The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 23, 1939

As 1939 began, the Soviet Union faced the greatest threat of war with Germany that it had since World War I. Flaunting the League of Nations, Hitler had remilitarized the Rhineland, unified Austria with Germany, annexed Czechoslovakia, and increased his threats against Poland. The rearmament and growth of the German army also continued at an exponential rate, with eastward expansion being the likely next step. The Soviets feared that, if France and Britain continued to appease the Nazis and if Poland were overrun, they alone would face a devastating German offensive. Stalin speculated that, were the Soviet Union to avoid signing on to a British-French guarantee to defend Poland, Hitler, who wished to avoid a two-front war, would reward its neutrality.

Stalin was right. As negotiations among the British and French about a pact of mutual assistance against Germany dragged on, concurrent negotiations between the Soviets and Germans bore fruit. The Soviet-German Nonaggression Pact, or Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact—after the foreign ministers of the two powers, Vyacheslav Molotov and Joachim von Ribbentrop—was signed in Moscow on August 23, 1939. The public agreement was supplemented by a secret protocol that divided Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence, giving Stalin a free hand in Poland east of the Vistula River, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Bessarabia, whereas Germany would control western Poland and Lithuania. A signature and a handshake over a line on a map thus sealed the fate of half of Europe. In the early morning of September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland; two days later France and Britain declared war on Germany.