



True North in
Canadian public policy

Commentary

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Do Not Forget the Lessons of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

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Garry Kasparov

My thanks to Bob Rae for the introduction. Minister Freeland, thank you for your unflinching defence of human rights and democracy worldwide. And thanks to my friend Marcus Kolga, and everyone who organized this important event. I'm honored to be here today. And it's always a pleasure to be in Canada, the uncompromising leader of the free world! Or what's left of it!

This has been a difficult speech to prepare, because it seems like every day there is breaking news related to our topic - hardly typical for an 80th anniversary. But remembering the facts and lessons of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact are more necessary today than ever because they are under attack like never before. The Kremlin propaganda machine is applying its methods not only to its current crimes and to foreign elections, but to historical events like World War II. There is now a massive Russian misinformation campaign to rehabilitate the Pact as a brilliant strategy by Josef Stalin instead of what it plainly was: criminal collusion between two dictatorships that launched a world war.

Yes, after decades of denial, followed by a few years of denunciation during the fall of the USSR, Putin's Russia is now openly embracing the agreement between two dictators that led directly to the greatest human catastrophe the planet has ever seen. The pact is now a staple ingredient in Russia's leading export of fake news - or, as it's called inside Russia, "news."

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Why this revisionism and why now? It isn't merely to maintain the Soviet-Russian narrative of the Great War, although that plays a part. Putin is reviving the Soviet belief that World War II basically began in June 1941, when Adolf Hitler invaded the USSR. This ignores the year and a half that Hitler and Stalin spent as allies, with the Soviet Union invading Europe from the East while also providing natural resources to Germany - resources that were used to attack Western Europe.

Let me state that again plainly here at the start: Hitler and Stalin were allies. They started World War II together with the goal of enslaving Europe between them. So eager for a deal was Stalin that he replaced his Jewish foreign affairs minister, Maxim Litvinov, with Vyacheslav Molotov in order to gain Hitler's favour. And it worked.

The Soviet Union was a principal aggressor in the invasion of Europe, waiting just 17 days after Hitler invaded Poland from the west before stabbing Poland in the back and invading from the east. The Red Army attacked Poland as eagerly as did Germany, and they met as friends in the middle. On September 22, 1939, conquering Soviet and German forces held a joint victory parade in the Polish city of Brest-Litovsk, before the German military withdrew back behind the line agreed by Molotov-Ribbentrop.

Less than a year later, the Baltic states were next to be occupied and annexed by the USSR. People who wanted only independence were trapped between two evil superior forces trying to destroy and enslave them. Even today, Ukrainian and Baltic patriots are slanderously accused of having been fascists when all they wanted was freedom. Finland was also on Stalin's menu, but heroic resistance and a harsh winter interfered with his plans.

And yet, because Stalin was left with no choice but to join the Allies to defeat Hitler after Germany invaded Russia, history and the present are much kinder to him than they should be. In the aftermath of the war, it was inconvenient to talk too much about Uncle Joe's alliance with Hitler in 1939, or his other crimes. The author of the Holodomor genocide in which upwards of 10 million people were murdered or died of starvation was welcomed as an equal on the world stage. Even after Winston Churchill warned the world of Stalin's threat in a speech in Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946, the full role of the USSR in starting the war was rarely mentioned. There would be no accountability for Stalin or his atrocities, even as he lowered the Iron Curtain across the middle of Europe.

The Allied betrayal of Eastern Europe at the Yalta Conference, where Central and Eastern Europe were left unsupported in the face of Soviet aggression, confirmed to Stalin that the US and UK were too weak to stand up to him. Roosevelt hoped that by making monstrous concessions to him, Stalin would join his new brainchild, the United Nations. And Stalin was happy to sign, knowing that he would never be bound by any international organization. It was left to Harry Truman, inspired by Churchill, to create meaningful institutions including the CIA, NATO, and the National Security Council that would save half the world from Communist tyranny. Dictators aren't stopped by pieces of paper, or by the United Nations Charter. They are stopped by NATO.

