

Diversity within Dogma: The Nazi Leadership's Accommodation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

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When one speaks of an “ideology,” there is a temptation to imagine a monolith to which followers consistently adhere. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party’s demonization of communism is one such case, as communists were one of the Nazis’ perennial scapegoats for explaining Europe’s “ills.” However, a study of the Nazis’ reconciliation of their alliance with the Communist Soviet Union reveals that the ways in which “practitioners” of an ideology perceive their principles are far from uniform; whatever the impact that these principles may have on individual thought, one must always remember that *human* diversity will produce diversity within dogma.

The emergence of the Soviet Union presented the whole of Europe with a challenge. In the aftermath of the Communist revolution of October 1917, V.I. Lenin and the victorious Bolshevik Party advocated the communist overthrow of capitalist governments throughout Europe. The largest country in the world was in the hands of a regime that based its very legitimacy on being the vanguard of an international revolution. For the next two decades, the Soviet Union was a pariah state in Europe’s midst, as European statesmen were gripped by fears of communist subversion sponsored by the Comintern, the Soviet organ tasked with facilitating worldwide insurrection.¹

It was in these circumstances that Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist (Nazi) Party came to power in Germany. The Nazis preyed upon European fears of the spread of “the Asiatic pestilence of Bolshevism” across the continent by portraying themselves as the “bulwark of European culture and civilization.”² Indeed, the Nazis’ anti-Bolshevik rhetoric won them many admirers; some American citizens called the Nazi regime “our shield and buckler against Bolshevism,” and future British foreign secretary Lord Halifax gratefully claimed that Hitler’s anti-Bolshevist stance had served to prevent its spread into Western Europe.³

Yet the Nazis’ preoccupation with Soviet Communism was more than an easy source of propaganda, for anti-Bolshevism was not only a cornerstone of Nazi rhetoric but was also, as historian Lorna Waddington noted, at “the heart of Nazi ideology.”⁴ Germany’s “world mission,” Hitler claimed in September 1937, was to defeat Bolshevism, for as he had said, “Soviet Russia is the exponent of a revolutionary political and philosophic system organized in the form of a state.”⁵ Hitler derided “internationalist” Bolshevism” as “an Asiatic concept of the world” that threatened the very fabric of Germany’s “nature” and its people’s “way” of life.⁶ Bolshevist *internationalism* was antithetical to the Nazis’ core tenet: absolute *national* unity around the German “master race.” Yet, when only two years later Germany and the Soviet Union signed an agreement in August 1939 dividing up Eastern Europe amongst themselves, Hitler was euphoric; he honored Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop as “a second [Otto von] Bismarck,” and boasted that “for the first time in history we have to fight only on one front.”⁷

Much has been written on the role of Bolshevism in Nazi ideology, and although historians are divided on whether anti-Bolshevism itself motivated Nazi foreign policy, most generally ascribe this agreement, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, to a calculation of pure pragmatism on the German leadership’s part.⁸ This essay, however, focuses on what anti-Bolshevism meant to the Nazi elites, as the Pact not only revolutionized Europe’s political landscape in Germany’s favor; it also revealed much about the nature of Nazi ideology and about the role of that ideology in the minds of the Nazi leadership. It is one thing for public opinion to be moved by propaganda from distrust to acceptance, but the *internal* response among

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¹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 258-259; Douglas Little, “Red Scare, 1936: Anti-Bolshevism and the Origins of British Non-Intervention in the Spanish Civil War,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (April 1988), 291-311: 292.

² Lorna Waddington, *Hitler’s Crusade: Bolshevism and the Myth of the International Jewish Conspiracy* (New York: Taurus Academic Studies, 2007), 90, 123.

³ *Ibid.*, 2, 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ Quoted in Waddington, 143.

⁶ Waddington, 3, 10-11; Norman Baynes, trans. and ed., *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 1922-August 1939*, 2 vols. (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969), 675.

⁷ Edward Hallett Carr, *German-Soviet Relations Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1939* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1951), 117; Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 218; Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 347.

⁸ See Waddington, *Hitler’s Crusade*, 3-11; Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany: Diplomatic Revolution in Europe, 1933-1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 75; and Klaus Hildebrand, *The Foreign Policy of the Third Reich*, trans. Anthony Fothergill (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 106-108.

those responsible for the propaganda is entirely another. As illustrated by the examples of three key Nazi leaders—Hitler, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, and Ribbentrop—the reaction of the Nazi leadership was by no means uniform, and this diversity is itself telling. Each man had a distinct ideological paradigm and saw Bolshevism differently; Nazi ideology was by no means monolithic. Nevertheless, an examination of the three leaders' reactions to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact reveals significant similarities. Pragmatism was equally as important as ideology to each man; the immediate necessities dictated by Germany's foreign policy position took precedence over the eventual goals that were the supposed "raison d'être" of National Socialism.⁹ Remarkably, however, their ideology did not coexist with their calculations of necessity. Individually their responses differed, but none of them carried on as before the Pact—Hitler adjusted his attitudes, Goebbels his conscious thoughts, and Ribbentrop his outlook as a result of the German-Soviet agreement. Ultimately, the Nazi leaders' justification for the Pact and the shift in their attitudes to Bolshevism demonstrates that Nazi ideology was defined by ambivalence—it was flexible yet obstinate, accepting of change yet hard-pressed to justify it. It is with no small amount of dark irony that this flexibility allowed Nazi Germany to conquer much of Europe and bring millions to their demise in the name of a radical, ideological cause. But such was the contradictory nature of the Nazi regime—supremely flexible in its means, yet intractably set upon its horrific ends.

