

= Background of the Winter War =

The background of the Winter War covers the period before the outbreak of the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1939 ? 1940 , stretching from Finland 's Declaration of Independence in 1917 to the Soviet @-@ Finnish negotiations in 1938 ? 1939 . Before its independence , Finland was an autonomous grand duchy inside Imperial Russia . During the ensuing Finnish Civil War , the Red Guards , supported by the Russian Bolsheviks , were defeated . Fearful of Soviet designs , during the 1920s and 1930s , the Finns were constantly attempting to align themselves with Scandinavian neutrality , particularly with regard to Sweden . Furthermore , the Finns engaged in secret military co @-@ operation with Estonia in the 1930s .

While during the late 1920s and early 1930s relations with the Soviet Union became normalized to a degree , from 1938 on , the Soviets , anxious that Finland could be used as a springboard for an invasion , started negotiations to conclude a military agreement . At the same time , Soviet leader Joseph Stalin 's desire to recover the territories of Tsarist Russia lost during the chaos of the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War made Finland an obvious target . Due to the nature of Soviet demands , which included the installation of Soviet military facilities on Finnish soil , these negotiations went nowhere .

In August 1939 , the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed the Molotov ? Ribbentrop Pact , in which Eastern European countries were divided into spheres of interest ; Finland belonged to the Soviet sphere of interest . In October 1939 , Stalin gained control of the Baltic states and turned his sights on Finland , confident that control could be gained without great effort . The Soviet Union demanded territories on the Karelian Isthmus , the islands of the Gulf of Finland and a military base near the Finnish capital Helsinki , similar to the demands presented in the previous years . The Finns again refused , and the Red Army attacked on 30 November 1939 . Simultaneously , Stalin set up a puppet government for the Finnish Democratic Republic , headed by the Finnish communist Otto Wille Kuusinen .

= = Finnish politics before the war = =

= = First steps of the Republic = = =

Finland had been the eastern part of the Swedish kingdom for centuries until 1809 , during the Napoleonic Wars , when Imperial Russia conquered and converted it into an autonomous buffer state within the Russian Empire to protect Saint Petersburg , the imperial capital . Finland enjoyed wide autonomy and its own Senate until the turn of the century , when Russia began attempts to assimilate Finland as part of a general policy to strengthen central government and unify the Empire by Russification . These attempts ruined relations and increased the support of Finnish movements vying for self @-@ government .

The outbreak of the First World War gave Finland a window of opportunity to achieve this . The Finns sought aid from both the German Empire and the Bolsheviks to that end , and on 6 December 1917 , the Senate of Finland declared the country 's independence . The new Bolshevik Russian government was weak , and soon the Russian Civil War would break out . Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin could spare no troops or attention for Finland , and consequently , Soviet Russia recognized the new Finnish government just three weeks after the declaration of independence . In 1918 , the Finns fought a short civil war , where the pro @-@ Bolshevik Red Guards were armed by 7 @, @ 000 to 10 @, @ 000 Russian troops stationed in Finland .

After the First World War , an inter @-@ governmental organization , the League of Nations was founded . The League 's goals included preventing war through collective security and settling disputes between countries through negotiation and diplomacy . Finland joined the League in 1920 .

In 1920s and 1930s Finland was politically diverse . The Communist Party of Finland was declared illegal in 1931 , and the far @-@ right Patriotic People 's Movement (IKL) had a minor presentation

of fourteen seats in the 200 @-@ seat parliament . The middle ground , occupied by Conservatives , Liberals , Agrarians and Swedish People 's Party , tended to cluster with the Social Democratic Party , whose leader , Väinö Tanner , was a strong proponent of the parliamentary system . By the late 1930s the Finnish export @-@ oriented economy was growing , the country had almost solved its " right @-@ wing problem " and Finland was preparing for the 1940 Summer Olympics .

