

Truth Can Only Come on the Battlefield: The Failure of Negotiations to Prevent the Finnish-Soviet Winter War of 1939-40

Essay Prepared for

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Introduction

In 1939, the western world was shaken by the lightning success of the German invasion of Poland and its subsequent partition between Germany and the Soviet Union. The Non-Aggression pact signed by Germany and the USSR, dismayed France and England, who had been conducting independent negotiations to achieve their own security agreements with the Soviet Union.

As the western world rested on the brink of all-out war, the Soviet Union suddenly invaded the peaceable and sovereign nation of Finland. Throughout the world, there were expressions of outrage, condemnation and support for the brave, plucky Finns. Newspapers triumphed the bold stand of the Finns and decried the aggressive moves of the Soviets. On moral grounds, it seemed as though all freedom loving nations would come to the aid of the Finns. This essay will explore the inevitability of the outbreak of hostilities between the Soviet Union and Finland in 1939 in light of the options available to the two combatants. I will also examine the subsequent conflict in light of the lessons that were learned by the participants.

The creation of the Finnish nation was still a recent political phenomenon in 1939. Largely under Swedish domination over the last millennium, they were bartered to the Russians by Napoleon as part of the Peace of Tilsit. Finland became a Grand Duchy with an appointed Russian Governor. With the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, a bitter civil war ensued in Finland between White forces under Baron Gustav Mannerheim and Red forces allied to the Russian Bolsheviks - both seeking to lead the new nation. The White forces sought and received significant support from Imperial Germany in their struggle to defeat the Reds. White officers were trained in Germany and formed what was known as the 27th Jaeger Battalion. From this cadre, would emerge many of the military leaders of Finland for the next 30-40 years. The eventual White victory saw bitter repression of communist elements in Finland.

Following turbulent and failed attempts to create a monarchical form of government under a German prince, the Finns found themselves embroiled in a desperate struggle to agree on another form of government for the new country. To provide interim stability, the hero of the Civil War, Baron Mannerheim was appointed Regent of Finland. The six-month debate over the form of government ended in mid-1919 with elections for the first President of the Republic of Finland. Moderate and liberal democrat forces supported a compromise candidate opposed to Mannerheim's clear conservative and right wing ideology.

Throughout the next ten years, Finland consolidated its position as an independent country. It was a bumpy road politically, however, as right wing forces, unsatisfied with the bleak economic times, attempted repeated coups with varying degrees of success. The left wing was largely

absent from Finnish politics as the communist party had been outlawed following the civil war and most communist politicians had fled to the Soviet Union.

Despite the precarious position of Finland next to the USSR and repeated threats to national stability from within, the Finns were slow to develop any military capabilities. They seemed to trust in geography and providence to see them through. They were active members of the League of Nations and strove to cement the bonds of Nordic unity with Sweden and Norway.

The 1930's saw significant upheavals in Finnish politics, as well as Mannerheim's return to prominence as head of the armed forces. Throughout the 1930's, he argued for increased spending to protect Finland's ability to defend its neutrality. In 1932, Finland signed a Non-Aggression Treaty with her largest neighbour, the Soviet Union. Finland grew increasingly confident of her security.

To further cement this security, construction began on a series of linked fortifications across the Karelian Isthmus. The so-called Mannerheim Line covered an 80-mile winding path between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga. It consisted of 109 reinforced concrete strong points, supplemented by a series of dugouts, log-roofed bunkers and elaborate earthworks. The line was strengthened at its endpoints with the addition of coastal artillery. It is flanked by water on either end. In this elaborate fortification the Finns held great hopes. While it was not of the magnitude of the much-vaunted Maginot Line of its time, it was a formidable defensive line and with it rested the security of the Finnish nation. Unfortunately, it was not entirely complete by the outbreak of the Winter War and its cost had caused the armed forces to sacrifice many of the necessary components of the modern army.¹

The Negotiations

In April 1938, secret negotiations were opened between the Soviet government and the Finnish through Boris Yartsev at the Soviet legation in Helsinki². Yartsev explained to the Finnish Foreign Minister Rudolf Holsti that, "if Finland was prepared to resist German pressure, then Russia would be prepared to extend all possible military and economic assistance."³

Over the next few months, Yartsev shared with Holsti the Soviets' view of the European situation. The Soviet representative indicated that they had unimpeachable evidence that the Germans had concrete plans to utilize Finland as a springboard to the invasion of the USSR. In response, the Finn assured his counterpart that the Finnish nation was committed to neutrality and had only peaceable intentions.

Over the next few months, Holsti involved additional high-ranking Finnish politicians, including Prime Minister A.K. Cajander and Finance Minister Väinö Tanner, in the discussions. It is clear, in retrospect, that the Soviets were not comfortable with Finland remaining a neutral nation, and that the Soviets could only be satisfied with Finland as a Soviet ally.

On August 5, 1938, the Finns stated that they would welcome better commercial relations, but that territorially, the Treaty of Tartu between their countries established boundaries, which they hold inviolate. The threat of German presence in Finland, either invited or forced, burned intensely in the Soviet conscious.

There was some ground to this fear. It was the presence of German troops and German training that had enabled the success of the White forces during the civil war. Several public visits, including one as recent as April 12, 1938, during which the German Count von der Goltz joined Marshall Mannerheim to review troops at a military parade for the Germans who had died for Finnish freedom in 1918-19⁴. This diplomatic faux pas sent the wrong message to Moscow. Despite their lack of success, the talks of a German-Finnish Non-Aggression Treaty early 1938 between Helsinki and Berlin, reminded the Soviets of the proximity of a potential German ally.

Following Finland's early refusal to even discuss territorial issues in the Finnish-Soviet negotiations, Yartsev's statements that, "the Red Army did not want to remain at the border waiting for the enemy, but intended to advance as far as possible to meet the enemy, or rather to anticipate him,"⁵ clearly indicated Soviet intentions.

