

Five.

The secret protocol to an otherwise public treaty between nations has a long if not entirely honourable history. The device was used with enthusiasm throughout many centuries of European diplomacy. In the twentieth, however, it may be said to have achieved the full glory of the treacheries it so fulsomely represents. For example - and many examples are possible - Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany agreed in the late 1930s to their famously duplicitous pact of non-aggression: an act of staggeringly last-moment desperation, which had been preceded by some years of the most ferocious opportunism.

By the mid- and late- 1930s, after all, every European power had every reason to suppose that an all-out war was on the way. The point, then, was to position oneself in a shifting pattern of alliances so as to be on the winning side: and - ideally - to come out on top of that winning side. This, after all, is the very essence of statescraft.

In 1934 the Soviet Union became involved in the League of Nations and entered into diplomatic relations with the United States. Two years later Germany was party to the Anti-Comintern Pact with Italy and (rather more ominously for the Soviet Union) with Japan. In the spring of 1939 the Russians made a formal offer to Britain and France of a Triple Alliance - an old name in the history of European power-politics (and British industrial history). Britain's Chamberlain government, however, was cool on the idea, although Winston Churchill would later write that such an alliance, 'of Britain, France and Russia would have struck deep alarm into the heart of Germany

in 1939, and no one can prove that war might not even then have been averted'.

Meanwhile, Germany was re-arming at a furious pace: and Stalin's Russia found itself increasingly isolated and threatened on the international stage. In the wake of Chamberlain's rebuff, the impetus for a Soviet deal with Germany was therefore very strong. In the spring of 1939, at his 18th party congress, Stalin himself made conciliatory noises about such rapprochement with Germany, and seemed to signal approval of limited German territorial expansion. Within the week Hitler had taken the hint and invaded Bohemia: while Britain and France did nothing. This was the first mistake in a series of disastrous mistakes.

In April the Soviets again made the offer of a Triple Alliance with Britain and France: but by now Soviet patience was wearing thin and there was little time to wait for a response, positive or otherwise. On the very same day, therefore, similar terms were offered to the Germans. Once again, European diplomacy was to be seen for what it so often had been: a carousel of muddle, panic, indecision, incompetence, and brutal cowardice: along with the crudest of intimidation and cynical opportunism.

By the middle of August the deal between the Soviets and Germany was complete. A trade agreement guaranteed German access to Soviet raw materials including important war metals, foodstuffs and oil, while the Soviets got access to the products of German industrial and military factories. In other words, Germany was no longer susceptible to the sort of British naval blockade which had helped (by way of mass starvation of a civilian public) to bring her to her knees in 1918. This trade-agreement alone may be counted as a dreadful error on the part of British diplomacy. But

more was to come, on the 23rd of August. On that day Ribbentrop flew into a delirious Moscow, where the streets were decorated with swastika and hammer and sickle flags. That same evening at a drunken reception in the Kremlin, the Treaty of Non-Aggression was signed. It bound its signatories to observe peaceful relations with each other for ten years and would, unless otherwise indicated, be automatically extended for a further five years: that is, until 1954.

There was also an additional secret protocol to the treaty, which made provision for the distribution of eastern Europe into Soviet and German areas of interest, with a crude line of demarcation simply slashed through Poland. Just one week after that secret protocol was agreed, the Germans moved. A million and a half men, in two army groups, along with an airfleet of two thousand planes, attacked Poland and raced towards the demarcation line agreed with the Russians just seven days earlier. Stalin - a notoriously careful coward - hesitated for a fortnight, and then his armies moved too. By the middle of September the swastika and the hammer and sickle were once again flying side by side, this time at a victory parade in the citadel of Brest Litovsk: and the terrible German and Soviet rape of Poland was about to begin.

This process was to occupy nearly two years. On the German-occupied western side of Poland territories were incorporated into what was called the General Government. In the Soviet-occupied lands, territories were also forcibly taken into the Soviet Union. Mass murder of hostages and prisoners and civilians was at once the order of the day. Screening of populations, with a view to their imminent enslavement, deportation or death, followed almost at once. The Germans began to concentrate western Poland's Jewish population with a view to its wholesale destruction:

meanwhile, 20,000 hostages were shot at Bydgoszcz and 15,000 priests, teachers and minor leaders were killed after transportation to Dachau or the Palmiry Forest. By the end of September, Heydrich could report to Berlin that, 'of the Polish upper classes in the occupied territories only a maximum of three per cent is still present'.