= = = Finnish ? German relations = = =

During the closing stages of World War I , German @-@ trained Finnish Jäger troops played a key role in the Finnish Civil War , while the German Baltic Sea Division also intervened late in the civil war . Jäger troops were volunteers from German @-@ influenced circles , such as university students . This participation in the Finnish struggle for independence created close ties with Germany , but after the German defeat in the World War , Scandinavian relations became more important and the main goal of the Finnish foreign policy .

Finnish @-@ German relations cooled after the National Socialists rose to power in 1933 ? Finns admired Imperial Germany , not the radical and anti @-@ democratic Nazi regime . Finnish conservatives did not accept the state violence and anti @-@ church policies of the Nazis . Still , there was sympathy for German aims to revise the Treaty of Versailles , although the official Finnish policy was reserved , especially after the German occupation of Czechoslovakia . Finland even recalled its ambassador for a short period . Finnish Nazis and ultranationalist parties such as the IKL achieved only minor support in several elections , especially in the aftermath of the failed Mäntsälä rebellion in 1932 .

= = = Finnish ? Swedish co @-@ operation = = =

After the 1917 Finnish independence and the Civil War , the other Scandinavian countries would have been the best candidates for a political alliance . Swedo @-@ Finnish cooperation represented a rich vein of shared history in the culture of both nations , and the Swedish @-@ speaking Finns had a common language with Swedes . During the Civil War , however , Sweden briefly occupied the Åland Islands and later supported the local movement that wanted to secede from Finland and join the islands to Sweden . The dispute was resolved by the League of Nations in 1921 and the Åland remained Finnish , but were granted autonomy . Other obstacles to closer relations were the ongoing language strife on the status of the Swedish language in Finland . Sweden had also opposed the upper @-@ class resistance movement against Russification . As a result , young Finnish men received their military training in Germany , generating the Jäger Movement . Nevertheless , Finnish ? Swedish relations improved considerably before the Winter War .

Finland sought security guarantees from the League of Nations , but did not have high expectations . Sweden was one of the founding members of the League , and consequently framed its military policies based on the League 's principles of disarmament and sanctions . In the mid @-@ 1920s the Finns established a special planning committee , called the Committee of Erich after its chairman Rafael Erich , which consisted of top politicians and officers , with the aim of exploring a possible military collaboration of Finland with other nations . The prime goal was co @-@ operation with the Scandinavian countries , amongst which Sweden was the most important prospective partner .

The Finnish and Swedish militaries engaged in wide @-@ ranging co @-@ operation , but it was more focused on the exchange of information and defence planning for the Åland islands than on military exercises or materiel . The Finnish objective was to commit the Swedes by establishing a military @-@ political joint venture in the Åland : if the Swedes would undertake to assist Finland in fortifying the islands , then an important and useful precedent might be set . The Government of Sweden was aware of the military co @-@ operation , but carefully avoided committing itself to Finnish foreign policy .

= = = Secret military co @-@ operation with Estonia = = =

Finnish ? Estonian relations were closest diplomatically after the Estonian Freedom War in the 1920s , but cooled afterwards . Military relations however remained close . From the Finnish point of view , the close relations with Estonia did not exclude the Scandinavian neutrality policy . Nevertheless , the military relations were top secret , and the countries held joint military exercises . The central aim was to prevent the Soviet Baltic Fleet from freely using its strength in the Gulf of Finland against either country . Estonia also sought public security guarantees and signed the Baltic Entente in 1934 with Latvia and Lithuania .

= = = Relations with the United Kingdom and France = = =

After the collapse of Imperial Germany in November 1918 , the Finns sought new political partners . The United Kingdom had been a significant trading partner since the 18th century , and the Finns worked to improve the relations for the next two decades . In the 1930s Finland purchased Thornycroft torpedo boats from the United Kingdom , and also refrained from buying bomber aircraft from Germany because of British protests , purchasing instead modern Bristol Blenheims , which later served successfully during the Winter War .

Relations with France were important after World War I and in the 1920s , as France played a leading role in the new European security arrangements . In the 1930s France started to fear the rise of Nazi Germany and initiated a rapprochement with the Soviet Union , which strained Franco - Finnish relations . However , during the Winter War France was one of the most important suppliers of military materiel .

