

Remarks by Natalya Narochnitskaya at the conference-debate

"1939-1945: What if we could avoid the war?"

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The current trend of equating Hitler's Nazism with Soviet communism did not originate during the Cold War, despite all the tensions among the recent allies.

This idea would not have been accepted in the 1950s by those in the West who had embraced on the Elbe and accompanied the Arctic convoys. British wartime newspapers were still kept in the homes of millions of people in the West, the stories there full of admiration for the sacrificial fight put up by the defenders of Stalingrad.

Until the 1970s, no one in the West ever compared Hitler's Nazism and Communism. Politicians and political analysts alike rightly considered them to be complete antitheses. The "history debate" was opened by the renowned German historian Ernst Nolte, a student of Martin Heidegger, when the ideology battle between 'totalitarianism and democracy' prompted an urgent review of all previous views on global politics. Some even went so far as to accuse Russia of unleashing the First World War. Attacking the Evil Empire required new ideology concepts, and Nolte's books came in handy. They offered a brilliant solution: debunking the Soviet Union as the main fighter against Nazi Germany, so as to free the West from its share of responsibility for the rise of Nazism without rehabilitating Nazism itself. Nolte interpreted the Second World War not as an extension of the ongoing ambitions for territorial and geopolitical domination, but as a "European civil war" between the two "antithetical global visions" that began with the October Revolution.

The leaders of Western countries in those days never condemned the Soviet Union because they knew the notorious August 23, 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was not what triggered World War II. The Soviet and other governments were perfectly aware that the date for the attack on Poland on September 1 had been designated by Hitler in the Fall Weiss directive on April 10, 1939. On April 17, the Soviet Union once again proposed

signing a comprehensive agreement with security guarantees – a proposal that was declined by its Western partners and rejected by the Baltic countries, which categorically refused to participate in any plans against Germany.

Everyone realised that after the Munich Betrayal and the Anschluss, a war on both fronts was inevitable, that Hitler was going to seize the mouth of the Scheldt River in Belgium, a strategic point to attack Britain. The pact only changed the timeframe for the war and, as a consequence, the post-war configuration, making it impossible for the Anglo-Saxons to move into Eastern Europe at the beginning or at the end of the war and create the long coveted buffer between Germany and Russia. But today the “Hitler-Stalin Pact” is highlighted as a prelude to World War II – not Munich or Anschluss. This rhetoric is clearly aimed at freeing the Western countries from any responsibility for their direct contribution to the Anschluss and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in Munich.

It was the Munich Agreement that not only deformed the entire system of international relations, but marked the beginning of the invasion and re-division of Europe – something that did not lead to bloodshed until later.

The Munich Betrayal was how the Western countries scrapped the system of France’s alliances in Eastern Europe, the Soviet-French-Czechoslovak treaties and the Franco-Polish alliance, and put an end to the Little Entente. The League of Nations bit the dust. But the main consequence was to drive the Soviet Union into a geopolitical deadlock, devoid of initiative. This was Britain’s ultimate purpose.

Warsaw, annoyed at not being invited as the fifth member of the conspiracy, put forward an ultimatum to the ill-fated Prague claiming Cieszyn Silesia. On October 2, the “victorious” Polish troops entered Cieszyn; that was followed by Hungary announcing claims for most of Slovakia and Transcarpathia. Its ambition to become a reorganiser of the Third Europe inevitably made Poland an accomplice to Hitler’s plans. Poland consistently and openly positioned itself as an enemy of the Soviet Union, ready to side

with Hitler and march eastward to invade Ukraine and establish a Polish empire stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.

Immediately after the Munich Betrayal and a year before the notorious Pact, non-aggression declarations were concluded between Germany and Great Britain (September 30, 1938) and between Germany and France (December 6, 1938). After that, Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet circulated a note to all French embassies, which said that from that moment on Hitler's goal was to fight Bolshevism. The Western countries' strategy paralysed alternative configurations of resistance to aggression. This deprived the Soviet Union of any initiative and meant a political dead-end and a geopolitical cul-de-sac. Therefore, Munich became the starting point for all ensuing events.

The Munich Betrayal caused deep disappointment in Moscow, and the Soviet leaders and diplomats issued an open warning about fatal consequences of Chamberlain's strategy and the suicidal nature of the Polish invasion of Czechoslovakia, which only brought closer the same outcome for Poland itself.