In order to understand the ideological context of the Pact, though, one must first have an understanding of the international context, as German-Soviet relations during the 1930s were defined by ambivalence. After a period of transition, during which the Nazis consolidated their rule and developed a foreign policy strategy, relations between the two countries deteriorated considerably. Yet, even though its leaders claimed that Germany required eastward expansion (German "living space" in Russia), and in spite of each side's hostile propaganda against the other, the Soviets still sought to keep open the possibility of a rapprochement with the Nazi state.¹⁰ Joseph Stalin, head of the Soviet Communist Party, sought to avoid isolation, pit the capitalist world against itself, and prevent the possibility of a two-front war with Japan and Germany. A partnership with Germany presented the possibility of achieving all three, as Stalin knew that Hitler's territorial designs in Czechoslovakia and Poland would inevitably bring Germany into conflict with Great Britain and France—provided that they did not allow the Soviet Union to do the job for them. This was Stalin's greatest concern; he feared that the western democracies would leave Germany and the Soviet Union to go to war, and in order to prevent the fulfillment of this nightmare scenario, he had to either forge an alliance with the west or come to an agreement with Germany and remain neutral in any European war. Stalin sought to position himself so that he could pursue whichever option maximized Soviet security—even cooperation with the Nazis.¹¹

But Hitler had other designs. In the mid 1930s, Central Europe was the primary theater of German expansion, and as such, historian Gerhard Weinberg has pointed out, Germany needed Poland as "a neutral shield in the east." For this reason, Hitler secured a non-aggression agreement with Poland in January 1934. At the time, Germany had no need to be concerned with Soviet neutrality; the Soviets had no common border with Germany, so a partnership with them would not have served the Nazis' foreign policy aims. Furthermore, the strained history of Polish-Soviet relations, dating to their war in 1920, precluded Germany's having amicable relations with both.¹² Thus, while Hitler ruled out the possibility of cooperation with the "Bolshevist state" on ideological grounds in his public pronouncements, foreign policy prudence played a decisive role in his spurning of the Soviet friendship as well.¹³

By early 1939, the international situation had shifted. After the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, Britain made a guarantee of assistance to Poland in anticipation of Germany's next expansion. Hitler's strategy had entailed isolating and eliminating his targets one by one; Poland, as the obstacle that lay between Germany and its "living space" in the east, was the next logical goal. With the new focus on Poland, expediency demanded that the Soviet Union, resentful of the Polish state's creation out of former Russian territory, should become Germany's new partner. Likewise, because of the British guarantee Hitler faced a potential two-front war if he invaded Poland and continued his antagonism of the Soviet Union. To avoid such a war, he needed a rapprochement with the Soviets so that he could coerce Britain (and

⁹ François Genoud, ed., *The Testament of Adolf Hitler: The Hitler-Bormann Documents, February - April 1945*, trans. R. H. Stevens (London: Icon Books, 1962), 42.

¹⁰ Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *Pariahs, Partners, Predators: German-Soviet Relations, 1922-1941*, trans. and ed. Gregory L. Freeze (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 74-75; Gustav Hilger and Alfred G. Meyer, *The Incompatible Allies: A Memoir-History of German-Soviet Relations, 1918-1941* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), 255; Waddington, *Hitler's Crusade*, 55-56, 99.

¹¹ See "Stalin's Bazaar," in Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 332-349; Geoffrey Roberts, *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War: Russo-German Relations on the Road to War, 1933-1941* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1995), 12-13, 49-58; Adolf Hitler, "Eastern Orientation or Eastern Policy," in *Mein Kampf, Complete and Unabridged, Fully Annotated* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), 933-967; Nekrich, *Pariahs*, 106, 113.

¹² Gerhard Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II, 1937-1939* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 214-215; Carr, *German-Soviet Relations*, 110-111; Waddington, *Hitler's Crusade*, 59-60, 78-82.

¹³ Baynes, *Speeches* 1339.