= = = Finnish defence plans = = =

The Finnish Defence Forces ' military operation plan against the Soviet Union was named Venäjän keskitys (" Russian Concentration " ; VK) in the 1920s . In the latest 1934 plan , the Finns saw two possible scenarios . In the VK1 scenario , the Soviets would mobilize all along their western border , and would deploy only limited forces against Finland . In this case the Finns would make counterattacks across the border . The VK2 scenario envisaged a much more unfavourable situation for the Finns . The main defense line would be on the Karelian Isthmus , the Finnish forces would repel Soviet attacks in favourable positions , and destroy the enemy by counterattacks . In the Winter War , the VK2 scenario was flexible and its basis proved correct , but the Finnish General staff badly underestimated the numerical superiority of the Red Army .

Finland had a limited defence budget after its independence and especially in the 1930s . Consequently , the Finnish Defence Forces were lacking military materiel in almost all branches . Much of the military 's materiel was outdated , and even proved unsuitable for the field during the Winter War . During the Winter War the material situation improved , but it still lagged behind the more modern and well equipped Red Army .

= = Soviet ? Finnish relations = =

= = = Diplomatic relations = = =

The relationship between the Soviet Union and Finland had been tense ? a legacy of the two periods of forced Russification at the turn of the century and the failed Soviet backed socialist rebellion in Finland , as well as incursions by groups of Finnish nationalists ? the Viena expedition in 1918 and the Aunus expedition of 1919 ? into Russian East Karelia .

On 14 October 1920 , Finland and Soviet Russia signed the Treaty of Tartu , confirming the new Finnish - Soviet border as the old border between the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland and Imperial Russia proper . In addition , Finland received Petsamo , with its ice free harbour on the Arctic Ocean . The treaty did not prevent the Finnish government from allowing volunteers to

cross the border to support the East @-@ Karelian Uprising in 1921 however , nor expatriate Finnish communists from causing disturbances in Finland . In 1923 both countries signed the Border Peace Agreement , which normalized the border .

In 1928 , the Soviet Union began collectivization in Ingria . During the collectivization and ethnic cleansing , the Soviets captured , killed and deported Ingrian peasants , provoking widespread criticism by the Finnish media in 1930 . Two years later , the nationalist Lapua Movement unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the Finnish government in the Mäntsälä rebellion .

Nevertheless , during the 1930s , the diplomatic climate between Finland and the Soviet Union gradually improved . From the 1920s , the Soviet Union had offered different non @-@ aggression pacts with Finland but they were all rejected . Now the offer was renewed as part of a series of agreements with the countries on the Soviet Union 's western border . In 1932 , the Soviet Union signed a non @-@ aggression pact with Finland , re @-@ affirmed in 1934 for ten years .

Relations between the two countries remained largely de minimis however . While foreign trade in Finland was booming , less than one percent of it was with the Soviet Union . In 1934 , the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations , and later accepted other " progressive forces " beside Communist parties . This change in Soviet attitudes , as well as internal politics in Finland , enabled a short thaw in relations in 1937 .

= = = Stalin and the protection of Leningrad = = =

After the Russian civil war , Joseph Stalin was disappointed at the Soviet Union 's inability to foment a successful revolution in Finland , and furthermore , the Bolsheviks struggle with national sentiments inside the Soviet Union . In 1923 , Stalin proclaimed that the main danger in national relations was Great @-@ Russian chauvinism . He started the policy of Korenizatsiya , indigenisation , to promote national communist cadres for every nationality . However , from 1937 Stalin encouraged Russian chauvinism , implying the Russians were politically and culturally superior . The Soviet diplomacy turned towards the recovery of the territories of the Tsarist state . The Soviet Union used the Comintern to announce a doctrine where bourgeoisie equaled Fascism , and that Communism was the natural agency of the proletariat . In practice , this meant that anything other than Communism would be considered anti @-@ Soviet and fascist . The Soviet foreign policy was a mixture of the ideology of world revolution and the traditional concerns of Russian national security .

