



Nazis, Jews, and Soviets

Govrin's Jewish Factor and Hitler's Racist Trap*

Reviewed by

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Ever since Hitler and Stalin concluded a Nonaggression Pact on 23 August (and a Friendship Treaty on 28 September) 1939, it has been rumored that they made secret deals.

This affected the lives of millions and led to the murder especially of great numbers of East European Jews. But observers were not sure about the scope of the pact's secret protocol. Only circumstantial evidence, namely, the Nazi and Soviet invasion of Baltic and Polish lands a week later and the Holocaust, suggested the possibility of a hidden agreement between the two dictators.



1939: Ribbentrop, Molotov, Stalin

The archives remained closed. After the war, the Nuremberg Tribunal covered up the documents, although Western media published copies of the secret protocol.¹ The point was that the Allies, namely, the Soviets, tried to avoid any impression or "anti-Soviet propaganda" of having promoted Hitler's aggressive war. When in 1959 the United States returned captured enemy files on microfilm, more collateral documents emerged in the form of letters or notes.

Over the years, however, the Kremlin kept denying the existence of that secret protocol and other protocols. Only during the final days of the Soviet Union, under pressure from protesters in the betrayed areas of the Baltic states, Poland, and Southern Europe, and at the personal behest of President Mikhail Gorbachev, did the Soviet originals emerge. The original German text of the secret protocol is said to have been lost during the bombardment of Berlin.

Yosef Govrin provides this new background in his book on the Jewish factor in Nazi-Soviet relations. First edited in Hebrew in 1986, the Israeli historian offers his updated focus on the Jews' role in this multilateral relationship. He personally experienced Soviet evasiveness during his four decades, dating from 1953, in the Israeli foreign service, including a posting at the Israeli embassy in Moscow from 1964 to 1967. At the time that the Soviet regime fell, he was serving as ambassador to Vienna and gaining some unique perspectives on its past from this special Austrian viewpoint to European history.



1939: Stalin, Ribbentrop

Currying Favor with Hitler

Before raising three basic problems for further research, which go beyond the purview of this book, a brief review of its contents and conclusions is offered here. In the chosen time frame, from the Nazis' seizure of power in 1933 until their invasion of Soviet Russia in 1941, Part one deals with the Jewish factor as seen in Berlin, and Part two presents Moscow's viewpoint. Usually books on this rare topic offer a synthesis of the interaction of both sides. Govrin's special approach here, describing each side separately, has merits too, briefly outlining each side's exclusive perspective.

The book's helpful appendices contain twelve key texts from the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact. These include the long-hidden secret protocol via another 1939 secret protocol on restraint in mutually hostile propaganda. Also added is a text showing the Soviet refusal to accept Jewish refugees who fled from German-occupied Polish territory. Here the reader discovers just how inhumane and criminal both regimes were.

Govrin's main findings (109-11) can be summed up thus: when Hitler came to power, Stalin, setting his ideological reservations aside, tried to establish good relations with him. At the same time, the Soviets saw an emerging threat and tried to build a coalition with the democratic powers to deter the Axis, that is, Berlin, Rome, and Tokyo.

Because of the ongoing distrust between the democracies and Stalin, it became clear to him that the first goal needed to be achieved quicker than the second. In choosing this route, he offered Hitler an enticement: a policy of officially and completely ignoring the Nazis' treatment of Jews. In this Stalin had a twofold aim: not to appear to Hitler as acting under Jewish influence, and not to interfere in Germany's internal affairs. Stalin permitted only one public condemnation of the Nazi policy – after the German pogrom against Jews on the so called *Kristallnacht*, 9 November 1938. Thus, the official Soviet press and Jewish policy became a function of Stalin's rapprochement with Berlin – and later of his withdrawal from it.

The murder of Red Army commanders, among them Jews, and purges in the army ranks enabled the dictator to achieve complete control of the army and to weaken anti-Nazi fervor. As Govrin notes, Hitler on occasion helped Stalin defeat his opponents. This process, the author maintains, led Hitler to conclude that Stalin was guiding his regime in a more nationalist direction.