France) into acquiescence. Germany could then focus on the defeat of the Soviet Union, the seizure of its “living space,” and the eradication of Bolshevism.¹⁴

In the summer of 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union hesitatingly drew closer together, and finally, the breakthrough came in August. After months of low-level talks and ambiguous discussions of the complementary nature of the two countries’ interests, Hitler became frantic. The invasion of Poland was fast approaching; he needed to secure an agreement, and given the Soviets’ continued negotiations with Britain and France, his impatience was understandable. In his desperation he wrote a personal note to Stalin asking that Ribbentrop be received in Moscow. Stalin accepted, and on August 23, Ribbentrop met with Stalin and Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov for the signing of a nonaggression pact accompanied by a secret protocol in which the two countries agreed to divide Eastern Europe into “spheres of influence” for themselves. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact allowed Hitler to launch his invasion of Poland and begin World War II, but it was also an ideological coup that shocked the world—the self-declared enemies of Bolsheviks were now their partners. Prudence had overcome dogma, and Europe faced war as a result.¹⁵

However, a critical question remains: since Germany was able to so radically change its position on relations with Russia, how did the Nazi leadership really feel about Bolshevism? A discussion of how Hitler, Goebbels, and Ribbentrop reconciled and reacted to the Pact sheds light not only on this question but on the larger topic of what National Socialism “meant” to its elite, and how the ideology was perceived by its supposed “practitioners.” Waddington has argued that “anti-Bolshevism per se took a back seat in comparison to early years.”¹⁶ This observation is only partially borne out by the evidence. Hitler, for one, abandoned the pillar of anti-Bolshevism quite abruptly in his public pronouncements. But although Hitler still privately spoke of the need to destroy Bolshevism and the Soviet Union, he was optimistic that Stalin’s willingness to cooperate had shifted Soviet ideology enough to delay a confrontation between the two countries.

In his early years in power, Hitler harshly condemned Bolshevism, insisting that “by taking upon herself this struggle against Bolshevism Germany is but fulfilling... a European mission.” He left no doubt that his venom applied equally to the Soviets as to the communists within Germany, calling Bolshevism “even beyond our frontiers... our mortal enemy.” Furthermore, the possibility of any cooperation or compromise (as later happened in 1939) was ruled out in principle, as there was between Nazis and Bolsheviks “a gulf... which can never be bridged.”¹⁷

One would expect that Hitler’s public statements would have to have changed to accommodate German-Soviet relationship’s new tone, and in fact, they did. Weinberg has noted that in his speeches Hitler indeed “ceased attacking Russia,” but he also halted his condemnations of Bolshevism.¹⁸ A sign of this transformation came in September 1939, one month after the signing of the Pact. Hitler declared that Russo-German solidarity transcended ideology and expressed a newfound tolerance for Bolshevism; for the present, what truly mattered was that “neither the Russian nor the German regime wishes to sacrifice even one man to the interest of the Western democracies,” and for that reason the two could work together.¹⁹

Hitler’s “acceptance” for the Soviet regime under Stalin led him to ignore Russia and the Bolsheviks where previously he would have wholeheartedly advocated Germany’s expansion at the expense of their destruction.²⁰ In February and May of 1940, Hitler made speeches that extensively discussed Germany’s need for *lebensraum* (or “living space”). Traditionally, he had targeted Russia for this expansion, but in 1940, he made no mention of Russia or of Bolshevism alongside his explanation of the importance of “the Lebensraum.” The primary goal of German foreign policy, Hitler proclaimed, was “to secure our own Lebensraum,” which “encompasses... all that was cultivated by us Germans.” Although he claimed that “there are several of these areas,” his only mention was that of Central Europe. His ambiguity could not have been accidental, for it is impossible that he had forgotten all that he had written and said up to that point. Far more likely is that the German friendship with the Soviets inhibited his indulging in anti-Bolshevik and anti-Russian rhetoric. The situation demanded that ideology give way to prudence, and Hitler rose to the occasion.²¹

Thus, Hitler’s attitude towards Bolshevism after the pact was quite soft-spoken in public. Nevertheless, in private a great deal of ambivalence pervaded his discussions of Soviet Bolshevism. On the surface, Hitler’s ideology appeared unchanged; in conversation, he still denounced Bolshevism as before. According to Hilger, Hitler thought that “destiny

¹⁴ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 316, 341-342, 346; Weinberg, *Foreign Policy 1937-1939*, 568; Carr, *German-Soviet Relations*, 34, 122-123; Nekrich, *Pariahs*, 108.

¹⁵ Nekrich, *Pariahs*, 111-119; Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 343-348

¹⁶ Waddington, *Hitler’s Crusade*, 141.

¹⁷ Baynes, *Speeches*, 668, 671, 673.

¹⁸ Weinberg, *Foreign Policy 1937-1939*, 575.

¹⁹ Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations, 1932-1945*, vol. 3, *The Years 1939 to 1940*, trans. Chris Wilcox (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1997), 1808.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1835.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1936-1937, 1980-1982.

had called him to make an end of Bolshevism, and that he must not rest until he had conquered for the German people that *Lebensraum* which was its due.”²² In terms of his ultimate goal, Hitler made no concessions and did not mince words; the annihilation of Bolshevism through a German invasion was ever-present in his mind.