During the Stalin era , the Soviet agriculture production collapsed causing famines in 1932 ? 1933 . Official output numbers of industrial production were used as propaganda to portray the Soviet Union as an economic miracle . Soviet propaganda also used cross @-@ border comparisons with Finland , to represent the country as a " vicious and reactionary Fascist clique " . The Finnish Marshal C.G.E. Mannerheim and the leader of the Finnish Social Democrat Party Väinö Tanner were particular hate figures . Stalin gained near @-@ absolute power in 1935 ? 1936 , leaving only army as self @-@ governing , but its officers also became the target of purges during the Great terror in 1937 ? 1938 .

In the late 1930s , Stalin 's Soviet Union was no longer satisfied with the status quo in its relations with Finland . This came as a result of a change in Soviet foreign policy , which now pursued the aim of recovering the provinces of Tsarist Russia lost during the chaos of the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War . The Soviets considered the old Empire to have had an optimal balance of security and territory , and their thoughts were shaped by a historical precedent : as the Treaty of Nystad of 1721 was intended to protect Tsarist Saint Petersburg from the Swedes , the re @-@ acquisition of Finland would protect the now Bolshevik Leningrad from the rising power of Nazi Germany . While in 1938 Sweden was no longer a major threat against Russia , the Soviets had not forgotten the role that the Finnish @-@ controlled Åland islands had played as a base of operations for the German Expeditionary Force in the Finnish Civil War .

= = Finnish ? Soviet negotiations = =

= = = Negotiations from 1938 to early 1939 = = =

In April 1938 , a junior diplomatic official named Boris Yartsev contacted the Finnish foreign minister Rudolf Holsti and prime minister Aimo Cajander , stating that the Soviets did not trust Germany and war was considered possible between the two countries . In such a war Germany might use Finland as a base for operations against the Soviet Union . The Red Army would not wait passively behind the border , but would rather " advance to meet the enemy " . If Finland were to fight against Germany , then the Soviet Union would offer all possible economic and military assistance . The Soviets would also accept the fortification of Åland islands , but demanded " positive guarantees " on Finland 's position .

The Finns assured Yartsev that Finland was committed to a policy of neutrality , and the country would resist any armed incursion . Yartsev was not satisfied with the reply , given Finland 's military weakness . He suggested that Finland could cede , or lease , some islands in the Gulf of Finland along the seaward approaches to Leningrad , a suggestion the Finns rejected . Earlier in the mid @-@ 1930s , the Soviet ambassador in Helsinki , Eric Assmus , and the Leningrad Bolshevik party leader Andrei Zhdanov , had presented a similar proposal .

Negotiations continued during autumn 1938 . The Soviets reduced their demands : a Red Army operation was not an option anymore and the focus was shifted on securing the Gulf of Finland . The Soviets wanted to be informed of key elements of the Finnish ? Estonian Gulf blockade , the secret military plan against the Baltic Fleet . Furthermore , Yartsev suggested that the Finns fortify the Suursaari island , but that the Soviets would take care of its defence . During the negotiations , Rudolf Holsti resigned as foreign minister , although not for reasons associated with the negotiations , and his place was taken by Eljas Erkkö . Holsti was rather anti @-@ German , so the resignation set off rumours , quickly quelled by the Finnish government , that he had been forced to resign by a Finnish government sympathetic to the Germans . The Finns attempted to appear even @-@ handed , and the interior ministry issued an order banning the extreme @-@ right IKL . The ban was reversed by the Finnish courts as being unconstitutional . Many years later , the minister in charge at that time , Urho Kekkonen , admitted that this was a simple gesture , to suggest to Moscow that Finland did not harbour a German fifth column .

By the winter of 1939 , the Soviets further reduced their demands and sent Boris Stein to negotiate . Stein and Erkkö met five times . Erkkö rejected the Soviet proposals , saying that the Soviet demands would mean the end of the Finnish neutrality policy and displease the Germans . When the chairman of the Finnish Defense Council C.G.E. Mannerheim was informed of the negotiations , he opined that Finland should give up the Suursaari islands because their defence would anyway be impossible during a war , but his arguments did not persuade the majority of the Finnish government . Stein departed Helsinki empty @-@ handed on 6 April .