Finally, on August 18, the Soviets presented a written document. The Soviets requested:

1. a written understanding that the Finns would accept immediate Soviet military assistance if Finnish neutrality was threatened;
2. Soviet cooperation in the militarization of the Aland Islands, even though this was in contravention of the League of Nations' Agreement of 1925;
3. Finnish consent for the Soviets to fortify Suursaari Island for their own defense.

In return, the Soviets offered:

1. to ensure the inviolability of Finnish frontiers;
2. to assist Finland by force of arms on advantageous terms;
3. to offer Finland an extremely advantageous trade treaty⁶.

Geography of the Gulf of Finland



While these terms seemed relatively reasonable, the simple fact that they compromised Finnish neutrality and proposed territorial alterations was grounds for their immediate rejection by the Finns on August 29. The above map provides some geographic background to the territorial discussions.

The next round of talks began with the Finnish suggestion that trade issues would be the best way in which to bind their two countries together. The Finnish ambassador to Russia and Soviet Minister for Trade Mikoyan meet in late 1938, but it became apparent that trade issues cannot be discussed until certain ‘other’ issues are resolved. It is clear to the Finnish representatives that the island of Suursaari is of special significance to the Soviets.

The second round of negotiations began between Soviet Foreign Secretary Litvinov and the Finnish Minister Yrjö-Koskinen, in Moscow, on March 5, 1939. To restart the negotiations, the Soviet Minister suggested that the Finns should consider leasing to the Soviet government for a period of 30 years, the islands of Suursaari, Lavansaari, Seiskari and the Tytarsaari Islands. The Soviets state that they do not propose to fortify these islands as they had previously proposed, but instead merely to use them as observation posts of the approaches to Leningrad⁷. The Soviets were conscious of the Finnish concerns about neutrality and had modified their demands accordingly. Three days later, the Finns again refuse to consider territorial concessions, as they feel this would violate their neutrality. Litvinov is upset by the Finnish interpretation of neutrality and suggests immediately that in return, the USSR was prepared to offer a large chunk of Soviet Karelia to offset the leased territory.⁸

Further discussions prove unproductive as the Finns further indicate that under their constitution, the territory of Finland is inalienable. In hopes of offering some guarantee, the Finnish representatives share with Litvinov the draft of a note which assured the Soviet Union of

Finland's intention to defend its neutrality under all circumstances. The Soviet reply that without further supplementary measures, the Soviet Union could place no value on such a guarantee⁹.

It is with this statement that the talks concluded. To the Finns, there still existed in the world a belief that signed and sealed Treaties held some binding force. This seemed especially true to the Finns as the land in question had been agreed to between the respective governments.

The third phase of negotiations began ominously following the Soviet invasion of Poland and the signing of military assistance treaties with the three Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. In all three cases, the states had accepted the Soviet demand to station troops in their countries to guarantee their mutual defense. In two weeks, the Soviet Union regained all the ports on the Baltic, south of Finland, which they had lost as a result of the First World War. As part of the Non-Aggression Pact signed between Germany and the USSR in August, a secret protocol defined the two countries spheres of interest. The northern border of Lithuania is stated to mark the division in the Baltic. This implicitly puts Finland within the Soviets sphere. Significantly, the lack of German involvement in this Baltic territorial re-arrangement probably supported Stalin's growing confidence in the validity of this protocol.

As Jakobson states in The Diplomatic History of the Winter War, "For eighteen months, Finland had conducted a muted dialogue with her great neighbor; the Russians had from time to time softly asked a favor or two, and the Finns had politely whispered their refusal. Now the tone had changed: this time, there had been steel in Molotov's voice."¹⁰

When the Finns were summoned to Moscow in September of 1939, it was clear that the Soviets felt that it was a matter of need and that they must have assurance of the security of Leningrad. The invitation to Moscow was made on the grounds of Discussion of items of concrete political interest. The Finns rationally deduced that they could expect a similar treatment to that meted out to their Baltic neighbours in the previous weeks. Finnish delegates therefore, they were empowered to offer up three of the smaller islands in the Gulf of Finland, when they left for Moscow.¹¹ The Soviets by this time had moved troops and aircraft into Estonia and Latvia. Their intention to consider these new client states as extensions of their own territory for military purposes were abundantly clear to the Finns. Equally important to Soviet thinking was the relative ease in which these annexations took place. None of the three Baltic states had opposed the Soviet moves militarily. The Soviets were emboldened by this lack of response and it would undoubtedly figure in their reasoning that Finland too, might be as easily coerced. Likewise, while the possession of airfields and naval facilities in Estonia radically changed the Soviet's security concerns in the Gulf of Finland, antiquated military thinking left Stalin convinced that the only way to guarantee the closing of the Gulf and the Karelian peninsula as a

threat to Leningrad lay in possession of both sides of the gap. As was remarked on by Finnish military representatives, Soviet thinking in the Gulf of Finland rested largely on experience and strategy still rooted in the end of the First World War and the Russian Civil War. British bombardment of Leningrad and Kronstadt remained Stalin's primary fear. The military actions in the Karelian Isthmus still permeated Soviet strategic doctrine. To the extent that the northern and water approaches to Leningrad were seen as the primary threat opposed to any attack from the southern approaches by a potential aggressor.

The Soviet demands made on October 12 were extensive. The new found confidence of the Soviets in their ability to annex the Baltic states made the tone of the discussions ominously different. The Soviets demanded:

1. the removal of the Finnish frontier to the west by approximately 40 miles, placing it within 20 miles of Finland's second largest city Viipuri;
2. the ceding to the Soviets of the islands of Suursaari, Lavansaari, Tytarsaari and the port of Koivisto, along with the entire Rybachy Peninsula in the north.
3. the lease of the peninsula of Hanko and the right to station 5,000 troops there and have transport rights on land to reach the point.
4. the immediate signing of a military assistance pact similar to those signed by the other Baltic countries.
5. the dismantling of all fortifications on either side of the Karelian Isthmus.

