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Bright Hopes and Bloody Realities: The Diplomatic Prelude to the Winter War

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**BRIGHT HOPES AND BLOODY
REALITIES:**

**THE DIPLOMATIC PRELUDE TO THE
WINTER WAR**

STEVEN D. WEBSTER

SPRING 1995

For Finns, the sixth of December is a day to celebrate. Along with the frolicking, frivolities, and the fireworks, the beer and vodka flow, celebrating the most magnificent event in Finnish history. On that day in the monumental year of 1917, Czarist Russia, fat from hundreds of years of imperialist expansion but reeling from military defeat and internal chaos, witnessed one corner of its crumbling empire do the unthinkable-- declare independence. Although it was widely known that under the nominal rule of the Czar, the Finns had quite a bit of independence both economically and politically, it had been some 600 years since they had enjoyed complete freedom from any form of foreign domination. So at the end of the month, political chaos at home forced a beleaguered Vladimir Ilyich Lenin to sign the document that guaranteed the sovereignty of the newly formed Republic of Finland.

But it was nearly twenty years later that the rosy story of the birth of modern-day Finland took a turn for the worse. Finland was to face a major international crisis that threatened not only the sovereignty of the Republic as a whole but the general welfare of its entire peace-loving population as well. The new Russia, now Red and far more threatening, coveted the pivotal piece of property that once belonged to their predecessor, and they were willing to go to great lengths to reacquire it. The Winter War was the culmination of this international crisis; a terrifying conflict that laced the snows of Karelia with the blood of hundreds of thousands of innocents. It was a deplorable act brought upon by the naiveté and arrogance of both sides involved and, in the context of the international situation of the time, unique in character. However, even though the origins of the Winter War seem easily understood, a thorough examination of the years prior to the outbreak of hostilities reveals some startling information. Obvious political misunderstandings among the circle of Finnish

leaders were, in effect, just as massive an impetus for the Russo-Finnish conflict as Soviet expansionist foreign policy.

The first official document that established relations between the newly independent Finland and the Soviet Union was the Treaty of Dorpat signed on November 14, 1920. Here the new Russia recognized the self-determination of Finland and disavowed any territorial demands. On the Finnish side, considerable concessions appeased the fledgling Soviet government's quest for border security.¹ Although in the eyes of the Finns, the treaty established all necessary prerequisites for normal relations between the neighbors, it was apparent that the conditions stipulated by the treaty were due to the relative weakness of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin was practically forced to agree to the maintenance of the Finnish border only fifteen miles from its second largest city. However, the Finns argued that the border was not only hundreds of years old,² but it was this same border that existed between the Grand Duchy of Finland and the Russian Empire from the 19th century up until the Revolution.

Though it is certain that the Soviet Union was not pleased with the content of the Dorpat Treaty, it was in no position to argue. At this stage in the new Russia's development, it was imperative to emphasize the peaceful nature of their policies, foreign suspicions must be quelled before serious internal development could begin. Non-aggression pacts flowed forth from the foreign ministry from the late twenties to the early thirties. Finland signed such a treaty with Russia in January of 1931, and in 1934 this pact was extended for a further

¹Finland agreed not to fortify the islands dotting the Gulf, nor to maintain any fort or battery within fifteen miles of the coast. Petsamo was to be demobilized entirely.

²The western frontier on the Karelian Isthmus dates back to the Peace of Pahkinsaari of 1323 and the Peace of Tayssine of 1595 between Sweden and Russia.

ten years. The two neighbors signed a Convention of Conciliation as well in 1932, supplemented by a treaty defining the term 'aggressor' in 1933.³

The next year marked the entry of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics into the League of Nations. Apparently, the growing menace of a violent Germany eased the apprehensive attitude of the Soviet Government into cooperation with the capitalist west. Germany had left the League in 1933 and bluntly displayed an open hostility towards Communist Russia. To counter this, the Russians implemented a policy of "collective security," believing that ". . . with the firm will and close cooperation of all its members a great deal could be done at any given moment for the utmost diminution of the danger of war."⁴ The situation deteriorated further with Hitler's courtship of Poland that same year. To counter this threat, the Soviets signed mutual assistance treaties with France and Czechoslovakia in 1935. Litvinov's collective security policy depended upon cooperation within the League of Nations, but, after the League failed to stamp out the aggressions in Manchuria and Ethiopia, it was clear that its credibility had plummeted.

For Finland, the onerous task of defining itself in the international political arena dominated Finnish foreign policy concerns in the twenties and thirties. Since Finland was a child of the Versailles generation, the League of Nations was her Godparent. But once the League began to show its inherent weaknesses, most smaller states gravitated to larger states in search of the insurance of existence. Finland and her Scandinavian brothers, however, were the exception; they desired a complete separation from the bantering of the big boys on

³Finland, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Documents Concerning Finnish-Soviet Relations, 22-23. (Hereafter referred to as the Blue Book.)

⁴Maxim Litvinov, "Speech on the Occasion of Soviet Entry into the League of Nations" Alvin Rubenstein, ed. The Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union. New York: Doubleday, 1960.

the block. Neutrality, in the eyes of the Finns, was the catch phrase for their future. To achieve this end, in 1935 the Scandinavian bloc emerged, and on December 5th of that year Premier Kivimaki outlined the purpose of this new northern coalition in a speech to the Finnish Parliament. It was the intention of the Finnish government to establish neutrality in conjunction with the other Scandinavian states, a policy which was generally recognized as a constant in European affairs.⁵ But little did the Finns or Russians know that just three months later the world would witness the first direct challenge to the policy of collective security.