But beneath the rhetoric, his views had shifted; he reconciled the Pact through his belief that Soviet Bolshevism under Stalin had sufficiently changed to make cooperation if not desirable, at least tolerable. Given his lingering anti-Bolshevist discussions, the revelations of his personal writings are particularly jarring. As late as 1945, Hitler had a more “favorable” view of Bolshevism in the Soviet Union. He expressed a hope that Stalin, who had “decapitated the Jewish intelligentsia,” could “rid himself of the nebulous Marxist ideology” that had defined the Bolsheviks. Hitler claimed that he was initially optimistic about the Pact’s long-term prospects because of this perceived change in the nature of Bolshevism.²³ There had been earlier indications of this subtle paradigm shift; the day after the Pact was signed, Goebbels wrote that “The Fuhrer... considers it [Bolshevism] to be shedding its skin,” and Hitler had hinted as much in an October 1939 speech: “Since Herr Stalin no longer views... Soviet-Russian principles as an impediment to entering into friendly relations... National Socialist Germany can no longer see any reason for employing a different means of assessment.”²⁴

While it is unlikely that Hitler’s anti-Bolshevik stance *per se* changed as a result of the Pact (as he said on numerous occasions), he at the very least seemed hopeful that Stalin had reined in the most implacably “Marxist” elements of Soviet ideology enough to make conflict both avoidable and unnecessary in the short-term as Germany dealt with the western democracies.²⁵ Nonetheless, it would be “an *entente*... watched over by an eagle eye and with a finger on the trigger,” for “the *raison d’être* of National Socialism” remained—as it always had—“the destruction of Bolshevism” in its consistently “Marxist” form.²⁶

Hitler’s reaction to the Pact and the change in his anti-Bolshevist attitudes are not only indicators of the flexible, even accommodating nature of Nazi ideology; they are also evidence of his own inner conflict. He was hard-pressed to reconcile anti-Bolshevism with the necessity of the Pact; thus, he pointed to what he perceived as a change in Bolshevism’s ideological “skin” that corresponded with the change in German-Soviet relations. The Pact may have been a “bitter necessity,” but for Hitler it was a temporarily tolerable one because of Stalin’s lesser emphasis on international revolution.²⁷

Whereas Hitler attempted to come to terms with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact by reconciling his anti-Bolshevik views, the example of propaganda minister Goebbels is starkly different, as Goebbels “adjusted” to the Pact by ignoring Bolshevism almost entirely. Taking into account this profound contrast, it is evident that despite any unity implied by the phrase “Nazi ideology,” the Nazi leadership was in fact thoroughly permeated by disparate, even contradictory attitudes and responses to Bolshevism and to the Pact.

Nevertheless, much like Hitler, Goebbels relentlessly vilified Soviet communism in the years before the Pact. His speeches to the Nazi Party Congress in 1935 and 1936 were dedicated to attacking Bolshevism, which he said “signifies the destruction of all the commercial, social, and political and cultural achievements of Western Europe.”²⁸ “Bolshevism in practice is terrible and horror-striking,” he said in 1936. “Terrorism, murder, bestiality—these are the traits that characterize every Bolshevik revolution.”²⁹ Furthermore, in his early diaries he wasted no opportunity for the disparagement of Bolshevism and of the Soviets, and concluded that “it is our job to smash Bolshevism.”³⁰

After the Pact his expressed tone changed profoundly. In his “conferences” at the Propaganda Ministry, he mentioned communism and Bolshevism only twice between October 1939 and the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Moreover, in neither case did Goebbels exploit the opportunity to indulge in vehement denunciations of Bolshevism; his attitude can only be described as wearily flippant. He argued in January 1940 that although “a distinction will have to be made between the Soviet Union and communism,” anti-Bolshevism “need not completely disappear from the public eye,” and in August cautioned against overly positive portrayals of Stalin and the Soviets that might “allow any bolshevik

²² Hilger, *Memoir-History*, 319-320.

²³ Genoud, *Testament*, 111-112, 120.

²⁴ Goebbels, 24 August 1939, quoted in Waddington, *Hitler’s Crusade*, 157; Domarus, *Speeches and Proclamations*, 1835.

²⁵ See Waddington, *Hitler’s Crusade*, 157; and Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 346.

²⁶ Genoud, *Testament*, 42, 112.

²⁷ *Akten zur deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945*, Serie D (1937-1941) vols I-XIII, eds. J.S. Beddie et al. (Baden-Baden, Frankfurt am Main, Bonn, Göttingen, 1950-1970) [hereafter *ADAP*, D] IX, no. 1, record of a conversation between Hitler and Mussolini, 17 [sic] March 1940, quoted in Waddington, *Hitler’s Crusade*, 162.

²⁸ Joseph Goebbels, *Communism with the Mask Off: Speech Delivered in Nürnberg on September 13th, 1935 at the Seventh National-Socialist Party Congress*, trans. unknown (Berlin: M. Muller, 1935), 9.

