

*Extended Essay in History*

# **The Importance of Vyacheslav Molotov in Stalin's 1930s Government**

## **RESEARCH QUESTION:**

To what extent was Molotov a driving force behind Stalin's domestic and foreign policies in the 1930s?

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## Introduction

When Josef Stalin came to power in the USSR in the late 1920s, he had already eliminated opposition to his dictatorship. Throughout his rule, he continued purging the party of any challenges to his power. Vyacheslav Molotov was one of the very few who survived these megalomaniac purges and occupied important positions in the USSR leadership throughout Stalin's dictatorship. Despite his ubiquitous presence, historians have had difficulty determining his political influence. Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev exiled Molotov from the party during his de-Stalinization campaign and publicly renounced the roles of party members during the terrors of the 1930s, shifting responsibility to Stalin individually. Due mainly to the effectiveness of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization, Molotov has become known as Stalin's subservient follower, "the Kremlin's brilliant mediocrity"<sup>1</sup> and "no more than Stalin's faithful servant."<sup>2</sup> However, a careful analysis of sources indicates that he may have been significantly more of an "independent actor" than is generally assumed.<sup>3</sup> The 1963 Shvernik Report, a government report detailing the repressions of the 1930s, mentions Molotov as Stalin's second-in-command and a responsible force behind the Purges.<sup>4</sup> This report, written towards the end of Khrushchev's time in power, evidences the discrepancy between Khrushchev's public proclamations, which blame the repressions primarily on Stalin, and the party's unpublished records. In his interviews with the Soviet historian Felix Chuev between 1969 and 1985, Molotov also speaks of his roles in Stalin's policies.<sup>5</sup> These interviews, however biased they may be, provide invaluable insight into Molotov's own perception of his power and help to validate claims made by other authors, many of whom, writing after the Soviet archives opened in 1991, use information that the Soviet government had concealed.

The essay draws on a variety of sources including numerous biographies of Molotov ranging in publication dates from 1941 to present. As this essay contradicts the conventional view of Molotov as merely Stalin's loyal follower, it draws especially on Molotov's own words in his speeches to the USSR, his correspondence with Stalin and his interviews with the Soviet historian Felix Chuev

<sup>1</sup> C. L. Sulzberger, "The Kremlin's Brilliant Mediocrity," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1954 accessed November 8, 2013 <http://select.nytimes.com/gstlababstract.html?res=FAOC15F63E5E107B93C4A9178DD85F40858F9>, quoted in Geoffrey Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler (Dulles, VA, USA: Potomac Books, 2012), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> E. A. Rees, "Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior," *The Historian* 75, no. 2 (Summer 2013).

<sup>4</sup> N. Shvernik et al., Report of the Commission of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on the Results of Investigation of the Reasons of Political Repressions and Circumstances Surrounding Politically Motivated Criminal Investigations of the 1930s, trans. Veronika Rundbaken, February 18, 1963, Russian State Archive of Contemporary History accessed November 8, 2013, <http://www.mat.univie.ac.at/neretin1937/shvernik>.

<sup>5</sup> Vyacheslav M. Molotov, interview by Felix Chuev, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics. Conversations with Felix Chuev*, by Felix Chuev, ed. Albert Resis (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993).

This essay pinpoints events of the 1930s in which Molotov was especially influential. He played a managerial role in both forced collectivization and the 1937 Purges. Elevated in 1939 to the post of Foreign Minister, he was crucial in the negotiation of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Additionally, Molotov may have been the only member of Stalin's administration with the freedom to voice his opinion to his leader. Molotov was certainly "the most devoted of [Stalin's] subordinates,"<sup>6</sup> but may not have been purely subordinate. Through examination of Molotov's role in Stalin's domestic and foreign policies, as well as the personal relationship between Stalin and Molotov, we begin to recognize his influence behind many of Stalin's most critical decisions and their execution. This interpretation necessitates a reassessment of our perception of Stalin as the single engineer of the repressions of the 1930s. This revisionist view prompts the question that will be discussed in this essay: **to what extent was Molotov a driving force behind Stalin's domestic and foreign policies in the 1930s?**