In return, Stalin was prepared to:

1. exchange 5,500 square kilometers of East Karelia to the Finns.
2. allow the Finns, but without Swedish involvement, to fortify the Aland Islands.

The Finns were shocked by the harshness of the Soviet demands, most particularly, the demand to surrender of their primary defensive line in Karelia. This new demand suggested, in some Finnish minds, that the Soviets were deliberately attempting to reduce Finnish defenses in preparation for additional demands on Finnish sovereignty¹².

Stalin's simple explanation for the request to move the border was that, "since we cannot move Leningrad, we must move the border."¹³

It is at this point that a widening breach between members of the Finnish cabinet became evident. Mannerheim, aware of the Finnish military weaknesses, was determined that the Soviets were not bluffing. He was convinced that they meant what they said and that they will use military means to take what they cannot get through diplomatic ones¹⁴. On the other side, Foreign Minister Erkko argued that these were merely prelude to more significant demands, if the Finns

acceded. He rejected any thought of acceptance of Russian demands and threatened to resign if any concessions were offered.

Defense Minister Niukkanen even went so far as to claim that the Finns could hold out at least six months against the Soviets¹⁵, grossly overestimating their ability. The bulk of the Finnish cabinet remained unconvinced of the Soviet determination and consequently felt confident in the negotiating process. By remaining steadfast, they felt that the Soviets would have to accept less than they demanded.

The Finns indicated that they would be willing to concede some, but by no means all the land demanded. They were also willing to consider the lease of some, but not all the islands in the Gulf of Finland. They were adamant that a Soviet military base on at Hanko within 50 miles of their capital was simply unacceptable. Stalin expressed his frustration with the process, proceeded to stab at the map around Hanko, and said, “do you need this island, do you need that one?”¹⁶ The Finns asked themselves the same questions and for a few hours, it seemed as though there might actually be the possibility of an agreement.

The cabinet back in Helsinki however, read Stalin’s reaction differently. They took it as proof of Soviet weakness and that they should remain strong. They severely over-estimated the strength of their position. The Finnish negotiators were instructed not only to not surrender the islands, they were told that Finland conclusively refused to the Soviets any bases in the west of the Gulf of Finland. On that note, Stalin wished the Finns well. More ominously, Foreign Minister Molotov ominously added that, “we civilians can’t seem to do anymore, Now it seems up to the military. It is their turn to speak¹⁷.

The Soviet Decision to Invade Finland

On November 13, 1939, the talks between the Finns and the Soviet Union collapsed. It was clear that neither side was prepared to make any further concessions. While the Soviets had withdrawn their demand for a military assistance treaty, and augmented their offer with a large part of Soviet Eastern Karelia, the Finns had essentially agreed to the ceding of the islands in the eastern Gulf of Finland, but remain intransigent on Soviet demands for a base in the Western Gulf of Finland. Consequently, Stalin ordered his military commanders to prepare for the long-planned invasion of Finland. The question that remains to be asked at this point is: were there other options available to either side?

It is not simply a matter of apportioning blame, it is a matter of trying to understand what each side saw as their objectives and goals.

Why was Leningrad so important to the Soviets? Ultimately, in a state driven by the power of propaganda, Leningrad was viewed as the cradle of the revolution. It had a huge symbolic value to the party and to the nation. While Leningrad and the Kronstadt naval facilities were strategic to Soviet interests, they also appreciated their vulnerability within the Gulf of Finland. The fear of Germans attacking Leningrad both via the sea route, which they felt the Finns could not protect, as well as via land from a potentially pliant Finland was an overwhelming fear.

Nonetheless, it is important to point out that following the Winter War with the leasing of the peninsula of Hanko to the Soviets; it provided the Soviets with no security against the Germans. When they attempted to take Leningrad they bypassed the sea routes and came by land. Ironically, though it was not across the Karelian frontier, but from the south. The Finns steadfastly refused German demands for them to conduct a joint operation and once the Finns returned to their border of 1939, they simply dug in and held them for the duration of the war.

Why was neutrality so crucial to the Finns? The Finnish nation was in her adolescence. She had not had the opportunity to develop her armed forces to defend her sovereignty. In neutrality, the Finns saw their salvation. They believed that joining in an alliance with the Swedes and potentially the Norwegians, they could together deter any possible incursion aimed at subverting Nordic neutrality.

The Soviet Options

From the Soviet point of view they had made a series of reasonable offers to their neighbour, even going as far as offering guarantee Finnish sovereignty in the event it was threatened. They had pursued talks with them to try to reach an accord that assured them both of mutual security in a theatre that was looking increasingly threatened by other European powers. With the breakdown of talks, what options were open to the Soviets?

First, the Soviets had the option of doing nothing - of ignoring the fact that they had even entered into negotiations and simply letting the Finns walk away from the table and hoping that the status quo could be maintained. How realistic is this for the Soviets? Not realistic at all, as they do not perceive the Finns as necessarily taking any actions themselves that would threaten the USSR. They do, however, fear that Finnish territory could be used by an outside power. This point of view assumes that the Soviets accepted that the Finns actually believed in defense of their neutrality and had bargained in good faith and that right-wing fanatics would not overthrow the government of Finland. One has to discount this, as the Soviets, reasonably, assumed that:

1. the Germans had military designs on Finland;

2. the Finnish government had demonstrated a lack of cohesion itself when carrying out the negotiations over the previous year;
3. right-wing (in Soviet eyes – Nazi-inspired) coups had rocked the foundations of the Finnish state repeatedly over the past decade, each one becoming more successful than the last;
4. Finnish behaviour suggested they felt that they had greater grounds to reject reasonable demands than their military preparedness suggested, thus raising suspicions of a pre-existing secret protocol with Germany.

