CHAPTER II

THE GERMAN QUESTION
IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
INTRODUCTION

The objective in this chapter is to highlight the changing dynamics of Russo-German relations in historical perspective, precisely since 1871 till the beginning of the World War II. The inter-play of the political manipulation and strategic manoeuvring of the two main political actors, namely Stalin and Hitler on the international scene during the inter-war period, has dispassionately been observed. A critical observation has also been made as to how the widespread Western anti-pathy for Bolshevism found a common ground in Hitler's hatred for Communism and how Stalin tried to turn the table on the West through the short-lived Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939.

The period under discussion in this chapter has been divided into four main phases. There is, of course, not only the chronological but also the logical co-relation of one phase to the other. At the same time each phase represents a set of distinctive features of its own.

PHASE I: 1871-1918

This phase had been characterized by unprecedented rise of nationalism and imperialism in Europe. Bismarck got Germany united but he failed to contain the rising German nationalism within a well defined territorial boundary. In the aftermath of Bismarck's departure from the scene the German urge for territorial expansion was eventually check-mated at the Balkans by Russians. The shortsighted policies of Bismarck's successors ultimately brought Germany to a European War of all against one.
1. GERMANY AS EUROPE'S DIPLOMATIC ARBITER

By unifying Germany under Prussia in 1871 Bismarck made Germany Europe's diplomatic arbiter. Europe's age old balance of power was radically altered. He created a web of secret alliances to keep all contemporary European powers perpetually balanced. Germany now entered into the privileged circle of Great powers but at the same time "became the object of vengeful envy on the part of the other Great powers, largely though not entirely, by her own fault."\(^1\)

Though Bismarck renounced further territorial expansion, he did, in order to consolidate his Reich, deliberately try to keep the spirit of German nationalism intact.

If politics speaks through the minds of the politicians, nationalism speaks through the hearts of the people. Bismarck was successful in balancing the power politics in Europe but he failed in coordinating the minds of statesmen and the hearts of people. In other words he failed to tune the German nationalism to the "exigencies of power politics."\(^2\) Germany as a nation, therefore, was fated to remain for long a concept in search of a complete political expression. It has been this unsatiatable urge of the Germans to be recognized as a nation, a culture and a distinguished political entity which made them undergo a series of shattering shocks and humiliations, at least since Bismarck left the scene.


Moreover, the latter half of the 19th century Europe witnessed an unprecedented rise in the magnitude of imperialism with its ramifications the world over. So, in an international system of rival imperialisms, Bismarck's Reich had no other soft option left but to adopt an aggressive nationalist policy combined with its commercial expansionism. In fact, the approach of Germans and their leaders were bearing conformity with, what may be termed as, the Darwinist notion that "if a rising nation could not win enough places for itself, it would decline and stagnate."\(^3\) As there was hardly any scope left now for the Germans to further push forward towards their western borders, they started looking back to Balkans in the East. Accordingly they set their eyes on annexing and assimilating countries of this region.

2. THE INTEREST CLASH

The Balkans at that time were dominated by Russians. Therefore, the German advance towards East meant, for all practical purposes, deliberately locking horns with Russians. Moreover, it was through the Balkans that the Russians wanted to penetrate deep into Europe. So far, they had been envying the Germans as they proved to be the only stumbling block in their way of pushing towards the West. But now, the traditional predominance of Russia in the Balkans itself came to face its biggest ever challenge from the powerful neighbour at its Western frontier. As such the long standing strategic gains of Russia's European diplomacy was now facing the danger of being snatched

\(^3\) Ibid., p.38.
away by the resurgent German power. "For over a century", writes John Rodes. "Russia had tried to prevent such occurrences since it would discourage Russia's possible future expansion toward the heart of Europe." The clash with Russians, therefore, was but obvious.

Bismarck on his part never wanted Russia to be unfriendly to Germany as he would have liked it to maintain neutrality while dealing with Austria and France. He did not want to antagonize Russia also because the hurt Russians were most likely to forge an alliance with France much to the detriment of an encircled Germany. Nonetheless, by cementing the fateful alliance with Austria-Hungary, Bismarck did annoy Russia annoyed, thereby paving the way for the Franco-Russian alliance in not so distant a future, and also, compelling the German army to face an eventual war on two fronts simultaneously.

3. BISMARCK'S ALLIANCE SYSTEM EXPLODES

With the departure of Bismarck in 1890 from the German scene his successors, not as consummate in their abilities for diplomatic manoeuvring as Bismarck himself was, failed to keep the European nations in balance. As a direct consequence of it, Russia was further estranged. France had already intensified its 'revanchiste' policy against Germany. In other words, Bismarck's well-knit web of secret alliance systems was made to explode. European nations 'fissioned' out of the secret alliances "and a general imperialistic striving

for power among the larger European states" began. Serbs instigated shots in Sarajevo, which killed the heir to the Austrian throne, proved to be the immediate factors for the beginning of the War in 1914 aptly described as a 'European Civil War'.

