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September 28, 1939: The fourth partition of Poland

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Joachim von Ribbentrop's two visits to Moscow, one in August and the other in September 1939, marked a continuation of sinister scheming against Poland by its two formidable neighboring powers. During the earlier visit, a non-aggression pact was forged, its secret protocol effectively transforming it into an agreement that sanctioned German's assault on Poland. The subsequent event, involving the chief of Hitler's diplomatic corps visiting Moscow, culminated in the signing of the German-Soviet treaty on friendship and borders. This marked the fourth partition of Poland, and effectively barred the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from reclaiming its former eastern borders. Paradoxically, it was the German-Soviet arrangements of September 28, 1939 that led to Germany's loss of territories east of the Odra and Nysa Łużycka Rivers, as decided during the Potsdam Conference following Germany's defeat in 1945.

Historians disagree on whether World War II, which started with Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, would have occurred had Hitler and Stalin not colluded through the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August 23, 1939. While a deep dive into this controversy and a discussion of all arguments for and against this hypothesis is beyond the scope of this article, little doubt remains that the Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17, 1939 resulted from the collaboration of two predatory powers harboring hostility towards Poland. Despite their previous ideological discord and being at odds with each other for several years prior, the two managed to set their differences aside at a crucial juncture to advance their imperial ambitions. Ribbentrop's first visit to Moscow led to a preliminary delineation of their respective "spheres of influence" through a secret protocol to the pact of August 23, 1939. These original arrangements underwent revision as hostilities in Poland subsided, along with a decrease in fighting in the eastern regions of the Polish-Lithuanian

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Commonwealth, which had been invaded by the Red Army and NKVD units on September 17.

On September 27, as the besieged and heavily bombed city of Warsaw capitulated, an airplane carrying the head of Hitler's diplomatic corps landed in Moscow. While Hitler granted significant authority to Ribbentrop, the latter repeatedly sought the Führer's approval during negotiations in the Kremlin to make specific concessions to satisfy Stalin's personal demands.

The primary point of agreement centered on maintaining control over ethnically Polish territories, which would predominantly fall under the Reich's jurisdiction. This marked a significant departure from the secret protocol of the non-aggression pact signed on August 23. In return, Germany conceded Lithuania to the USSR's "sphere of influence" despite prior arrangements placing it under German control. However, the most pivotal aspect was the establishment of the new German-Soviet state border, which roughly bisected the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The original map delineating this border, bearing the signatures of Stalin and Ribbentrop, is archived within the collection of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Ribbentrop later recalled feeling at home among familiar NSDAP party comrades during a gala dinner hosted by Stalin in the Kremlin. The atmosphere was indeed remarkably convivial.

The German-Soviet treaty, known as "the treaty on border and friendship" (its name coined by Vyacheslav Molotov in his October 31, 1939 speech at an extraordinary meeting of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR), was formally signed on the morning of September 29, but dated the previous day. The fourth article of this five-article treaty declared: "The Government of the German Reich and the Government of the USSR regard this settlement [of the border line - S.Ż.] as a firm foundation for a progressive development of friendly relations between their peoples."

Both governments also released statements, asserting that "it would be in the best interest of all nations" to put an end to the state of war involving Germany, France, and Great Britain.

Before long, the Kremlin began reaping the benefits stemming from the secret annexes to the agreements of August 23 and September 28, 1939. As early as that autumn, Moscow pressured the governments of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into accepting the presence of Soviet military bases within their borders. In late November, the Red Army launched an offensive against Finland, which eventually fell within the Soviet "sphere of influence". The continued independence of Finland owed much to the heroism of its soldiers;

in a peace treaty in March 1940, the Soviets secured substantial territorial gain but fell short of subjugating Finland. The three Baltic republics were not so lucky. In the summer of 1940, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union under dire circumstances. By mid-1940, as a result of an ultimatum, the Soviet Union seized Bessarabia and the northern part of Bukovina from Romania.

The establishment of a new border between Germany and the Soviet Union through the September 28, 1939 agreement was in breach of international law. This boundary, largely unaltered, endured throughout World War II. Following Germany's attack on the USSR on June 22, 1941, the Soviet Union swiftly shifted from being a tacit ally of the Nazi Reich to a member of the anti-Hitler coalition, shouldering much of the conflict with Germany, at least until the Allied landing in Normandy in June 1944. The USSR consistently asserted that its incorporation of eastern Poland respected the will of the local popuce, and that a restoration of the pre-1939 border was out of the question. This stance found acceptance among the leaders of Great Britain and the United States, as evidenced by the conclusions of the Big Three conference in Tehran in late 1943.

The delineation of Poland's eastern border, resulting from collusion between the USSR and the Nazi Reich, endured with minor adjustments (including the return of the Białystok region to Poland) until 1945 and remains in effect to the present day. The significant departure came with the anti-Nazi Great Coalitions, which embraced the belief that Poland should be compensated for the loss of its eastern voivodeships from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the USSR, with territory in the West to be granted at the expense of the defeated German Reich. The new western border of Poland was designated by the Big Three during the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945.

It remains evident that, to this day, many Germans are unaware that the loss of territory east of the Odra and Nysa Łużycka Rivers was, paradoxically, a consequence of the partition of Poland between Hitler and Stalin in September 1939. The Federal Republic long resisted recognizing this border, even after Chancellor Willy Brandt's signing of the relevant agreement with the People's Republic of Poland on December 7, 1970. Even in 1990, when the German reunification hung in the balance, the issue continued to strain Polish-German relations due to the ambiguous stance adopted by Chancellor Helmut Kohl. It was not until November 1990 that the Federal Republic of Germany ultimately recognized the border.

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