### **1: Molotov's Rise to Prominence**

Born on March 9, 1890,<sup>7</sup> Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Scriabin joined the Russian Social Democratic and Labor Party in 1906,<sup>8</sup> changing his name to Molotov ('hammer') in 1914.<sup>9</sup> He met Stalin in 1912 in St Petersburg while working for the revolutionary newspaper *Pravda*, at which he was the editor until Stalin took his post in 1917.<sup>10</sup> In early 1917, when both Lenin and Stalin were in exile and the Tsar's power was crumbling, Molotov and one other, Shlyapnikov, led the Bolshevik Party in Petrograd in what became the February Revolution.<sup>11</sup> He was influential in the Petrograd Committee of the Bolshevik Party, "probably [spearheading] the fight for the adoption of Lenin's course" after the revolution.<sup>12</sup> As a member of the Military

<sup>6</sup> Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and his Hangmen* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 39.

<sup>7</sup> William Peyton Cotes and Zelda Kahan Coates, "A Biographical Sketch of V. M. Molotov," in *Soviet Peace Policy by V. M. Molotov*, by V. M. Molotov (London: Lawrence and Wishart (for the Anglo-Russian News Bulletin), 1941), accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/molotov/biography.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> "Vyacheslav Molotov," WWII: Behind Closed Doors: Stalin, the Nazis and the West, accessed August 19, 2013,

<http://www.pbs.org/behindcloseddoors/biographies/molotov.html>

<sup>10</sup> Janet Caulkins, *Joseph Stalin* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1990), 42.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 308.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (London: Haymarket Books and Pluto Press, 2004), 60.

Revolutionary Committee he participated in planning the October Revolution.<sup>13</sup> He was not elected to the Central Committee but was involved in the party's administration.<sup>14</sup> Other party members, especially Trotsky, mocked Molotov for his apparent stupidity,<sup>15</sup> giving him the nickname "iron ass" for his dullness and his unrelenting capacity for work.<sup>16</sup> Despite this, Molotov was prominent in Lenin's administration, refuting the theory that he rose to prominence only during Stalin's attempt to fill government organizations with his allies.<sup>17</sup>

Although Stalin's consolidation of power was not the only cause of Molotov's ascent, it brought him, along with others, quickly to the forefront.<sup>18</sup> By 1926 Molotov was a full member of the Politburo, the Central Committee and the Executive Committee of Comintern. In 1930 he became Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars (Premier), the second most important position in the Soviet administration.<sup>19</sup> Molotov's theoretical knowledge was similar to Stalin's, giving the dictator reason to trust him. If anything, Molotov was even more of a theoretician than Stalin, as can be seen by his adherence to policy. While Stalin altered his policies to exclude opposition in his consolidation of power, Molotov remained rooted in his doctrinal interpretation of communism. He was not, for example, part of Stalin's triumvirate to exclude Trotsky from the party. Those who believe Molotov merited his power see his ascent to prominence as the "logical consequence" for his achievements before and after the revolution.<sup>20</sup> Among the many pragmatic actors, Molotov's dogmatic commitment to theory and his loyalty to the party helped him attain and retain high offices.

<sup>13</sup> "Vyacheslav Molotov," Spartacus Educational, accessed November 10, 2013, <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSmolotov.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, "Russia's Street of Secrets: Molotov's Magic Lantern: A Journey in Russian History by Rachel Polansky," *The Evening Standard* (London), March 4, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Mimmack, Daniela Senes, and Eunice Price, "Josef Stalin and the USSR," in *History 20th Century World: Authoritarian and Single-Party States* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2010), 106.

<sup>18</sup> David Evans and Jane Jenkins, *Years of Russia, the USSR, and the Collapse of Soviet Communism*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder Education, 2008), 267.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Lynch, *Origins and Development of Authoritarian and Single-Party States* (London: Hodder Education, 2013), 30.

<sup>20</sup> Coates and Coates, "A Biographical Sketch of V. M. Molotov," in *Soviet Peace Policy by V. M. Molotov*.