The year 1914 was a watershed in European history. This was the year in which crisis of the Western modernizing society surfaced prominently. The outbreak of the War primarily owed its origin to the long drawn out struggle for economic and political supremacy among the great European nation states. While Germany together with Austria-Hungary precipitated the conflict, Russia and France, too, did precious little to avoid the ultimate outbreak of the war. Even the British diplomacy at that time was not vigorous enough to stop the war although "it was in London's hand to curb French revanchism and Pan-Slav chauvinism". However, instead of discouraging such tendencies the British government egged them on. In the face of the ever growing antagonism between France and Germany, Britain was expected to play the role of an honest broker but it chose to join hands with the former and then came a point of time, when the British government became party to the ensuing world catastrophe known in common parlance as the World War I.

The world around Germany during 1914 was moving faster than the German calculations. The German Chancellor Bethmann's diplomatic design of

counter-balancing the deteriorating German military position vis-a-vis France and Russia through an improved diplomatic relations with Britain was shattered when the secret of Anglo-Russian naval talks of June 1914 was disclosed. He was now put under tremendous military pressure. Chancellor Bethmann’s war aims, however, were clear and pronounced. He wanted to make continental Germany militarily secure for all time to come. At the same time, he wanted France to be defeated decisively lest it reemerged as a potential challenger to the German power in future. Further, as Calleo writes, "he was no less determined to break the Franco-Russian 'encirclement' and replace it with some form of German hegemony on the continent". At the societal level the militant German nationalism had been galvanized to a very considerable extent. The German People in general shared his diplomatic dreams and cherished his strategic aspirations. Accordingly,"their hopes flared up until the last moment only to lure them on to their ultimate fall".

This seemed almost inevitable though Bismarck would not have liked it to happen. His nightmare became a reality when Germany decided to wage a war which it could not win. His successors failed, indeed, to win the game he had set in, partly because of the fact that they lacked his strategic skill and diplomatic abilities and partly because Britain, France and Russia got united against Germany with a determination to crush the chronic German challenge to the European nation states decisively and permanently.


PHASE II : 1918-1925

The most important characteristic feature of this phase had been the coming closer of the actually isolated Germans and the virtually outcaste Russians. The German reluctance for paying war reparations and the Russian refusal for acknowledging the Tsarist debts to the West brought them together at Rapallo to collaborate.

1. THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

At the end of the World War I, an unjust and vindictive peace treaty was inflicted upon the defeated Germans. Back home the causes of the German defeat in the War and terms of the armistice imposed upon the Germans at the Treaty of Versailles were getting articulated by the conservatives in a way which meant "the German army had not been defeated in the field of battle but had been stabbed in the back by revolutionary elements at home namely by Communists, Socialists and other un-German factions".9

Instead of going for a serious introspection at the diplomatic, strategic and political levels in the aftermath of the War, Germans started despising and blaming each other for their defeat. There prevailed a situation of total chaos and confusion. The postwar German leadership failed to inspire the people of Germany to work unitedly for national reconstruction. The Germans in general were condemned to undergo an unprecedented economic hardship caused by

9. Rodes, n.4, pp.185-186.
wide spread inflation and recession. In short, the existing social, political and economic situation in the immediate postwar Germany proved to be the ideal breeding ground for dictatorship. Later we will see, how Nazis encashed people's anguish and impatience in capturing power.

Lenin, on the other hand in Russia, was busy in consolidating the gains of the Bolshevik revolution. He was, of course, providing all help, advice and encouragement to the Communists in Germany who were making ceaseless bid for power since armistice was signed in November, 1918. Germans were now, therefore, forced not only to listen to the dictates of the victors of the War at Versailles but also the vanquished back home.

At the same time, Lenin was well aware of the fact that the victorious European powers of the World War I wanted the Russians to be confined within their own borders in the same manner as they did to the Germans through the Treaty of Versailles. He was, nevertheless, determined to escape this isolation which, in turn, made him to look towards Germany. Paradoxically, Lenin was simultaneously desirous of ensuring the spread of the communist revolution in Europe for which Germany was to be the main target because, in his calculation, "a communist Germany would be Soviet Russia's ally and provide the power for revolution throughout Europe; a capitalist Germany might join other capitalist states against Russian communism".  

