THE SOVIET DECISION FOR WAR AGAINST FINLAND,
30 NOVEMBER 1939

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Article one of the secret additional protocol of the Soviet–German Non- 
Aggression Pact of 23 August 1939 stated that, ‘in the case of a territorial-
political transformation in the area of the Baltic states (Finland, Estonia, Latvia,
Lithuania) the northern frontier of Lithuania will form at the same time the 
boundary of the spheres of interest of Germany and the USSR . . .’.1 At the end 
of September and the beginning of October this clause enabled the Soviet 
government to demand mutual assistance pacts from the Baltic states with confidence that they must be accepted. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania accepted agreements which included rights for Soviet naval and military facilities on their territories. Comparable demands were made to Finland at the beginning of October yet in spite of three visits to Moscow from 10 October to 13 November by the Finnish delegation led by J. K. Paasikivi, veteran of the Tartu negotiations of 1920, agreement was not reached. The Finnish delegation left Moscow for Helsinki on 13 November. At 8.30 a.m. on 30 November 1939 after a half-hour artillery bombardment the Red Army crossed the frontier on the Karelian isthmus in force.

The Soviet decision to take large scale military action against Finland and the tactics accompanying it mark an important precedent in Soviet policy. It was an unequivocal public break with the image built up in the 1930s of commitment to non-aggression and concern to achieve collective security on a treaty basis.2 It was significant as it saw for the first time in the period of Stalin’s power the resurgence of the revolutionary element in Soviet foreign policy with the associated attempts to impose the puppet Kuusinen government on Finland through the success of the Red Army. The suitability of the policy of collective security for the protection of Soviet interests had already been undermined externally by the appeasement of the Western powers. ‘The struggle for collective security’ was also being lost internally in 1939 (as shown by the dismissal of Litvinov), and it resulted in the conclusion of the Soviet–German non-aggression pact and the occupation of eastern Poland in September 1939. The attempt to achieve collective security against aggression, wherever it occurred, was abandoned for the pursuit of Soviet security alone. But whether anything was to survive of the earlier image of Soviet policy remained to be seen. Even the occupation of eastern Poland could still be seen as legitimately and logically directed against the German danger and an unfortunate necessity. The initiative in bringing about the collapse of Poland had been taken by Germany. It had been thought necessary to conclude the Soviet–German pact in order to
avoid a conflict with Germany for which the Soviet leaders did not consider themselves prepared at that time, particularly as the Japanese activity in the east promised a two-front war. As Poland collapsed in the first two weeks of September, Stalin was left with the alternative of seeing Germany occupy the whole of Poland by default, or of moving Soviet troops forward into the eastern provinces. He had, it is true, prepared for this eventuality in the secret articles of the Nazi–Soviet Pact by drawing a demarcation line in Poland. But only the dramatically rapid collapse of Poland and the absence of a French offensive, neither of which could have been foreseen with certainty, put this advance by the Soviet forces into operation. Stalin was also careful to draw the new frontier line near to the Curzon line proposed at Versailles in 1919 as the appropriate ethnic boundary of Poland. The mutual assistance treaties with the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in October showed that there were still limits to the manner in which the Soviet regime would pursue its security. It was certainly made clear to the Baltic states’ representatives that they had to accept the Soviet demands. Provision was made for Soviet naval and military facilities where appropriate. But the agreements also included clauses (as in that with Estonia) that they ‘should in no way affect the sovereign rights of the contracting parties and in particular their economic system and political structure’.3

