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# The Round Tablette

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Written by Dr. Joe Fitzharris

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## Welcome to the December session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight's speaker, Ian Johnson, will discuss his book, *Faustian Bargain*, the collaboration between Hitler and Stalin that lay behind the massive German military buildup.

After months of fruitless negotiations between the Allies and the USSR, Hitler proposed dividing Poland (a problem for both countries) between them and Stalin welcomed negotiations. Foreign Ministers von Ribbentrop and Molotov quickly came to a “Faustian bargain” on 23 August 1939. The centerpiece of this “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact” was a public a ten-year non-aggression pact with secret provisions dividing Poland and creating spheres of influence in eastern Europe with Estonia, Latvia, and Bessarabia given to the Soviets. Poland was divided with the USSR along the Narev, Vistula and San Rivers.

Both countries found reason to enter into commercial agreements that involved the exchange of Soviet raw materials (oil, manganese, etc.) and foodstuffs for German finished goods, naval equipment, sample aircraft, etc. The first was the German-Soviet Commercial Agreement of 19 August 1939 which may have encouraged Hitler to seek the non-aggression pact. The second agreement, the 11 February 1940 German-Soviet Commercial Agreement, expanded the list of goods exchange. Stalin found the agreement so important and so trusted Hitler that the last Soviet shipment west crossed the border into German territory mere hours before the invasion began.

This was not the first pre-war cooperation between the two powers. Smarting from limitations imposed in the Versailles Treaty, Germany entered into secret agreements with the Soviet pariah to build up its armed forces in spite of international covenants and in turn assisted the Soviets to modernize their armed forces. The Reichswehr under General Hans von Seeckt was very nearly an entity unto itself, having a “black” source of funding and conducted most of its cooperation with the Soviets in great secrecy. Lenin himself, in 1922 and 1923, arranged a concessionary system that allowed Germany to modernize and run existing factories to build aircraft,

weapons, etc. Failing financially due to political and economic instability following the Russian Civil War, the Junkers aircraft firm leaked details of the program to the Reichstag and the government collapsed.

Starting in 1923, the Reichswehr utilized four secret bases in the USSR to rebuild its professional military forces and in addition, trained the Soviet officer corps. Soviet and German officers studied together in an illegal Kriegsschule (War College). Most important to both countries was technological cooperation in a network of laboratories, testing facilities, and workshops that re-engineered Allied equipment and created many of the advanced weapons systems of the Third Reich. The Soviets shared in this technological buffet.

In 1924, the Red Air Force invited German pilots to their flight school and in 1925 the Germans took over operation of the facility, training both countries’ pilots and mechanics. The Germans learned about and adopted the Soviet concepts of paratroopers (“vertical envelopment”) and dive bombers. Tanks were designed (essentially the basis for Panzers I through IV) and their tactics of use were articulated. The Soviets also benefited since their tank designers – those who survived the Great Purges of the 1930s at least – designed the T-34 and the KV series that saw extensive use against the Germans. Much of the tactical development focused on tactical mobility and maneuver, ideas pioneered by Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky and other leaders of the Red Army as well as by Ernst Volckheim, the preeminent German tank officer of the Great War. (Heinz Guderian claimed the credit due Volckheim after the war to build his own reputation.) The blitzkrieg might not have been so impressive if the Germans had not secretly practiced armored warfare in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.

Similarly, Tukhachevsky was able to develop his doctrine of “Deep Operations” – that victory could be achieved through simultaneous corps- and army-size unit maneuvers and parallel attacks throughout the depths of the enemy’s ground forces to induce catastrophic defensive failure. This doctrine relied upon close air support and advances in armor (both initially developed in this partnership) to produce a quick, efficient, and decisive victory. Tukhachevsky and his theory were both victims of Stalin’s 1937-1938 purge of the Red Army but the doctrine returned, playing a critical role in the Red Army’s post-1942 planning and conduct of the war in the east.

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**If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

While these efforts were kept secret, other developments in Germany itself were noted. In 1927, for example, Inter-Allied Commission of Control, watchdog to supervise German disarmament, reported ominously: “Germany has never disarmed, has never had the intention of disarming, and for seven years had done everything in her power to deceive and ‘counter-control’ the Commission appointed to control her disarmament.” Collectively, the Allies lacked the will to act to end Germany’s rearmaments. The Americans did not care and the British leadership (its upper classes in particular) were sympathetic to Germany in the 1920s. Both American and British businessmen saw economic opportunities in Russia and in Germany. Only France among the victors had any interest in halting German renewal but it lacked the military or economic power to act unilaterally.

The cooperation between the two armed forces ended in 1933 after Hitler took power. By this point, both the Red Army and the Wehrmacht of World War II were trained, organized, and led by graduates of the secret schools with weapons and equipment that originated in the Russian steppes. In 1939, both leaders – whose ideologies were each fixated on hating the other – found mutual ground for public and secret cooperation. Both countries from 1919 onwards had worked to overthrow the post-Great War world order, arming themselves, and agreed that their mutual enemy, Poland, should be destroyed.

Western leaders lacked knowledge of these secret efforts – a glaring failure of intelligence. As a result, as war approached, they vastly *underestimated* the technical and military capabilities of the Nazi state as Hitler began his search for Lebensraum and a “place in the sun” for Germany. The restored partnership between the dictators was a match of convenience and economic exchange. Germany benefitted from both the removal of the Soviet threat and from the massive influx of Soviet resources. Stalin seemed not to have gained much benefit from the time bought by the non-aggression pact, and his armed forces did not seem to learn much from the resulting Finnish War or the annexation of neighbors. The resource flows might have had a net positive impact but the evidence is too scarce and imprecise to say.

**FURTHER READINGS:**

- Ian Ona Johnson, *Faustian Bargain: The Soviet-German Partnership and the Origins of the Second World War* (Oxford, 2021).
- Bruce Menning, *Bullets before Bayonets* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 1992)
- A. A. Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-1991* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005).

Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command, 1918-1941* (London: Macmillan, 1965)

**Announcements:**

- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 17 Jan. 2023, *The Turning Point: The Wilderness and Spotsylvania* – [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) - info@tccwrt.com Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/> Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - [www.mnangmuseum.org](http://www.mnangmuseum.org) 8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesdays at 1130 - <https://www.8thmn.org>. Friends of Ft. Snelling - [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org) World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 - <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/> Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show – TBA - 320-564-6644 - <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>. Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie – 22-23 July 2023 - Flying Cloud Airport - 952-746-6100 - [www.wotn.org](http://www.wotn.org) Alliance Française 612-332-0436 - [www.afmsp.org](http://www.afmsp.org) Selim Center for Lifelong Learning, UST, <https://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/> Western Naval Historical Association [info@wnha.net](mailto:info@wnha.net) Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - [crazyjerry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail.com) CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - [www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org)

**We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

**Round Table Schedule 2023**

- 14 Feb. Marshall and Stimson
- 14 Mar. Navies of World War II
- 28 Mar. Patton & Victory in North Africa
- 11 Apr. New Guinea – Buna
- 9 May 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in Europe

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Stalin and von Ribbentrop at the signing.