2. THE COINCIDENTAL COMMON INTEREST

Incidentally such initial diplomatic initiatives of the Soviet Russia, born out of certain ideological understanding, found a coincidental positive response from Germany, as it was the time, when the German conservatives and the army were very much in need of requisite strength to stand against the French power. Therefore, they were left with no other options but to reorient the German foreign policy towards the East and get friendly with Russia even though the latter was a communist state by now. The German desire to find an ally at this point of time was so great that even a person like General Secckt, the Commander of the German regular army known for his staunch conservative viewpoint, favoured "a rapprochement if not a treaty with Russia".¹¹

Apart from political and strategic considerations there was one very important economic issue around which the interests of both the Germans and the Russians converged. That was the issue of international financial obligations. While Germany was reluctant to pay the war reparations imposed arbitrarily on her, the communist Russia refused to acknowledge the Tsarist debts. The delegates of the two outcast nations met secretly at Rapallo in 1922 and signed a treaty what became known as the Treaty of Rapallo. Both Moscow and Berlin agreed to resume diplomatic relations and decided to forego mutual claims for reparations and became the 'most favoured nations' for each other in their mutual commercial dealings. Soon, there followed a series of secret military deals between the two, through which the Red Army started getting assistance

¹¹ Rodes, n.4, p.214.
in modernizing its economy and the German army started clandestinely rearming itself bypassing, of course, the Versailles restrictions.

Needless to add, "the idea of German-Russian collaboration against the West was shared by some Soviet leaders and nationalist Germans as early as 1918". Lenin asked for the German assistance in reorganizing the Red Army and General Secckt happily obliged. The Treaty of Rapallo approved the military cooperation between the two states. The German industrialists took up the task of setting up of Russian war factories for the production of experimental planes and tanks for both the armies. Russia allowed its territory to be used for the training of special weapons units of the German army.

Interestingly, through the Rapallo Treaty of 1922, Germany succeeded in entering into foreign policy pact with the Soviet Russia and through Locarno Pact of 1925, it tried to get its Western frontier fixed. This was, however, a purely opportunistic and unrealistic political arrangement as the nationalist sentiments (at least in terms of geopolitical expansionism) of the Russians and the Germans have been directed against each other in most of the history of both the nations.

**PHASE III : 1925-1933**

Stalin and Hitler were the two main movers of this phase. It was the changing dynamics of the rival nationalistic designs of the aforesaid two that forms the basic theme of our study in this phase.

12 Ibid., p.226.
The decade that followed Lenin's death in 1923 witnessed Stalin taking up reign of Russia and Hitler poised to capturing power in Germany. Though the duo - Stalin and Hitler, inherited qualitatively two different political systems, they did, (when Hitler too captured power later) during their stay in power, exemplify themselves to be the sine qua non of authoritarianism in their respective countries. Authoritarianism is fed on nationalism. Accordingly, it was the rival nationalisms of the two, the Communist and the Fascist, that were going to be the sustaining force for both of them. Stalin started arousing nationalistic feelings among his people to consolidate his own position at the domestic front, of course, in the name of 'Communist Internationalism'. Hitler, on his part, started linking the lost glory of Germany to its lost territory in order to inflame the hurt nationalist sentiments of the Germans. He started shifting responsibility for Germany's defeat primarily on the fellow Germans and causes for wide spread economic crisis on the existing economic sanctions and payment of war reparations. However, such a breakdown of the economic system was not a specific and exclusive tragedy of Germans alone, rather it became a global phenomenon - an obvious consequence of the crisis of imperialism the world over. The outbreak of the World War I was indeed the logical "consequence of expanding demands confronted by shrinking resources, a combination that overloaded the international system beyond the possibilities of peaceful adjustment".\textsuperscript{13} Germany, being a late comer on the stage of European

\textsuperscript{13} Calleo, n.2, p.158.
imperialism, was bound to be impatient and aggressive. By the same logic it was also the most vulnerable nation in the European imperialist order.

It was, therefore, natural for Germany that it should have been destined to have confrontation with the older European powers. Thus, if the outbreak of the first World War brought tremendous strain on the Germans, its conclusion proved catastrophic for them. The German state system having broken down, the way for the rule of adventurers was wide open now. Instability and disorder reigned supreme, so did inflation and depression. "Finally, the German state went berserk under Hitler".  

2. SOVIET UNION IN HITLER'S STRATEGY

In his philosophical belief and outlook Hitler seems to have been a Darwinist for whom "history was the struggle of peoples". The history of a society was, in Hitler's understanding, essentially competitive in nature. To exist and flourish as a nation there must be sufficient territory at the disposal of the people comprising it and the foreign policy objectives of such a nation must ensure enough living space. He wanted land not in the form of distant colonies


15. Darwin's theories of natural selection and heredity placed man squarely within the organic realm. "His theories gave rise to such influential doctrines of racial supremacy and racial determinism as Aryanism and Nordicism". * Hitler conveniently utilized Darwinism as an expression of a fundamental law of nature to justify his racial discrimination against Jews. 