²⁹ Joseph Goebbels, *Bolshevism in Theory and Practice: Speech Delivered in Nürnberg on September 10th, 1936 at the Eighth National Socialist Party Congress*, trans. unknown (Berlin: M. Muller, 1936), 7.

³⁰ Joseph Goebbels, *The Early Goebbels Diaries, 1925-1926*, ed. Helmut Heiber and trans. Oliver Watson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 44, 51, 71.

tendencies and attitudes into Germany.”³¹ It is clear that Goebbels’s underlying sentiments toward Bolshevism had not changed because of the Pact; however, it is the change in his *expressions* that is remarkable. Where before Goebbels had clamored for Soviet Bolshevism’s destruction, now he merely made passing, cautionary remarks against any softening of tone towards it.

Goebbels was even more nonchalant in his diaries. He rarely expressed any anti-Bolshevist sentiments during the time of the Nazi-Soviet partnership, and when he wrote about the activities of the Soviets, his tone was strikingly matter-of-fact. Russia’s army was “not much good,” he frequently wrote, yet he never seized the opportunity to vilify either Russia or Bolshevism. His words were astoundingly withdrawn; in a particularly dry entry, he wrote “Russia [was] excluded from Geneva. [It] will probably get over it.”³² He gave as little mention as possible to the Soviets—in the wake of the Pact, ignoring Bolshevism replaced demonizing it as Goebbels’s default disposition.

Even when he privately wrote on what he perceived as Nazi Germany’s greatest enemies, Goebbels declined to include the Soviet Union or its “Bolshevist” ideology. In December 1939, he insisted that “all the forces of internationalism are against us,” and that “we must break them.”³³ He referred to the Pope and Catholicism as the source of the “internationalist” threat but did not mention Bolshevism, even though Hitler had said that the primary reason that Nazi Germany quarreled with Soviet Bolshevism was because “Its supreme principle is its internationalism.”³⁴ In his 1935 address to the Nazi Party Congress, Goebbels himself had pointed to Bolshevism’s “aggressive and international tendency” as among the greatest sources of its incompatibility with National Socialism.³⁵ Even more remarkable is what he wrote in a January 1940 entry: “England must be chased out of Europe, and France destroyed as a great power. Then Germany will have hegemony and Europe will have peace. This is our great, eternal goal.”³⁶ He declined to explain how Germany could establish “hegemony” with the Soviets still present, and this utter disregard for the Soviet Union’s very existence not only ignored Europe’s geopolitical reality; it contradicted both Hitler’s and Goebbels’s declared aims and every claim that the Nazis had made about being Europe’s protector from the evils of Bolshevism. This contradiction is the most visible illustration of Goebbels’s new tone. He wrote as if the Soviet Union and Bolshevism did not exist and seemed desperate to ignore them, lest he be reminded of the glaring inconsistency between the *reality* of Nazi foreign policy and the *rhetoric* of Nazi anti-Bolshevism before the Pact.

The vitriolic character of Goebbels’s pre-Pact writings began to re-emerge one week before the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. “The Bolshevik poison must be eliminated from Europe,” he wrote. He reveled in the triumphant return of the anti-Soviet, anti-Bolshevik focus of German war planning, and was confident that “every old Nazi will be deeply gratified to see this hour.”³⁷ Thus, the changes in Goebbels’s demeanor had come full circle; as the Pact’s relevance and the shame it imposed upon Nazi anti-Bolshevik ideology diminished, Goebbels became able to confidently attack Bolshevism. He no longer had to fear the shame that would have accompanied his devoting attention to the contradiction inherent in Pact’s opportunism.

It could be said that Hitler’s and Goebbels’s treatment of Bolshevism improved while the Pact remained in effect. This, however, would be misleading, for while they did not publicly condemn Bolshevism or the Soviet regime, they largely ignored them. Even while Hitler expressed friendship for the Soviets and hope that the nature of Bolshevism had changed, he spoke of communism and Bolshevism with nothing more than a tone of resigned acceptance, and Goebbels privately exhibited what can only be described as a willful ignorance and disregard of Bolshevism itself. Rather than reconciling his ideology with the “cooperation” with Bolshevism and condemning it as before, Goebbels simply suppressed his anti-Bolshevik tendencies and wrote as if Soviet Communism did not exist. Though Hitler and Goebbels expressed “admiration” for Stalin’s willingness to cooperate with Nazi Germany and rein in Bolshevism’s internationalist tendencies, their favor did not extend to the Soviet system, and the Nazis’ partnership with it, as discussed below, was to be merely a temporary expediency.³⁸

When they directly spoke about the Pact itself, rather than about the state of Bolshevism in the abstract, the Nazi leadership resorted to stressing the Pact’s practicality from the perspective of German foreign policy. This is clearly evident in the case of Hitler; although he claimed that the cooperation with the Bolsheviks had caused him “mental agonies,”

³¹ Willi A. Boelcke, ed., *The Secret Conferences of Dr. Goebbels: The Nazi Propaganda War, 1939-43*, trans. Ewald Osers (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970), vii, 16, 76.