Because of these facts, it is clear that the Soviet Union could not simply walk away from the table. It is further clear that the Soviets are driven by paranoia and behavior based on trust was simply ludicrous.

The Soviets had a second option: that of reinitiating the negotiations later and hoping for a more favourable Finnish attitude. This option begs the question of exactly how long a negotiating party could expect to continue without seeing any positive results. The Soviets however had been trying to deduce exactly what was behind the Finnish motivation and continued to believe that it might be German military involvement. They based this belief on the continuation of diplomatic relations, the existence of splinter Finnish fascists groups and their own blind paranoia¹⁸. The Soviets have been planning the invasion of Finland, if not to occupy, at least to threaten, the Finns into accepting the Soviet terms. The success of this operation was based on factors, such as the time of year, the availability of materiel and the fact they would not question their existing Non-Aggression Treaty with the Germans. With suspicions that the Germans were going to take military action eventually, the Soviets believe that as every day that goes by, they were one step closer to either having to confront the Germans following their own move into Scandinavia or to risk a situation in which the Germans were materially involved with the defense of Finland.

It is clear that Stalin had no misconception about the value of collective security. Both he and Hitler had trampled on agreements with other states in the past and it seems abundantly clear to any Soviet military strategist that Hitler's moves into eastern Europe threaten Soviet interests. As regards the Soviets, seeking any alliance with the western powers at this time seems less likely with their "long histories of anti-communism"¹⁹. As William Trotter concludes in Frozen Hell, "for the moment, given the realities of the day, Russia would have to go it alone. So, given the real threat posed by Hitler, the record of close German-Finnish co-operation in 1918, the realities of geography, the Russian viewpoint concerning Finland was not entirely unreasonable."²⁰ In the Soviet mind, time was working against them and any delay in the negotiations would favour the Finns.

In regards to the Soviet paranoia of German influence in Finland, there were grounds for this suspicion. Because of German aid during the civil war, the military caste in Finland had remained friendly with the Germans over time. Trade with the Germans was more significant than with the USSR and political visits between Berlin and Helsinki continued at the highest levels. Additionally, “Stalin was unrealistically influenced by the headline-grabbing antics²¹,” of the Finnish right wing splinter groups. It seems clear that in later negotiations, Stalin “really did believe that the interior of Finland seethed with class antagonism and fascist plotters and that all Finnish society was undercut by smoldering grudges left over from the civil war days.”²²

The Third option open to the Soviets was to invade Finland. They chose to exercise this option on November 30, 1939. Realistically, they were left with no reason to suppose that further negotiations would lead to any greater success. Similarly, they have been given no signs that the Finns had ultimately peaceful motives behind their wish for neutrality. The Soviets could not understand the Finns’ inability to perceive the Soviets’ fear of invasion.

The Finnish Options

Like the Soviets, the Finns had the option of doing nothing. Of walking away from the negotiating table on November 13, 1939 and hoping that by ignoring the problem of a powerful and fearful neighbor, they could somehow survive. Unfortunately, this was the choice made by the Finns. They were simply unable to perceive the threat envisioned by the Soviets. They do not appreciate the need by the Soviets for the Finns to take concrete actions to assuage the Soviet fear. Nevertheless, there were other options open to them.

The Finns could have re-initiated talks. To some extent, they attempted to do this, but were met with cold refusal by the envoys they chose to approach. The Finnish cabinet at the time had demonstrated that they firmly believed that it was only through a strong game of risk-taking that they could negotiate satisfactorily with the Soviets. Nonetheless, their ambassador in Moscow was instructed to request a further meeting with the Soviet foreign Ministry a week following the collapse of the talks. His note was not returned²³. The Finns then attempted to seek outside diplomatic assistance to reopen the negotiations. What the Finns were prepared to offer at this point still rested on a belief that they must continue to maintain a hard line. When they presented this to the ambassadors of Germany, France and Britain, all advised the Finns to settle for the Russian demands. The Only the Americans offered to use their offices to attempt to open the channels. In the American case however, they had little weight with the Soviets and their efforts mattered very little²⁴.

The failure of the Finns to be able to re-open the talks also negated their option of coming to the realization that the Soviets were not bluffing and accepting fully their final offer, even if they were so inclined.

The additional option available to the Finns was a deterrent defensive alliance with Sweden. For over a year before the outbreak of the war, Finnish diplomatic efforts had been working to this end. Following the First World War, both Sweden and Finland had laid claim to the Aland Islands. They provide a strong military position from which to control the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia. The League of Nations granted the Islands to Finland in 1925 with the proviso that they had to be demilitarized. In 1935, the Finns approached the Swedish government and through discrete channels offered a joint re-militarization of the islands. The Swedish Foreign Minister Rickard Sandler proposed specifically that the agreement over the Alands become the basis of a larger mutual defense agreement. The Finns could not get the League's acceptance of this change to the Aland Island Treaty, and the Finnish-Swedish alliance was still a dream when hostilities broke out in 1939.

The entire conflict was predicated upon Soviet demands on Finland. From the Soviets' perspective, these demands were in the Finns best interests, they were willing to protect what they perceived as Finnish interests for small territorial concessions. The Soviets felt that any other power, principally the Germans, could violate Finnish neutrality and this is what threatened Soviet interests. In fact, the outright rejection by the Finns of the seemingly rational Soviet demands increased the Soviet suspicion that the Finns had a secret arrangement with Germany. Ultimately, the Soviets could not understand the Finns intransigence in recognizing this reality and this led to an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. Negotiations on reasonable level could therefore not be expected to yield results satisfactory to either party. Stalin had a free hand to handle the Finnish threat to his security without risking German intervention. He felt that the same German situation limited the potential reaction of the western allies. All Soviet planning indicated that the Finns were militarily weak and that the entire operation could produce the required results within eleven to twelve days. The military option was simply too attractive for Stalin to avoid. It was the logical reasonable reaction to the failure of negotiations. The Finns had clung tenaciously to their claim of neutrality and were simply too divided in their opinions to conduct an appropriate course of action with regard to the Soviet requests/threats.