16. Ibid., p.87.
but adjoining borders with Germany in Europe. The Soviet Union was the obvious target for him. Looking for land in the east obviously meant going for war with Russia. Apart from Russia, France was to be another inevitable target as per Hitler's geopolitical and strategic perspective. He was convinced that the rapprochement with France at any point of time was neither possible nor desirable. He, in fact, wanted a permanent enemy to be at war with Germany. Further "he felt equally certain that Russia, according to him, dominated by Jews, would disintegrate because the Jews race was incapable of building a state". 17

3. STALIN'S NATIONALIST APPEAL

Surprisingly, indeed, instead of inculcating a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose among his fellow-countrymen by using optimistic agenda of Marxism Stalin, too, tried to arouse negative nationalism in them by provoking them to come forward to exact the redressal of injustice done to them as a nation. Unlike Hitler, who had Germans' most immediate excruciating past to remind and provoke, Stalin had to go deep into Russia's past in order to remind Russians of their national humiliation and shame. For instance, exhorting the nationalist sentiment of his people, Stalin at the first All-Union Conference of Managers of Socialist Industry on February 4, 1931, made the most revealing single statement of purpose in Soviet politics:

"Those who fall behind get beaten... Old Russia was beaten by the Mongol Khans. She was beaten by the Turkish Beys. She

17. Rodes, n.4, p.257.
was beaten by the Swedish feudal lords. She was beaten by the Polish and Lithuanian gentry. She was beaten by the British and French capitalists. She was beaten by the Japanese barons. All beat her—her backwardness, for military backwardness, for cultural backwardness, for political backwardness, for industrial backwardness, for agricultural backwardness. ... Such is the law of the exploiters—beat the backward and the weak. ... That is why we must no longer lag behind. You must put an end to backwardness in the shortest possible time and develop genuine Bolshevik tempo in building up the socialist system of economy. There is no other way. ... Either we do it, or they crush us". 18

Thus, much before the actual commencement of the War, both Hitler and Stalin were actively engaged in articulating and aggregating nationalist sentiments of their respective people. Hitler, in fact, went one step ahead in this direction. He made race as the basic unit of historical growth or decay of a nation. He visualized history as a struggle between races for domination of one over the other. "We can not, like Bismarck, limit ourselves to national aims", 19 Hitler declared.

PHASE IV: 1933-1945

This phase of the study witnesses an unprecedented display of double talks, double standards, double-cross and dilly dally in European diplomacy. As a matter of fact No single nation wanted to face Hitler on one-to-one basis. At the same time each one of them wanted Hitler to be check-mated, defeated and, if possible, decimated. Here was a triangle - the West, Germany and the Soviet

Union. The West wanted Germany and the Soviet Union to quickly collide head on to their mutual extinction. The Soviet Union on the other hand would like to see just the opposite, i.e., the West and Germany to take on each other to their mutual exhaustion. Hitler according to his own calculations envisaged to take both of them to task one-by-one. Ultimately it was the misunderstanding between the West and the Soviet Union and miscalculations on the part of Hitler that brought the world to the War.

1. REIGN OF HITLER

No sooner did he capture power than Hitler established in Germany, what is best known in history as, the Fascist dictatorship. One of the most logical manifestations of his programme was the relentless aggrandisement and militarisation of Germany. In violation of the injunctions of the Treaty of Versailles he began to rearm Germany on a massive scale. He set out to fight a series of wars to capture land around Germany's adjoining borders so that the growing German population could be fed comfortably. Hitler was emphatic: "Our aim is to round out our living space in the east to solve our food problem".20 He seem to have systematically glanced through the globe and found most of Europe's fertile agricultural land lay in the east, mostly in the Soviet Union. For Hitler it was not only an extraordinary stroke of good fortune that most of the Slavic stocks living over there, according to him, were racially

20. Rodes, n.4, p.274.
inferior but also that they were ruled by somewhat more 'inferior and incapable Jews' who had captured power through Bolshevik Revolution.

But well before actualizing his plans for the east, Hitler contemplated to strengthen his position in the mainland Europe. He wanted to deal with France first "whose army stood perilously close to Germany's most important industrial area the Ruhr". Similarly he envisaged to take Britain to task because, in his estimation, there was hardly any distinction between the French and the British and, thus, they too had to be driven off the mainland Europe. He wanted to execute his war plans against the West by making Austria and Czechoslovakia as his base. Obviously absorbing these states into Germany constituted a part, or at least, a preliminary step of Hitler's grand design of conquering the West.