On March 3, 1936, Germany threw down the gauntlet and marched into the Rhineland. The League of Nations watched the western powers vacillate and allow a rearmed and chanting Germany to reclaim the bit of ground which was ultimately to change the balance of power in Europe. Behind the doubly red brick walls of the Kremlin, Stalin and his henchmen understood quite well what this meant. Once the Rhineland was fortified, France could not be expected to come to the aid of its eastern allies. Hitler's verbal attacks on the Soviet Union grew in intensity, and with the Spanish Civil war raging and the Anti-Comintern Pact a matter of public knowledge, the gap between Russia and Germany seemed impossible to bridge.⁶ It becomes obvious, then, why the Soviet Union began to question the allegiance of its neighbors.

Finland's declaration of neutrality was not enough to allay the fears of a paranoid Soviet Union. It would be disastrous for Russia if indeed the Baltic states and Finland were to come under the influence of Germany. The development of cultural and commercial

⁵John Wuorinen, Finland and World War Two. (New York: Doubleday, 1948), 57

⁶Adolph Hitler, My New Order ed. by Raoul de Roussy Sales, (New York: Doubleday, 1941), 386-447

relations between Finland and Germany was suspiciously viewed as a veil hiding possible military cooperation. And who in the Soviet government could forget Germany's interference in Finland's civil war of 1918, when 12,000 German troops landed in Helsinki to ensure the victory of the whites? These fears surfaced as early as 1936, when the Commissar for Leningrad, Andrei Zhdanov, gave a speech at the All-Union congress of Soviets:

We people of Leningrad sit at our windows looking out at the world. Right around us lie small countries who. . . permit great adventurers to scheme within their border. . . if they are not satisfied to mind only their own business, we may feel forced to . . . call upon the Red Army to defend our country.⁷

Here, the Soviets had to make one of the many drastic changes in foreign policy that dotted the decade with chaos. In accordance with the growing strength of the communist regime, the powerlessness of the League of Nations, and the current international turmoil, the position of Russia's neighbors was to be drastically altered.

In an attempt to alleviate Russian fears, in April of 1935 the Prime Minister of Finland denied any hostile designs on the Soviet Union, while making it clear that Finland would not jeopardize her neutral position by signing any sort of mutual assistance pact with the USSR. He even repeated himself in July,⁸ but to no avail, for in August, the Soviet press alleged that recent plans for the development of commercial airfields in Finland were actually military installations destined to base German warplanes.⁹ Prime Minister Kallio responded the next month by declaring that Finland was not interested in the Anti-Comintern Pact in any way.¹⁰

⁷*Pravda* March 1936, 3

⁸Max Beloff, The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia. (New York, Harcourt and Brace, 1955), Vol. 2, 81-82.

⁹Izvestia, August 1938, 4

¹⁰Beloff, The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 81

But of all of the attempts to calm the concerns of the Soviet Union, previous efforts paled in comparison to what took place in 1937. Prime Minister Kallio, a member of the liberal Agrarian party, defeated the long-time conservative, pro-German incumbent Svinhufvud in the presidential elections on February 15th. This, coupled with Foreign Minister Holsti's visit to Moscow earlier that month, signalled to the Soviets that the time was ripe to improve relations.

Immediately following the election, Holsti issued a press release revealing the political purpose of his recent Moscow venture:

I wanted to dispel the anxieties felt in Moscow that Finland might have made secret arrangements with a great power whereby Finland should be the jumping-off ground for an attack on the Soviet Union. No such arrangement exists, and the Finnish Government had no plans for warlike adventures of any kind.¹¹

Unfortunately for the Finns, the European situation continued to deteriorate. In the spring of 1938, Hitler annexed Austria, outflanking Czechoslovakia. Poland served an ultimatum on Lithuania, and to the north, Russia shared a lengthy border that came not fifteen miles from Leningrad with a neighbor whose political friendliness was questionable at best. It was time for the Soviet Union to act.

One intriguing phone call started it all. The entire diplomatic process that led to the Winter War began on the morning of April 14, 1938, when a young Soviet diplomat, Boris Yartsev, telephoned Finland's Foreign Minister, Rudolf Holsti. Mr. Yartsev asked to see the Minister privately, for he had just received an urgent message from Moscow and wished to deliver it personally. Even though it was contrary to diplomatic protocol for a junior official to directly approach the Minister, Holsti agreed to see him immediately, for he knew very

¹¹Arnold Toynbee, Survey of International Affairs, 1936, (Stanford University Press, 1937), 356

well that Boris Yartsev was no ordinary junior official. In fact, he seemed to move and talk with great ease and much more freedom than any of his colleagues, including even the Soviet Minister to Finland. Väinö Tanner, then Minister for Economics, described him as

. . . a lively individual, pleasant in a way. One could easily discuss with him even the most delicate matters, as though he were a man who did not have to be particularly careful of what he said, unlike many people in his position.¹²

Yartsev's glib tongue led to rumors, most likely true, of a possible connection to the GPU.¹³

Indeed, there was no reason for Holsti to regret waiving the usual formalities. On meeting the Foreign Minister, Yartsev announced that he had received "exceptionally broad authority"¹⁴ to discuss certain delicate matters of extreme importance to the Soviet Union, as long as the discussions remained entirely secret. Holsti agreed to secrecy, and asked Yartsev to be candid. Yartsev began.

The Government of the Soviet Union was convinced that Hitler was mustering his forces for an eventual assault on the USSR, he said, and Finland played a major role in his plans as a base for northern aggression. Finland's attitude toward German designs then came into question. If German forces were to operate freely on Finnish soil in preparation for an attack in Karelia and Leningrad, then "the Red army would not remain on the border to await the enemy, but would advance as far as possible to meet him."¹⁵ Finland would therefore become a battleground for the two Great Powers. However, if Finland was prepared to resist

¹² Väinö Tanner, The Winter War (Stanford University Press, 1957), 3

¹³ *Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie*, or State Political Administration, a forerunner of the KGB. It was common practice in Soviet embassies to have at least one GPU representative on the payroll.