Russian oil poured through what had been independent Poland into Germany, to help Hitler's actual invasion of France, and intended invasion of Britain: both of which had declared war on Germany following that country's invasion of Poland. Hitler was happy to ignore Stalin's attacks on Finland, Romania and the little Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. And the Soviet dictator did nothing about Germany's conquests of France, Belgium, Denmark, Holland and Norway. Prior to the Soviet invasion of the Baltic republics, local NKVD agents in each of them had drawn up 30 categories of people due for immediate arrest. In the first year of the Soviet occupation of Latvia, for instance, more than 2 per cent of the population vanished - equivalent in Britain to one million people. This was no more than a taste of what was to come elsewhere.

In Soviet-occupied eastern Poland, things were to be as they had been through the long nineteenth century of Russian occupation, when hundreds of thousands of Polish nationalists had been transported in fearsome penal convoys to Siberia. Some had been even forced to walk all the way to Siberia: on occasions, in convicts' chains. But the Stalinist occupation was to be worse than that of any of the Tsars.

Directly behind the front-line troops - little more than Mongol barbarians with a taste for rape and plunder - were the secret policemen of the NKVD. These came equipped with ready-prepared

categories of enemies: which in effect meant anyone of any intellectual or political or cultural significance at all. In the dreadful winter of 1939-1940, an incredible two million of these civilians (minor aristocrats, small landowners, priests, lawyers, stamp-collectors, linguists and the like) were deported to Arctic Russia, Siberia and Kazakhstan: at least one half of them were dead within a year of arrival. And 15,000 Polish officers disappeared from Soviet captivity in the spring of 1940: they were murdered by the Russian occupiers in an event associated with the name of the Katyn Forest, near Smolensk in Byelorussia. The numbers deported from the Soviet zone of Poland in 1939-1940 (to present the figures in another way) were equivalent to a deportation from Britain of five million people: or roughly the entire population of Scotland.

Such was the conduct of the Soviet Union, signatory to the secret protocol which had allowed the surprise occupation of Poland: the Soviet Union that within eighteen months would be a faithful ally of Britain, and deadly enemy of Germany.

The Soviet allegiance to Germany could hardly have survived, after all, the surprise German attack on Russia in June, 1941. This attack involved three million men, two thousand planes, half a million trucks and ten thousand tanks and guns. For the Soviets, the early hours and days of the invasion were a disaster. Twelve hundred of Stalin's planes were destroyed within hours. By Christmas the Germans had taken nearly four million prisoners: rather more than the strength of their own huge army! That autumn, for a few famous days, panic reigned in Moscow. The police disappeared, the political leadership was in turmoil and on the point of desertion, and prostitutes swarmed from their hiding places. It is said that as

few as five hundred parachutists - perhaps even, five hundred prostitutes - could have taken the city: and the state.

And yet the tide turned. Germany lost the battle of Moscow; then lost in the south at Stalingrad and in the north at Leningrad: while in time the gigantic tank battle at Kursk clearly pointed to the inevitability of a German defeat sooner or later.

With the help of murderous repression, the Soviets stabilised their home front: and the power of their war-industrial output could never be matched by that of the German. Though the Germans fought with immense tenacity, the Russians inexorably drove them back. In time, they had driven the Germans back over their own eastern borders: and the Red army - now re-named the Soviet army - was able to pour into the countries of central and south-eastern Europe. From Romania, 200,000 military prisoners were never again seen after falling into Soviet hands. Another quarter of a million 'politically unreliable' civilians were also dragged to distant Soviet prison camps. Half a million people disappeared from Hungary, and rather less from neighbouring Czechoslovakia. In the tiny Baltic republics, yet another terrible purge was launched. Five hundred thousand citizens were dragged off to the distant GULag amid scenes of the most fearful violence.