Sometimes it takes the battlefield to demonstrate the truth at the root of negotiations.

Conclusion

So, what can be said about the nature of this conflict? Was the invasion inevitable? In the mists of time, all things seem to have an irresolute trajectory that propels them into fruition. In the case of the conflict between the Finns and the Soviets, it is clear that neither side truly appreciated the nature of the others concerns. To that end, it has been claimed that, “when war enters through the front door, morality seems to exit through the back.”²⁵ There is a certain truth that the exact measure of the combatants in this conflict would only ultimately emerge on the battlefield.

Clearly, the Soviets gained an enormous appreciation for the capabilities of the Finns to resist aggression against their sovereignty. Would they have slept easier in Leningrad knowing that the Finns were more able to resist the German threat to make use of Finnish territory? I feel that this would not have had any bearing on their decision to seek assurances of Finnish willingness to resist German advances. From the available evidence, it seems quite clear that the Soviet actions during this period were motivated by a blind paranoia of the German boogeyman. Their own willingness to trample over treaties would certainly suggest that they would not perceive the Finns or anyone else to behave any differently. Their willingness to enter into secret protocols, both with the Germans with regard to having a free hand in Finland, or in their willingness to offer the same secret protocol in the re-militarization of the Aland Islands suggests inherent duplicity. Ultimately, the possession and ability to retain possession of strategic territory was their only way to assure security. Thus, it was imperative for the Soviets to have the Islands, and the buffer zones at any cost. If they could not get them through negotiations, they had no choice but to do so militarily.

That being the case, could the conflict have been avoided if the Finns understood the Soviet determination? Possibly. Why? Although in the case of the three other Baltic republics, which simply acquiesced and were absorbed into the USSR, it was clear that in 1944, the Soviets, had both the legitimate claim and the military might to move into Finland in force. Instead, the Soviets settled for a peace treaty that admittedly provided them with reparations and additional territory, but was surprisingly lenient, given the balance of power between the decimated and tired Finns and the victorious Soviet forces. They had clearly learned from their military mistakes. Admittedly, there was a decision made to transfer all available troop strength for the push to reach Berlin. This represented a Soviet desire to create a similar buffer and ultimately seize the security through territorial possession that they had sought during the Winter War. There was certain pragmatism in Soviet actions. They took what they needed, but they also avoided taking something that they simply did not require.

The Soviets learned much from the Winter War. Following the peace, it was quickly realized that, “a victory at such a cost was actually a moral defeat.”²⁶ Quickly, the Red Army made significant changes. “Following the Winter War, political commissars were officially abolished and the rank of general and other ranks were reintroduced into the Red Army, with the privileges attached to them.”²⁷ The leadership realized that lack of training, lack of tactical and strategic intelligence and reliance on politically motivated intelligence did not belong in battle. The belief that the Finns would be an easy victim, not just because of their military weakness, but because the people of Finland would rise up and welcome their liberators were examples of the pitifully misguided intelligence that led the Soviets to contemplate the action. So, in a weird way, the Soviets benefited from the lesson of the Winter War, as historian Paul Gartenmann relates:

“The heroic stand of the Finns against the Russian juggernaut... forced the Russians to institute radical changes in their armed forces, which proved as crucial to their ability – barely- to check the initial German onslaught as did the early winter of 1941.”²⁸

The pursuit of a greater understanding of the Soviet side of this issue is challenged by the lack of reference materials available from the Soviet position. I have been able to only rely on Krushchev’s memoirs to gain understanding of the Soviet thinking at the time of the invasion of Finland. This presents a severe imbalance for trying to gain a complete perspective on the events in question.

Therefore, while there were military lessons and strategic considerations that kept many nations out of the conflict, it did ultimately provide a purely moral benefit. To the western democracies, it demonstrated strength in the face of unwarranted aggression and provided a compelling psychological boost in a dark time. As to intervention, the claim is made that, “the Finns were defending democracy and freedom and justice, all the things the western democracies stood for, but had had, at the time, little actual chance to fight for. Many a modern Byron on skis volunteered to go to the scene of the action, and, though a few got as far as the firing line, in most countries of the west, there are men who think of Finland, a little wistfully perhaps, as the country they almost died for.”²⁹

So, at the end of the day, one is forced to reconsider the original questions. Was the conflict the only option? Yes, given that neither side could ultimately be satisfied through negotiations. Was the question of intervention by outside powers pre-ordained? In a large part, yes. The states concerned behaved with rational self-interest as their guiding principle. Ultimately, it was in the best interests of all to let the conflict play out amongst the two parties concerned. They were the only nations that really had anything of value to gain or lose in the conflict.

Appendix A

A Short Operational Look at the Winter War

Early in the morning of November 30, 1939, Soviet bombers appeared over the skies of Helsinki and other Southern Finnish cities. As the siren wailed, they dropped their bombs. This was the first indication to the Finnish people they were at war with the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, 600,000 Soviet soldiers comprising four Russian Armies crossed the Finnish frontier from the Gulf of Finland all the way to the Arctic Ocean. The Finns sorely unprepared for this incursion could at best field 140,000 troops, of which most had been mobilized two months earlier. Immediately upon the falling of bombs in Helsinki, Mannerheim, who had resigned 4 days earlier in disgust with the politicians' failure to accept his recommendations to enhance military preparedness, withdrew his resignation and was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish forces. Anticipating reasoned Soviet military strategy; the Finns had placed the bulk of their forces in the 80-mile gap between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga opposite Leningrad. The Finns felt that an attack further north would be suicidal due to the inhospitable climatic conditions. As it turned out, the Soviets surprised the Finns by doing just that.