In his report, Italy's Ambassador [to the United States], Augusto Rossi, shared his conviction that the outcome of the Munich conspiracy would force the Soviet Union to "abandon its attempts at international cooperation" with the governments of the Western democratic countries and adopt "a defensive policy of relative isolation."

So, the disappointment in the prospect of reaching an agreement with Britain and France and the orientation towards an agreement on neutrality with Germany was called a defensive policy by the Western diplomat.

Speaking at the House of Commons, British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax fully justified the actions of the Soviet Union in September 1939.

Churchill initially believed this treaty was a symbol of the false British strategy and fully recognised it was a forced move amid the failed hopes for cooperation with Britain. "It is a question whether Hitler or Stalin loathed it most. Both were aware that it could only be a temporary expedient. The antagonisms between the two empires and systems were mortal... The fact that such an agreement could be made marks the culminating failure of British and

French foreign policy and diplomacy over several years. On the Soviet side it must be said that their vital need was to hold the deployment positions of the German armies as far to the west as possible so as to give the Russians more time for assembling their forces from all parts of their immense empire... If their policy was coldblooded, it was also at the moment realistic in a high degree.”

Let us go back to the 1930s to see how consistently and deliberately the Western countries pursued the goal of directing Hitler’s aggression towards the east of Europe.

The general course of politics in the 1930s formed a triangle of diverging interests: fascist regimes, the Soviet Union and the Western states, among which the initiative was gradually shifting to Britain. It actually replayed the strategy it used before World War I and sought to redirect Germany’s aggressive potential to Russia. The inevitability of the overall restructuring of Europe was becoming obvious, and all countries, primarily in Eastern Europe, were looking for a way out of this situation and pondered the possibility of using their rivals in the crisis and the chances of realising their eternal ambitions.

Britain and France realised that Hitler’s rise to power will put an end to Versailles, but concluded the Four Power Pact – a “pact of consent and cooperation,” signed on June 7, 1933 between Nazi Germany, Italy, France and Britain, whose archives on this subject remain off-limits. Not even ratified due to the protests of French society, this pact introduced Hitler into the “accepted” circle. And he was no longer restricted, but only asked to stay within the limits.

Anschluss of Austria, the partition and seizure of Czechoslovakia with the tacit consent of the West European countries directly stemmed from the strategy of “distracting Japan and Germany from us (the British) and keeping the Soviet Union under constant threat.” As Lord John Lloyd bluntly put it, “... We will open Germany a way to the East and thus provide it with the much-needed opportunity for expansion. ”

Let's look at the milestones of this redivision.

The Japanese Kwantung Army invaded China as early as 1931. Japan occupied an area equal to the territory of France. With the tacit consent of the international community, Japan also captured the province of Rehe in 1933, and invaded Chahar and Hebei in 1935.

In 1935, Italy began aggressive operations in North Africa and attacked Abyssinia using chemical weapons against civilians. The League of Nations spoke out for sanctions, but Britain and France did not even impose an oil embargo on Mussolini. They cynically explained that the reason for this complicity was their desire to appease the aggressors and keep them from making a fundamental change in the balance of power in Europe. Although this completely undermined the Kellogg-Briand Pact, i.e. the European security system, President Roosevelt hurriedly published a declaration of neutrality, which meant *carte blanche* not only for Italy and Japan, but Germany as well. Berlin took note of the West's silence and made its first trial of strength by carrying out a military demarche in the Rhineland and declaring the Locarno Treaties invalid. Hitler's arguments were very characteristic. He said that having concluded an agreement with the Soviet Union on mutual assistance in 1935, France had committed a hostile act against Germany. The message was that if the West continues to provide guarantees to Moscow, Berlin will break the status quo in Western Europe.

The message was received and Germany was openly pushed eastward.

Then, Italy invaded Albania in April 1939, and annexed it on April 7, thus getting closer to realising its concept of *Mare Nostrum*, a ring-shaped control over the Mediterranean Sea.

The Soviet leadership understood Hitler's projects perfectly. It also received information from its security services about Britain and the United States' position in upcoming events.