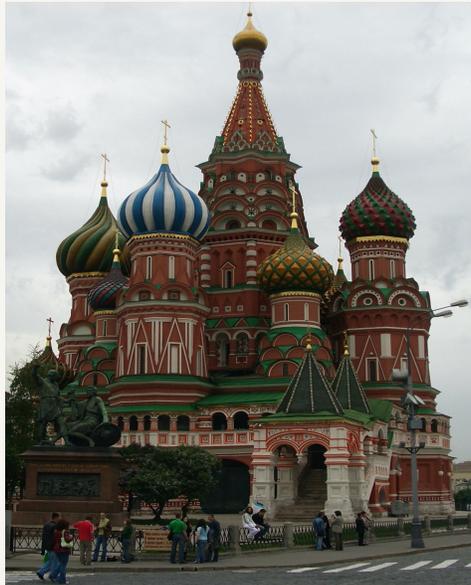


Photo: Thomas Vogel

Saint Basilus Cathedral at the Red Square today: nearby at the Kremlin the 1939 Nazi Soviet Nonaggression Pact and the Secret Protocol were signed

Here, then, are Govrin's main points: Stalin's murder of leading Jews since mid-1937 (the Communist party's newspaper *Pravda* asserted that like Judas they sold themselves for fascist coins and silver), or the sidelining of international-socialism proponents like Maksim M. Litvinov in May 1939, was aimed at demonstrating to Hitler less Bolshevism and more nationalism, hence a greater ideological compatibility that enabled Hitler to turn – first – against the Western democracies.

Moreover, keeping silent over the Nazi atrocities and portraying the Nazis as faithful allies of the Soviets facilitated a stronger blow to the unprepared Jewish populace in the soon-to-be-occupied areas. Finally, while in Hitler's mind Jews occupied a central place in his policy toward Moscow, for Stalin they played a more tactical role in his policy toward Berlin.

Three Problems

Thanks to the author's deep, detailed historical knowledge and his precise general conclusions, this book is a good read, while raising three problems.

First, there was certainly a "Jewish factor" in the Nazi-Soviet relations. Jews as transnational groups, however, were not only a factor; they were also actors who had various national and global organizations. Although the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes had destroyed most of the independent Jewish organizations in their countries, in the Soviet case to a somewhat lesser degree, the reader would like to learn more about Jewish organizations' countermoves and reactions globally, and in the European, Middle Eastern, and American spheres. Although this does not fall within the scope of one book, presenting the Jews only as a factor and not as actors gives an all too passive and somewhat distorted picture.

Second, Govrin makes another important observation (11), namely, that while Hitler never saw Jews as an exclusive enemy (as one of Govrin's hypothesis claims [5]), he "elevated" them as the eternal force behind all worldwide evil. It was his openly professed policy to single them out as the people's enemy; more than one foe would confuse the masses: "Never show the masses two or more opponents, since this leads to a total disintegration of their fighting power."² Hence, for example, Hitler used the conflated term "Judeo-Communist Empire."

Moreover, he invented Jews as a "race of Semites," connoting that one's race is something one cannot escape or alter. Thus he could present a racist, "inescapable" rather than mere ideological, justification for his hostility. Of course, an anti-Jewish hatred preceded Hitler but not a "racial theory" on this social-Darwinist magnitude.

As he realized it in World War One with the Armenians, Hitler wanted to sacrifice another stateless minority group, feeding the lust for scapegoats and vengeance. In reality, no such "race of Jews or Semites" existed; even in Hitler's days there was only one human race. Although Hitler did not have a good formal education, he knew this.³ Even if there were a race, no such large group of individuals could have had common attributes of the "cosmic evil" as Hitler assigned to them.

This indicated his level of evil and madness. Moreover, from his Vienna years he learned that Jews, all the more in the Diaspora, never constituted a single "race" in an anthropological sense. Nevertheless, he concluded that the mistake of his forerunners was to base "the anti-Semitism on religious instead of racial knowledge." The former type of anti-Semitism, so he calculated, was bound to be incomprehensible. The "recruiting power" of that idea was limited almost exclusively to some narrow intellectual circles: a "sham anti-Semitism."⁴

Acting as a failed, jailed and isolated man when he developed this main theme in his book of 1924, Hitler falsely but intentionally categorized Jews as "race," so as to posit himself as the "superior anti-Semite," the "master Aryan," and them as "inferior Semites" though they had often "only" a faith in common. Lacking the factual evidence of an actual "race," it was no coincidence that he also spoke of a "mental race" (9).