Order of Battle

The Soviet plans were clear, at least on paper. There were five main thrusts. In the north, three divisions of the Fourteenth Army would take the lightly guarded copper mines and the port of Petsamo and push on to the capital of Lapland at Rovaniemi. Five Rifle Divisions of the Ninth Army would cut across the "waist" of Finland aiming to reach the Gulf of Bothnia at Oulu and Kemi. A third thrust would seek to cut off any Finnish reinforcement of the Northern Finnish forces. The principal thrust of the Soviet forces was south of Lake Ladoga in the Karelian Isthmus. Twelve to Fourteen Divisions comprising the Seventh Army were detailed to strike against the heavily defended Mannerheim Line. To support this operation, the Eighth Army comprising an additional six rifle divisions and two tank brigades were sent north of Lake Ladoga to strike across and sweep down behind the heavily defended Karelian Isthmus.

On the Karelian Isthmus, six divisions comprising the Army of the Karelian Isthmus opposed the Soviets. A second front stretched sixty-miles north of Lake Ladoga and was manned by the Fourth Corps comprising two divisions. The North Finland Group covered the remaining 625 miles and was a motley collection of Civic Guards, border guards and a series of reserve units. There were two divisions remaining held in reserve in Southern Finland.

The Winter War seemed to have four distinct periods. Initial confusion because of the shock of the invasion plagued the Finnish defenders, and only through improvisation and sheer tenaciousness were they able to resist the initial Soviet incursions. They slowly gave up ground and gradually fell back. After the first week of fighting as the complete scope of the Soviet invasion becomes clear, the Finns stabilize their lines and even conduct some minor offensive operations. Fighting to a stalemate, there is a period of lull as the severity of the weather increases and the momentum of the initial fighting subsides. During this time, the Soviet high command becomes aware of the glaring tactical errors in their original plan and they make significant changes in the command and control apparatus. They planned for a renewed offensive and rectified the fatal error of assuming that the Finns would not resist. The fourth and final stage of the fighting began in February of 1940 as the Soviets committed in excess of 1 million additional troops backed by improved tanks and artillery. Slowly but surely, the numerical superiority and the rationalized military planning forces the Finns to fight a losing battle trying to surrender as little territory as possible as the politicians attempted to reach peace terms.

The Strategy

On paper, the Soviets were committing enormous manpower against a sparsely defended and lightly populated country. Their mindset seemed to suit the experience they had seen with the success of German blitzkrieg operations. Unfortunately, at the time, the Soviet forces could only be described as "a ponderous, top-heavy army of ill-trained soldiers led by timid officers, overseen by inexperienced party ideologues, sent forth to conquer a country whose terrain consisted of practically nothing but natural obstacles to

military operations.”³⁰ Unfortunately, the Soviets acted as if they were blissfully unaware of these shortcomings and planned to “overawe the Finns with a massive ground attack at every point on the frontier where it seemed feasible to support an attack, coupled with air raids to hamper Finnish communications and spread terror among the civilian populace.”³¹

Finnish defensive plans were to fight the Soviets (they were the only perceived aggressor) and hold them long enough for outside assistance to come to their aid. If that aid was not reasonable, then the faint hope was that fierce resistance could convince the Soviets to opt for a negotiated settlement rather than total conquest.³²

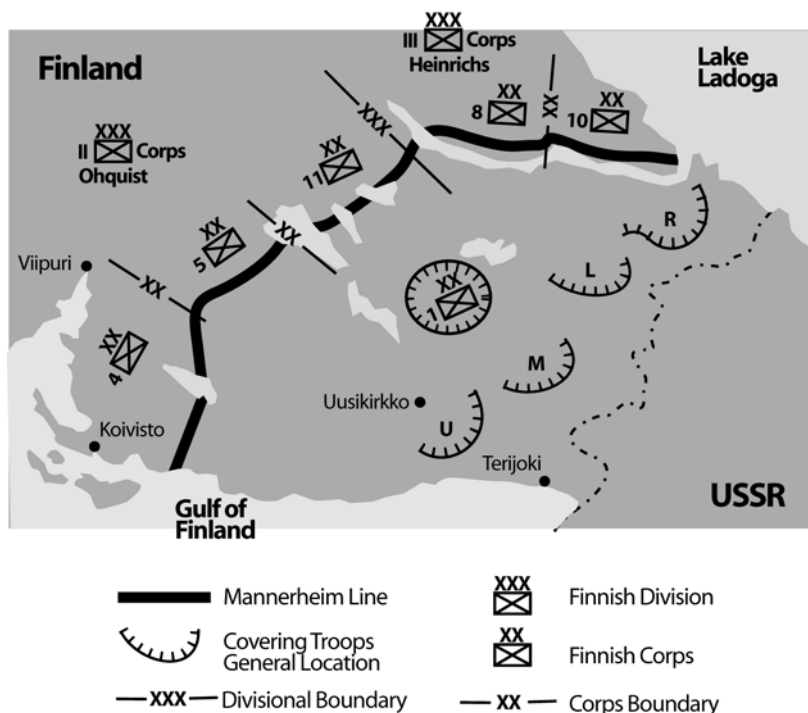
Mannerheim as Commander-in-Chief had anticipated Soviet deployment of seven divisions in the Karelian Isthmus and five divisions to the north. The Finns were caught completely unprepared for the huge Soviet manpower committed north of Lake Ladoga. The Finns were not aware of the extensive Soviet preparations on the Soviet side of the border to supply the northern thrusts.