¹⁴ Tanner The Winter War, 4

¹⁵ Jakobson, Max. The Diplomacy of the Winter War. (Cambridge, 1961), 8

the German assault, the Soviet Union would offer her all possible military and economic assistance, vowing to withdraw all forces from Finnish territory after the cessation of hostilities. According to Yartsev, if Finland truly wished to avoid falling into German hands, acceptance of such assistance was essential. Otherwise, she would find German pressure irresistible, for it was known in Moscow, he claimed, that Fascist circles were poised to overthrow the Finnish government if it did not bend to Germany's will.

An astonished, confident Holsti assured Yartsev that Finland's adherence to Scandinavian neutrality bloc was solid proof of her status in world affairs. As well, the current government enjoyed wide popular support; a full three quarters of the parliament professed loyalty to Kallio's administration. Finland just wasn't in as much peril as Yartsev claimed.

But that wasn't enough for the Russian. His government needed "guarantees" that Finland would not aid Germany against Russia. "What do you mean by guarantees?" Holsti asked. But Yartsev quavered; he was either unwilling or unable to answer. He said that further negotiations would determine the nature of the guarantees.¹⁶

Throughout the summer, while Holsti was away at the League of Nations, Yartsev spoke to several other cabinet members. First approached was the Prime Minister, A. K. Cajander, who at first did not give the conversation the attention it deserved. Following this and other fruitless clandestine discussions, Mr. Cajander deferred to Väinö Tanner, a member of the foreign affairs committee of the Cabinet. Mr. Tanner and Mr. Yartsev met

¹⁶Jakobson The Diplomacy of the Winter War, 9. Here Jakobson quotes a heretofore unpublished document, a report of a committee set up to study Finnish foreign policy from 1938-1944.

for the first time on July 30, 1938, but they were also unable to reach any concrete agreements. Frustrated, Tanner turned to his superior, A. K. Cajander, who jotted down a note for Yartsev, even though the same points in the note had been expressed several times before:

While always adhering to the neutral policy of the northern countries, the Finnish government will at the same time permit no violation of Finnish territorial integrity nor consequently the acquisition by any great power of a foothold in Finland for an attack against the Soviet Union. . . .¹⁷

Mr. Yartsev read the reply on August 11, and one week later approached Tanner with something that for the first time defined more precisely what Moscow was looking for. But, even though in writing, it was still as hazy as a Leningrad morning. In rough German (Tanner spoke Russian poorly) Yartsev listed three Russian proposals.

The first dealt with Finland's reluctance to sign a secret agreement with the Soviet Union. With this in mind, Yartsev stated "Russia would be satisfied if it receives a written undertaking under which Finland stands prepared to ward off possible attacks and, to that end, to accept Russian military aid."¹⁸ The second proposal from Moscow dealt with the controversial question of the Åland islands. Finland and Sweden had been planning to arm the islands in accordance to a League of Nations ruling. However, Russian concerns plagued their fortification, in the belief that they could be used to bar access to the Gulf of Finland. According to the proposal, Moscow ". . . can assent to the fortification of the Åland Islands if Russia is enabled to take part in their arming and if it is permitted to send its own observer to follow the work and subsequently to maintain surveillance over the use of the

¹⁷Tanner The Winter War, 8

¹⁸Ibid, 9 Tanner's notes of the meeting.

fortifications."¹⁹ The identity and activities of the said observer would, Yartsev stated, be entirely secret. But the most shocking of the proposals was the third, where in return for withdrawing its objections for the Åland fortifications, the island of Suursaari (located approximately halfway between Leningrad and Helsinki) would become a fortified air and naval base for the Red Army.

Finally, Tanner had something with which to approach his government. Even though a few of the phrasings were far from fathomable, such as the extent of "Russian military aid," it was clear that Russia's wishes were on the table for everyone to see. For here, in the lazy Scandinavian sun of the summer of '38, the seeds of war were sown. Russia's concerns about Hitler and eventual war with Germany were commonplace; Yartsev's words regarding Moscow's definition of security were far more revealing. Security, in the eyes of the men in Moscow, meant not waiting at the border for the Germans to arrive, but advancing to meet them. This statement is the most practical explanation of Soviet foreign policy in the late 1930's. Non-aggression pacts would not do-- Russia needed something a little more dependable. She was trying to convert her neighbor into an ally.

But Helsinki did not desire a change in policy, and to accept any such agreement with Russia would be contrary to the principles of Scandinavian neutrality that the Kallio government had been pursuing since their election. It was clear that the Soviet proposals were not menacing in tone, for they were not a threat but rather an offer of guardianship. But Holsti had spent his career as Foreign Minister trying to avoid becoming a satellite of any power, and a defensive agreement like the one Russia proposed would jeopardize Finland's complete neutrality, for Finland was now a member of the Scandinavian countries, and

¹⁹Ibid, 8

proudly so. Moreover, those Finns who knew of the talks underestimated the importance of Yartsev. Surely, they reasoned, if the topic was so important to Moscow, the approach would be through typical diplomatic channels. When finally Tanner approached Cajander with Yartsev's three proposals, the Prime Minister was again forced to explain to the Russian envoy the importance of Finland's place in the world: "The proposal tends to violate Finland's sovereignty and is in conflict with the policy of neutrality which Finland follows in common with the nations of Scandinavia. . . ." ²⁰ This was the final word of the Finnish government; but before Yartsev could press the matter further, the world's attention focused on the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia.