## **2: Molotov's Role in Forced Collectivization**

### 2.1 : The Theory of Collectivization

Molotov's first major role in the 1930s was in overseeing collectivization and de-Kulakization. He was instrumental in arresting *kula"ks* (wealthy peasants) to be killed or sent to labor camps, requisitioning grain from starving peasants, and forcing millions to give up their individual farms and join collectives. The goal of collectivization was to achieve "utopia" in the countryside, which, it was argued, could not be achieved without loss.<sup>21</sup> Molotov believed that forcing the peasants to join collectives was necessary in building a communist state and, ultimately, eradicating capitalism,<sup>22</sup> a belief that Stalin shared. Stalin wrote to Molotov that, "if we can beat this grain thing, then we'll prevail in everything."<sup>23</sup> The party came to the conclusion that, whether through humane or inhumane methods, grain had to be requisitioned and communism achieved in the countryside by removing those peasants deemed to be unjustly wealthy.<sup>24</sup>

Molotov was vocal alongside Stalin in advocating the formation of collective farms and the removal of *kula"ks*. He urged harsh controls for the *kula"ks* and supported large-scale collectivization at the 1927 Party Congress,<sup>45</sup> seconding Stalin's collectivization plans.<sup>26</sup> Even as late as 1938 Molotov advocated collectivization,<sup>27</sup> when the massive social experiment had already proven to be a failure. This demonstrates Molotov's adherence to ideology even when Stalin shifted his focus. While Stalin wavered on the correct implementation and severity of collectivization, slowing it down in 1930 due to the famine as shown in his "Dizzy with Success" article,<sup>28</sup> Molotov does not indicate ever having changed his opinion. In interviews with Chuev

<sup>21</sup> Martin McCauley, *The Soviet Union 1917-1991*, 2nd ed., Longman History of Russia (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 1993), 80.

<sup>22</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 253.

<sup>23</sup> Josef V. Stalin, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, et al., trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New Haven, USA: Yale University Press, 1995), 175.

<sup>24</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 246.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Oxley, *Russia 1855-1991: From Tsars to Commissars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 160.

<sup>26</sup> Coates and Coates, "A Biographical Sketch of V. M. Molotov," in *Soviet Peace Policy by V. M. Molotov*.

<sup>27</sup> Vyacheslav M. Molotov, "Speech at the Session of the Supreme Council of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," *International Press Correspondence (Inprecor)* 18, no. 3 (January 22, 1938): accessed November 10, 2013, [http://www.marxists.org/archive/molotov/1938\\_stalin-speech.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/molotov/1938_stalin-speech.htm).

<sup>28</sup> Josef V. Stalin, "Dizzy with Success: Concerning Questions of the Collective-Farm Movement," *Pravda* (Moscow, USSR), March 2, 1930, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1930/03/02.htm>.

he shows a firm conviction that collective farms were the best and only path to a communist future.<sup>29</sup> Molotov was hugely important in the development of the theory as well as in the execution of collectivization and, unlike Stalin, did not let its failure move him from the course of events he perceived as correct.

### : Molotov's Authority

It is unclear under exactly which conditions Molotov became responsible for collectivization, but even many historians reluctant to admit to his powerful influence indicate that "Molotov planned the destruction of the *kulaks*."<sup>30</sup> Molotov agreed to this role with a disturbing amount of pride. "I personally designated districts where *kulaks* were to be removed... We exiled 400,000 *kulaks*. My commission did its job."<sup>31</sup> Molotov was responsible for overseeing grain requisitioning in the Ukraine, where the famine was the worst.<sup>32</sup> He maintained written correspondence with Stalin during his trips to the Ukraine and Stalin's trips throughout Russia. Some of Stalin's letters have been published and evidence the development of his plans for collectivization in part through written communication with Molotov.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Molotov claims there was never a time in which both he and Stalin were out of Moscow; when Stalin was away, Molotov remained in the Kremlin.<sup>34</sup> In his interviews with Chuev, Molotov does not exhibit knowledge that this trust was extremely rare, even unparalleled, under Stalin's dictatorial power. Stalin delegated to him directly, telling him in one instance to "[force] up the export of grain to the maximum."<sup>35</sup> Molotov certainly carried out this order; the famine in the Ukraine reached appalling levels during forced collectivization.

Molotov exemplifies Stalin's policy of unquestioning discipline by describing that, in collectivization, "hands must not tremble, you must not quake in your boots."<sup>36</sup> In statements like these we can see his loyalty to communist theory. As much as historians downplay

<sup>29</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 243.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 47.

<sup>31</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 248.

<sup>32</sup> Mimmack, Senes, and Price, "Josef Stalin and the USSR," in *History 20th Century World*, 111.