The Soviet army was equally brutal in Poland. Poles who had resisted the German occupation were at once arrested and deported. With the 'liberation' of each village and town, the apparatus of Soviet dictatorship was imported overnight: and the deportations began once again. To this savagery was added the terrible cynicism - or realism - characteristic of the Soviet regime. The Polish Home Army had 150,000 armed men in Warsaw alone. Its leadership knew - or hoped - that there was a slim window of

opportunity between the withdrawal of the Germans and the arrival of the Russians. Soviet forces were on the other side of the Vistula. When Soviet tanks were seen in the eastern suburbs of Warsaw, the fateful decision was made to signal a general rising. It was a disaster.

Just as the Poles began their rising, the Germans counter-attacked the Russians across the Vistula. The Ninth Army was strengthened by the notorious RONA and Dirlanger brigades, along with the SS Herman Goering regiment and the SS Viking Panzer division. The battle raged in Warsaw for two months, while the Soviet Army sat and watched it, from just one mile away. Between two and three hundred thousand civilians died, and when the remnants of the Home Army capitulated, Hitler ordered that the Polish capital be flattened.

Throughout the autumn of 1944, the Soviet advance continued despite extraordinarily tough German resistance. But from the early weeks of the new year, the German retreat began to look like a rout. The Soviets swarmed around and over the Pomeranian Wall and the so-called fortresses of Breslau and Glogau. And this was not the Great War of 1914. In that year, after all, when the Tsar's armies overran East Prussia, some damage to fruit trees was reported, along with two (unsubstantiated) claims of rape.

But Soviet civilisation did things rather more robustly. Massacres and plundering scarred East Prussia and Pomerania and Silesia. Entire railways, whole factories, were torn apart and carried off to the east. Complete cities, Danzig among them, were emptied and flattened. Scarcely any female, from very young children to grandmothers, survived unscathed: and children could in addition be tossed alive on the points of bayonets. One Russian

officer reported the case of a girl who had been raped by at least 250 men in just one week: and her case was not exceptional.

The massacres got under way from October 1944. On the 16th of that month, the Soviet army launched a massive offensive along a ninety mile front on the eastern border of East Prussia. Three days later, the Russians broke through into the Reich and captured the districts of Goldap and Gumbinnen. The massacres that followed were only the beginning.

In eastern Pomerania, for instance, British prisoners of war reported, 'in the district around our internment camp - the territory comprising the towns of Schlawe, Lauenburg, and Buckow, along with hundreds of larger villages - Red soldiers during the first weeks of their occupation raped every female between the ages of 12 and 60. The only exceptions were girls who managed to remain in hiding in the woods or who had the presence of mind to feign illness - typhoid, diphtheria, or some other infectious disease. Flushed with victory - and often with wine found in the cellars of rich Pomeranian landlords - the Reds searched every house for women, cowing them with pistols or tommy guns, and carried them into their tanks of half-tracks'.

Meanwhile, more than two hundred thousand able-bodied men and women from East Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia were deported to remote areas of the Soviet Union for indefinite periods and under murderous conditions.

Vessels on the Baltic, on which civilian refugees attempted to escape the Russian horde, were attacked without mercy. The Wilhelm Gustloff was deliberately sunk at the end of January by a Soviet submarine while the ship was carrying around seven thousand civilian refugees along the Pomeranian coast towards

Mecklenburg. Three huge explosions were followed by slow sinking. Other boats in the convoy took off around 800 people: but the remainder drowned in the freezing water. Equally terrible was the fate of the refugee vessel Goya. This ship, carrying civilians just a few weeks from the end of the war, was sent to the bottom by a Soviet submarine on April 14th, and less than two hundred of her six or seven thousand passengers were saved.

And the huge columns of civilian refugees were also machine-gunned from the air and dive-bombed without mercy by Soviet war planes. Many people trekked to the Baltic coast in the hope of escape. Huge numbers tried to cross the ice-covered bay which separated the coastline from the Pillau peninsula on the icy winter shores of the Baltic. When they arrived, however, it was to discover that they would have to spend six to eight hours trekking fifteen miles on foot, sometimes on ice and sometimes through shallow freezing water. Exposure and exhaustion took a terrible toll on old and young. Low-flying Russian planes machine-gunned these civilian refugees, and bombed the ice that covered the waters of the Frisches Haff.