2. SOVIET UNION'S EARLY OVERTURES

The intervening period during which Hitler was busy in rearming Germans and planning to attack Austria and Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union was consistently dropping wide diplomatic hint for improving relations with Germany. But in Hitler's crude calculation Moscow at that point of time was not worth making much friendship precisely because neither Czechoslovakia, nor Austria had a common border with the Soviet Union. Therefore, Moscow was to be of no use in case of seizing Austria or attacking Czechoslovakia. Germany needed a huge blue-water navy for successfully waging a war against British and rest of the West. The Soviet Union was never in a position to assist Germany in

this regard. Nonetheless, bypassing the Versailles restrictions of 1919 the USSR was secretly helping Germany in rearming itself in the prohibited area of poisonous gases, armoured warfare and air warfare. By now Hitler himself started rearming Germans on a vastly greater scale and relatively openly. Therefore, the Soviet Union was now of no special use in this respect, too.

Back home the German Communist Party, which had, through the inadvertent logic of its strategy, helped the Nazis in destroying the Weimar Republic, was now itself bitterly targeted at by the regime.

Before launching an all out war against the West in near future Hitler wanted to have relatively quiet eastern borders with subordinated and circumscribed eastern neighbours. He found Hungary and Poland there to be the two major stumbling blocks in the way of his voyage towards the East. He, therefore, set out to make them his immediate targets. He, maimed Hungary comfortably by the winter of 1938-39 but Poland resisted lock, stock and barrel. No doubt, "the leaders of Poland were as anti-Communist as anyone in Europe, but they were not about to give up the revived independence of their country without a fight".²² They were simply not ready to pay easy obeisance to Hitler.

3. HITLER'S ROUND ABOUT

When he realized Warsaw would not bow without war, Hitler instantly decided to take a quick round about. He started pretending to be genuinely friendly with the Soviet Union. Of course yes, 'enemy's enemy is friend'. He

²². Weinberg, n.21, p.182.
found Poland not only sharing with the Soviet Union a long common border but also a long tradition of hostility between the two. He systematically started luring the Soviet leadership against Poland. He did succeed in his designs by making Stalin authorize the signing of the much talked about Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 which we would discuss later in detail.

In fact, Hitler's decision to join hands with Stalin was just a part of his greater strategic thinking. He thought partitioning of Poland with the Soviet Union would deter Britain and France from going for all an out war against Germany. At the same time Germany would get open access to the USSR for much needed materials in an event of the impending war with the West. As a master strategist, Hitler was convinced that the war with the West was difficult but imminent and unavoidable. Once the West was maimed, he thought, the subsequent moves against the Soviet Union would be easy and fast. Therefore, there was no harm in giving the Russians the concessions they wanted "including a few things they did not even ask for". The calculation was that once Germany had won campaign against the West everything given to the Russians was to be taken back easily. So the terms and conditions of agreement with the Russians were never a real question. The real question was the time-frame in which the Germans wanted Russians to be made to agree. The real question was that of providing much needed economic and diplomatic aid

23. Here it is pertinent to recall that the Germans had always found Russians to be a great hindrance to their desire to push forward towards the East in search of much needed fertile agricultural land for food as it had been the Russians who had traditionally been dominating the Balkans, the only gate way to the East.

24. Ibid., p.183.
the Germans wanted before and during the actual war against the West. It was, of course, certain that once the honeymoon with the USSR served the purpose of assuring a German victory over Britain and France, the Germans would take Russians to task in a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere.

For, despite all his pretensions of being just anti-Communist and not anti-Russian, Hitler publicly requested others to help him preserve European civilization and "safeguard Europe from the incursion of this destructive Asiatic ideology which topples all traditional values". Expansionism, no doubt, involves the risk of obvious resistance. Resistance, therefore, must be smashed if, at all, it comes in the way of expansionism. Hitler was, thus, convinced that "only force could solve the German Question".

Ever since Hitler concluded an anti-Commintern Pact with Japan in 1936, a move solely aimed at immobilizing the Soviet Union, the Soviet leadership started seriously suspecting Hitler's real intentions. In fact, "ever since the fascists first came to power in Germany", Khrushchev reveals, "we'd known that sooner or later they would wage war against us". Hitler, indeed, had made annihilation of communism a tryst with his destiny. Accordingly, an attack on the USSR, the then citadel of communism, at the most opportune time formed the part of Hitler's 'operation push towards the East'. His vision of "Lebensraum" indeed included portions of European Russia. In fact, Most

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25. Rodes, n.4, p.260.
26. Ibid., p.264.