<sup>33</sup> Stalin, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, 165.

<sup>34</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 242.

<sup>35</sup> Rachel Polonsky, *Molotov's Magic Lantern: Discovering Russia's Secret History* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 211.

<sup>36</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 243.

Molotov's importance in Stalin's government, they frequently mention collectivization as "Stalin and Molotov's plan," implying a kind of collaboration.<sup>37</sup> From Molotov's comments to Chuev and his correspondence with Stalin it appears that Molotov co-designed forced collectivization and was zealous in its execution.

### **3: Molotov's Role in the 1937 Purges**

#### **3.1 : Ideology of the Purges**

After the failed experiment of collectivization, Stalin, and with him Molotov, turned his attention to the elimination of "Enemies of the State" and engineered Purges to exile and kill millions of Russian civilians, primarily under the quota system that designated anonymous numbers of people to be arrested. The ideological basis for the Purges was that, in order to create the golden utopia to which the party strived, all dross had to be discarded.

The government became increasingly distrustful and controlling after the Civil War of 1918-1921 and the awareness that

not all citizens were loyal to the party.<sup>38</sup> Molotov, like Stalin, was not actively involved in the Civil War, but observed the communist state falling into chaos soon after its creation. This gave rise to the mentality that, by cleansing the country of dissent, such chaos could be avoided in the future. Molotov justified the Purges by reasoning that the USSR would have sustained even heavier losses in World War II if opposition had not been eliminated earlier.<sup>39</sup> Though this may be true, the Purges decimated Russia's military forces to the point that the 1939 campaign against Finland was not easily won and demonstrated the Red Army's weakness.

Additional distrust may have come from Sergey Kirov's murder in 1934, often seen as the catalyst of the 1937 Purges. Leonid NikoJaev, charged with assassinating Kirov, was also accused of plans to murder Stalin, Molotov and Kaganovich; whether or not Kirov's assassination was a conspiracy, this indicates Molotov's importance at the time.<sup>40</sup> If Kirov was assassinated by enemies of the party, then Molotov's contemporaries must have recognized his dangerous power. If the assassination was part of a conspiracy, possibly led by Stalin himself,

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<sup>37</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, 47.

<sup>38</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony D'Agostino, *The Russian Revolution 1917-1945* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 137.

<sup>40</sup> McCauley, *The Soviet Union 1917-1991*, 102.

the inclusion of Molotov in the list of targets demonstrates his value to his leader. No matter how Kirov's murder is interpreted, Molotov's inclusion as a target is of doubtless importance as an explanation of the suspicion that led to his role in the Purges.

### 3.2: Molotov's Role

The Shvernik Report names Molotov, like Stalin, "personally responsible for the organization and execution of groundless mass political repressions."<sup>41</sup> More recent sources also indicate his highly important role. He signed 373 quota lists in 1937 and 1938, eleven more than Stalin.<sup>42</sup> It is unlikely that he only followed Stalin's orders and signed anything laid before him, as some historians suggest. Although Molotov acknowledged that he followed Stalin's orders, he saw the repressions as necessary and congruent with his ideology.<sup>43</sup> By this point, Molotov had such power in Soviet leadership that his signature was required alongside Stalin's; Stalin signed for the Party, Molotov for the government.<sup>44</sup> This suggests a terrible double act, with each man supporting the other in mass murder. The NKVD, the secret police force responsible for conducting the Purges, received approval from Stalin and Molotov together.<sup>45</sup>

This demonstrates that Stalin shared some of his authority with Molotov and that Molotov was a co-pilot of the Purges. He certainly had the ideological basis to support elimination of opposition and, after his leadership in collectivization, knew he possessed considerable authority.

It has been postulated that Molotov himself developed the infamous quota system.<sup>46</sup> This seems unlikely, since Molotov was not part of the NKVD. Interestingly, he never mentions the quota system directly in his conversations with Chuev. This is strange, since he proudly recalls signing death lists and carrying out collectivization. However, he frequently discusses the 'justice' of 1937 and that it was the correct way to deal with enemies. It is possible to speculate that, by not mentioning the quota lists, Molotov attempts to deny their existence and ignore the most terrible of his actions.

