish connection between cause and effect. The decision admitted that the secret protocols had violated the previous treaties, and they had been created outside of the already existing legal structure. However, there was no reference to the consequent events instigated by the Soviet Union which had allowed it to annex several countries and territories. As a result, the document did not define any clear solution but ended in an extremely obscure way (Article 8). It is important to note that condemnation of certain action means nothing if no legal remedy is established. The December 1989 decision did not condemn the MRP

and the way it condemned the secret protocols had no practical outcome.

AFTERMATH OF THE DECEMBER 1989 DECISION UNTIL TODAY

Already in May 1990, on the 45th anniversary of the 'Soviet people's victory in the Great Patriotic War', Gorbachev repeated the already existing version of the events (misdoings of the West and the USSR as a victim). He had nothing to add to the December 1989 decision. Nowhere did he mention the realisation of the secret protocols. The only hint could have been a reference to the 'war with Finland' but only in the context of mistreatment of the Red Army by Stalin⁹. It was evident that the December 1989 decision had not changed the already existing version of events where the 'Great Patriotic War' lasted from June 1941 until May 1945 as if the USSR had not participated in WWII since September 1939. That official Soviet view on WWII remained the same in Russia.

Even though the December 1989 decision was obscure and did not have any effect on the central authorities, some Soviet republics (Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian SSR as well as SSR Moldova) adopted decrees which developed it further deeming the Soviet annexation in summer 1940 illegal. At first, the Baltic Soviet republics were not officially reprimanded for that, i.e. those decrees were not repealed. However, the central authorities

⁹ Уроки войны и победы. As published in Pravda, 09.05.1990, nr 129 (26212), 1-2.



decided to use force against them once the situation developed further (twice against already independent Lithuania in January and July 1991 with casualties; against still the Latvian SSR in January 1991 with casualties; against all the three in August 1991). A similar document of the SSR Moldova¹⁰ was repealed by Gorbachev's decree on December 22nd, 1990, which was titled 'On measures to normalise the situation in the SSR Moldova' (the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the USSR and some countries of the Warsaw pact in 1968 had also been an act of 'normalisation'). The Russian military units are present in the so-called Transnistria still today.

The fact that the Soviet Union and Germany were allies from August 1939 until June 1941, and that the USSR used that union for expansion at the expense of its neighbours, was never recognised in the USSR. The official position of the Russian Federation has always been the same. Accordingly, the Baltic states were never occupied or annexed, but they joined the USSR 'voluntarily'; parts of Poland and Romania were not taken by force but as an act of 'liberation' of the people who lived there; Finland 'threatened' Leningrad, so the Soviet border had to be pushed westwards. Since April 27th, 2022, Article 13.48 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation stipulates fine or arrest for

public identification of the goals, decisions and actions of the leadership of the USSR, the command and military personnel of the USSR with the goals, decisions and actions of the leadership of Nazi Germany, the command and military personnel of Nazi Germany and the European Axis countries during the Second World War, as well as denial of the decisive role of the Soviet people in the defeat of Nazi Germany and the humanitarian mission of the USSR during the liberation of European countries¹¹

CONCLUSIONS

The December 1989 decision did not condemn the MRP nor stated that the Soviet Union was responsible for realisation of the secret protocols. The connection between the deals with Germany and the action of the USSR against its neighbours was denied. The version of WWII originally created by Stalin remained. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that Russia has been 'gradually returning' to Soviet version of events regarding the MRP and secret protocols prior December 1989 because that document itself was in line with that interpretation. In this light, it is an exaggeration to see Putin's statements in 2009 as a sign of reproachment since he repeated the Soviet version of events while been misleading about the December 1989 decision.

Until very recently, there have been countless statements of similar kind

¹⁰ Указ «О мерах по нормализации обстановки в ССР Молдова», 22.12.1990. As published in Pravda, 09.05.1990, nr 129 (26212), 1.

¹¹ <https://base.garant.ru/12125267/76b594a029c2282293db2a57798287a6/>



by various Russian officials, politicians, historians, political scientists and others. Similar voices have been heard from outside of Russia sometimes by leading experts in their field. At the same time, the core problem has remained the same. There has never been condemnation of various actions of the Soviet Union by the USSR or Russia which would have been followed by clearly defined legal remedy. From this point of view, it is necessary to reconsider the way how we see the period of 'perestroika' as well as later developments in Russia in terms of dealing with the past. Unwillingness or inability to tackle this issue by the international community has enabled Russia to continue the Soviet path.

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