Hitler's racist-ideological world-view originated in the years of his socialization in Austria-Hungary and in the decade thereafter in Germany. Another decade further on, in 1941, he recalled that "anti-Semitism" in Vienna could never have any foundation but a religious one; from the standpoint of race, half of the population there was not German. A year later he stressed that only in Germany, acting on behalf of a real or imagined majority, was he able to base his hatred of Jews on a racist-ideological foundation for "four-fifths of our people are of Germanic race."⁵

Although the notion of "race" differed in countries and times--before World War Two, for instance, the British often associated groups with this word that in other lands would be considered nationalities such as English, Welsh, Irish and Scottish--, Hitler's racist approach constituted his most effective trap. In it the demagogue found his most powerful "recruiting idea" for manipulating a majority. Govrin aptly notes Hitler's statement: "If the Jews did not exist, we would have to invent them" (7).

And yet Hitler's racist trap of "Jews as unworthy subhuman race" is still endlessly repeated, even up to the present. Whenever academics use the term anti-Semitism, even in its modern consensus meaning, they again open the door to mislead the less informed toward Hitler's racist distortion. What was crucial, as Govrin argues, was not Hitler's awareness of either emotional or "rational" anti-Semitism, but his will to destroy the enemy as a "race" that thus could not escape its fate. In a globalized world, however, and particularly one where the Middle East plays a major role, a nonsensical term such as "anti-Semitism" is even more pernicious. Is it not high time to close Hitler's genocidal trap and finally get rid of it?

Third, Govrin mentions (5) that Hitler told the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Hajj Amin al-Husaini, that his fight against Jews extended to England and Russia. Although, Hitler explained to this cleric in late 1941, there was a difference between capitalism and communism, the Jews behind those "citadels of Jewry" were pursuing a common goal. Thus, along with his racist justification, Hitler also claimed ideological reasons for struggling against the Jews.

This duality of racism and ideology made his hatred of Jews more complex, more difficult to explain and deal with. Just as his racism included Slavs and other groups, his National Socialism contained a range of collectivistic and anticapitalistic elements that not only provided a potential bridge to Stalin's own type of national socialism but are attractive to more recent totalitarian movements, and hold the potential for forging new global coalitions.

An Ongoing Danger

The excellence of Govrin's book lies in his rich analysis, from the various viewpoints, of the dictators in Moscow and Berlin. Both harbored a secret admiration for the other. The Soviet dictator trusted Hitler even more than his own Soviet people. The book inspires the reader to compare further the claims and the functioning of the two totalitarian systems of the recent century.

While this book has appeared seventy years after the bilateral Nonaggression Pact, the contents of its secret additional protocol [see text below at this page] have again become, unfortunately, most topical. Indeed, the current anti-Jewish aspirations of certain new totalitarian strains in Islamism, and their leaders, bear a strong similarity with this precedent.

They now claim supremacy for a mix of religious, racist and class reasons. If possible, they would just as readily sacrifice Jews as Hitler and Stalin did in their time, by exploiting the "Jewish factor" in domestic and global affairs. There is now, though, a main Jewish actor, the State of Israel.

**The Jewish Factor in the Relations between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union 1933-1941*, by Yosef Govrin, Vallentine Mitchell, 2009, 143 pp.

Endnotes

¹ Jan Lipinsky, *Das Geheime Zusatzprotokoll zum deutsch-sowjetischen Nichtangriffsvertrag vom 23. August 1939 und seine Entstehungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte von 1939 bis 1999* (The Secret Additional Protocol to the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 23 August 1939: Its History and Perception-History from 1939 to 1999) (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004), 331-67. [German]

² Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston/New York: Mariner 1999), 117.

³ For more insights in Hitler's racism see Florian Beierl, Othmar Plöckinger, *Neue Dokumente zu Hitlers Buch Mein Kampf*, in: Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte (2009) 2, 261-318, 282, 290. [German]

⁴ *Ibid.*, 119-121.

⁵ Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, ed., *Hitler's Table Talk* (New York: Enigma 2007), 113 (12/17/41); 303 (04/05/42).

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Secret Additional Protocol of the Nazi Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 1939

Article I. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and U.S.S.R. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is recognized by each party.

Article II. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San.

The question of whether the interests of both parties make desirable the maintenance of an independent Polish State and how such a state should be bounded can only be definitely determined in the course of further political developments.

In any event both Governments will resolve this question by means of a friendly agreement.

Article III. With regard to Southeastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterestedness in these areas.

Article IV. This protocol shall be treated by both parties as strictly secret.

Moscow, August 23, 1939.

For the Government of the German Reich v. Ribbentrop

Plenipotentiary of the Government of the U.S.S.R. V. Molotov