<sup>41</sup> Shvernik et al., *Report of the Commission*, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 296.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Lynch, *Stalin's Russia, 1924-53* (London: Hodder Education, 2008), 72.

<sup>46</sup> Polonsky, *Molotov's Magic Lantern*, 88.

In explaining Molotov's motivation for carrying out the Terror, Lynch reasons that "[people] like Ezhov, Beria and Molotov derived the same vindictive satisfaction :from their work as their master did."<sup>47</sup> Some place Molotov alongside NKVD chiefs Ezhov and Beria as architects of the Terror,<sup>48</sup> others put him "second only to (...) Stalin."<sup>49</sup> Molotov himself said that, "as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, [he was] accountable for all the repressions"<sup>50</sup> and "[considered them] correct."<sup>51</sup> This assessment implies that Molotov, if not the engineer of the Purges, was at least instrumental enough to share responsibility. Molotov was a close second to Stalin in supporting and counter-signing the death sentences.<sup>52</sup> His role is confirmed by the Shvemik Report, which states that he shared Stalin's responsibility for the repressions and was "the second figure after Stalin," omnipresent throughout the Terror.<sup>53</sup> The suspicion that he could have been responsible for the quota system, and the fact that his signature was necessary for the arrest warrants, places him on equal ground with Stalin. Although we cannot definitively assess Molotov's precise responsibility, it is equally clear that we cannot accept that Stalin alone was responsible for the ideology and authorization of the Purges.<sup>54</sup>

#### **4: Stalin and Molotov's Cooperation in the Nazi-Soviet Pact**

##### 4.1: Molotov's Role in the Pact

After thus leading the forced collectivization and the Purges :from a virtually invisible position in the Politburo, Molotov achieved international recognition in his role as Foreign Minister in 1939. According to Riasanovsky, no high-ranking party member had held the position since Trotsky in 1918,<sup>55</sup> evidencing the post's sudden relevance as the Second World War began. With respect to

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<sup>47</sup> Lynch, *Stalin's Russia, 1924-53*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Oxley, *Russia 1855-1991*, 198.

<sup>49</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 263.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>52</sup> McCauley, *The Soviet Union 1917-1991*, 107.

<sup>53</sup> Shvernik et al., *Report of the Commission*, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Felix Chuev, *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics: Conversations with Felix Chuev*, ed. Albert Resis (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 256.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 506.

the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the conventional view is that Stalin "took it upon himself to be his own foreign minister acting through Molotov."<sup>56</sup> Molotov's position is generally seen not as a merit-based promotion or a reward for loyalty, but as a strategic placement to increase Stalin's own power over international affairs.<sup>57</sup> However, Molotov's involvement in negotiation of the Pact indicates, once again, collaboration rather than subservience. In the internationally publicized photograph of the signing ceremony Molotov, not Stalin, is seen signing the agreement, while his leader stands in the background. (Appendix A).

Molotov was present throughout the negotiations of the pact,<sup>58</sup> but reports of his engagement during debate are varied. The British ambassador to Moscow in 1939, Sir William Seeds, thought of Molotov as "totally ignorant of foreign affairs."<sup>59</sup> Churchill called him "a robot," implying that he merely obeyed orders and lacked personal character.<sup>60</sup> It is true that he was inexperienced in diplomacy, but his success in negotiating the Pact shows that he was far from ignorant. While Molotov's argument style may have been robotic, he did not simply follow Stalin's orders. As Molotov received all the public recognition for the Pact, between broadcast speeches and the publicized photograph, it is unlikely that he sat passively by while Stalin conducted negotiations. Montefiore argues that Stalin was "clearly the engine" behind the Pact and led the discussions,<sup>61</sup> but Molotov himself disagrees. "I was always an active participant in everything, never a passive observer" he tells Chuev.<sup>62</sup> It is possible that Molotov was self-aggrandizing in this report, and yet many who witnessed him negotiating speak of a similar engagement.

Molotov did not simply defer to more authoritative figures. Hitler's interpreter Paul Schmidt was shocked in 1940 by Molotov's outgoing directness in discussions with Hitler, emphasizing that

<sup>56</sup> Robert C. Tucker, foreword to *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, by Josef V. Stalin, ed. Robert C. Tucker, et al., trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), ix.

<sup>57</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, 40.