The negotiations with Paasikivi and Tanner in Moscow emphasized the commitment of Stalin still to a peaceful solution. He had good reason to expect this. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact had excluded the possibility that the Finns would remain unresponsive to Soviet strategic requirements in expectation of German support, which had been the fear for much of the 1930s. And the evidence of Hitler’s continued aggression seemed to make incontrovertible Soviet claims that they needed to improve their security by controlling access into the Gulf of Finland in the face of evident future dangers. In these circumstances the Soviet demands were, as Upton notes in his excellent study of the Winter War, ‘both rational and moderate’.4 The Soviet expectation that a settlement could be reached and was desirable was shown by the tone of the negotiations, which were generally friendly and not threatening. Stalin and Molotov attempted to convince by their arguments rather than by the weight of Soviet power. The priority given to a negotiated solution was shown by the involvement of Stalin himself in most of the discussions, and by a significant flexibility in the Soviet negotiating position, even though there remained the essential points of a base at the entrance to the Gulf of Finland and of the removal of the frontier on the Karelian isthmus further away from Leningrad. Stalin did not insist on a mutual assistance treaty which had been imposed on the Baltic states. He sought to find ways by which the proposal might be made more acceptable to the Finnish parliament and to give assurances on the evacuation of a base at Hanko at the conclusion of the war between Germany, Britain and France. After Molotov had seemed to bring the discussions to a close on 3 November with the statement that as there had been no agreement ‘the matter will have to be handed over to the military’, Stalin still showed a readiness to compromise. He returned to the discussions on 4 November and when the Finns firmly resisted any arrangement on Hanko, he dropped the idea and proposed an agreement for a base on any of
the islands off the Hanko peninsula. Even when this was rejected by the Finns in the final session on 9 November, Stalin still sought to find another island in the vicinity which the Finns would be prepared to concede by lease or sale, but without success. Stalin’s commitment to a negotiated settlement, for whatever reasons, right up to 9 November at least, thus maintaining a particular image of Soviet policy, emphasises the importance of the decision to use military force against Finland, made between that date and 30 November.

The context of the decision to use force was equally momentous for Soviet external policy. Integrally associated with it was the decision to set up a new government under the émigré Finnish communist, Otto Kuusinen, secretary of the Comintern, which the victory of the Red Army would enable to be established in Helsinki. The Kuusinen government tactic signified a new phase which undermined the credibility of assurances on independence. That this was not simply a means of pressure on the existing Finnish government but a definite commitment of the Soviet authorities from the beginning of the war, was shown by the Soviet refusal to recognise any longer the real Finnish government in Helsinki and by the publication on 2 December on the front page of Pravda of pictures of Stalin, Molotov and Kuusinen signing the treaty with the new ‘government’.

Stalin had not dissociated himself from the revolutionary theme in Soviet foreign policy. In 1926 he had noted that ‘in order to win conclusively, we must ensure that the capitalist encirclement is replaced by a socialist encirclement, that the proletariat is victorious at least in several countries’. Socialist revolutions were necessary in order to guarantee the security of the first revolution. The Finnish case of 1939 and then of the Baltic states in 1940 were the first occasions during Stalin’s period of power when Soviet policy actively sought to create the favourable situation called for in 1926. But it would be wrong to make too close a link between them as simply being a reversion to a policy aim long held and which represented ‘real’ Stalinist foreign policy. Such an aim could not be single-mindedly pursued because of other conflicting considerations and unforeseen circumstances. That the revolutionary theme was revived at that particular time was a result not simply of Stalin’s single minded commitment to it, but of the outcome of the struggle for influence in foreign policy internally and, in particular, of the closing of other seemingly feasible avenues of action by developments beyond Soviet control. The persistence with which Stalin pursued the negotiations with Finland in 1939 showed that (at least at that time) he preferred an alternative to the revolutionary theme. The views of influential figures in Finland, Mannerheim, Paasikivi and Tanner, in favour of a fuller acceptance of the Soviet security claims, emphasized that in hoping for agreement Stalin was not unrealistic, nor was he attempting simply to create an opportunity for intervention in a revolutionary style.

The failure of the negotiations undermined the hopes of the Soviet authorities (held more by some than by others) that Soviet security could be maintained in cooperation with existing independent bourgeois governments on their north-western borders. The military action was not now simply concerned with acquiring the requisite territories, but with forcibly changing the character of the
Finnish government. The failure of the Finnish government to give adequate appreciation to Soviet security needs, in the presence of the self-evident dangers of 1939, strengthened the view in the Soviet leadership that the chances of getting bourgeois governments on its borders to appreciate the rationale of Soviet claims was limited. Their policies would always be little more than veiled hostility. The attempt to solve the Finnish problem by the imposition of the Kuusinen government was a recognition of this line of argument which had significance for the future. But that it was not the inevitable or even most desirable (for the Soviet leadership) outcome of Soviet policy is emphasized by the serious attempts to reach a negotiated agreement.