The Soviet Divisions entered Finland with no worthwhile intelligence estimates of their opposition, guided by hopelessly inaccurate maps. Into some of the densest forests in the world, they brought hundreds of flat-trajectory guns, and relatively few howitzers. Each Russian column lumbered into the forests with a full complement of anti-tank guns, even though Soviet intelligence must have been aware that the Finns had no operational armour. Of the Soviet tanks, it took days before someone had the wise idea of actually painting them white to match the environment.³³

In the Karelian Isthmus, the Finns also had the fixed defensive positions of the Mannerheim line. While the bulk of the fortifications were completed by the time hostilities commenced, it was clear that the paltry defense budgets of the past years had left some crucial gaps in the line.

The Finnish strategy in Karelia was to cling to some forward positions for as long as possible and to slowly yield them up and withdraw to the prepared position of the Mannerheim line as they were fully manned. The following map indicates the disposition of troops at the outset of the war in the Karelian Isthmus.

Actions of Covering Groups on Karelian Isthmus, December 1939



The key to Finland is control of the Isthmus, and only the Isthmus. Although the map of Finland could suggest that the Isthmus is cramped and cut up by rivers, lakes and bogs, it is in fact that the only land allowing terrain for operation of a modern army. The vast spaces to the north seem to offer open space for maneuver, but are in fact extremely densely forested and roads were non-existent. The Finns therefore

concentrated their forces in this bottleneck and attempted to conduct defense in depth. Covering troops were stationed well ahead of the fixed defensive line and were expected to hold as long as humanly possible tying down Soviet troops who were not trained to bypass pockets of resistance. In this area, the Soviets were thrown into disarray by these strongpoints and in many cases paused for hours when they came under fire from small sniper positions.

At the outset, the Soviets attacked all along the Finnish frontier:



In the north at Petsamo, the Finns had only four companies of alpine troops with no support beyond a few heavy machine guns. The Soviets committed the entire 104th division, which easily seized the copper mines in this area and detained the British and Canadian workers of the mines. These Soviet troops dug in and held their gains throughout the war. The Finns did not launch any significant efforts to retake this area.

In the area of Salla, the Soviets were similarly successful, as the Finns simply did not have the manpower resources to cover the large distances north of Lake Ladoga. The Finns had expected nature to work in their favour. The Soviets committed the 122nd and 88th Divisions to this attack. While they had extremely overwhelming resource superiority, they were quickly bedeviled by the Finns tactic of appearing out of the forest, attacking and quickly withdrawing. The Finns were able over the first few weeks to develop this tactic into an effective strategy of creating “Mottis”. Essentially, they discovered that the Soviets were trained to immediately set up a defensive perimeter when set upon and basically rally the wagons. The Finns discovered that this allowed for the severing of columns that quickly became strung out on narrow roads and barely passage trails, into a series of disjointed units. By utilizing the environment and the Soviet tactics, the Finns simply divided and conquered the small pockets in succession. This was an extremely effective Finnish tactic. It allowed for the utilization of the Finnish speed and mobility in the harsh conditions and quickly decimated the columns sent to sever Finland at the “waist”.

In the Karelian Isthmus, the fighting came to a standstill well ahead of the Mannerheim Line. Static conditions developed within the first week and it was not until the second Soviet Offensive in February that the Soviets were able to take advantage of the colder conditions that allowed them to operate on the ice of the Gulf of Finland and of Lake Ladoga and they were able to flank and then reduce the strong Finnish defensive positions.

The Soviets anticipating a short operation had not felt it necessary to equip their troops any differently than those in the south of Russia. To protect them in temperatures, often below minus 40 degrees Celsius, the Soviets had "light-weight olive brown tunics, only slightly warmer than a good dungaree overall."³⁴ Not only did they provide no protection against the elements, they also made them stand out against the vast snow covered wastes of northern Finland. They proved easy targets for Finnish sharpshooters. It did not seem to have occurred to the Soviet planners to issue anything similar to the standard issue Finnish white, fur-lined snowsuits.

The winter of 1939-40 turned out to be one of the coldest on record and as a result, lubricants froze in weapons and batteries died unless they were used and recharged every hour. Even from a transportation standpoint, the Soviets had not seen fit to equip more than a handful of troops with skiis and even those that were provided with them had never received training, often receiving skiis and manuals on their usage just days before the invasions. The Soviets immediate experience had been Poland, where they had conquered 200,000 square km, inhabited by thirteen million people at a cost of less than a thousand casualties³⁵. As a result, the military planners were similarly confident about their chances in Finland. Their main concern in fact, seemed to be that overzealous tanker might blunder across the Swedish border by accident³⁶. The Soviets at this time retained a command structure that made political officers part of even the smallest command decisions.

The Finns had the advantage, throughout the conflict, of possessing guns designed for the freezing climate of the north and were aware of the precautions that they had to take to ensure their continued operation. However, they lacked anything heavier than some antiquated Tsarist era artillery and were only able to successfully procure anti-aircraft guns, heavy mortars and anti-tank weaponry during the war itself. To make up for their weakness, they improvised and made extensive use of captured Soviet equipment.

The Finns were equipped with light and medium machine guns of indigenous manufacture. The quick-firing Suomi machine gun became a particularly dangerous weapon in the hands of a lightly equipped Finnish ski patrol.

In the end, the Soviets suffered nearly one million casualties in the Winter War. Most were due to frostbite and the severity of the weather. They lost over 2,000 tanks and other armoured vehicles and demonstrated for the entire world to see, that the Red Army had feet of clay. The Finns suffered proportionately higher losses with over 60,000 casualties out of a population of less than four million. As a result of the terms of the Treaty of Moscow, which ended the war, the Finns were left with over 400,000 homeless, they had to surrender 10% of its territory, including their second largest city: Viipuri. A Russian general commenting after the war expressed the futility of the endeavour when he said, "we have won just about enough ground to bury our dead."³⁷

The Finns had placed their defensive strategy on an ability to hold out until help arrived. As far as foreign intervention was concerned, the Germans, whom the Russians had always suspected of collusion with the Finns, offered little or no materiel assistance. At the outbreak of hostilities, Finnish requests, through their ambassador in Berlin, for German assistance in reopening the peace talks were met with stony silence. The Germans expressly forbade the transportation of wartime assistance to the Finns through their territory and confiscated shipments from both their Hungarian and Italian allies. The Germans were quite willing to see the Soviets humbled once the war seemed to be going that way and felt that they had little or no immediate strategic interest in Finland.