* * *

Munich hosted one of the most decisive events of the century. France, Britain, Italy, and Germany dismembered an absent and agape Czechoslovakia, which allowed Hitler in one stroke to undermine security in eastern Europe and rupture relations between the Soviet Union and the western democracies. On September 29, *Isvestia* reflected the views of the rejected and infuriated Politburo, asserting that Munich was not a "fight for Czechoslovakia, but a fight against German hegemony in Europe." ²¹ The Soviet government interpreted the agreement as western conciliation aimed at excluding Russia from European affairs. ²² Russia

²⁰Ibid, 10

²¹*Isvestia* 29 September, 1938.

²²D. F. Fleming, The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917-1960, (New York, Doubleday, 1961), 83

was truly isolated; Litvinov's noble collective security policy collapsed revealing the hopelessness of containing Germany through western cooperation.²³ Soviet Foreign policy needed a change, but it would be March before the Munich reverberations would take solid form in Moscow.

The shadow of Munich reached the shores of Helsinki as well. It was Finland's farsighted belief that war between the western powers would leave Russia supreme in Europe, and Finland would lie at the great bear's mercy, as the *Helsingin Sanomat*, claimed "a world conflagration would benefit only the Soviet Union which would be able to spread the misery of Bolshevism across Europe."²⁴ To Finns, saving Czechoslovakia would have meant sacrificing Finnish security. The agreement reached, therefore, was necessary for world peace as well as Finnish security, albeit contrary to democratic ideals.²⁵

Aside from a few trade talks conducted in Moscow in the early winter months, conversations between Finland and Russia ground to a halt after September. Rudolf Holsti resigned as Foreign Minister on November 16, and Eljas Erkko, publisher of the daily *Helsingin Sanomat*, assumed the role on 12 December. Erkko was known to have strong British and American ties and was an avid believer in the Munich agreement, as well as a strong belief in the power of Finnish neutrality manifested in territorial integrity. Holsti's resignation coincided with the unilateral banning of the IKL, Finland's openly fascist party.

²³Vladimir Potemkin "The Soviet View of Munich," (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1960)

²⁴Louis Schmier, Russia and Finland. (New York: Schmier, 1963), 24

²⁵Germany, Foreign Office, Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, (Weisbaden, 1951), Series D, vol 6, 513-514

Although the act was later denounced unconstitutional by the courts, it was an obvious attempt to balance Holsti's departure and the induction of Erkkö.

March of 1939 proved pivotal for the precarious political impasse in Russo-Finnish relations. On the tenth of the month, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union began its eighteenth party congress in Moscow. Excitement was high--the great comrade Stalin himself planned to deliver a major address on the international situation. And when the time came, no one in the audience heard any internationalist phrases, such as "collective security" and a "common front of peace-loving nations." No one there heard distinctions between the western capitalist powers, either; cooperation with other nations had proven fruitless, and the USSR was not going to be Europe's fireman. To Russia's neighbors he wished ". . . to maintain peaceful, close, and friendly relations so long as they refrain from threatening directly or indirectly the integrity and inviolability of our frontier."²⁶ And Stalin, rasping through his second language on a podium of power fit for a god, also hinted that there were no insurmountable obstacles to a better Russo-German understanding. Whatever the case, the Soviet Union was not going to entangle itself in the squabbles of the western imperialist powers.

Stalin's speech to the Eighteenth Party Congress also marked a new series of bilateral talks, including, of course, one with Finland. Yrjö-Koskinen, the Finnish envoy in Moscow, received a memorandum from Litvinov early in March requesting the lease of the Islands of Suursaari, Lavansaari, and Seisaari to the Soviet Union for thirty years. Finland flatly refused the request, even when the Russians promised to keep them demilitarized. It was not a matter

²⁶Jane Degras, ed. Soviet Documents of Foreign Affairs, 1933-1941 (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1948-53), vol. 3, 320

of demilitarization, the Finns believed, but a matter of the continually stressed policy of territorial integrity. An annoyed Litvinov played his last trump: in exchange for the islands, he offered 150 square miles of territory in east Russian Karelia. This too was refused.²⁷

Even though these few ideas put forth by the Soviet Union in March of 1939 were not taken seriously by the majority of the Finnish cabinet and decisions to refuse the offers were nearly unanimous, one dissenting voice broke the solidity of the government. Marshall Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, Chairman of the Council of Defense and long time hero of the Finnish Republic, did not share the views of the liberal majority of the cabinet. Whereas President Kallio, Foreign Minister Erkko, and Prime Minister Cajander argued that there were no guarantees that the first Russian request might lead to further demands for leases on the mainland, the aging Marshall advised immediate acceptance in order to allay Soviet suspicions. He stated:

. . . the islands were of no real use to the country and with their neutralized condition, we had not the chance of defending them . . . For the Russians, on the other hand, they were of practical significance because they guarded the entrance to their marine base in Luga Bay. We should therefore use the few trumps we hold.²⁸

Not only did he support the cession of the islands in question, but he also suggested a readjustment of the Karelian frontier a few kilometers westward (but not far enough to compromise Finnish fortifications) as a gesture of goodwill to the Soviets. But the majority was not swayed, and Finnish silence once again frustrated hopes for a settlement.

Throughout the summer of 1939, it occurred to the Finns just how difficult it was to maintain freedom in the political maelstrom of the late 1930's. Big-Power diplomacy had

²⁷Tanner, The Winter War, 13-15

²⁸Carl Mannerheim, Memoirs, (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 30-31

dismembered Czechoslovakia and the other small states of eastern Europe feared their turn. The Finnish government categorically refused offers for a German non-aggression Pact in June, bellowing loudly the same pretexts the Soviets had heard for the past twelve months.²⁹ But when Anglo-French-Soviet talks began in Moscow in the summer, it was Finland's turn to be discussed behind closed doors.