The Nuremberg trials were under way in 1946 when Churchill gave his famous Iron Curtain speech condemning Soviet policies. At the trials, Joachim von Ribbentrop was sentenced to death by hanging and became the first man to be executed. Von Ribbentrop was sentenced for "crimes against peace" and "deliberately planning a

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war of aggression,” along with his involvement in the extermination of the Jews, the “Final Solution.” Some legal purists have criticized the Nuremberg trials for their lack of clear legal grounds. But good riddance to those condemned, I say. The real problem with hanging von Ribbentrop after Nuremberg was that Vyacheslav Molotov was not hanging next to him. And that the KGB was not condemned along with the Gestapo.

Instead, Molotov lived to the ripe age of 96, dying peacefully in Moscow in 1986. He died five years short of seeing the collapse of the totalitarian empire he helped create. He died unrepentant for his actions under Stalin, and even continued to deny the existence of the secret protocol that he signed, revealed to the world after the war but officially denied in the USSR until 1989.

So again, why? Why is Putin’s regime working so hard to distort the facts and motives of an 80-year-old agreement? Why has he gone from calling the pact “immoral” to “a necessary evil” to his regime calling it this year “Stalin’s brilliant strategy”? That’s an actual quote! The timing of this rehabilitation holds the answer.

Around five years ago, Putin and his regime began to shift their position on Molotov-Ribbentrop. Having previously condemned the pact, on November 5, 2014, Putin downplayed it, saying “What is so bad?” if the Soviet Union didn’t want to fight Nazi Germany. Putin ignored the secret protocol that divided up the territories of parts of Eastern Europe and the Baltics into Nazi and Soviet “spheres of influence” and quickly returned to his usual lecture about how many more Soviets died than did citizens of other Allied nations. Yes, 27 million Soviet dead – in a war that Stalin began. Twenty-seven million dead after Stalin ignored dozens of reports that his ally, Adolf Hitler, was preparing to attack the Soviet Union. Twenty-seven million dead as part of Stalin’s grand plan to destroy Poland and turn the USSR into a slave state.

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The answer to why Putin changed his tune is the date – 2014 – the year he invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea, the first such aggression in Europe since the end of World War II. If you are going to imitate Stalin’s methods of repression at home and aggression abroad, you must launder and whitewash those methods.

From the date of the invasion until now, the trend has been clear. Even the disgraceful secret protocol has been revived, along with many of the same false justifications, such as protecting Russians in Ukraine – echoing Stalin’s claims on Eastern Poland and Hitler’s on Czechoslovakia.

Another familiar justification for Putin’s policies is the fight against fascism. As the joke goes in Russia today, no matter how many fascists support Putin and no matter how many fascists Putin supports, Russia is always fighting fascism! Even as Putin’s regime cracks down harder and harder on every aspect of Russian civil society, including the classic scapegoats, Jews and homosexuals, state propaganda tells Russians they are fighting fascists in democratic Ukraine – a country, by the way, that recently elected a Jewish president! Meanwhile, an international collection of nationalists and far-right leaders and followers profess their admiration for Putin. They know a brother-in-arms when they see one.

I’m not one to eagerly quote Marx and Engels – trust me! – but they were onto something when they wrote that history repeats itself first as tragedy, then as farce.

History is repeating itself today, but I'm afraid it's no farce. The lack of accountability for Stalin's crimes was repeated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was no Nuremberg for Communism. There were no trials for the commanders of the Soviet ethnic cleansing in the Baltic states and Ukraine, or of the Soviet crackdown in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, or Poland in 1970. There was no lustration, no truth commission, for the architects and agents of the Soviet police state. Is it really a surprise that just nine years after we celebrated the pulling down of the statue of KGB founder Felix Dzerzhinsky in August 1991, that a KGB lieutenant-colonel became the president of Russia? I never say "former KGB lieutenant-colonel" because, as Putin said himself, there's no such thing as a former KGB officer.

Amnesia and revisionism aren't exclusive to Russia. Several initiatives to recognize the crimes and atrocities of Communism have failed to pass through the European Parliament. Why? Why is the swastika banned and reviled, but the hammer and sickle seen as a valid political symbol, or even as sentimental kitsch?