The Italians showed the largest materiel support, even going as far as sending Italian fighter pilots to fly the 35 Fiat fighters they provided. In addition to straight materiel assistance, Mussolini went so far as to chide Hitler for his lack of support for the Finns and to warn him against the continuing appearance of backing the weak and ideologically repulsive Soviets³⁸. Despite appearances to the contrary, however, the interests of the Italians in seeing the Soviets occupied in Finland and not turning their attentions south made good strategic sense. At the time, Soviet designs on Romania and the Balkans threatened Italian interests in this region. The perpetuation of the war in the north was clearly in the Italians best interest.

The Hungarians shared the interests of the Italians in this regard and provided volunteers as well as significant materiel assistance. This was curtailed a few weeks into the war when Germany refused to allow transshipment of goods to Finland.

The Americans provided strong vocal assistance at the outbreak of the war. Despite extensive pressures by the Finnish ambassador to allow for the continuation of shipment of materiel ordered before the war, the US neutrality laws forbade direct purchase of equipment by the Finns. The Americans did however guarantee a number of loans, which were used to buy medical equipment, which was then bartered to third parties for their assistance in procuring American equipment. As well, a contingent of Finnish-American volunteers sailed from New York. They did not however reach the frontline before the ceasefire.

The French and the British worked largely in concert to determine the nature of their intervention. Despite vociferous denouncement of the Soviet actions and outspoken support for the Finns, equipment ordered by the Finns from both powers remained held up due to fears of their own need of the equipment. By mid-December, planning was underway to send actual soldiers to fight alongside the Finns. In the case of the French, Premier Daladier had triumphed the cause of the Finns as a last political gambit to save his faltering government. While some goods were dispatched, French commitment to the operation was not realistic given the perceived threat at home. The British held up the shipment of two divisions of troops for France waiting for the opportunity to dispatch them to Finland through Norway and Sweden. Unfortunately after two months of diplomatic requests, both countries refused to compromise their neutrality by permitting British or French presence in their countries. According to most of the cabinet and war office planning documents, the British considered fighting their way through both these countries to the Finnish border. However, it appears that the denial of Norwegian ports to the Germans and the cutting off of German access to Swedish Iron Ore deposits were the primary motives for the operation. Finland posed little or no strategic interest for the western allies. While they dismissed the value of the Soviets as their own ally at that time, citing their weak performance as evidence, they did realize that the USSR as a stronger German ally or USSR neutrality in the coming cataclysm were less in their strategic interest. The British and French had little or no reason to assist the Finns unless it could grant them strategic advantage in other areas.

The Swedish government would have seemed a likely ally during this time. During the years leading up to the outbreak of the Winter War the Finns had made countless entreaties to arrive at just an alliance. The Swedes were irreticent. Largely as it would drag them into a situation, much like the one they now faced. While the Swedes did express some serious fear that the Soviets may not be contained in Finland, these fears were dispelled as the war progressed, and protection their neutrality became their sole objective. There seemed to be a lack of resolve similar to that experienced by the Finns during their negotiations.

In summary, therefore, it is clear that the only country that really had a strategic interest in Finland was the Soviet Union and the Winter War was their attempt to realize that interest. As to the Finns strategy of holding out until outside assistance could arrive, it was seriously misplaced as was evidenced by the reality of the reaction to the war.

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Endnotes

- ¹ William R. Trotter, Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish War of 1939-1940, (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1991), p.65.
- ² Max Jakobson, The Diplomacy of the Winter War, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), p.8.
- ³ Trotter, p.12.
- ⁴ Jakobson, p. 58.
- ⁵ Väinö Tanner, The Winter War: Finland against Russia 1939-1940, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1950), p.12.
- ⁶ Tanner, The Winter War, pp. 8-9.
- ⁷ Tanner, p.13-14.
- ⁸ Trotter, p.13.
- ⁹ Tanner, p.16.
- ¹⁰ Jakobson, p.106.
- ¹¹ Jakobson, p.109.
- ¹² someone...indicating Erkkö's reaction
- ¹³ Jakobson, p.117.
- ¹⁴ Trotter, p.16.
- ¹⁵ Jakobson, p.131.
- ¹⁶ Jakobson, p.131.
- ¹⁷ Eloise Engle and Lauri Paananen, The Winter War: The Soviet Attack on Finland 1939-1940, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1973), p.12.
- ¹⁸ Tolstoi, Nikolai. Stalin's Secret War,...p.
- ¹⁹ Trotter, p.14.
- ²⁰ Trotter, p. 14.
- ²¹ Trotter, p.9.
- ²² Trotter, p.9.
- ²³ Jakobson..p.
- ²⁴ Jakobson...p.
- ²⁵ M.C.P. O'Donnell as related to the author, 6 November 2002.
- ²⁶ Krushchev, as quoted in Engle, p.143.
- ²⁷ Engle, p.147.
- ²⁸ Paul Gartenmann as quoted on the jacket of Engle.
- ²⁹ Jakobson, p.177.
- ³⁰ Trotter, p.36.
- ³¹ Trotter, p.36.
- ³² Trotter, p.39.
- ³³ Trotter, p.37.
- ³⁴ Engle, p. 45.
- ³⁵ Trotter, p.34.
- ³⁶ Trotter, p.34.
- ³⁷ Unnamed Russian general as quoted in Engle, p.143., Trotter, p.263.
- ³⁸ Jakobson, pp.188-89.