The cabinet feared the worst. While the French, British, and Russians debated the fate of eastern Europe in the event of a war with Germany, the Finnish government informed the British that:

The Finnish government cannot admit the right of any Power to come to their assistance for the purpose of resisting an alleged direct or "indirect" aggression on Finland, in any other cases than when they themselves have called for such assistance.³⁰

By no means were the Finns to have their destiny preplanned for them.

For over a year the Soviet Union had tried to bargain with Finland. The Kremlin's first attempt at an agreement failed with Boris Yartsev's return to Russia. After the Munich conference and the subsequent shift in Russian foreign policy, the men in Moscow tried a more direct approach. This, too, failed. Talks between Britain, France, and the Kremlin came to naught; neither Poland, Rumania, nor Finland would allow access to the Red Army in order to counter any German threat. Historians still debate when the idea of German-Russian cooperation came into being, and they will continue to do so until the Pandora's Red box is opened. But one thing is clear: after the snub at Munich and the impasses at Moscow in the summer of 1939, Stalin realized the futility of cooperation with the western democracies.

²⁹Germany, D.G.F.P. 1918-1945 Series D vol 6 ,525-527

³⁰Great Britain, Foreign Office, Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939 (London, 1952-54), Series III vol 6, 308

And since working with the west had proven fruitless, perhaps Germany had something to offer.

The infamous Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939, shocked the world. In Finland, reactions were mixed. Many believed that since Finnish policy strived to avoid close ties with either Germany, Hitler's declaration of disinterest was exactly what the government wished.³¹ However, more observant Finns, including Marshall Mannerheim, foresaw doom, for they knew that Finnish security rested upon the balance of power in the Baltic. Historian Henry Wolfe quoted one Finn who summed up the position of all states sandwiched between Germany and Russia:

We . . . are like bones laying between two fierce, hungry dogs. As long as they are snarling at each other, we bones are relatively safe. Neither dog will allow the other to grab us . . . what we fear most of all is the possibility that the dogs may become friends. In this case they would divide the bones between them.³²

The Nazi-Soviet Pact ended all hope for Finland. Although the Finnish Government was technically unaware of the secret protocol signed by Ribbentrop and Russia's new Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, it soon became apparent that indeed Germany and Russia had divided the bones between them.

* * *

Few dates imbed themselves on the minds of men like September 1, 1939. Germany's assault on Poland was unprovoked and swift. Soon France and Britain declared their second

³¹Tanner, The Winter War, 19

³²Henry C. Wolfe, "Stalin in Europe: the Baltic," Current History Nov 1939 vol.5, 19

state of war with Germany in twenty-five years. This time, however, no crowds lined the streets; no parades celebrated the declarations. All was dark in Europe.

Finland immediately declared its neutrality.³³ The Kremlin, however, remained silent until the rumble of tanks and infantry enveloped eastern Poland, followed soon after by Stalin's diplomatic envelopment of the Baltic states. Molotov summoned Estonian Foreign Minister Kart Selter to Moscow on September 22; when he returned five days later, Estonia had to accept its fate. The Red Navy occupied Estonia's harbors, the Red Army guarded their cities, and the Red Air Force garrisoned their aerodromes.³⁴ Latvia was next, followed by Lithuania. By October 11, the Kremlin had snuffed out all Baltic independence of action. Militarily cut off from the west and politically sold out by Germany, all three were now Soviet protectorates.

The next move was obvious to the Finns, who could only wait for the inevitable. From Boris Yartsev's telephone call to the developments in March, never did the Finns truly realize the glaring fragility of their situation. Perhaps one could call it idealist or foolish; but the Finns never thought it would come to this. In an agreement between Russia and Germany, Finland must have been mentioned. Attempts in Berlin to ascertain Finland's fate failed, though, for German diplomats left Finland uninformed.³⁵ Nevertheless, the policy of aloof neutrality was upheld in diplomatic circles as Finland's last and only hope to avoid Russian domination.

³³Finland, Blue Book, 38

³⁴Schmier, Russia and Finland, 32

³⁵Germany, D.G.F.P. Series D vol. 8, 199

On October 5, Molotov handed Yrjö-Koskinen a note suggesting that Finland send a delegation to Moscow within three days in order to discuss "concrete political questions which have become urgent through the outbreak of war."³⁶ Now was not the time for whispered conversations between a few officials; there was steel in Molotov's note. This was the challenge which had been expected; an invitation to question Finland's neutrality, her Scandinavian status, her sovereignty, and her soul.³⁷ But even though Finland's position was nothing to envy, several signs indicated that the Finns would not capitulate so quickly. The time limit set by Moscow -- forty eight hours -- was simply ignored. An astonished Molotov viewed this as an act of defiance, warning the Finnish government to hasten with a reply or Russia would have to resort to drastic means. In Helsinki, the Soviet envoy burst into Erkko's office crying outrage.³⁸

But the most blatant move of defiance on the part of the Finnish Government was their decision to send someone other than Foreign Minister Eljas Erkko on the gloomy train of despair to Moscow. "The place for a foreign Minister is with his government," Erkko stated, in order to advise the President and partake in the crucial decisions of the cabinet.³⁹ The lucky man chosen to share a table with Stalin and Molotov was none other than Juho Kusti Paasikivi, the same man who nineteen years earlier represented Finland in the negotiations at Dorpat. According to Max Jakobson, "the choice was one of the rare

³⁶Finland, Blue Book, 42-43

³⁷Jakobson, Diplomacy of the Winter War, 106

³⁸Ibid, 107

³⁹Finland, Blue Book, 44

intuitive, or perhaps accidental, strokes of genius that may change a nation's history."⁴⁰

Paasikivi, at the time, held the influential position of Finnish Minister in Stockholm. His Russian was excellent; his will powerful. At the age of sixty nine years, Paasikivi witnessed his career blossom from Minister in Stockholm before the conflict to Prime Minister in 1944. Juho Paasikivi came to mean to Finland what Churchill did to Great Britain, the difference being that his task was not winning the war but winning the peace after the war had been lost. Finland was truly preparing for negotiations, not for some mere ceremony of subservience.

