

*THE WESTERN AND SOVIET REVALATIONS OF THE
GERMAN-SOVIET NON-AGGRESSION TREATY*

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The German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty (AKA the "German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact" or the "Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) was a diplomatic treaty signed on August 23, 1939, in Moscow between German foreign minister Ribbentrop and Soviet foreign minister Molotov. While being a non-aggression treaty on the surface, this treaty contained a secret protocol, in which both parties had jointly drawn lines that divide Eastern Europe into two and each declared its own sphere of influence over that region with complete disregard of the national sovereignty of independent nations that lie there. This treaty eventually led up to political earth quake in which the two sides jointly invaded Poland in 1939, divided and conquered the various independent states in the region soon after.¹ As the two ideological arch enemies agreed to demolish the sovereignty of the independent eastern European states, both were well aware of the potential backlash they could receive for the revelation of such notorious agreement; and therefore, both sides had put in their best efforts to keep the secret protocol hidden. Well the treaty was revealed at the end of war and acknowledged by Molotov and Ribbentrop, the secret protocol, the USSR had firmly denied its existence throughout the Cold War. From its signing in 1939 to its final official revelation by the Russian Federation in 1992, this research project seeks to unfold the bitter and uneasy story behind the 53-year long battle for the revelation of the secret protocol, a battle between truth and lies, national integrity and political gains.

Ever since the signing of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty, it has been classified as top secret by both parties for obvious reasons. While the world certainly sensed the abnormally good relationship between the two states during their joint invasion of Poland in 1939, there was no solid proof of an actual treaty until after the war, when Ribbentrop testified before the Nuremberg trial and confirmed the existence of the treaty and its secret protocol in 1946.² Further investigation on this issue by the international legal court, however, was hampered by the USSR and Great Britain for various political reasons, as confirmed by both Sevastianov's article and Eckert's book; and thus the issue regarding the this topic was removed from the agenda of the Nuremberg trial.

Before Ribbentrop was sentenced to death by the Nuremberg jury, however, the original document of the treaty, including the secret protocol, was provided to the Allies by a German

¹ "Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics", GHDI

² Sevastianov and Havtin

named Karl von Loesch. In Eckert's 2012 book detailing the discovery of this important document, it was recorded that Loesch was a German civil servant in foreign ministry who worked with Paul Otto Schmit, Ribbentrop's interpreter and chief of staff. Loesch was fluent in English as he had been born in London to a British mother and maintained British citizenship.³ More impressively, he had been educated at Oxford before he was drawn back to Germany by Hitler and had allegedly joined the SS. Due to the constant bombing by the Allies in 1943, the German foreign ministry ordered the office be evacuated and the highly-classified documents to be microfilmed and relocated. Loesch was put in charge of safekeeping both the original and the microfilm of the original German copy.⁴ When, near the end of the war, an order came from Berlin to destroy all documents, Loesch burned the original paper document but hid the microfilmed document elsewhere. As the war came to a close, Loesch utilized his fluency in English and networking to reach the Allies and revealed the existence of the microfilm in hope to exchange for better treatment.⁵

The British and American military soon went into action and dispatched a small team to assist him in retrieving the hidden microfilm, granting him all sorts of privileges of passage, transportation, and supplies, etc, during the process.⁶ Loesch, in return, successfully obtained the microfilmed collection of documents, including that of the original German copy of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty (and its secret protocol), and this collection was later known as the "Loesch Collection." Interestingly, the Russian document by Sevastianov and Havtin also pointed the beginning of the process of the revelation to the "коллекция фон Лёша" (the collection of Lyosha) and identified it as the single most important source through which the West, and later on the Soviet bloc, began to know about the existence of the secret protocol.⁷ However, since I have little to no understanding of German language, I would stay rather cautious as to whether the Russian name "Лёша" is the same name as "Loesch" in German or refer to the same person. Further studies on this matter by those with expertise in German and Russian language is welcomed.