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historians opine that Hitler's offensive against Poland and also the West were merely preliminary preparations for the ultimate invasion of the Soviet Union. However, no documentary proof of such an assertion has been found so far. On the contrary, A.J.P. Taylor went to the extent of refuting the idea that "Hitler had a definite time table of conquest". He, as a matter of fact, used to steer his moves as and when situations demanded so. "Hitler's primary foreign policy requirement" maintains John Lukacs, "was to ensure the vassalage of neighbouring countries, rather than the actual annexation of their territories".\footnote{28 John Lukacs, "The Coming of the Second World War", \textit{Foreign Affairs}, vol.68, no.4, Fall, 1989, p.168.} This seems precisely what he was interested in by capturing both Austria and Czechoslovakia. When the Poles refused to oblige Hitler with this minimum objective, they were taken to task then and there no matter at what cost and with what consequences.

4. STALIN'S ABOUT-FACE POLICY

Stalin, on his part, right from the beginning of the 1930's, started contemplating a complete about-face policies towards the West. By 1933 he started feeling alarmed over the imminent German and Japanese threat to Soviet Union. By 1934-35, he almost stopped denouncing the capitalist world. Instead, he would seek political alliances with any forces opposed to fascism. Themes like 'collective security' and 'Popular front' substituted the terms like international proletarian revolution etc. in his day-to-day policy.
speeches. The Soviet diplomatic realism undertook to tune down the slogans pertaining to working class idealism to such an extent that when in 1936, a journalist asked Stalin whether the Soviet Union had abandoned its plans or intentions for bringing about a world revolution? Stalin replied, "we never had such plans and intentions".29 Subsequently, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with the United States in 1933. During 1934-35 it tried its level best to work out effective diplomatic and military collaboration with France and Czechoslovakia, too.

However, Stalin's such unilateral offer of cooperation with the West was, in fact, more of a temporary strategic move directed against the Fascist Germany than that of a sudden change of a Communist head and heart. "There is not the slightest evidence that Stalin was willing to enter into any alliance with the Western democracies if he could make a deal with Germany instead".30 He was, therefore, basically interested in making any such temporary deals. He wanted to make deals with the West as well as with the Germans. He wanted to see both of them fighting head on and bleed and become weak enough, so that the Soviet Union could make a massive come back on the European scene. "The Soviet Union was prepared", maintains Richard von Weizsacker, "to allow other nations to fight one another so that it


30. Weinberg, n.21, p.170.
could share in the spoils”. 31 In fact, Stalin was, at this stage, actively engaged in playing the "double cross diplomacy. He was stringing along the Western powers publicly so that he could put pressure on Germans to raise their offers to the Soviet Union in private. At the same time he was trying his level best to convince Hitler that he preferred a change in the existing international scenario.

Admittedly, Stalin made it evidently clear that he was interested in changing the old equilibrium. So wanted the Germans. It was Britain and France who together wanted to preserve the existing equilibrium of power equation and maintain, as far as possible, the status-quo.

Eventually it was the common desire of the Russians and the Germans to do away with the old equilibrium that "had created the basis for the rapprochement" 32 between the two.

Moreover, by 1938 Stalin was convinced that the capitalist West would remain united against the Soviet Union and, therefore, he had repeatedly started approaching the Germans for an agreement with Moscow.

Interestingly, Stalin did try to give the impression that he had been continuing negotiation with the Western powers with all pomp and show so that the Germans might be put under pressure to come to terms with the Russians and go ahead with their war plan against Poland and the West in sequence or simultaneously. For, a war at this juncture between the

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Western powers and Germany was to provide the Soviet Union with the best possible guarantee for its territorial security and an enhanced prospect for the future expansion of the Soviet area of influence.

Surprisingly, indeed, despite the widespread apathy for Bolshevism the Western powers never wanted countries of the Eastern Europe to lose their independence. Britain, in particular, "never intended Germany to have a free hand in Eastern Europe at all"\(^{33}\) to the extent that the British Government was prepared to go for a general war against Germany if it were bent upon pushing towards the east. Therefore if war broke out ultimately over Poland in 1939 it was, to a great extent, more of a British than the German initiative.

5. ERA OF MANOEUVRE AND MANIPULATION

Nevertheless, the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, "secretly continued to seek an agreement with the Germans to guarantee England's security".\(^{34}\) The only concession Chamberlain at this juncture was trying to seek was that he wanted Hitler to be a bit more reasonable and sensible about Poland in order to have an honourable relationship with Britain.

It was at this time the media in the West, particularly French and British, were targeting their vigorous propaganda campaign in deliberately

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belittling the military might of the Soviet Union and thereby provoking Germany against it. The leitmotif of this campaign was - "Russia is nothing but a colossus with feet of clay!" 35 Quite in line with such propagandistic suggestions the Western countries too, were eagerly waiting to see Germany and the Soviet Union to take on one another and finish each other off once and for all.