As the delegation hastily readied itself for departure on October 9, the Finnish cabinet instructed Paasikivi in the position of the government. In the event discussions concerning the frontier near Leningrad should arise, he was to refer to the treaty of Dorpat. He was told to uphold the idea of neutrality, for Finland was not about to compromise its independence. Any requests for a mutual assistance pact should be declined, no matter what the proposal. As an extreme concession, discussion of the islands in the Gulf of Finland would be permissible with the notable exception of Suursaari.⁴¹

No organization urged the people to flock to the railroad stations; no official called for a surge in patriotism. In fact, the government consistently played down the importance of the delegation's mission. In order to clarify Finland's role in the upcoming talks, Erkkö stated, "Finland will not sign a dictated agreement incompatible with her independence, her integrity,

⁴⁰Jakobson, The Diplomacy of the Winter War, 107

⁴¹Finland, Blue Book, 46-49

and her neutrality."⁴² Nevertheless, cheering crowds gathered at station after station along the route, as if every Finn knew deep in their souls the true implication of the invitation.

While Paasikivi and his retinue sped towards Moscow, Marshall Mannerheim began to prepare Finland for the worst. The army ordered certain border towns evacuated and called up several classes of reserves. Frontier troops on high alert status manned the fortifications; it wasn't long before a full 250,000 troops reached readiness. Although the government announced no cause for apprehension, the military attempted the first complete blackouts of Viipuri and Helsinki. On October 13, more reservists entered active duty. Military men commandeered hundreds of cars and trucks, erected barracks, and piled sandbags next to buildings.⁴³ President Kallio soon signed a bill that required national service from all civilians.⁴⁴ The evacuations on the border continued.

But while all was bustling in Finland, in a quiet room behind the world-stopping walls of the Kremlin, the talks began. It had been nineteen years since these men had met. At Dorpat, Paasikivi sat across from the Commissar for Nationalities of the fledgling Soviet Republic, a man who had risen to be one of the most powerful men in the world. For Russia's representative at Dorpat was none other than Josef Djugashvili -- Stalin. Little did they know that on a rainy, grey Moscow day in 1939, they would meet again.

Negotiations commenced in earnest when Stalin and Molotov proposed a treaty of mutual assistance similar to those concluded with the Baltic States. Paasikivi at once rejected

⁴²"Foreign Minister of Finland in Statement Says Nation Will Reject Any 'Dictated' Pact." New York Times 12 October, 1939 p. 4 col. 1

⁴³Mannerheim, Memoirs, 309

⁴⁴"Finland Mobilizes Civilians for Duty" New York Times 14 October, 1939 p. 3 col. 6

the proposal, maintaining the view that such an alliance with the Soviet Union was a prelude to invasion, occupation, and annexation. Molotov then stressed the need for security in the Gulf of Finland since the war had broken out. Talks continued, with a second proposal for an alliance rejected as well.⁴⁵

Two days later, on October 14, a frustrated Stalin presented a list of minimum demands. He suggested a new frontier between the two nations in the area of Leningrad, one about fifteen miles behind the current border. All fortifications there would be dismantled. The Red Army and Navy would also man a military installation on the peninsula of Hanko, near Turku. He also requested control over the islands of Suursaari, Lavansaari, Tytarsaari, and Koivisto, and regions in the far arctic north around the Rybachi peninsula. In compensation, the Soviet Union would cede Finland certain territory along the border of eastern Karelia. In reference to the reasoning behind these minimum demands, Stalin told the Finns, "We ask that the distance from Leningrad to the border should be 70 kilometers. As to [Koivisto] you must bear in mind that if 16-inch guns were placed there, the movement of our fleet could be entirely paralyzed in the far end of the Gulf."⁴⁶ It became clear to the Finns that even though the Russians shared a military pact with Germany, it was Germany they truly feared.⁴⁷ Outside expansion in an endangered zone was a necessary facet of pre-war maneuvering. If the war ended in the west and Russia was forced to fight Germany for whatever reason, the Soviet Union had to be militarily and politically insured. The Russian

⁴⁵David Dallin, Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 1939-1942, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942) 119

⁴⁶Wourinen, Finland in World War Two, 53

⁴⁷Tanner, The Winter War, 41

policy of "rushing to meet the enemy" had not changed because of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, for the Kremlin had always chosen territorial acquisition over military alliances.⁴⁸

However, Finnish opinions differed. Finland knew that ties with Germany were at this time nonexistent, and Russian talk of Leningrad security requirements masked real intentions of expansion. Because of Finland's isolated position, most Finns agreed that no Great Power could use Finland as a base of attack against Russia. A plan of this sort would require so much time that Russia would have ample opportunities to repel such an assault whether they owned military complexes in Finland or not.⁴⁹

In light of these two dominant, contrasting misunderstandings -- the Russians on one hand fearing the German use of Finland as a base of operations against Leningrad and the Finns on the other claiming an ulterior motive to the Soviet Union's advances, it is not surprising that the talks in Moscow would be inconclusive if the two sides would not give in. The absence of any strong military ties with any nation allowed Finland to be isolated. Germany's gift to Russia in August further drowned Finland in waters of impending doom.