<sup>58</sup> *Behind Closed Doors*, "Unlikely Friends 1/2," episode 1.

<sup>59</sup> Sir William Seeds, quoted in Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Winston Churchill, quoted in Polonsky, *Molotov's Magic Lantern*, 66.

<sup>61</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, 316.

<sup>62</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 319.

no foreigner had ever spoken to the *Fuhrer* so demandingly in his presence before.<sup>63</sup> Whether speaking to Stalin or Hitler, Molotov disregarded their authority over him and demanded attention, using, when necessary, "harsh words and tone."<sup>64</sup> Schmidt's observation fits perfectly with Molotov's interactions with Stalin; his arguing skills were well suited to diplomacy. As Pritt summarizes, "Molotov says what he means and means what he says,"<sup>65</sup> acting without hesitation even when confronting dictatorial leaders. These comments contrast so greatly with Churchill's and Seeds' interpretations that we can wonder whether the robotic attitude that Churchill noted referred more to Molotov's determination than to unthinking loyalty to Stalin.

Molotov's role is illustrated in a speech on August 31, 1939, in which he, not Stalin, presents the pact to the public. The speech justifies the nonaggression agreement between the two ideological rivals, which Molotov introduces as being in the "interests of the Soviet people."<sup>66</sup> He illustrates Soviet international policy at the time, emphasizing that the USSR would and could not be excluded from international negotiations.<sup>67</sup> The treaty came after years of anti-Nazi propaganda, and it fell to Molotov to announce to the public that the USSR's greatest enemy was now its ally.<sup>68</sup> Although it is not surprising that he received some public credit for his actions as Foreign Minister, it is interesting that Stalin allowed him to make this incredibly pivotal speech. Molotov also presented the speech two years later announcing that the USSR was at war with Germany. It is possible that Stalin delegated these duties to him to avoid personal involvement in a treaty he knew would crumble. Even if this was his motivation, Stalin still granted Molotov an unusual amount of power as Foreign Minister.

<sup>63</sup> Paul Schmidt, quoted in Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 43.

<sup>64</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 37.

<sup>65</sup> D. N. Pritt, foreword to *Soviet Peace Policy by V. M. Molotov 1940-A Collection of Four Speeches*, by V. M. Molotov (London: Lawrence and Wishart (for the Anglo-Russian News Bulletin), 1941).

<sup>66</sup> Vyacheslav M. Molotov, "The Meaning of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact," speech presented at Meeting of the Fourth Special Session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Moscow, August 31, 1939, Internet Archive, last modified 2001, accessed July 7, 2013, <http://archive.org/details/theMeaningOfTheSoviet-germanNon-aggressionPact>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Molotov, "The Meaning of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact," speech, Internet Archive.

### : Molotov and Stalin as a Negotiating Team

4.2

Molotov was not a passive observer as Stalin conducted negotiations. Roberts offers the best description of their relationship in negotiations: "Stalin and Molotov played good cop/bad cop," covering between them multiple perspectives.<sup>69</sup> Roberts, consistently with his views of other areas of Molotov's career, places him side by side with Stalin in negotiations. Montefiore describes a similar relationship, calling Stalin and Molotov an "international double act" in which Stalin played the more radical, Molotov the more analytical role.<sup>70</sup> This view is based partially on information revealed after the opening of the Soviet archives in 1991. By contrast, Paxton's 1970s description of the Pact never mentions Molotov,<sup>71</sup> demonstrating the effectiveness of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization. Even our post-1991 knowledge of Molotov is limited, but the fact that he presented the treaty to the public indicates his importance in its creation. Molotov was extremely active as Foreign Minister; while Stalin and Hitler never met, Molotov travelled to Berlin to meet personally with Hitler. Stalin was present and active throughout negotiation of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, but the Foreign Minister himself was equally involved, acting as would the minister of a non-dictatorial country and reaping the publicity that this post would offer.

### 5: The Relationship between Molotov and Stalin

It seems bizarre that a man with this much power who played such a major role in the most significant events of his time would be allowed to survive beside a dictator renowned for his irrational, power-hungry paranoia. The fact that Molotov survived Stalin's Purges indicates a personal relationship that kept Molotov in Stalin's favor and gave him license to express his own opinion. Instead of simply obeying any order from Stalin, as some suggest,<sup>72</sup> Molotov was not afraid to question Stalin's opinion and disagree with him. "I can stand on my own two feet; I hold my own opinions. Perhaps it did not always please him, nevertheless I told him my frank

<sup>69</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 34.