In this light therefore the conditions determining both the decision to use force against Finland, and the accompanying of this by the decision to impose a communist government on Finland at some time after 9 November 1939, deserve close examination, which is the purpose of this article. Three aspects deserve examination. Firstly, in what conditions had military action against Finland been contemplated before 1939 and what were the military considerations relating to the decision to embark on operations at that time and place; secondly, what was the origin and significance (for the decision to go to war) of the establishment and recognition of the Kuusinen government at the moment of embarking on military operations; and thirdly, what does the Mainila frontier incident of 26 November 1939, which was the immediate occasion for the war, reveal about Soviet policy?

How far had the Soviet leadership contemplated before 1939 a military solution of its north-western problem in so far as it concerned Finland? As early as June 1935 the Soviet minister, Erik Assmus had warned the Finnish prime minister, Kivimäki, that if there were war between Germany and the Soviet Union, it would involve Finland; and the Soviet army would not wait on the frontier at Rajajoki only 20 miles from Leningrad, but would occupy Finland within a week. This tough talk, whatever the exact content of it, had its effect. In November 1935 foreign minister Hackzell appeared in the Finnish parliament to assert Finland’s desire to follow a Scandinavian orientation and hold aloof from the struggle of the great powers. But the Soviet leaders failed to see in this anything more than a tactical change in Finnish policy.

Again, as the international situation deteriorated at the end of 1936, A. A. Zhdanov, Leningrad party secretary and recently appointed chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Supreme Soviet, in a speech at the eighth Congress of Soviets in Moscow on 29 November warned of the possibility of military conflict with Finland:

... as you know the Leningrad region marks the Soviet frontier with Finland, Estonia and Latvia, countries with whose peoples the USSR has normal peaceful relations. And if, in some of these little countries, for example Finland, feelings of hostility to the USSR are being kindled by larger and more adventurous countries, and preparations are being made to make their territory available for aggressive action by fascist powers, in the long run it is these little countries alone who will be the losers. It does not pay for little countries to get entangled in big adventures, and if fascism dares to seek military victories on the north-west frontier of the Soviet Union, then we in Leningrad, placing
at the service of defence all the technical strengths we can command, shall deal it such a crushing blow that the enemy will never again turn his eyes on Leningrad.9

These were certainly crude threats, but they were conditional. They were a warning against Finland being used by Germany against the Soviet Union.10 Zhdanov’s words need to be put in the context of the international situation of the Soviet Union in late 1936; the failure of non-intervention in Spain was seen as a serious threat, the Anti-Comintern Pact of November 1936 threatened the possibility of a two-front conflict. And relations with Finland specifically were at a low point. Litvinov in a conversation in Geneva in October 1936 with Rudolf Holsti, the new Finnish foreign minister, commented that Finland seemed to orientate itself in international politics towards the Germans, even after the emergence of Hitler to power.11 Although Finland in 1935 had declared in favour of a Scandinavian orientation, the Soviet leadership had not been convinced that this was anything more than a smoke screen. Indeed Svinhufvud, Finnish President until 1937, saw Finland’s salvation only in Germany and had commented privately at this time to the German minister in Helsinki, W. von Blücher, that ‘the Russian danger is permanent. For Finland it is therefore good when Germany is strong, from the Finnish point of view Hitler is better than Stresemann’.12 The anti-Soviet demonstrations and articles in the Finnish press in favour of the Karelians and Ingrians in the mid-1930s, combined with the right wing movements of the IKL (National Patriotic Movement) and the influential AKS (Academic Karelian Society) produced frequent protests from the Soviet Union; and specifically in the autumn of 1936, frontier incidents had occurred in which a Soviet border guard had been killed and the Finns were reluctant to cooperate in an enquiry into the matter.13 Zhdanov’s statement should not be seen as a Soviet commitment to solve problems with Finland in future by war and certainly not as the only strain in Soviet foreign policy; but it was a reminder that Finland’s foreign policy orientation was not a matter of indifference to the Soviet Union in the context of the virulently anti-Soviet regime in Germany.