³ Eckert, 62-63

⁴ Eckert, 63

⁵ Eckert, 63-64

⁶ Eckert, 64-65

⁷ Sevastianov and Havtin

After the discovery of the microfilmed German original copy of the treaty, including the secret protocol, the western Allies decided not to release it to the public immediately because it was damaging to the Soviet Union. They waited until 1948 when the Cold War started. The State Department publicly released the content of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty with its attached secret protocol in 1948. The *Times of London* was one of the press to publish it, and it also followed up with reports of Soviet Union's immediate official response. On Feb. 16th 1948, the *Times of London* newspaper reported that Molotov claimed:

It would be a gross slander to assert that the conclusion of a pact with the Hitlerites was part of the foreign policy plan of the Soviet Union... Whereas the Soviet Union insisted on an agreement for combating aggression (by Nazi Germany), Britain and France systematically rejected it, preferring to pursue a policy of isolating the USSR... and directing aggression eastwards against the Soviet Union. The German proposals for a pact were one way out for the Soviet Union—the best of all possible ways.⁸

As this 1948 report demonstrates, the USSR officially admitted the non-aggression treaty with Nazi Germany in 1939 but blamed it on the betrayal of the Western countries. However, the Soviet government denied the secret protocol of dividing up eastern Europe with spheres of influence with Germany⁹ while accusing the British of negotiating with Germany to draw spheres of influence throughout the world.¹⁰ The British and American press, while critical of their own governments' failure, expressed their bitter resentment towards the Soviet Union itself:

whatever the mistakes of the British and French Governments in the years before 1939, those Governments are no longer in power, while the same Russians who signed the Nazi-Soviet pact are still responsible for their country's policy.¹¹

From this refutation, we can see that the press and public opinion on the West following the revelation of the secret protocol had escalated from disagreement on past faults and grudges to a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the present Soviet state.

While the microfilmed German copy of the treaty was revealed in 1948, the Soviet copy had yet to see daylight. For decades after WWII, the official policy of the USSR had always been in denial of the existence of the secret protocol, and the Soviet foreign ministry had forbidden the

⁸ "Mistake of 1939" p.4

⁹ Sevastianov and Havtin

¹⁰ "Mistake of 1939" p.4

¹¹ "Mistake of 1939" p.4

release of any official foreign policy-related documents in and before 1939.¹² Valentin Falin (Валентин Фалин), the USSR ambassador to West Germany (1971-1978), however, wrote in the 1980s that by the time of his writing, most of the top-ranking Soviet officials mostly believed that the secret protocol was real and therefore should be acknowledged.¹³ Falin further suggested that it was Gorbachev who said that he was not aware of the existence of the secret protocol and could not, as the head of the USSR, admit the existence of the secret protocol and take responsibility without seeing the original document himself.¹⁴ Things changed, however, in 1988 when Gorbachev met with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. During the meeting Kohl told Gorbachev that the Loesch microfilms should be considered as the original document. Kohl also informed him that the microfilm of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty was stored in Germany.¹⁵ Kohl managed to convince Gorbachev to send scholars to Germany to bring the microfilms back to USSR, which soon created a political earthquake among the various Soviet republics.¹⁶ Under pressure from the various Soviet republics, the first Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union established the Commission for the Political and Legal Estimation of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact of 1939.¹⁷ The commission was composed of scholars and historians from a very diverse spectrum of nationalities, headed by Alexander Yakovlev (Александр Яковлев).¹⁸ The commission was tasked with studying the alleged secret protocol to present a report on the second Congress of People's Deputies.

The Commission soon found itself in a heated discussion over a very complicated issue that mixed politics with historical claims, legal disputes, and national sovereignty. While the Soviet government at this point still officially denied its signature of the secret protocol, all members of the commission could tell from the lines being drawn in the secret protocol that the items stated in the secret protocol manifested exactly what happened shortly after the signing. This meant that the very foundation on which various countries like the Baltic states joined the