³² Fred Taylor, trans. and ed., *The Goebbels Diaries, 1939-1941* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1983), 46, 59, 67-68, 87.

³³ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁴ Baynes, *Speeches*, 675.

³⁵ Goebbels, *Communism with the Mask Off*, 9.

³⁶ Taylor, *Goebbels Diaries*, 100-101.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 414-415.

³⁸ See Taylor, 16; and Domarus, *Speeches and Proclamations*, 1808, 1835.

he saw substantial advantages in the Pact.³⁹ Although the transformation of relations coincided with the emergence of Hitler's more "benign" view of Soviet Bolshevism, he openly justified the Pact almost exclusively on pragmatic grounds.

For Hitler, "a sober delineation of interests" dictated German-Soviet relations.⁴⁰ He had no intention to maintain mutual antagonism with the Soviets if the British (and French) planned to oppose Germany's further expansion.⁴¹ Furthermore, Hitler even exploited the Pact for propaganda purposes; in a September 1939 speech he used Germany's "understanding" with the Soviet Union to reassure the British and to "remove once and for all the haunting images of the present German regime being out to conquer the world."⁴² In Hitler's view, the Pact was first and foremost "forced" upon him by the actions of the western democracies. "Everything I undertake is directed against Russia," he told the high commissioner of Danzig in August 1939, and "if the West is too stupid and too blind to comprehend that, I will be forced to come to an understanding with the Russians."⁴³

Hitler never intended friendly relations to be a permanent, however, as the coming of the Pact led Hitler to prescribe a new set of goals: "To smash the West, and then after its defeat, to turn against the Soviet Union with my assembled forces."⁴⁴ Hitler sought to avoid a two-front war, and if a conflict with Britain and France was inevitable, he had no choice but to temporarily reconcile with the Soviets. Writing in 1945, Hitler claimed that the decision to break the Pact and invade the Soviet Union was both the result of unforeseen complications in the war effort and a calculation of expediency. After the war against Britain had stalled, Hitler argued that Germany needed to break Britain's will to continue fighting and lessen the possibility of meaningful American intervention by crushing their hope of decisive Soviet intervention at a later point. In Hitler's view, time was not on Germany's side, and because of its previous lightning successes in Poland and Western Europe, he felt confident of victory.⁴⁵ Thus, calculations of power politics drove Nazi policies towards the Soviets even up to and including the decision to break the Pact.

Goebbels, even more than Hitler, based his support for the Soviet agreement on its utility for German foreign policy. The Pact's necessity was ideologically distasteful, but as he wrote "we [the Nazis] are in a tight spot and, like the devil, have to eat flies."⁴⁶ Goebbels asserted that "our relations with Russia are guided by purely power-political expediency," and, like Hitler, saw the Nazi-Soviet partnership as important fodder for the propaganda "war" against Britain.⁴⁷ "Stalin... declares that Russia and Germany will march together to their goal," Goebbels wrote in April 1941. "This is marvelous and for the moment extremely useful. We shall bring it to the notice of the English with all appropriate force."⁴⁸ The existence of the German-Soviet agreement, Goebbels hoped, would crush any British illusion of potential Soviet aid to the Allies, and so the Pact was temporarily useful enough to justify the cost of any ideological misgivings.

Ultimately, however, Hitler and Goebbels concluded that Bolshevism was still "enemy number one" and after the west was dealt with and the Pact had lost its value, Goebbels wrote, "at some point we will come into conflict with it [the Soviet Union]."⁴⁹ A week before the invasion, he described the partnership as "a blemish on our honor" that would be "washed away" by the coming of war. In much the same manner as Hitler, Goebbels concluded that the time was ripe for the restoration of Germany's anti-Soviet crusade; the invasion was a "pre-emptive strike," as Goebbels was sure that if Germany did not take the offensive first, "Russia would attack us if we were weak" because of the war with Britain. Most of all, Goebbels was simply overjoyed because the Nazis' hour had finally arrived, and declared in his diary that "We shall now destroy what we have fought against our entire lives." With the coming of the invasion, Goebbels was able to cast off the shame of the opportunistic "blemish" and finally engage in vehement anti-Bolshevik rhetoric—his perpetual wish, but one that he had needed to suppress because of the ideological retreat symbolized by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.⁵⁰

Similarly to Hitler and Goebbels, Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop and the German Foreign Services justified the improvement in Soviet relations on the basis of Germany's national interests. Yet unlike the Fuhrer and his propaganda minister, Ribbentrop hoped that the Pact would forge a German-Soviet partnership for the indefinite future. Despite personal anti-Bolshevist feelings, he sought to make that possibility a reality through the channel of German diplomacy. In December 1939, less than three months after the Pact's creation, German State Secretary Ernst von Weizsacker (un-

³⁹ ADAP, D/XI/2, no. 660, Hitler to Mussolini, 21 June 1941, quoted in Waddington, *Hitler's Crusade*, 172.