This, then, was the Soviet approach to the areas of eastern Europe in which it gained control after the expulsion of the German military forces. And the absolute nature of that possession was all within the spirit or letter of existing international agreements between the powers that were to share the victory over Germany.

At the end of 1943, the leaders of the Allied powers had wheeled over the shores of the Caspian and the snowy Elburz mountains to their first great conference at Tehran. Here, the foundations were laid for the post-war settlement in Europe: in other words, the agreement that Soviet Russia would enjoy without

question a sphere of influence up to that line which would soon become known as the Iron Curtain. Stalin's translator (who died as recently as Christmas, 1998) at Tehran later recalled that the dictator was very nervous beforehand, fussing over the seating arrangements and adjusting the lighting of the meeting room, to lessen the prominence of his smallpox scars.

At Tehran, famously, Poland was moved 150 miles to the west, into what had been pre-war German territory. There was, so far as is known, no talk of similarly moving Germany westward, into the territory of Belgium and Holland and France: but such a proposition would certainly have been within the spirit of the carve-up.

Later, these Tehran arrangements were to be largely confirmed at the Great Power conferences at Yalta, in February 1945, and at Potsdam between July 17 and August 2 of the same year: or in other words broadly between the surrender of Germany and the American use of nuclear weapons on Japan which brought about the surrender of that last country.

These dates may be important. So too is the possibility of secret protocols between any two of the participating powers at any one of the three great conferences.

After all, in the immediate wake of the German defeat in Europe, the Americans, with their ruined and exhausted British ally at their heels, were still at war with Japan in the Pacific. And Stalin's armies certainly had the power and momentum to carry them through France to the shores of the Atlantic. What if Stalin had suddenly done a deal with the Japanese Emperor - no more Gothic an alliance than that earlier one with Hitler - to stop the Americans where they stood? What if the Soviets had suddenly announced

that, in the Pacific theatre of war, they were henceforth to take the side of Japan, into whose economy they would now pour aid and munitions? Would the Americans then have dared use nuclear bombs on Japan - a nation that was now an ally of Russia? And what would the Russian response have been to that bombing? What if Stalin had ordered his armies - and by 1945 his arms factories were just hitting their stride - to storm onwards into western Europe? What, indeed, if he had wilfully provoked the Americans into using nuclear weapons in the densely-populated areas of western Europe (and without any doubt whatsoever, Stalin was certainly capable of that sort of provocation)?

What deal - enshrined in secret protocol - might the Soviet dictator have reached with the Americans to avoid any one or more of these eventualities? What might the Soviet pay-off have been? How about some undefended and exhausted offshore islands, with their armed forces on the mainland of Europe: a private aircraft carrier with which to dominate those areas of Europe which Stalin had not occupied in the weeks following the collapse of Germany?

The proposition bears repetition. By the winter of 1944-1945, it was perfectly plain to Stalin that sooner or later Germany would fall and the Soviets would take control of eastern Europe. It was also plain that sooner or later Japan would fall to the Americans. That would leave the United States in command of the Pacific to the Soviet east, and in command of western Europe to the west of the new, enlarged Soviet empire: for Stalin had, of course, failed to take control of Spain during that country's savage civil war of 1936-1939.

Why not, then, a surprise attack on and occupation of Britain, with or without secret American agreement?

It would give Stalin strategic control of the Iceland Gap and protect the seaways from Murmansk (and thus open the eastern seaboard of the continental United States to Soviet submarines and aircraft carriers). In turn, it would deny the Americans their British offshore aircraft carrier for the defence of their new sphere of influence in western Europe. Rather, Britain would now serve as a Soviet base for an attack on western Europe at a later date: for Stalin always thought many moves ahead in any game.

Would not the Americans - faced with the terrible prospect of defeat or stalemate in the war with Japan should the Soviets switch sides in the Pacific - have at least accepted the matter as a fait accompli? With the Irish republic left to them as a sop?

Like all things in statecraft, of course, an invasion of Britain in the early summer of 1945 would require nerve, skill, immaculate timing, considerable resources and above all luck: for luck is the greatest of all gifts in politics and statecraft. And Stalin - blood-drenched gangster that he was - was always supremely lucky in his endeavours.

In other words, why not? The Second World War, after all, did begin as a result of secret protocols to otherwise public treaties. Might it not also have ended in the same way?