With all of this fresh in his mind, Paasikivi told Stalin that the Russian demands went far beyond the delegation's authorization and that he would have to return to Helsinki for consultation with the cabinet. Stalin did not object, but he did point a finger at the mobilization efforts in Finland. He calmly mentioned that Russian troops were mobilizing as well, and as Paasikivi took his leave, Stalin ominously warned, "This cannot go on for long without danger of accidents."⁵⁰

⁴⁸Schmier, Russia and Finland, 45

⁴⁹Wourinen, Finland and World War II, 177

⁵⁰Jakobson, The Diplomacy of the Winter War, 119

* * *

The Finnish cabinet immediately discussed the Russian demands as soon as Paasikivi stepped off the train. Military experts also participated, at the request of Marshall Mannerheim. Eventually, the wise words of the aged Marshall penetrated the idealistic skulls of the civilian members of the cabinet. In the end, the government drew up a reply to the demands, which was in fact a significant retreat from its original adamant position. In principle, the cabinet decided to agree with Stalin's argument that Russia had legitimate defense needs along the various approaches to Leningrad which Finland was obliged to fulfill. The issue, then, was what constituted legitimate Soviet security needs. A modest revision of the border on the Karelian isthmus was acceptable, and the government also offered the islands of Suikari, Tytasaari, Peninsaari, Lavansaari, as well as the southern half of Suursaari and the northern half of the Rybachi peninsula.⁵¹ However, one point in particular perturbed the politicians: the peninsula of Hanko. Even Mannerheim, who proposed more concessions to the Soviet Union than the cabinet agreed, stressed that if indeed the Russians owned a military installation deep within the borders of Finland it would greatly endanger not only the defense of the Republic but the ideal of independence of action. In effect, a Russian outpost on Hanko would ensure Russian domination of Finnish affairs. In the end, the cabinet ordered Paasikivi not to discuss the leasing or ceding of Hanko.⁵² Accompanied by Väinö Tanner to represent the cabinet, Paasikivi left for Moscow on October 21.

⁵¹ Finland, Blue Book, 51

⁵² Mannerheim, Memoirs, 315

As the train sped to Moscow, Mannerheim continued his preparations. Reports confirmed the massing of Red Army men and materiel on the border, and Russian flights over Finland occurred daily in Karelia and the area near Petsamo. The situation looked grave to the Marshall; so in order to avoid any unfortunate incidents, he ordered all Finnish artillery out of range of the frontier, and he instructed border garrisons to avoid any activities which might serve as an excuse for Soviet provocation.⁵³

Stalin read the Finnish reply on October 23. Unfortunately, the Finns based their diplomacy on the assumption that Stalin's first demands were so high enough as to leave room for bargaining. Stalin and his henchmen, however, did not diplomacize as per the old school rules of bargaining; minimum demands meant no space for bargaining at all.⁵⁴ As he perused the delegation's reply, he calmly declared the counterproposals completely insufficient; the Karelian border must be shifted to the village of Koivisto, not only eight miles as the Finns suggested. In addition, Stalin once again raised the question of the Hanko peninsula.⁵⁵

After sharing a knowing glance, Tanner and Paasikivi prepared to leave; apparently the negotiations could continue no further. Molotov remained in his seat. "Is it your intention to provoke a conflict?" he asked, to which Paasikivi replied, "We want no such thing, but you seem to."⁵⁶ The door closed shut.

⁵³Ibid., 320

⁵⁴Tanner, The Winter War, 134

⁵⁵Finland, Blue Book, 54

⁵⁶Tanner, The Winter War. 41

The negotiations had reached their final, crucial stage. Both sides refused to alter their current stance, but neither wished to initiate a final break. The two sides had forged a deadlock of steel in their policies. In the end, both parties agreed to wait until the Finnish delegates once again consulted Helsinki.

The cabinet was in chaos. But by now Paasikivi no longer felt that Stalin was bluffing; one more rejection of his demands could mean war.

What is the use of neutrality and Scandinavian cooperation? Our geographical position ties us to Russia. Now we must choose between a war that might turn Finland into a Bolshevik state, and submitting to life within the Soviet sphere of influence. . ."⁵⁷

Paasikivi feared the worst; he argued for the acceptance of a Soviet base at Hanko, though he hoped Stalin would accept a nearby island instead of a mainland installation.

Väinö Tanner agreed that Hanko represented the sore on the foot of the talks. To reject the Soviet demand for Hanko would certainly mean war. He believed that Finland could do without the islands in question, and without portions of the Petsamo area as well, save Petsamo itself. The Karelian border, Tanner argued, should be adjusted, but even though he believed that war could result, he stressed that if Finland abandoned Hanko, then Finland would abandon her independence.⁵⁸

Eljas Erkkö similarly believed that the surrender of Hanko would signify a humiliating defeat. If the Russians had access to Hanko, he argued, it would imply the use of the entire railroad complex of southern Finland, thereby allowing the Russians access to the entire country. Erkkö, however correct he might have been regarding this statement, certainly did

⁵⁷Jakobson, The Diplomacy of the Winter War, 125

⁵⁸Finland, Blue Book, 61-66

not understand Stalin or Russia as a whole. He refused to heed the words of those elder Finns who had personally dealt with Russia and Russians before, namely Mannerheim and Paasikivi. The Foreign Minister proceeded to believe that if Finland took a firm stand in the negotiations, the Russians would ease their demands. As the delegation left for the third and last time on October 31, Erkkö handed Tanner a note. His words occupied Tanner's thoughts on the train to Moscow: "The Russians do not want a conflict. Nor will they risk a fiasco before the eyes of the world . . ." ⁵⁹ He could not have been more wrong, for the Russians did both.