⁴⁰ Domarus, *Speeches and Proclamations*, 2060-2061.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1686.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1809.

⁴³ Quoted in Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 346.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Genoud, *Testament*, 73-74, 84.

⁴⁶ Goebbels, 24 August 1939, quoted in Waddington, *Hitler's Crusade*, 157.

⁴⁷ Boelcke, *Conferences*, 76.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Goebbels Diaries*, 315.

⁴⁹ Goebbels, 9 August 1940, quoted in Waddington, *Hitler's Crusade*, 162.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Goebbels Diaries*, 414-415.

doubtedly with Ribbentrop's support) instructed Germany's diplomats to "avoid any anti-Russian note" in any impending "conversations regarding the Finnish-Russian conflict." In order to avoid offending the Soviets, Weizsacker even provided a variety of talking points that could be employed in order to explain to those in other countries how and why the Soviet invasion was both legitimate and necessary.⁵¹

Moreover, in his memoirs, Ribbentrop expressed nothing but an unapologetic desire that the Pact might permanently solidify a German-Soviet friendship. He wrote that the German delegation "regarded the agreement as a permanent settlement," and added that he hoped "that one of the most dangerous sources of conflict... would be gradually removed by the bridging... of the ideological divergences between National Socialism and communism."⁵² Of course, when reading Ribbentrop's memoirs, one must keep in mind that he wrote them while awaiting his 1946 Nuremberg execution for planning "aggressive war" and crimes against humanity, and it is possible that he may have wanted to appease the Soviets (or any of the Allies) to stave off his execution. However, as noted below, there is considerable evidence that bears out his claims, and what is more, no amount of words could have saved him, as he wrote but two months before his hanging. Furthermore, Ribbentrop's tone is hardly favorable to the Soviets themselves. He refers to Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as having been "bolshhevized" and does not extensively praise the Soviets; his focus is always on the benefits that friendship had for Germany.⁵³ Soviet Bolshevism was still distasteful to him, just as it was to Hitler and Goebbels.

Yet in spite of his personally held anti-Bolshevik views, his overriding concern was ensuring that circumstances in European power relationships favored Germany. "Provided National-Socialist Germany and Soviet Russia respect one another's ideology," he declared in October 1939, "they can live in neighborly friendship."⁵⁴ Ribbentrop's enthusiasm for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact's long-term prospects was clear at its signing, at which point he wanted to include "lofty preambulant phrases of mutual admiration and respect." Stalin, on the other hand, cautioned against such embellishment on the grounds that the rhetorical shift would have been too radical, as they had "been pouring buckets of manure all over each other for years."⁵⁵

Hitler's continued contempt for the Soviet Union, in Ribbentrop's view, was problematic, as he noted that "Hitler had referred almost demonstratively to the 'gallant Finns,' and, since Russian action in Finland was in line with our agreement, this attitude of the Fuhrer was distinctly inconvenient from the view of foreign affairs."⁵⁶ To Hitler, the Pact was a sideshow in the larger framework of his efforts, prominently among which was the destruction of Bolshevism. But for Ribbentrop, the German-Soviet friendship was the main event—the key to Germany's international position in the long-term. The importance that Ribbentrop placed on a strong relationship with the Soviets blinded him to Hitler's actual intentions; in 1946, Ribbentrop wrote that "even now I have no doubt... that he really thought at that time that understanding with Russia would be permanent."⁵⁷ This, of course, was an illusion; Hitler clearly expressed that he held no such view, but Ribbentrop was unable to comprehend the vehemence of Hitler's anti-Bolshevik sentiments and the extent to which they influenced Hitler's foreign policy ambitions.

Ribbentrop idealized "Bismarck's Russian policy" of maintaining close relations, and saw its advantages to be self-evident. "Throughout these months [in early 1941] I reminded Hitler of Bismarck's Russian policy," he wrote. "I left no stone unturned to achieve a German-Russian alliance after all. Perhaps I would have succeeded in the end had there not been that resistance on ideological grounds which always made the conduct of a foreign policy impossible."⁵⁸ Indeed, the memoranda issued by German diplomats in March and April 1941 support Ribbentrop's assertion that he and the rest of the German Foreign Office opposed the invasion of the Soviet Union. Weizsacker argued that in a war with the Soviets, Germany "would lose in an economic sense," and that "a German attack on Russia would only give the British new moral strength." Likewise, German Ambassador Werner von Schulenburg noted that "rumors of an imminent German-Russian military show-down... constitute a great hazard for the continued development of peaceful German-Soviet relations," and he expressed confidence that Stalin would continue to work "personally in the maintenance and development of good relations between the Soviets and Germany."⁵⁹ Ribbentrop and Weizsacker, along with other members of the German diplomatic ser-

⁵¹ Telegram, "The State Secretary In the German Foreign Office (Weizsacker) to German Missions Abroad," 2 December 1939, in Raymond J. Sontag and James S. Beddie, ed., *Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939-1941: Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 1948), 127-128.