¹² Sevastianov and Havtin

¹³ Sevastianov and Havtin

¹⁴ Sevastianov and Havtin

¹⁵ Sevastianov and Havtin

¹⁶ Sevastianov and Havtin

¹⁷ Sato, 1147; Sevastianov, George and Havtin, Boris

¹⁸ Sato, 1147

USSR was now in question, and the legitimacy of the whole Soviet Union was now under fire.¹⁹ This sentiment passed down from the scholars from different Soviet socialist republics to the people living there, arousing immense resentments against their respective Soviet governments which they now began to view as traitors who sold their national sovereignty and interests to Kremlin and communism.²⁰ In Latvia specifically, people staged grassroots protests to remind themselves of the Latvian people being sent to Siberian gulags as the country got practically "annexed". The resentment reached all-time height on August 23, 1989, the 50th anniversary of the treaty, as two million people, organized by the Baltic republics, "held hands to create a human chain from Vilnius, through Riga to Tallinn."²¹

While the growing nationalism and national sovereignty severely challenged the legitimacy of the USSR, the commission itself was also occupied with legal problems. While it was very obvious that the secret protocol was a serious offense to the national integrity of Eastern European states such as the Baltic states, Belarus, and Ukraine, etc, the secret protocol also benefited some countries with greater territories. As the secret protocol allowed the USSR to split eastern Europe with Nazi Germany and annex various countries as the Soviet socialist republics, it consequently redrew borders between these new members who had conflicting territorial claims in the past.²² For example, Lithuania, perhaps one of the most disobedient Soviet socialist republics to Moscow, while calling for the annulment of the secret protocol alongside the treaty, insisted its territorial claim on Vilnius, a place which it had historically competed with Poland and only obtained in the 20th century as a Soviet republic when both countries were practically annexed by the USSR under the secret protocol.²³ Other states faced similar problems, and reaction towards the treaty and secret protocol became a tactical maneuver dictated by national sovereignty—each Soviet socialist republic was now faced with the task of finding the balance between endorsing the secret protocol too much to maintain national independence, and denouncing it too radically to hold on to old territorial claims.²⁴

¹⁹ Sato, 1162

²⁰ Dreifelds, 33

²¹ Dreifelds, 34

²² Sato, 1155

²³ Sato, 1156

²⁴ Sato, 1162

Against all odds, however, the commission, in the end, was able to reach an agreement to present to the Second People's Congress in December 1989.²⁵ Interestingly, although it had been obvious to everyone that the Loesch microfilm was indeed the original document and that it was generally agreed that it should be nullified, they all knew that the acknowledgment of the signature combined with the annulment would be the annulment of the USSR by the USSR itself. To all the republics seeking independence, however, this would also result in a complete rejection of all items in the treaty and secret protocol, thus denying them the basis on which to lay claims to certain territories. As a result, the leaders decided that Alexander Yakovlev, on behalf of his commission, should only present a “personal” instead of a “formal” report during the Second Congress.²⁶ During the 1989 Congress, Alexander Yakovlev showed that the microfilmed 1939 treaty and the secret protocol were both evidently valid as the personal opinion of himself and colleagues from his commission while admitting that they still could not find the original copy on the Soviet side.²⁷ Thus, Gorbachev and the leadership were in a relatively comfortable position to declare the annulment to the treaty and the secret protocol from the moment they were signed should they have been signed, yet still officially denying the actual signature on the basis of the absence of the Soviet copy of the original document.²⁸ Even if the items on the secret protocol matched exactly what had happened next, as long as there was no Soviet copy of the original document found, it could always be interpreted as a fake document purposefully produced after the war to discredit the USSR’s foreign policy.

Where, then, was the Soviet copy of the original treaty and its secret protocol? Evidence later became clear: Gorbachev had been playing the fool this whole time in his last effort to keep the USSR intact. According to the Minister of Public Affairs of the Central Committee, Болдин, Gorbachev had seen not only the original Soviet copy of the treaty and secret protocol, but also examined the map used by Ribbentrop and Molotov as reference, on which they drew a line that was to become the exact border between Germany and the Soviet Union in the future. When asked why he would lie to the world about this document, Gorbachev reportedly said, “this could