Finnish policy from November 1935, and particularly under Rudolf Holsti as Foreign Minister between October 1936 and November 1938, emphasized its non-alignment and Scandinavian neutrality in the great power conflicts. But the strategic position of Finland was an increasing preoccupation of the Soviet authorities as they viewed the possibility of a war with Germany. Even Svinhufvud appreciated this, believing that if it did come to a German–Soviet war Soviet forces would only occupy the islands of Suurasaari (Hogland) and Kiovisto (Björkø).14 The policy pursued by the Finnish government in 1937–38 led to an improvement in Soviet–Finnish relations and somewhat reduced, but did not remove, the Soviet fear that the Scandinavian orientation was simply a cover for maintaining links with Germany.15 Certainly there was enough evidence to arouse Soviet suspicion, particularly in the activities of the Finnish military. But the improvement of relations enabled the Soviet authorities to feel confident enough to raise the question of improving their security by negotiation in the hope that this would not arouse Finnish suspicion. The Soviet
awareness of the delicacy of the matter in Finnish conditions is shown by the covert manner of the discussions through the second secretary at the Helsinki legation, Boris Yartsev, between April and December 1938. These negotiations also show that the Soviet authorities were convinced that Finland might not in all circumstances be hostile to them in a Soviet–German war. Yartsev explored the possibility of a mutual assistance treaty (a non-starter for the Finns) and the slightly more hopeful proposals of the lease of some of the islands of the Gulf of Finland (particularly the largest, Suursaari) as a Soviet base; or for their exchange against territory in Karelia. These ideas were also raised by Mikoyan at the opening of trade negotiations in December 1938; and Boris Shtein, a former minister to Helsinki, was sent on a special mission in March–April 1939 to press the Finnish government again on these matters. Although Mannerheim understood the Soviet concerns and advised that Shtein should not be allowed to depart empty handed, Finnish Foreign Minister Erkko was resolute: nothing could be conceded. Whether the Finns were right or wrong to be so uncompromising is not the concern of this article. Of course they were reluctant to concede anything if it could be avoided. As Hakkila, the speaker of the Finnish parliament, later pointed out ‘little nations do not get back what they have once given away’. But the persistence of the Soviet attempts at negotiation, at a time when Litvinov was losing his authority, are evidence that even amongst the newly emerging influences on Soviet foreign policy making in 1938–39 the conviction was that the mood in Finland had changed, so that a negotiated settlement satisfactory to Soviet strategic requirements and not too obviously unacceptable to Finnish sensibilities was possible.

With the deterioration of the international situation in late 1938 and early 1939 efforts were made to improve the defences of Leningrad and specifically the communications from the Murmansk railway towards the Finnish frontier under the direction of the newly appointed (February 1939) commander of the Leningrad military district, K. A. Meretsov. This, significantly perhaps, follows the failure of Yartsev’s feelers in 1938. But only after the failure of the Shtein mission to Finland in April 1939 was B. M. Shaposhnikov, chief of the general staff and former commander of the Leningrad military district, ordered to prepare plans for the event of a campaign against Finland. He made wide-ranging proposals emphasizing that significant exertions of the whole Red Army would be required for such a conflict. He considered it was ‘far from a simple matter and expected that it would require not less than several months of intense and difficult war, even in the event that the great imperialist powers did not intervene directly in the conflict’. And to avoid this, speed was essential: ‘the corresponding military action should be carried out and completed in a very short time’ in order not to give the opportunity for intervention. This plan for a campaign against Finland alone, not apparently in the context of a war with the imperialist powers, but pre-empting possible action, was a result of the failure to reach agreement with the Finns. But at the end of June 1939 at a meeting of the Chief Military Council chaired by Voroshilov, Shaposhnikov’s views and plans were rejected as they were said to under-estimate the strength of the Red Army.
Certainly, on Swedish advice, the Finns had rejected in May a non-aggression pact with Germany but their refusal to accept a guarantee from Britain, France and the Soviet Union was regarded as either naivety or proof that they were in tow of Germany. And on 21 June news reached Moscow of the forthcoming visit of General Halder, Chief of the German General Staff, to Finland and Estonia. The General arrived on 29 June and visited the Karelian isthmus, where energetic efforts were being made to improve the defences, and then Lapland. At the same time the Soviet negotiations with Britain and France were progressing rather slowly: the British and French proposals of 21 June excluded any guarantee of Finland, Estonia or Latvia, which provoked a critical article from Zhdanov in Pravda doubting the good faith of the Western powers. Only on 1 July did the British and French accept the inclusion of Finland, Estonia and Latvia, but not the concept of ‘indirect aggression’, which encapsulated the Soviet fear that the German front against them might be extended to the Soviet–Finnish and Estonian frontiers without any overt aggression, but simply by internal developments in those states. The Soviet leaders did not have the same trust in the stability of Finnish policy and the strengths of the constitutional democratic system that the Finns had themselves, and the developments of the 1930s in Europe gave them some basis for this view. The Soviet leaders were not appreciative of the nuances in Finland in the attitudes of the military leadership, but simply aware of their pro-German tendencies. These might for the time being be muted, but if the occasion arose when the Soviet Union was in a difficult position, they would be unlikely to make the Finns helpful. That some of the more sensitive Finns were aware that it was not enough to be firmly convinced themselves of their commitment to Scandinavian neutrality, but was necessary to be sure they were creating the appropriate image elsewhere, was shown in a letter from Väinö Tanner, the Social Democratic Minister of Finance, to J. K. Paasikivi in July 1939:

We have often been directly provocative and have spoken and written about Soviet Russia disparagingly. We ought to make an end of that. The Russians have also spoken to me about the unbridled friendship for Germany which has appeared in our press, in the speeches of public figures and particularly through the visits to Germany of the military.

It is in this context that the instructions to Meretskov at the end of June 1939 should be seen, ordering him to prepare, within two or three weeks, plans for a ‘counter attack’ against Finland making use of the resources of the Leningrad Military District alone. These were approved at a further meeting of the Chief Military Council at the end of July; he was advised to prepare to complete the campaign in the shortest time possible. His objections, like those of Shaposhnikov, that ‘a few weeks for an operation on such a scale were not enough’ were brushed aside: the campaign was to last three weeks and he, like Shaposhnikov, was told ‘it was necessary to take into consideration the strength of the Soviet Union as a whole’. What political conditions does this decision suggest that Stalin and the Soviet leadership foresaw in June–July 1939? Was the instruction to Meretskov to rely
on the forces of Leningrad alone a recognition that the campaign would be easy; or that the Red Army would also be adequately occupied elsewhere? And what was meant by the seemingly contradictory comment to ‘rely on the strength of the Soviet Union as a whole’? What seems to be clear is that the plan foresaw a campaign against Finland in which, whatever action the ‘imperialist’ powers might take, they would not have time to intervene in Finland. Why then could not more substantial forces be employed, as the military advised? Whatever opportunities might develop in Finland in the near future, it was clear in the summer of 1939 that the situation of the Soviet Union, between Germany and Japan, would not allow it to lower its guard elsewhere on its frontiers. It is significant that O. W. Kuusinen was present at the preliminary discussions with Stalin and Meretkov in June and that Stalin advised the general to keep in contact with Kuusinen, who would inform him about the Finnish situation. Kuusinen’s involvement at this stage suggests that the germ of the Kuusinen government idea was already present in June 1939. What was Kuusinen to advise Meretkov about, if not the relevant developments of the Finnish socio-political situation?25

The Chief Military Council, which made the decision to prepare for a Finnish campaign, had been established in March 1938 following the purging of the Soviet officer corps. It included a substantial political element with Stalin, Zhdanov and Mekhlis, Chief of the Red Army Political Directorate, who had been the instrument for much of the military purge, and rather few competent military specialists except for Shaposhnikov. At the XVIII Congress in March 1939 Voroshilov had declared ‘comrades, our army is invincible’, and Mekhlis had claimed ‘the army had not suffered as a result of the purge . . . but was actually stronger’.26 The influence of these attitudes on the political leadership in 1939 is evident from the military memoirs. In the post-purge context the military specialists were hardly in a position to press their views against the political generals and civilians. But were their warnings entirely without effect? The Soviet government’s requirements from Finland did not radically change with the departure of Litvinov in May 1939. The proposals of October–November 1939 were certainly rather more far reaching, but their limited purpose was essentially the same. Their content and manner of negotiation confirmed that the Soviet leadership thought at that time a negotiated solution was necessary and possible, even though the agreement with Germany created more favourable conditions for action. The relative caution of Stalin’s diplomacy in this matter suggests a rather more sober estimate of the ease with which the Red Army could resolve conflicts; and when the negotiations failed, the approaching winter made the warnings of the professional military leaders even more relevant.