The Kremlin did not remain silent during the lapse in the negotiations. The very day the Finnish delegation left for Moscow, Molotov presented the matter before the Supreme Soviet in a public address. He emphasized the need for security in Leningrad, and warned of great harm if a treaty could not be concluded. The Soviet Union, he claimed, had "not only the right, but the duty. . . to adopt serious measures for strengthening its security." ⁶⁰ With this speech, Molotov placed the prestige of the Soviet Union on the line. It was a strategic maneuver to warn Finland, for with this move the Russians had cut off all avenues for discussion. ⁶¹

Back in Helsinki, the optimistic Erkkö made a public reply. The crowd roared when he spoke of defending basic values, of no surrender of Finnish territory for Russian military bases. And as he concluded, he stressed the fundamental attitude behind the Finnish

⁵⁹Tanner, The Winter War, 57

⁶⁰Dallin, Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy 1939-1942, 114

⁶¹Schmier, Russia and Finland, 57

delegation: the suspicion that acceptance of proposals today would destroy Finland's ability to resist the demands that were bound to follow tomorrow.⁶²

The third round of negotiations deadlocked from the start. Hanko again formed the root of the problem. After an hour's discussion, Molotov cryptically mumbled, "It is apparent that we civilians don't seem to be making progress; now it is up to the military to have their way."⁶³ Never had his words come closer to a threat during the talks.

On November 4, the talks reached a climax. Stalin summoned the Finns and offered to relinquish his claims on the peninsula of Hanko in exchange for the nearby islands of Koo, Hermanso, and Hasto-Buso. The gracious comrade Stalin then informed the Finns that they needed the protection of "larger powers," and he added, "look what happened to Poland."⁶⁴

Tanner and Paasikivi were astonished. Here, finally, was the possibility of compromise. Stalin anxiously awaited an agreement and the Finns now felt it; the price could go no lower. Paasikivi radioed Erkkö and urged him to accept the offer. Erkkö and the cabinet, however, mistakenly believed that Stalin's withdrawal from his original demands meant that the Foreign Minister was right all along. Now was the time to stand firm and resist the Russian demand for any bases on Finnish soil. The exact location of the base meant little; a Soviet installation in Finland was a threat to Finnish independence.

⁶²"Finns defy Soviets" New York Times November 1, 1939, p.1 col. 7

⁶³Hinsaw, David Heroic Finland, (New York, Doubleday, 1942), 169

⁶⁴Dallin, Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 123

Paasikivi was furious. He remarked to Colonel Paasonen, "None of the . . . people but Mannerheim understands anything."⁶⁵ The aged emissary knew that the time had come; neither the younger members of cabinet nor the Russians would go no further. In fact, they were headed in opposite directions. When Paasikivi asked Erkkö if he should call an end to the talks if no agreement could be reached, Erkkö replied, "If no agreement [is reached] on the basis proposed, you are free to break of the negotiations."⁶⁶

Tanner and Paasikivi met with Stalin again on the ninth of November. Tanner handed him Helsinki's final answer: "Finland cannot grant a foreign power military bases either on its territory or within its borders."⁶⁷ All present soon realized another deadlock was at hand and the men cordially disbanded. It lasted less than an hour. On November 13, the silence of the Kremlin convinced Helsinki to recall its envoys. The mission to Moscow, as well as the negotiations as a whole, had ended.

* * *

It wasn't long until the Kremlin initiated action of an alternative sort. On November 26, several artillery shots decimated a Red Army bunker near the border village of Mainila. Finland vehemently denied the accusations that streamed from a volatile Molotov. By the end of the month the Red Army poured into Finland; the rest is history.

⁶⁵Tanner, The Winter War, 75

⁶⁶Ibid. 73

⁶⁷Finland, Blue Book, 68

Whether or not the Winter War could have been avoided is a matter wholly dependent upon the reader's fancy for the unreal. The facts show that from the treaty of Dorpat to the Munich agreement and the subsequent change in Russian foreign outlook, the policy of the Soviet Union towards Finland was not hostile in any way. Boris Yartsev's attempt at an understanding in 1938 ultimately failed due to the strict policy of neutral aloofness that the idealistic Finnish government followed. After the hardening of diplomacy in March of 1939, Russian attempts at leasing key islands, islands which Mannerheim stressed were useless to Finland but valuable to Russia, failed as well for the same reasons. Elder statesmen who comprehended the reality of the political maelstrom of the 1930's and the reality of the Soviet Union always advocated concessions to the mighty, merciless neighbor. But for some reason, politicians of the younger generation, the Versailles generation, were much more inclined to foolishly believe that Russia is a power who believed in faith, trust, and respect. A quick glance at a map of the Second World War reveals the unfortunate fate of many a "neutral" state, including three Scandinavian countries, who disbelieved their own importance in the eyes of their neighbors.

Certainly, as the facts have shown, the Nazi-Soviet Pact sealed Finland's fate. Lodged in the Soviet sphere of influence, the Finns should have realized that they had to deal with their neighbor or face an uncertain fate. Even though it is this author's belief that the Winter War proved the pride, prowess, and solidarity of Finland as a nation, many Finns suffered and died. Twelve per cent of the population, which includes Viipuri, Finland's second largest city, fell into the hands of a terrible power.

Could Finland have bargained to save themselves from a war? The facts initially spell out affirmatively, but no one can guess what would have happened next, especially since the following May, as Hitler's Panzer divisions danced across France, the USSR swallowed the Baltic states whole. But would this, too, have happened to Finland if they had given in to Soviet demands? No one can answer this without adding heaping portions of speculation to the recipes of research.

Some day, intrepid researchers will crack the portals to key archives. Perhaps their efforts will reveal new insights or new information as to the origins and consequences of the Winter War. Or perhaps they will raise new questions for further study.

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