

B. The Russo-Finnish War

The Anticommunist Version

Many sources conclude that the Soviet Union had intended to conquer all of Finland, and use the establishment of the puppet Finnish Communist government and the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact's secret protocols as proof of this ...

With Stalin gaining absolute power through the Great Purge of 1938, the Soviet Union changed its foreign policy toward Finland in the late 1930s and began pursuing the reconquest of the provinces of Tsarist Russia lost during the chaos of the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War almost two decades earlier.

The Red Army ... had been crippled by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's Great Purge of 1937.[42] With more than 30,000 of its officers executed or imprisoned, including most of those of the highest ranks, the Red Army in 1939 had many inexperienced senior and mid-level officers.¹

The Truth

No evidence exists to support the statements above. There is little disagreement about the Soviet motive for the war against Finland, which began on November 30, 1939 and ended with the Moscow Peace Treaty signed on March 12, 1940.

Background to the Winter War

No other country had been as hostile to the Soviet Union or as dependent on Germany as was Finland. In January 1918, unable to crush a working-class communist revolution, the Finnish “Whites” called to Germany for help. Generalleutnant Rüdiger von der Goltz and 12,000 men of his Baltic Division crushed the Finnish revolution by April 1918. This was followed by a slaughter of the Russian-speaking population – men, women, and children.

There followed a Finnish war against Soviet Russia to seize Russian Karelia, commanded by General Karl Mannerheim. Soviet victory came only 4 years later, in February 1922.

According to Maxim Litvinov, Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs:

Ни в одной стране пресса не ведёт так систематически враждебной нам кампании, как в Финляндии. Ни в одной соседней стране не

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_War (accessed May 29, 2017)

ведется такая открытая пропаганда за нападение на СССР и отторжение его территории, как в Финляндии. Эту пропаганду в Финляндии ведёт целый ряд организаций, в особенности так называемое карельское академическое общество, в состав которого входят весьма влиятельные лица и чуть ли не член правительства в лице министра внутренних дел Пухака. Белогвардейская газета “Клич” призывает даже к террористическим актам. Я уже не говорю о том, что военные лица отдаленной Японии сделали излюбленным местом туризма Финляндию.²

In no country does the press conduct such a campaign that is systematically hostile to us, as in Finland. In no other neighboring country is such open propaganda conducted for the attack on the USSR and the seizure of its territory, as in Finland. This propaganda in Finland is carried out by a number of organizations, in particular the so-called Karelian academic society, which includes very influential people and almost a member of the government represented by the interior ministry of Puhak. The White Guard newspaper “Klich” even calls for terrorist acts. I'm not talking about the fact that the military faces of distant Japan have made Finland a favorite destination for tourism.

On September 23, 1937, Col. Philip R. Faymonville, U.S. military attaché to the Soviet Union, reported to Washington:

The most pressing military problem of the Soviet Union is preparing for to defend at the same time against Japan in the East and Germany with Finland in the West.

Finland and Germany

Finland had helped Germany rearm during the Versailles period, when Germany was forbidden to rearm. German U-boats were built in Finland, ostensibly for the Finns. In the 1930s, in return for copper and nickel Germany gave Finland anti-aircraft weapons and, in August 1937, a squadron of 11 submarines. By 1939, with the help of German engineers, Finland had built a network of air bases capable of holding 10 times the number of airplanes in the Finnish air force.

The Finnish military insignia was the “blue swastika.” Finland claimed that this stemmed from 1918, before the Nazi symbol had been invented. True or not, by the 1930s the swastika was firmly associated with German Nazism. With defeat at hand the Finnish government abolished it in 1944.

Soviet security demands

² Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR. T. XVIII. 1 ianvaria – 31 dekabria 1935 g. Moscow, 1973, 143.

In 1939 the Soviet Union wanted to push the border with Finland away from Leningrad. The Soviets negotiated for the rights to build fortifications on some islands in the Gulf of Finland that controlled sea access to Leningrad, and for moving the border two miles northwest to put it further from Leningrad.

Stalin stated the Soviet position thus:

Вы спрашиваете, зачем нам нужен Койвисто? Я скажу вам зачем. Я спросил Риббентропа, зачем Германия вступила в войну с Польшей. Он ответил: «Мы должны были отодвинуть польскую границу дальше от Берлина». Перед войной расстояние от Познани до Берлина составляло около двухсот километров. Теперь граница отодвинута на триста километров к востоку. Мы просим, чтобы расстояние от Ленинграда до линии границы было бы семьдесят километров. Таковы наши минимальные требования, и вы не должны думать, что мы уменьшим их. Мы не можем передвинуть Ленинград, поэтому линия границы должна быть перенесена. Относительно Койвисто: вы должны иметь в виду, что, если там были бы установлены шестнадцатидюймовые орудия, они могли бы прекратить любое передвижение нашего флота на всей акватории залива. Мы просим 2700 квадратных километров и предлагаем взамен более 5500 квадратных километров. Какое государство поступало таким образом? Такого государства нет.³

You ask why we need Koivisto? I'll tell you why. I asked Ribbentrop why Germany had entered the war with Poland. He replied: "We had to move the Polish border further away from Berlin." Before the war, the distance from Poznan to Berlin was about two hundred kilometers. Now the border is pushed back three hundred kilometers to the east. We ask that the distance from Leningrad to the frontier line be seventy kilometers. These are our minimum requirements, and you should not think that we will reduce them. We cannot move Leningrad, so the border line must be moved. Concerning Koivisto: you should keep in mind that if sixteen-inch guns were installed there, they could stop any movement of our fleet throughout the entire water area of the bay. We ask for 2700 square kilometers and offer in exchange more than 5500 square kilometers. What state did it in this way? There is no such state.

The Finnish government was divided on the question of such concessions. Marshal Mannerheim was for acceding to the generous Soviet demands, but the government declined. The Soviet Union began its attack on November 30, 1939.

The Winter War

³ V. Tanner [Vaino Tanner], Зимняя война. — М.: «Центрполиграф», 2003, Chapter 2. = Tanner V. The Winter War: Finland against Russia, 1939-1940. — Stanford: Stanford U. 1950.

By March 1940 the Red Army was in a position to collapse the remnants of the Finnish defence, advance on Helsinki and then overrun and occupy the whole country. Stalin chose, however, to respond to Finnish peace feelers and to negotiate and conclude a treaty ending the war. (Roberts, Stalin's Wars 50).

Roberts regards the Soviet demands as "relative moderation."

The Red Army suffered heavy casualties in the first months of the war, since it was attacking a fortified defense position, the Mannerheim line, in winter conditions and with inexperienced commanders. By February, under a new commander (Marshal Semion Timoshenko) the Soviets were able to breach the Mannerheim line.

The British and French, who were formally at war with Germany but in fact were doing nothing on land, made preparations to attack the Soviet Union on the side of Finland. They were willing to send 135,000 men to fight alongside the Finns. Finland sued for peace before these plans could be put into effect.

According to Roberts,

The Winter War is often depicted as a great failure of Stalin's leadership...But that was not how the war and its outcome were seen by Stalin. The war had been won, after all, and it only took three months, despite difficult terrain and weather conditions. The Soviet Union had achieved its territorial goals and the timely conclusion of the war had thwarted Anglo-French imperialist intrigues. (53-4)

Soviet research on the losses due to the military purges show that about 15,500 officers were "repressed", many of who were later reinstated. (Gerasimov) There is no evidence that this had any effect on the combat readiness of the Red Army either in the Winter War or at the time of the German invasion of June 22, 1941.