Stalin, on his part, was very optimistic in his estimation. He thought that Hitler and the West were equally matched. When they would start fighting they would fight for a long time and fight devastatingly. They would not only ruin themselves but also the whole of the military, economic and moral potential of Europe and Europeans. Stalin thought he would then simply walk through the Europe so ruined but with his country's entire military, economic and social strength remaining intact.

Therefore, by mid-1939 there existed a dangerous triangle consisting of the Anglo-French alliance, Hitler and Stalin. Each one of them wanted the rest of the two to fight between themselves to their mutual exhaustion.

When the last bid of anti-fascist military alliance between the British, French and the Russians could not materialize by the summer of 1939, Moscow apprehended the threat of being left isolated and exposed in international arena subsequently circumscribed to face Germans on a one-to-one basis. The USSR felt doubly threatened by the constant Japanese provocation in the Soviet Far East during the same period. The Soviet Union

35. Khrushchev, n.27, p.130.
now started having the constant nightmares of being forced to wage a war on the two fronts simultaneously.

In a characteristic Soviet move Maxim Litvinov was relieved of his duties as the People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs. He was succeeded by Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov. This was indeed a diplomatic sensation for the West. Litvinov was a Jew by nationality and an "active opponent of closer ties with Germany". Thus, his removal was indirectly aimed at appeasing Hitler in order to gain his acceptance for a Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact which was in offing.

6. THE NAZI-SOVIET PACT

It was at this critical juncture that Hitler agreed to offer Russians what the West had so far refused them to give - the territorial possession of the Baltic states and the share in Polish territory. Stalin decided to snatch this opportunity and go for the Nazi-Soviet pact right at the earnest.

The Soviet press on August 22, 1939 startled the whole world by giving the exclusive scoop that the German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop was arriving in Moscow to sign a non-aggression pact. After several rounds of discussions between Stalin and Molotov at the one end, and Ribbentrop and other German diplomats on the other during the nights of August 23-24, an agreement on all the points of negotiation was reached. The

36. Medvedev, n.34, p.726.
37. Fortunately for the Soviet Union Hitler agreed to oblige them though, as history was to witness later, such a pact proved to be, keeping with the spirit of the time, terribly unreliable and short-lived.
act along with a secret protocol were thus signed.\textsuperscript{38}

The Non-aggression Pact "provided that Germany and the Soviet Union would not attack the other or assist any third power at war with the other thereby assuring each of the neutrality of the other party should either decide to attack a third country. They promised not to join groups of powers directed against the other and to settle by peaceful means all differences that might arise between them".\textsuperscript{39} The pact initially was binding for ten years. Though there were the provision for addition of five years. At the same time sufficient provisions in the Pact to extend it to an additional five years. It was liable to be terminated by giving a one year prior notice if it was so desired.

It is thus evidently clear from the description of the text of the pact that the Germans were given enthusiastic thumbs up by Stalin to attack Poland. Interestingly, this was the only non-aggression pact signed by the Soviet Union, which contained no provision that the pact would become invalid if either of the two parties attacked a third party.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} When Ribbentrop flew to Moscow, Marshal Voroshilov, the People's Commissar of Defense, was busy hunting duck in a preserve. The French and the British delegates, present there for talks were of the impression that they might reach an alliance with the Russians. Later they realized that ignorance was not always bliss.

\textsuperscript{39} Weinberg, n.21, p.175.

\textsuperscript{40} A portion of Maxim Litvinov's speech given on this subject to the League of Nations on September 14, 1935, is worth mentioning here: "Not every pact of non-aggression is concluded with a view to strengthening general peace. While non-aggression pact concluded by the Soviet Union with its neighbours included a special clause for suspending the pact in case of committed by one of the parties against any third state, we know of the other pacts of non-aggression which have no such clause. This means that a state which is secured by such a pact of non-aggression its rear or its flank obtains the facility of attacking with impunity third state. Quoted in Jane Degas, ed., Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy, 1953-1941, vol.3, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), p.145.
Thus, the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of nonaggression meant something new to everyone directly or indirectly so involved. The pact facilitated the reappearance of the Soviet Union on the European scene after a gap of 20 years. The whole political geography of Europe of the post-World War I had undergone a change. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, in actual reality, had meant virtual withdrawal of the Soviet Russia from Europe - politically, economically, militarily, and ideologically. Politically it became almost an outcast among the family of European nations. Economically, the European market was almost completely sealed for the Soviet Russia. Militarily, the Russian army could remain of no significant reckoning in European balance of power. Ideologically it became repulsive to even most of "East European neighbours".41 Moreover, the odds against the Soviet Russia was further compounded by the fact that Lenin's original predictions of the spreading of communism in Europe did not seem coming true.