²⁵ Sato, 1162

²⁶ Sevastianov and Havtin

²⁷ Sevastianov and Havtin

²⁸ Sevastianov and Havtin

not be shown to anyone at any time, we cannot bear the consequences.”²⁹ Gorbachev was well aware of the vital importance of this document to the Soviet Union, which was on the brink of collapse, and he remained silent about this through the rest of his life, even choosing not to mention it at all in his memoir long after the downfall of the USSR.³⁰

The final nail on Gorbachev’s lie’s coffin was put on by Yeltsin. As the USSR collapsed and Yeltsin became the president of the Russian Federation, he ordered mass-scale declassification of Soviet-era documents, specifically those of the CPSU and the KGB. It was during this operation that investigators found out that the original Soviet copy of the document was not only real but had been sitting in Gorbachev’s archives in the CPSU building this whole time under his full knowledge.³¹ Yeltsin reportedly made a phone call to Yakovlev and informed him about the finding. On October 27, 1992, the government staged a press conference and released the declassified Soviet original copy of the 1939 German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty with its secret protocol. Shortly after, the document saw its first official publication in the Russian scholarly journal *New and Newest History* (*Новая и новейшая история* 1993 no.1) alongside other 1939-1941 Loesch microfilmed documents the USSR had received from West.³² I confirmed through searching the news being reported during that time and found a report covering the release of the document on October 29, 1992, two days after the stated press release.³³ As for the original Soviet copy of the treaty, I searched the Russian internet and found the database for the *New and Newest History* journal (*Новая и новейшая история*), where it was allegedly first published. While that database only keeps the titles of articles published in each issue and volume, I was able to confirm that the publication of the Soviet copy of the original document was indeed present on the 1993 no.1 issue of the journal under the title “Soviet-German documents 1939-1941 From the Archives of the Central Committee of the CPSU” (Советско-германские документы 1939—1941 гг. Из Архива ЦК КПСС.)³⁴

²⁹ Sevastianov and Havtin

³⁰ Sevastianov, George and Havtin, Boris

³¹ Sevastianov, George and Havtin, Boris

³² Collins, Michael. “Russia Releases Original Molotov-Ribbentrop Pacts”

³³ Collins, Michael. “Russia Releases Original Molotov-Ribbentrop Pacts”

³⁴ “Soviet-German documents 1939-1941 From the Archives of the CPSU (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) Central Committee” *New and Newest History*

The story behind the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty and its secret protocol is an often-neglected yet fascinating one, one which my current self is not yet ready to fully discover. I welcome further studies based on my limited research to produce more insightful knowledge. In the end, I would like to offer my sincere appreciation and special thanks to my mother Ms. Wang Ping for her generous support in researching and translating a huge amount of Russian texts and documents with her expertise in Russian language. This research would not have been possible without her helping hand.

UCSB Hist 133B Essay

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In *United States Department of State, Documents on German Foreign Policy: From the Archives of the German Foreign Ministry*. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1956. Series D (1937-1945), The Last Days of Peace, Volume 7: August 9 – September 3, 1939. Document Numbers 228 and 229, pp. 245-47. (English translation accredited to the U.S. Department of State Division of Language Services and slightly edited by GHI staff)
http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1545

“Mistakes of 1939”, *Times London*, Feb 16, 1948. Issue no. 50996

<http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/9PSf85>. Accessed 7 Mar. 2019.

Relevance: This was one of the many newspaper articles that first reported the secret protocol of the treaty revealed by the US State Department and its follow-up in 1948. This article specifically recorded the immediate responses from the Soviet government. This piece is very interesting not only because of the argument it provided and its refutation against the Soviet propaganda but also because of the time it was released. Clearly, from what we know from the previous documents, the US State Department was already well aware of the secret protocol following Loesch's confession in 1945-1946, but waited to go public until the post-war political tensions with the USSR escalated. This piece was not only valuable evidence about the narrative of pre-WWII history, but an even more powerful ideological weapon in the post-WWII era.

Collins, Michael. “Russia Releases Original Molotov-Ribbentrop Pacts” UPI Archives. October 29, 1992. News Article Database. Accessed in 2019.