The Finns had many reasons to turn down the Soviet proposals . Finland had started negotiations for a military co @-@ operation with Sweden , and the Finns had great hopes for the joint Finnish ? Swedish defense for the Ålands islands and did not want to jeopardize these negotiations . In addition , the violent collectivization , purges , show trials and executions in Stalin 's Soviet Union had given the country a bad reputation . Furthermore , most of the Finnish Communist leadership in the Soviet Union was executed during the Great Purge . The Soviet Union did not therefore seem to be a reliable contracting party . The Soviet envoys sent to negotiate with Finns were officially of relatively low rank , but as Väinö Tanner put it later , the Finns assumed rightly that they represented of some higher organ of State , probably the Soviet secret police NKVD .

= = = Soviet ? German pact = = =

On 23 August 1939 , the Soviet Union and Germany signed the Molotov ? Ribbentrop Pact . Nominally , the pact was a non @-@ aggression treaty , but it included a secret protocol in which the independent countries of Finland , Estonia , Latvia , Lithuania , Poland and Romania were divided into spheres of interest , with Finland falling to the Soviet sphere of interest .

In the immediate aftermath of the Pact , the Scandinavian countries and Finland were relieved . The Germans and Soviets were now allies , and there was no German threat against the Soviet Union . But shortly afterwards , Germany invaded Poland and Great Britain and France declared war against Germany . Next , the Soviets invaded eastern Poland , and later Moscow requested that the Baltic states allow the establishment of Soviet military bases and the stationing of troops on their soil . The government of Estonia accepted the ultimatum , signing the corresponding agreement in September , while Latvia and Lithuania followed suit in October .

= = = Soviet demands in late 1939 = = =

On 5 October the Soviet Union invited Finland to negotiations in Moscow . The Finnish government did not hasten to comply , like the Estonian government had earlier . Unlike the Baltic countries , the Finns started a gradual mobilization under the guise of " additional refresher training " . The Finnish government did not send the foreign minister , but its ambassador in Stockholm , J.K. Paasikivi . This was done on purpose , to limit his powers as a negotiator . In Moscow , Paasikivi met both Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and Stalin .

The Soviets demanded that the frontier between the USSR and Finland on the Karelian Isthmus be moved westward to a point only 30 kilometres (19 mi) east of Viipuri , Finland 's second @-@ largest city , to the line between Koivisto and Lipola . In addition , the Finns would have to destroy all existing fortifications on the Karelian Isthmus . Finland should also cede to the Soviet Union the islands of Suursaari , Tytärsaari , and Koivisto in the Gulf of Finland . In the north , the Soviets demanded the Kalastajansaarento peninsula . Furthermore , the Finns should lease the Hanko Peninsula to the Soviets for thirty years , and permit the Soviets to establish a military base there . In exchange the Soviet Union would cede Repola and Porajärvi from Eastern Karelia , an area twice as large as the territories demanded from the Finns .

The Soviet offer divided the Finnish government . The foreign minister Eljas Erkko and the defence minister Juho Niukkanen rejected the offer , backed by the president Kyösti Kallio . J.K. Paasikivi and C.G.E. Mannerheim , together with Väinö Tanner ? who was later appointed one of the Finnish negotiators ? wanted to accept the Soviet offer .

The Finns relied on military assistance from Sweden , and Eljas Erkko took part in the Stockholm assembly of Scandinavian leaders between 18 October and 19 October . There , Erkko met the Swedish foreign minister Rickard Sandler in private , and Sandler assured him that he would persuade the Swedish government to assist Finland during a possible war . During the actual war , however , Sandler failed in this task and resigned . Finland was totally isolated by a German and Soviet blockade , and attempted in October to obtain arms and ammunition in absolute secrecy by enlisting the German arms dealer Josef Veltjens .