By the time the negotiations with Finland had begun on 14 October, the possibility of German support for Finland had been excluded.27 Stalin on the first day warned that they had sent troops to the frontier like the Finns, who had in effect mobilised by 10 October. On 23 October, as the negotiations faltered, Molotov, irritated by the lack of progress, enquired of the Finns ‘do you want matters to lead to a conflict?’; and on 3 November he told them that ‘the
negotiations had failed and the matter would have to be given over to the military’. On the same day the first serious warning came on the front page of Pravda that the fate of Beck who ‘provoked war with Germany’ could await Erkko, the Finnish Foreign Minister, who was ‘working for war against the Soviet Union’. But there was an element of bluff still in Molotov’s intimidation; the decision had not yet been made to go to war; there were evidently good reasons for trying to avoid it. This is clear from the return of Stalin to the negotiations on 4 November and the flexibility shown on the matter of the site of the naval base which the Soviet Union had demanded. Hanko on the mainland was not essential and Stalin made two further proposals for the use of islands off the Hanko peninsula instead. Paasikivi felt that it would have been possible to reach agreement, but the Finnish government set too narrow limits for the negotiations and Erkko was convinced that all they had to do was to hold firm. The final Soviet commitment to a military solution does not even appear to have been made when the negotiations failed on 10 November. Confronted with unexpected Finnish unwillingness to appreciate their point of view, Soviet policy makers hesitated. The international situation was not so stable that the Soviet Union could risk being involved in a war which its military specialists had advised would be difficult and lengthy, particularly as winter was approaching. But the dilemma was that although Stalin evidently preferred a diplomatic settlement, its achievement had become dependent on the Soviet Union making clear its power and determination to reach a settlement. Erkko’s parting advice to Paasikivi: ‘forget the Soviet Union is a great power’, illustrated the problem.28 For the Soviet Union, however, there was a limit to how far sabre rattling could be taken as bluff, without losing its credibility.

As the negotiations with Finland faltered and broke down in November, the warnings of the more serious Soviet military authorities that war with Finland could not be entered on lightly must have been repeated, even though the possibility of serious international intervention seemed to be prevented now by the secret articles of the Soviet–German pact. Men like Mekhlis and Kulik laughed at the idea that it would be a difficult campaign, estimating it would be all over in twelve days. Meretskov complains in his memoirs that the war was taken so lightly that they were not prepared when the order to cross the frontier came on 29 November; the reserves were not fully concentrated on the Karelian isthmus and there were supply shortages. They required at least a week but were only given four days after the Mainila frontier incident. Meretskov warned at the end of November, ‘it is criminal to believe that our task will be easy or just like a parade, as I have been told by officers in connection with my inspection’. And N. N. Voronov, who was sent in mid-November as head of a military commission to Ukhta and Petrozavodsk and the Karelian isthmus, and who kept constant contact with the Defence Commissariat and General Staff, warned against ‘mob tactics’ (‘shaikazakidatel’svo’) and that communications were bad and the conditions difficult, particularly for tanks. In Voronov’s view they would be lucky if they could settle with Finland within two or three months.29

The persistent attempt to reach a negotiated solution (an opening was still left for a peaceful settlement even after Mainila), suggests that the warnings of the
more serious military about the difficulties of the campaign were not without impact.

The Finns’ awareness of the strategic importance of their southern coast to the defence of Leningrad, with its command over access up the Gulf of Finland, and the nearness of the frontier to Leningrad itself, made them fear that the Soviet authorities might feel compelled to take action in any case to insure themselves in an uncertain situation. On the other hand the Soviet leaders’ awareness of the strategic importance of command of the gulf of Finland to the defence of Leningrad made them fear that a great power opponent, in the event of war, would seek to control it, as had happened in 1918 and 1919, and that they must be prepared to pre-empt such an attempt. The internal balance of forces in Finland particularly in the first half of the 1930s only increased the Soviet suspicion that the Finnish authorities might cooperate in providing help to a power hostile to the Soviet Union in the event of a war; it certainly showed that the Finns would not do anything to help the Soviet Union if it were in difficulties.

