The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The War That Russia Didn't Fight

By Alexei Bayer

March 30, 2014



Karma is a belief that past actions return to haunt us. Once a bad deed is perpetrated, bad karma casts a shadow over the future, shaping it and inflicting inevitable retribution.

The 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, signed a week before Hitler invaded Poland and resulting in the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland, three Baltic states and parts of Romania, as well as a war of aggression against Finland, was a heinous crime. It created bad karma that is coming to haunt Russia now, 75 years later.

Today's Russia is crawling with Stalin's apologists who claim that preternaturally wise "Uncle Joe" needed to take over all those territories to push Soviet borders further west. However, instead of fortifying those new borders, Stalin's secret police began terrorizing and deporting the local population, sowing so much hatred and fear so that the people there ended up welcoming the invading Nazis as liberators.

Stalin willfully ignored warnings that German troops were massing on Soviet borders. When Hitler did strike on June 22, 1941, the official Soviet statement termed the German attack as "verolomno," meaning "breaking the trust."

The Red Army and the Wehrmacht held a joint parade at Brest-Litovsk after successfully dismembering Poland, demonstrating to the rest of the world their close ties and military might. The NKVD executed 22,000 experienced Polish military officers at Katyn in 1940, hardly a sign that Stalin was preparing to fight the Germans. On the contrary, the Soviet Union came close to being drawn into World War II on the side of Nazi Germany and fighting against Western allies had Hitler's brutal 1941 invasion not put an end to any such possibility.

The Soviet Union bore the brunt of fighting in World War II, and the Soviet people made a decisive contribution to the eventual defeat of Nazism. Its heroic struggle and its role in liberating Europe earned it tremendous goodwill around the world. The strength of communist parties in Italy and France, and their popularity among leading Western intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s, stemmed from those wartime experiences.

But once the war was over, the Soviet Union refused to give back any of the territories it had grabbed while in an unholy alliance with Hitler, effectively re-validating the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. And the unfought war against Western democracies seems to have remained stuck in the Soviet subconscious, enduring throughout the Cold War.

It let up only in 1991 with the collapse of communism. But even as the official rhetoric moderated, neo-Nazism — an ideology that was unthinkable in the Soviet Union — began to spread insidiously in the Russian ultra-nationalist circles. Swastikas, SS uniforms and salutes with cries of "Heil Hitler!" became common attributes at the annual Russian March and similar gatherings of extremists.

Over the past decade, the Kremlin has been ratcheting up anti-Western rhetoric, and suddenly it has gelled with ultra-nationalist ideology. The hasty occupation of Crimea, complete with a bogus referendum conducted under the barrel of the gun, seemed to follow Hitler's Sudetenland scenario. And now the actions of Russian quislings on Ukrainian territory are transforming the black and yellow St. George ribbon from a symbol of victory over fascism into a symbol of 21st-century aggression.

Russia is edging dangerously toward a war with the Western alliance. Could it be that the Molotov-Ribbentrop karma is coming into play 75 years later?

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/03/30/the-war-that-russia-didnt-fight-a33451