The secret talks between British Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon and Hitler held at the Chancellor's palace in Berlin on March 25–26, 1935, were quite remarkable. Their transcripts were obtained by Soviet intelligence and

declassified around 2000. The main point of London's message to Hitler was authorising the Anschluss of Austria. When Ribbentrop asked Simon to outline Britain's views on Austria, he put it bluntly: "His Majesty's government cannot feel about Austria the same way it does, for example, about Belgium, that is, a country located in the closest proximity to Great Britain."

What about the United States?

The United States fully reproduced its behaviour of 1914–1917 and was going to adopt a wait-and-see policy in the impending war between Germany and the Soviet Union until they were exhausted or until structural geopolitical changes began that would radically upset the balance of forces. Following a conversation with Special Envoy of the Baldwin-led Cabinet Walter Runciman, Roosevelt told his cabinet that if there were an armed conflict between democracies and Nazism, America would fulfil its duty. However, if it came to a war started by Germany or the Soviet Union, it would adopt a different stance and maintain its neutrality.

The prospect of inevitable Nazi aggression, the occupation of Eastern Europe and the destruction of Russia, and the fact that Western countries would stay out of Germany's way were becoming clear to the Soviet Union. The Munich Betrayal was the conclusive evidence of this.

Here's an unconventional perspective on Chamberlain's strategy. There's a widespread superficial and exculpatory opinion that Britain planned to appease Hitler, but made a mistake. No. The worst thing for the Anglo-Saxons would have been if Germany had been satisfied with Munich and the Anschluss of Austria, which were accepted by the "democratic community."

This would have meant a concentration of German potential in one powerful state – Mitteleuropa, which was Britain's nightmare from the time of Otto von Bismarck. It would have meant a revision of Versailles, which would then have been difficult to dispute as these territories were not the conquests of 1914–1918, but were part of Germany and Austria-Hungary prior to World War I. It would have been an almost hypothetical victory of the Central Powers and the Austro-German bloc in World War I.

Britain's plan was not to appease Hitler, but to tempt him with the prospect of advancing to the East, not the West, and the Anglo-Saxon calculation of his unbridled ambitions was accurate. Aggression to the East was a chance to intervene and, if the circumstances had been auspicious, to complete the geopolitical projects not only for the countries subjected to aggression, but the entire area as well. The media and political circles in Britain openly discussed Hitler's next step, namely, his claims for Ukraine, in which Warsaw offered assistance to him.

Munich and the position of the "democratic countries" showed that following in the footsteps of the Anglo-Saxon strategy was not an option for the Soviet Union. Maxim Litvinov stated this in his report during the Munich conspiracy, which the West immediately took note of.

What was Poland hoping for as it showed its full agreement with Berlin?

Could it really have had illusions about Germany? Berlin would never have confirmed Poland's western borders, and Germany's goal was to get Danzig back. Berlin planned to placate Poland even at a stage where it could have served the Reich only at the expense of Czechoslovakia, seeking to create a group of allies in dismembering a sovereign state. Hitler's real plans for the ultimate future did not include Poland at all, which rendered senseless Poland's unscrupulous behaviour towards Prague.

However, Warsaw defiantly concentrated significant troops in southern Silesia to put pressure on Prague and simultaneously held major military exercises on the border with the Soviet Union, as if sending a message to Berlin that it would not let the Soviet troops through its territory should the Soviet Union decide to help Prague. This choice sealed its fate.

The only country to emerge with clean hands from the Czechoslovakia crisis was the Soviet Union.

On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Munich Agreement, a leading Czech expert on Czechoslovakia's foreign policy between the wars, Emil Voracek, published an article which crowns his many years of research in Western, Czech and Russian archives. All documents confirm the fact that

Moscow expressed its full support for Czechoslovakia and was ready to provide military and other assistance, but on the condition that the alliance agreement of 1935 would be fully implemented, primarily, by France. At some point, Czechoslovakia itself insisted on introducing such a provision into the Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty.

Voracek: "The behaviour of Paris, which was the worst-case scenario for Czechoslovakia, eventually freed Moscow from its obligations. Despite large-scale military exercises, the provision of Soviet military assistance was unrealistic due to Poland and Romania's positions...."

Important archive documents show the Soviet Union's readiness to provide real assistance to Czechoslovakia:

On September 20, 1938, Deputy People's Commissar Vladimir Potemkin sent Stalin an "extraordinary" telegram dated September 19 from the embassy in Prague with Benes' urgent request to the Soviet government to provide an immediate answer to two questions: "1 / Will the Soviet Union provide, under the treaty, immediate and real assistance to Czechoslovakia if France fulfils its obligations under the treaty with regard to the latter?

