



The Duel, Hitler vs. Churchill 10 May – 31 July 1940, by John Lukacs, © 1990 John Lukacs, Phoenix Press, London, 2000.

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The peak of the idiocy was the underestimation of the Russians. (Only after the British archives were opened in 1970 does one find that as late as March and April 1940 British reconnaissance planes flew over the Caucasus, photographing Batum and Baku and drawing Russian anti-aircraft fire – or that in January 1940 the British chargé d'affaires in Moscow insouciantly advised the Chamberlain government that 'the effective and continuous bombardment of Baku should... present no great difficulty to us and it alone should be sufficient to bring Russia to her knees within a very short time.')

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We know that few people knew in the summer of 1940: that Hitler, instead of invading the British Isles that year, would invade Russia a year later. The main obstacle in the way of winning his war was not Russia but England. His main opponent was not Stalin but Churchill.

In August 1938, nine days before the Second World War began, he, the self-appointed arch-angel of anti-Communism, had made a pact with Stalin. The main purpose of that pact was to free his hands for the approaching war with the Western democracies, to frighten them into acquiescence to his conquest of Poland, and to avoid the prospect of a Germany threatened by opponents on both sides.

[...] We cannot tell exactly when the idea of eliminating Russia appeared first in Hitler's

mind. One of the earliest evidences was the earlier-mentioned recollections of General von Sodenstern on the second of June – which, as I wrote above, should be treated with some caution. However, it is unquestionable that around the time of the French surrender Hitler was beginning to gather evidence that the Soviet Union had dangerous ambitions of its own [...]

He was beginning to be irritated by some of Stalin's moves. A source of irritation was the imprecise language of the Secret Protocol. The lines of that protocol were precise [...]. The language was not: it spoke only of 'spheres of interest'. (In this respect that should remind us of parts of the Yalta Declarations...). [...] In early October 1939 Stalin forced the Baltic states to allow the stationing of Soviet troops within their territories – in essence a partial reduction of the independence of those states. [...] But on the very day Paris fell to the Germans, the Russians presented an ultimatum to... Lithuania... Latvia and Estonia... to Rumania... demanded the former Russian province of Bessarabia... (and) another small province too.

This was what Churchill would later call The Rush for The Spoils [...] A few days later a staff officer in Hitler's new headquarters was told to gather some maps of European Russia.

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It took Churchill some time to recognize that precisely because of his Left-Labour ideas Cripps was the wrong man to represent Britain in Moscow, where Stalin preferred to deal with imperialists. It is interesting to note that the idea of sending Cripps to Moscow was not Churchill's but Halifax's and that it was supported by the Tories, whereas the Labourite Hugh Dalton, Churchill's Minister of Economic Welfare, was skeptical about Cripp's judgment.

During the week after the French collapse Churchill began to think that if Britain held out, Hitler might recoil eastward and attack Russia. Whether the memories of Napoleon in 1803-5 played in his mind we cannot tell.

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After the routine situation report at noon of the twenty-ninth of July he asked Jodl to stay. He

wanted to say something to him privately. (Field-Marshal Keitel was on leave.) He told Jodl that he was worried: the Russians might change their course. There were too many Russian troops at the other side of the German-Russian border. 'In the east we have as much as nothing.' (Why? He no longer needed all those divisions in the west.) The Russians might break into Romania and seize the oil wells there. 'Then the war would be lost for us.' (An exaggeration to say the least)* He asked Jodl: what were the chances of deploying the army in the east and, if necessary, attacking and defeating Russia in the autumn? That would be impossible, Jodl said. Such preparations would take four months at least.

*Not an exaggeration at all in our opinion. Ploesti, in Romania, was Hitler's only source of oil besides the Ukraine that was partly exploitable only through the Non Aggression Pact or war. In fact, the destruction of Ploesti would have stopped the German war machine at any time of the war, which still leaves us wondering why so little was done about it and why the Allies (USAAF) recoiled so quickly after one single, major, and quite late air raid that took heavy (30%) losses, and why the Soviets did so little about it too. Furthermore, Hitler's much touted synthetic oil represented only a very small part of Germany's consumption. 'Ploesti' is a still unexplained and capital mystery of WWII.