Putin has positioned himself as Stalin's successor. This is not a wild accusation by Garry Kasparov; it is Putin's own propaganda. He has promoted Stalin as someone to be admired. He has allowed even Stalin's worst crimes to be forgotten, and even his worst betrayals are now celebrated. Step by step, Putin is rehabilitating the motives and actions of one of the worst mass murderers in history. Ignoring Putin's revanchism and aggression is a tragedy by any measure. Genocide in Syria is no farce. Support for thugs and nationalists from Venezuela to the UK to Germany is no farce. Thousands of dead in Ukraine is no farce. But once again, the leaders of the free world prefer to wait and see - but we cannot wait and see with our eyes closed.

Looking back at the history of the 1930s, Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier made a terrible mistake in trusting Hitler in Munich. But I can forgive them because they had no way to know what was to come. They and their constituents, remembering the horrors of the first world war, wanted peace at any price. And at least, unlike today's leaders, Chamberlain and Daladier had no personal profit motives in their deal with the devil.

There are new Molotov-Ribbentrop pacts going on all around us today, and they are taking place out in the open, not in secret. An axis of autocracy has developed, with cooperation between authoritarian regimes and their would-be imitators in the free world. Pro-Putin rhetoric - which must be distinguished from pro-Russian, since they are opposites - is routinely heard from Hungary and Italy, not to mention the current occupant of the White House. Global freedom has been steadily declining for a dozen years, led by the spider in the center of the web in Moscow.

Equally unsavory are the business deals between Putin and his cronies, deals that fund both his engine of domestic repression and his foreign hybrid wars - and perpetuate his dictatorship. Deals like the Nordstream 2 pipeline with Germany, or a Russian aluminum plant in the state of Kentucky, or French trade with Russia that went up 11 percent last year. The board of directors of the Russian state-owned oil giant Rosneft includes four Americans and two Germans - and I'm sure they are very well compensated. Instead of isolating Putin's rogue regime and forcing his elites to choose between ruling like Stalin at home or living like kings in the free world, this is what we have.

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Putin believes the West will abandon principle for profit, and so far it's hard to say that he's wrong. He pays for lobbyists, a global propaganda network, sports teams – all welcomed with open arms and open pockets in the free world.

Little better are the calls for peace talks and appeasement while Putin concedes nothing and continues his occupation of Crimea and his invasion of Eastern Ukraine, a war he could end in an instant – as quickly as he started it. But we are not fooled. These are not arguments for “better relations with Russia,” but for better relations with our oppressor. All of this is going on while Putin continues his campaigns of assassination and war.

Stalin needed conquest to strengthen his position and hold his shaky empire together. Here, too, Putin follows in his footsteps, attempting to distract Russians from the disastrous state of their country with foreign aggression. Putin has enjoyed 20 years of unchallenged power, so it is difficult to explain why Russia is still doing so badly; he must invent domestic enemies where none exist. And when those aren't enough, Putin follows the path of previous dictators and inevitably looks outside his country's borders.

“I've often said that dictators don't ask why, they only ask why not.”

“War” is the correct word for Russia's approach to the world, no matter how you qualify it. Call it hybrid war or gray-area war, but it is war. Putin is attacking not only his neighbours, but the institutions of the free world that he sees as threats to his power. His most dangerous allies aren't far-right politicians or thugs in Iran and Venezuela. No, Putin's most dangerous allies are the free world leaders who fail to stand up to him when they have the power to do so. From treating Ukraine as a buffer state, to the shooting down of MH17, to assassinations in the UK, Germany, and the US, leaders in the free world are happy to provide Putin with the benefit of unreasonable doubt.

I've often said that dictators don't ask why, they only ask why not. Putin is interfering in elections around the world because no one will stop him. He is occupying neighbouring territory because no one will stop him. And he will continue with such aggressions as long as he thinks no one will stop him. Eventually he will push too far, as every dictator does, driven by domestic pressure or a foreign defeat, and catastrophe will follow. But with every day Putin stays in power, the price the world will have to pay to remove an aging, paranoid dictator will only rise.