<sup>70</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, 308.

<sup>71</sup> Robert O. Paxton, *Europe in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 427+

<sup>72</sup> Lars T. Lih, Oleg V. Naumov, and Oleg V. Khlevniuk, preface to *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, by Josef V. Stalin, ed. Robert C. Tucker, et al., trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New Haven, USA: Yale University Press, 1995), xiii.

opinion” These words, coming from any other person, would likely have led to imprisonment or death, and yet, for Molotov, his opinions and fearlessness may well have led to his survival. Stalin valued Molotov's opinion and shared confidential information with him. After sharing plans regarding the removal of Bukharin in a letter to Molotov, Stalin warned that "for the time being, this is just between you and me."<sup>74</sup> This indicates that Stalin trusted Molotov more than anyone else and valued his opinion on matters such as purging high-ranking party members. Molotov was "more direct" than Stalin and, as has been suggested, proved to be a necessary counterpart.<sup>75</sup> His knowledge, personality and perseverance made him indispensable to Stalin.

Despite his courage in standing up to Stalin, Molotov knew how to grovel, and was so "incredibly devoted that he would back down and agree with Stalin when it became necessary."<sup>76</sup>

When he displeased Stalin by abstaining from a vote to exile his wife, he withdrew his abstention, admitted his mistake and divorced her, to be reunited only after Stalin's death.<sup>77</sup> Molotov had an almost uncanny awareness of how far he could push Stalin, and, by backing down when needed, managed to work with him for 41 years and outlive most of his colleagues.<sup>78</sup>

He understood how to interpret Stalin's irrationality better than others, and, apart from this one incident, does not seem to ever have seriously displeased his leader.

It is not true that Molotov won his power due to blind loyalty and agreement with Stalin's every word, as Khrushchev and many historians have implied. He "spoke out about certain matters in a way others hypocritically avoided"<sup>79</sup> and was the only man who could talk to Stalin "as one comrade to another."<sup>80</sup> He did not get so lulled into Stalin's cult of personality that he never questioned his leader, and yet he truly believed in even the most brutal of Stalin's policies. "Let us assume he made mistakes. But name someone who made fewer mistakes," emphasizes

<sup>73</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 306.

<sup>74</sup> Stalin, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, 216.

<sup>75</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, 308.

<sup>76</sup> Tamara Eidelman, "Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact Signed August 24, 1939," *Russian Life* 52, no. 4 (July/August 2009).

<sup>77</sup> Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 17.

<sup>78</sup> Montefiore, *Young Stalin*, 248.

<sup>79</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 213.

<sup>80</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, 320.

Molotov, indicating his complete support of Stalin even after the dictator's death.<sup>81</sup> Marshal Georgii Zhukov, Stalin's deputy supreme commander during World War II, recognized Molotov's power and that "he was able to exert a strong influence on Stalin."<sup>82</sup> Instead of seeing Stalin as the engine behind Molotov's actions, as Montefiore does, it may be necessary, in some situations, to reverse these roles. Molotov must have been indispensable to Stalin, or Stalin would not have allowed him to retain such prominent positions. By disagreeing and sharing his own opinion, Molotov likely influenced Stalin's own policies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Molotov was a loyal puppet not to Stalin, but to the communist ideology he strongly supported. He was, in all his roles, responsible for "carrying out in action the fight for socialism," the prime example of a Soviet citizen.<sup>83</sup> He supported and oversaw collectivization and the Purges, seeing the sacrifices as necessary to the establishment of a communist state. When Stalin did not adhere to Molotov's ideology, Molotov would argue against him. He was "utterly convinced of his rectitude" and willing to do anything for the party he believed in.<sup>84</sup> Despite Khrushchev's efforts to divest Molotov of all responsibility for the events of the 1930s and exclusively blame Stalin, strong evidence suggests that, in some situations, Molotov may have been Stalin's equal more than his subordinate. Even during Khrushchev's life Molotov's influence was not ignored, and he features prominently in the unpublicized Shvemik Report, if not in publicized accounts during de-Stalinization.<sup>85</sup> He remembers Stalin saying, late in his life, "let Vyacheslav go to work now."<sup>86</sup> With this comment, Stalin, according to Molotov, was considering stepping down and letting his younger colleague assume the dictatorship.<sup>?</sup> This provides an unconventional view of the megalomaniac Stalin and hints that he considered Molotov his likely successor.