⁵² Joachim von Ribbentrop, *The Ribbentrop Memoirs*, trans. Oliver Watson (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1954), 114-115.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, ix, 146, 191-194.

⁵⁴ Joachim von Ribbentrop, "Speech Delivered by Herr von Ribbentrop, Reich Minister for Foreign Affairs, in Danzig on October 24, 1939," trans. unknown, Indiana University Lilly Library, 9.

⁵⁵ John Weitz, *Joachim von Ribbentrop: Hitler's Diplomat* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1992), 201.

⁵⁶ Ribbentrop, *Memoirs*, 147.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁹ Schulenburg to the German Foreign Office, 2 May 1941 and 7 May 1941, in Sontag and Beddie, *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, 333, 334, 335-336.

vices, attempted to use these memoranda to convince Hitler that Germany's interests demanded a continued German-Soviet friendship; they pointed to the economic benefits gained from it and argued that the Soviets had no intention to break the Pact.⁶⁰ Thus, in Ribbentrop's view, the necessities of German foreign policy overrode all other concerns; his view of Bolshevism was far from favorable, but ideological matters had to be subordinated to pragmatic ones.

Ribbentrop, then, reacted to the Pact differently than did the Party leadership, as he put far less value on anti-Bolshevism as a *policy*, and preferred instead to simply treat it as a personal value. Hitler and Goebbels held no illusion about the inevitability of an eventual conflict with the Soviet Union. On the contrary Ribbentrop, despite his personal distaste for Bolshevism, genuinely hoped for a sustained partnership that could overcome each side's ideological antipathy. It was one thing for Hitler and Goebbels to reconcile their anti-Bolshevism with the temporary expediency of the Pact; it was entirely another for Ribbentrop to simply abandon the eradication of Bolshevism as a fundamental objective of the Nazi state. Hitler adjusted his ideology and Goebbels suppressed his, but Ribbentrop *disregarded* anti-communism and changed his entire outlook towards Bolshevism for the sake of German foreign policy.

Despite the Nazi leaders' "marriage of convenience" with the Soviet Union, and despite their insistence to the contrary, their attitudes *did* undergo a shift that corresponded with the transformation of German-Soviet relations.⁶¹ Though Hitler's utmost goal of destroying Bolshevik Russia never waned, two elements of his thinking allowed him to accept temporary cooperation with it: considerations of international power politics, and a perception that Bolshevism had changed in form and degree if not in ultimate substance. It is remarkable that, although all three men had a strong distaste for Bolshevism and justified the Pact as an unfortunate necessity (or, in the case of Ribbentrop, not so unfortunate), their *personal* sentiments and demeanor changed to accommodate the Pact. They did not simply rein in their rhetoric and discuss how they despised Bolshevism in private; their private remarks actually shifted. Goebbels's hatred of Bolshevism as such may not have changed to accommodate the Pact, and in this regard he is something of an exception when compared to Hitler and Ribbentrop. Nevertheless, it is at least clear that he became so uncomfortable with them that he declined to express them, even in his private diaries. Furthermore, it is another indication of the diversity that existed within Nazi ideology; in the wake of the Soviet agreement, not one of the three could continue on attacking Bolshevism as before. Instead, they temporarily adjusted their attitudes. Even Goebbels, who tended to ignore even the continued existence of Soviet Bolshevism in his diaries, "adapted" through a suppression of his anti-Bolshevism.

Thus, the examples of Hitler, Goebbels, and Ribbentrop reveal much about the nature of Nazi ideology. Each man reconciled the Pact differently: Hitler by pointing to a perceived change in the nature of Bolshevism, Goebbels by acting as if it did not exist, and Ribbentrop by hoping that the agreement would transcend Nazi ideology. Yet, though Nazi ideology was not homogenous, their responses shared a common thread: they saw the agreement as a measure of utmost prudence that justified a partnership with the hated Bolsheviks. Nazi foreign policy should thus be regarded not solely as the product of a fanatical, racist world view but as based on cold pragmatism, and the ideology of the Nazi leadership should be treated accordingly.

On one level, to speak of an abstract Nazi "ideology" is to obscure how its "followers" actually thought. At the same time, ignoring the commonalities that unified them in their common causes would be equally myopic. Robert Paxton has argued that "Fascism [and Nazism] consisted neither of the uncomplicated application of its program, nor of freewheeling opportunism," as both abstract ideology and "real-world" expediency influenced the perspectives of the Nazi elite.⁶² It may seem unfitting that a regime so often unequivocally regarded as evil should be associated with such an ambivalent leadership. Yet it is a reminder that searching beneath the surface of the abyss often means the discovery not of a monstrosity, but of something human.

⁶⁰ Michael Bloch, *Ribbentrop: A Biography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1992), 331-332; "Conversation of the Fuhrer with the Ambassador Count von der Schulenburg," 28 April 1941, in Sontag and Beddie, *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, 330-332.

⁶¹ Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 271.

⁶² Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 219.