At the start of World War II, the anti-war protesters yelled, “Why die for Danzig?” Today it could be, “Why die for Narva?” as Estonia looks on nervously while two Georgian provinces are still occupied and Ukraine remains under siege – not by so-called separatists, by the way, but by the Russian military under command of Moscow. But Putin is no Stalin, and Putin's Russia today is a pale shadow of Stalin's empire. The free world is in a much stronger position today, with dominant military, economic, and cultural might. What is lacking is the will to use it.

Let us see with clear eyes what is happening so that we may do what must be done. Engagement with Putin has failed; it has only spread his corruption and emboldened him. If you want to change Russia's behaviour, you must threaten Putin's grip on power in Russia. Everything else is just noise that he will ignore, and we will all live with the consequences. Threatening Putin means targeting sanctions on Putin's cronies; it means

removing Europe's dependence on Russian energy; it means keeping Putin's oligarchs out of the free world they enjoy visiting so much until they seek another path in Russia. It can be done, and, with Canada leading the way, it will be done.

The unholy alliance that was the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact enflamed the world. The choices made at the Yalta Conference in 1945 led to the enslavement of half of Europe, which was only brought to an end by decades of sacrifice. Are we to go quietly back into a dark age of regional powers and self-interested nation-states? Are we to abandon the principles of freedom and democracy that so much blood was shed to defend? We must not.

It is all well and good to make the record clear on Molotov-Ribbentrop on this anniversary, especially on Stalin's role as a protagonist in launching World War II. Let us use that lesson and call things as they are. Lies are lies. Murder is murder. Dictators are dictators. And just as we cannot allow history to be revised, we must not allow what is happening now, right in front of our eyes, to be distorted. Thank you.

About the Author



Garry Kasparov became the under-18 chess champion of the USSR at the age of 12 and the world under-20 champion at 17. He came to international fame at the age of 22 as the youngest world chess champion in history in 1985. He defended his title five times, including a legendary series of matches against arch-rival Anatoly Karpov. Kasparov broke Bobby Fischer's rating record in 1990 and his own peak rating record remained unbroken until 2013. His famous matches against the IBM super-computer Deep Blue in 1996-97 were key to bringing artificial intelligence, and chess, into the mainstream.

Kasparov's was one of the first prominent Soviets to call for democratic and market reforms and was an early supporter of Boris Yeltsin's push to break up the Soviet Union. In 1990, he and his family escaped ethnic violence in his native Baku as the USSR collapsed. In 2005, Kasparov, in his 20th year as the world's top-rated player, retired from professional chess to join the vanguard of the Russian pro-democracy movement. In 2012, Kasparov was named chairman of the New York-based Human Rights Foundation, succeeding Vaclav Havel. HRF promotes individual liberty worldwide and organizes the Oslo Freedom Forum. Facing imminent arrest during Putin's crackdown, Kasparov moved from Moscow to New York City in 2013.

The US-based Kasparov Chess Foundation non-profit promotes the teaching of chess in education systems around the world. Its program already in use in schools across the United States, KCF also has centers in Brussels, Singapore, and Mexico City. Garry and his wife Daria travel frequently to promote the proven benefits of chess in education.

Since 1990, Kasparov has been a regular contributor on politics to many major publications, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Daily News*. He speaks frequently to business audiences around the world on strategy, decision-making, and artificial intelligence. In 2016, he was named a Security Ambassador by Avast Software, where he writes and lectures on cybersecurity and the digital future, and to the executive board of the Foundation for Responsible Robotics.

In 2017, Kasparov founded the Renew Democracy Initiative, dedicated to promoting the principles of the free world. After adding hundreds of prominent signatories from all parts of the political spectrum and around the world, RDI's first project was an essay collection modeled on the *Federalist Papers* titled *Fight for Liberty*, which was published in October 2018.

Kasparov's 2007 book *How Life Imitates Chess* on strategy and decision-making is available in over 20 languages. He is the author of two acclaimed series of chess books, *My Great Predecessors* and *Modern Chess*. In 2015, he wrote *Winter Is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must Be Stopped*, a prescient blend of history, memoir, and analysis of the threats to the modern world order. His latest book is *Deep Thinking: Where Machine Intelligence Ends and Human Creativity Begins* (2017). It reveals the full story of his matches against Deep Blue and his optimistic and pragmatic analysis of our future with intelligent machines.



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