It was against this background that a breakthrough was said to have been achieved by Stalin. Now not only was he in a position to facilitate a smooth re-entry of the Soviet Union into Eastern Europe, but also to make a successful attempt to recover some of Russia's lost territories that even Lenin failed to retrieve.

This agreement provided, nonetheless, an encouragement to Germany to launch an all out war with the West which Stalin thought would

41. Weinberg, n.21, p.171.
make both the parties in question weak satisfying the Soviet Union's long cherished desire "for a war in Europe".  

For Poland this pact signified an outright disaster in offing. Poland was now as isolated, circumscribed and exposed as the 'Droupadi' of the famous Indian epic, 'Mahabharata'. Poland needed a deliverer as did Droupadi. War with Germany was imminent. Soviet invasion seemed obvious. Poland, thus, was sure to be sandwiched.

For Britain, the pact dashed all hopes of a multi-front war against Germany. The last minute bid of luring the Russians failed. War seemed awaiting at the European door steps. Chamberlain's loud threat of going for an all out military offensive against Germany in an event of the German attack on Poland did not deter Hitler.

The pact made France all the more disappointed and angry. It had been pinning up hopes in the Soviet assistance against German menace.

The pact put Japan, too, in a fix. For Japan it was like a humiliating diplomatic defeat. For the Japanese were still hoping to negotiate an alliance with Berlin and Rome against Moscow. They were all the more aggrieved as by now, the expected help from their German anti-Comintern pact partners against Moscow did not seem forthcoming.


43. "Droupadi" is one of the central female characters in Mahabharata, an Indian Epic. She was made to suffer simply because of the clash of ego between the two families of a mythical Indian clan.
Nevertheless, the non-aggression pact of 1939 marked the end of the US isolationism as we shall see in subsequent chapters facilitating its return on the European scene with a bang. After the World War I much like Russia, the US too chose to withdraw from Europe. Yet unlike Russia, "America's withdrawal was only military and political, not economic and cultural".

By 1939, a large chunk of considerably influential category of Americans started putting effective pressure on the US policy makers to take cognizance of fast changing scenario unfolding in Europe. Despite widespread isolationist mood prevailing among the American masses, President Roosevelt did conclude that it was in the larger interest of the Americans to encourage the European powers in putting up pressure against Hitler's designs. Hitler was well aware of Roosevelt's inclinations. Therefore, he considered Roosevelt as his enemy number one till his ultimate demise.

This is worth noting here that Hitler, indeed, was tricking the Russians with a treaty. Stalin himself accepted: "of course, it is all a game to see who can fool whom". For the Soviet leadership the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of 1939 was inevitable and profitable. "We were betting on the possibility that we could duck behind the treaty and escape the bullets which would soon be flying - thus avoiding the fate which the Western powers hoped would befall us".

44. Weinberg, n.21 p.172.
45. Khrushchev, n.27, p.128.
46. Ibid., p.130.
The Soviet Union, indeed, succeeded in postponing the imminent threat of war against Hitlerite Germany not only in terms of time but also in terms of space.

The Germans too were very much in need of gaining some time before they could take on the Soviet Union head on. They wanted to engineer divisions among the nations which unitedly fought against Germany in the World War I and wanted to do everything possible to stop the emergence of another anti-German united front. Hitler wanted to take them to task one at a time. He was somewhat convinced that Germany lost the World War I simply because it had to fight on two fronts simultaneously. The Non-aggression pact was the shuttle device for him to limit the ensuing war to one front at a time as far as possible.

Once the pact along with its secret protocol had been signed, Hitler felt free to attack Poland. On September 1, 1939 Germany did attack Poland. With that the World War II began.

To sum up, when seen in historical perspective, the German Question has many manifestations. First, the people of Germany, as articulated by their leaders, don't seem to be ready to accept the fact that the extend of the German nationalism is co-terminus with the existing geographical boundaries of Germany as a state in a given point of time. Second, how to contain the ever increasing German desire for territorial expansion well within their state borders is a perennial question for Germany's neighbours in Europe. Finally, the changing dynamics of the German strategy to penetrate deep into the Balkans in order to grade lands for food and the Russian constraints to contest them there right at the
Balkans in order to facilitate their (Russian's) long cherished desires for pushing towards the West forms yet another interesting manifestation of the German Question. In fact, in subsequent chapters it is the Soviet response to the ever changing contents of the German Question in totality that shall be the main focus of our investigation in this study.