<sup>81</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 183.

<sup>82</sup> Marshal Georgii Zhukov, quoted in Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior*, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Pritt, foreword to *Soviet Peace Policy by V. M. Molotov*.

<sup>84</sup> Chuev, *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 308.

<sup>85</sup> Shvernik et al., *Report of the Commission*.

<sup>86</sup> Josef Stalin, quoted in Chuev, *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 190.

Molotov, as one of the very few whom Stalin trusted, was able to provide much of the advice Stalin required in leading the USSR. He worked behind the scenes, offering advice but remaining invisible to the public until the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Molotov agreed with Chuev's assessment, asserting that he was "the second most powerful man in the state" and vital in the government's decisions.<sup>87</sup> He was valued because of his courage to question Stalin's decisions while remaining firmly rooted in his interpretation of communist ideology. By insisting on doctrine Molotov became a hugely important but underestimated driving force behind Stalin's policies, influencing the domestic and foreign policies of the 1930s so significantly that he cannot be merely dismissed as Stalin's subservient follower. He survived Stalin's Purges and was trusted with unrivalled power because, as he himself asks, "If Stalin did not trust me, whom could he rely on?"<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Chuev, *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 323.

<sup>88</sup> Molotov, interview, in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*, 326.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Molotov signs the Nazi-Soviet Pact

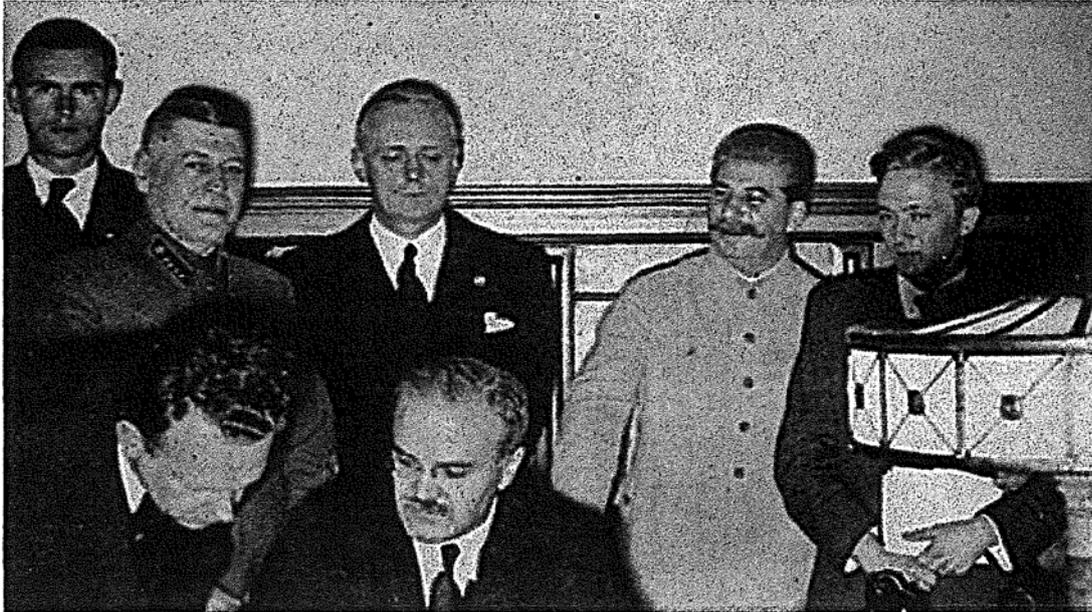


Figure A1: Molotov, seated center, signs the Pact in Moscow on August 23, 1939. Stalin stands second from right; Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister, stands third from right.

*Molotov Signs the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Photograph. August 23, 1939. Accessed September 7, 2013.  
[http://ww2history.com/key\\_moments/Eastern/Nazi\\_Soviet\\_non\\_aggression\\_pact/](http://ww2history.com/key_moments/Eastern/Nazi_Soviet_non_aggression_pact/).*