2 / Will the Soviet Union help Czechoslovakia as a member of the League of Nations, under Articles 16 and 17 of the League of Nations Charter, if, in the event of an attack by Germany, Benes asks the Council of the League of Nations to apply the said articles?"

On the same day, a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks approved the answer:

"1) To a question by Benes, whether the Soviet Union will, under the treaty, render immediate and real assistance to Czechoslovakia, if France remains loyal to it and also renders assistance, you can give an affirmative answer on behalf of the Government of the Soviet Union.

2) You can also give an affirmative answer to the question by Benes of whether the Soviet Union will help Czechoslovakia, as a member of the League of Nations, under Articles 16 and 17, if, in case of an attack by Germany, Benes turns to the Council of the League of Nations with a request to apply the above

articles.” The text also instructed to inform Benes that “at the same time, we have informed the French government about the content of our answers to both questions.”

Even though Benes received a message about the Soviet government’s answer later on the same day, according to Voracek, it could no longer change the situation. On the night of September 20–21, the ambassadors of Great Britain and France presented an ultimatum to President Benes. Czechoslovakia was required to unconditionally accept the Anglo-French plan.

The night-time meeting of the Czechoslovak government recreated from transcripts by Voracek shows the political and psychological atmosphere in Europe as it was sliding into the abyss. When the Soviet government’s response was announced, it was stated that “Russia’s actions without the consent of the League of Nations would be the worst scenario.” “Just like the Axis countries (Germany, Italy and Japan), the West will think that it is time to go on a crusade against Bolshevism.” President Benes added: “That would be the worst-case scenario ... Even if the Soviet Union says that even without the participation of France it will be satisfied with the League of Nations declaring Germany an aggressor, the entire world will rise against us if it were just the Soviet Union and us against Germany.”

The government eventually agreed to the demands in the Anglo-French ultimatum, without even asking for the opinion of parliament. That was the cruel reality of that situation.

So, the Anglo-French politics did more than just give carte blanche to Nazi Germany to begin the repartition of Europe and occupation of Eastern Europe. This policy created a political environment where even the humiliated and partitioned Czechoslovakia had every reason to be afraid to accept Soviet help fearing a “crusade against Bolshevism” by entire Western Europe. The politics of Anglo-French Europe not only openly turned its back on cooperation with the Soviet Union in preventing Hitler’s expansion, preferring to embolden Hitler, but also created a political atmosphere where cooperating

with the Soviet Union became unacceptable and impossible for others, because it condemned them to isolation.

In their conversations with British ambassador to the Soviet Union William Seeds, both Litvinov and Molotov repeatedly conveyed to him their disappointment with the policy of London, whose failure in Munich allowed the Soviet Union to “consider itself free from all commitments.” Following Munich, the West, too, realised that this was the only option open to for the Soviet Union.

The prospect of a German attack loomed ahead, during which the Western countries would have watched the extermination of Russia until “structural changes begin.” What kind of structural changes were in store for the Soviet Union if Germany decided to attack the Soviet Union first?

In such a hypothetical case, Germany, quickly draining the forces of the Soviet army, which was totally unprepared and bleeding from reprisals, would have pushed the Soviet Union back beyond the Volga, the Urals, the Caucasus with its oil, and the Black Sea. Following the canons of its centuries-old geopolitics, Britain would probably have tried to block the straits to the Mediterranean Sea, the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. Having lured Hitler as deep as possible into the Soviet territory with their initial inaction, and without lifting a finger to help the Russians until they are pushed far to the East, the Anglo-Saxons would certainly have not allowed Germany to become the master of Eurasia. But they would have waged war with it from the west on Russia’s territory, thus driving Russia forever out of Eastern Europe, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. A major conflict would have flared up on the Far Eastern borders with Japan rushing in and the United States entering Russia’s Far East to prevent Japan from capturing Trans-Baikal area (as was the case in Vladivostok in 1919).

Britain and the United States would have taken advantage of Russia’s situation to permanently move its borders deeper inland away from the seas. (The same strategy can be clearly seen in the early 21st century but in

completely different forms.) In any case, Russia would have ended up in the tundra, which would have meant the end of its history.