On 31 October , Molotov announced the Soviet demands in public , during a session of the Supreme Soviet . The Finns made two counteroffers ? the first on 23 October and the second on 3 November . In both offers Finland would cede the Terijoki area to the Soviet Union , which was far less than the Soviets had demanded . The Finnish delegation returned home on November 13 , taking for granted that the negotiations would continue in the future .

= = Beginning of war = =

= = = Military preparations = = =

The Soviet Union had started an intensive rearmament near the Finnish border in 1938 ? 1939 . Finnish students and volunteers had spent the late summer 1939 improving the defensive structures across the Karelian Isthmus . On the Soviet side of the border , penal labour worked hard in order to add some density to sparse road and rail networks . In summer 1939 was an important phase of Soviet planning , told by Aleksandr Vasilevsky and Kirill Meretskoy in their memoirs . The Supreme Council of War ordered the Commander of Leningrad Military District Merestkov to draft an invasion

plan , instead of Chief of Staff Boris Shaposhnikov . The plan was adopted in July . Necessary assault troop deployments and commands were not initiated until October 1939 , though operational plans made in September called for the invasion to start in November . Stalin however was certain that the Finns would change their opinion under Soviet pressure and cede the demanded territories .

The invasion plans were laid down by the Soviet General Staff under Boris Shaposhnikov and Alexander Vasilevsky . The Soviet timetable was clearly and rigidly defined , with little or no margin for error . The key date was 21 December , Stalin 's sixtieth birthday . By then , the Finnish capital Helsinki would have been " freed of the Fascist oppression " . Andrei Zhdanov had already commissioned a celebratory piece from Dmitri Shostakovich , entitled " Suite on Finnish Themes " to be performed as the marching bands of the Red Army would be parading through Helsinki .

On 26 November , the Soviets staged the shelling of Mainila , an incident in which Soviet artillery shelled area near the Russian village of Mainila and then announced that a Finnish artillery attack had killed Soviet soldiers . The Soviet Union demanded that the Finns apologize for the incident and move their forces 20 ? 25 kilometres from the border . The Finns denied any responsibility for the attack and rejected the demands , calling for a joint Finnish @-@ Soviet commission to examine the incident . The Soviet Union claimed that the Finnish response was hostile , and used it as an excuse to withdraw from the non @-@ aggression pact .

= = = The Red Army assaults = = =

On 30 November , Soviet forces invaded Finland with 27 divisions , totalling 630 @,@ 000 men , bombed civilian boroughs of Helsinki and quickly reached the Mannerheim Line . The shelling of Mainila was a casus belli of the Soviet Union as it had withdrawn from non @-@ aggression pacts on 28 November . Earlier , Nazi Germany had staged a similar incident to have an excuse to withdraw from the nonaggression pact with Poland . Later , the Soviet Union would used the Orze? incident to challenge the neutrality of Estonia .

Later , the Finnish statesman J.K. Paasikivi commented that the Soviet attack , without a declaration of war , violated three different non @-@ aggression pacts : the Treaty of Tartu of 1920 , the Non @-@ aggression Pact between Finland and the Soviet Union signed 1932 and again in 1934 , and further the Charter of the League of Nations . The invasion was judged as illegal by the League of Nations , which expelled the Soviet Union on December 14 . Following the Soviet attack , C.G.E. Mannerheim was appointed Commander @-@ in @-@ Chief of the Finnish Defense Forces . Furthermore , the Finnish government changed as Risto Ryti was appointed the new prime minister and Väinö Tanner as foreign minister .

On 1 December , the Soviet Union created a new government for Finland , henceforth to be called the Finnish Democratic Republic . It was a puppet regime headed by O. W. Kuusinen , and became known as the " Terijoki Government " , since the village of Terijoki was the first place " liberated " by the Red Army . The puppet regime was unsuccessful , and it was quietly discarded during the winter of 1940 . Contrary to Soviet expectations , from the beginning of the conflict , the working @-@ class Finns stood behind the legal government . This national unity against the Soviet invasion was later called the " spirit of the Winter War " .