<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1992/10/29/Russia-releases-original-Molotov-Ribbentrop-pacts/1305720334800/>

Relevance: It was a news article produced in 1992 about the Russian government's press release of its discovery of the Soviet copy of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. This serves as strong evidence for the claim that Sevastianov and Havtin made in their journal and confirmed that it was through the Russian government that the Soviet copy of the secret protocol was first officially revealed to the general public after the collapse of the USSR itself.

“Soviet-German documents 1939-1941 From the Archives of the CPSU (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) Central Committee” *New and Newest History*, no.1, 1993, p.83-95. Online Journal Database, Accessed in 2019.

“Советско-германские документы 1939—1941 гг. Из Архива ЦК КПСС” Новая и новейшая история. 1993. № 1.

http://Annales.info/sbo/contens/nni.htm#93_01

Relevance: This was the first publication of the Soviet copy of the original German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty and its secret protocol.

Dreifelds, Juris, *Latvia in Transition*. Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=0d9svpuxozkC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Relevance: This book recounts the reaction of the general public of Latvia to the alleged secret protocol of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and shows how the people chose the anniversary to put on huge protests, which further intensified the divisions within the USSR.

Sevastianov, George and Havtin, Boris. “The History Behind the Revelation of the Soviet Copy of the German-Soviet Secret Protocol from 1939-1941” *The Forum of the Newest Eastern European Histories and Cultures*. No.1, 2007. Online journal, Accessed in 2019.

Георгий Севастьянов, Борис Хавтин. “К истории публикации советских текстов советско-германских секретных документов 1939-1941 гг” Форум новейшей восточноевропейской истории и культуры. No.1, 2007.

<http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/7Chavkin7.pdf>

Relevance: This is perhaps the most important and detailed account of the whole history behind the signing of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and its subsequent revelation from the Soviet side. This article provides a detailed account on how the USSR government officially reacted to external and internal pressures and criticisms, how it struggled to uncover the original document, and how the document played an important part of its downfall, when the original copy was finally released.

Note about the Authors:

- 1) George Sevastianov (Георгий Севастьянов): Russian Historian, 1991 Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences since 1987. Expertise in US History and International Relations, with the main focus on military history.
- 2) Boris Havtin (Борис Хавтин): Ph.D. In History, Professor at the Russian Academy of Military Sciences.

Eckert, Astrid M (2012). *The Struggle for the Files: The Western Allies and the Return of German Archives after the Second World War*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-88018-3.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=vRjJVIRG4qcC&pg=PR6&lpg=PR6&dq=ISBN+978-0-521->

88018-

[3.&source=bl&ots=1w5mWvsIIw&sig=ACfU3U2T65A6_yQWqiQ9IVfE37go_SiI2w&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjS0vK4g6ngAhUJeKwKHxfAATwQ6AEwAHoECAMQAQ#v=onepage&q=ISBN%20978-0-521-88018-3.&f=false](#)

Relevance: Eckert is a contemporary historian from the United States. She recounts the turbulent history of the different Allied powers struggling and competing to acquire the German documents after the war in efforts to preserve their post-war public images. This book documents the story of the revelation of the document, how the original ones were turned into microfilms, how the microfilms were ordered to be destroyed, and how Karl von Loesch, an officer serving in the German foreign ministry during the war, hid it in secret and revealed it to the Allies after the war. More interestingly, Eckert documents the exchange between Loesch and the Allied historians based on the records from the British archive in London.

Sato, Keiji. "Acknowledgement of the Secret Protocol of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and the Declaration of the State Sovereignty by the Union Republics of the USSR" *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 7, September 2014, 1146-1164. Online Database Accessed in 2019.
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=33db5ba6-3a09-4651-8495-36270c986492%40sessionmgr4009>

Relevance: This article examined and studied the process through which the research on the alleged secret protocol was carried out and the power struggles at the top level of the Soviet government over its huge implications. This article further shows that a document, despite being signed a long time ago by a group of people already gone and heavily condemned, nonetheless could still haunt the most powerful state on earth with its legitimacy crisis of state sovereignty.