If a satisfactory settlement could not be obtained from Finland, war was not the only alternative open to the Soviet Union after 10 November 1939, particularly in view of Stalin’s preference for a peaceful solution and the advice of the military. The failure of the negotiations strengthened the hand of those in the Soviet leadership who were keen on a military solution, but did not make war the only possible tactic. The matter could have been left until the spring, having made clear their own position to the Finns, and the lack of outside support available in the context of the Soviet-German pact. But the problem also had wider ramifications. The Soviet-German non-aggression pact was an insecure basis for Soviet policy. The direction Germany would take now that Poland was defeated remained to be seen. The western front was inactive; and given the cast of Stalin’s mind, he must have entertained the fear that Britain and France would settle with Germany and leave the latter to direct its efforts to Eastern Europe. As a result of the agreements of 28 September, Stalin had even been compelled to commit himself to trying to bring about a peace between Germany and the Western allies. The scrupulous exclusion from the Soviet press of accusations against Germany for continuing the war, and the directives to foreign communist parties, showed how important the Soviet government considered it was not to antagonise Germany. But this very policy might well be construed as weakness in Germany and bring a reversion to an anti-Soviet foreign policy. Doubts about the real military strength of the Soviet Union were common amongst the leadership of the European powers, particularly after the purges of 1937–38, and were an important factor in Erkko’s instructions to the Finnish negotiators in Moscow. In other circumstances, Stalin might simply have waited, quietly confident in the strength of the Soviet Union. But this was not enough. The evaluation of the strength or weakness of the Soviet Union was a vital factor in an uncertain international situation. To have failed to obtain fairly modest concessions from the Finns at a time when the Germans were glorying in their brilliantly rapid defeat of Poland would have emphasised lack of Soviet virility, strengthened doubts in Germany about Soviet military capacity and
made clear that it was only Soviet weakness which had committed the country to the Soviet–German non-aggression pact.

If a military solution was to be attempted, an essential requirement, as evident in the Military Council discussion in the summer, was that the campaign should be short and decisive. These requirements did not lose their importance in the uncertain international situation at the end of 1939. Something was needed still to give conviction to the argument that military success could be achieved quickly and without complications. This was the essential role played by the Kuusinen government idea in the decision to seek a military solution. Already, no later than 13 November, preparations were begun to make use of émigré Finnish communists to form an alternative government. It would, it was hoped, be attractive enough to discourage the Finns from seriously struggling against such implacable odds. But it was a fateful decision with which Soviet historians have not yet come to terms and which undermined the frequent assurances about Finnish independence. How did the decision come to be taken? It has generally been concluded that it was the result of the influence of A. A. Zhdanov. This was the view of Tuure Lehen (one of the members of the Kuusinen ‘government’) in an interview in 1968 and of Yrjö Leino, communist Minister of the Interior in Finland in 1948; and also of Erkki Salomaa, Kuusinen’s biographer. Even before the end of the Winter war, Ribbentrop’s contacts had convinced him that Zhdanov had been responsible for what by then was regarded as a disastrous error.

Zhdanov had been chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Supreme Soviet since 1936 and an active critic of Litvinov. He had been naturally involved with the officers of the Leningrad Military District for many years improving the defences of the area. As Litvinov’s authority declined, his opponents naturally gained in influence in 1939. In July Zhdanov had entertained Admiral Kuznetsov, Naval Commissar, on a cruise along the Gulf of Finland on which the strategic problems created for the navy bottled up in Kronstadt were discussed and compared with 1914. Zhdanov was present at the signing of the treaty with Kuusinen on 1 December 1939 and was one of the signatories of the Treaty of Moscow at the end of the war. He certainly stood for a hard isolationist line in foreign policy, tending ‘to see the rest of the world as an undifferentiated and uniformly hostile mass’.

But no definite evidence links Zhdanov exclusively with the Kuusinen government idea. Bolshevik fundamentalist ideas had more opportunity to come to the surface with the decline of Litvinov. Already in 1938 the Leningrad newspaper Krasnaya gazeta had insisted that in the event of a conflict with Finland the Finnish workers and peasants would not fight for their bourgeois government. And Molotov was not far from the idea when in August 1939 he told the Finnish Chargé d’Affaires to take note of the Czechoslovak case, the implication being that it was only necessary to find a suitable Hacha. Zhdanov’s notorious speech of 29 November 1936 had threatened action against the Finns, but in circumstances which were different from those of 1939, and he made no threats of subversion. Derevyansky, a former subordinate of Zhdanov, had been appointed Minister in Helsinki in early 1938 and had consulted with
Zhdanov on the most trivial matters. But the key developments of the
Soviet–Finnish relations at that time, the Yartsev negotiations and Shtein
mission, were controlled directly from Moscow. Yartsev emphasized that his
instructions were directly from Molotov and Mikoyan. The autonomy of
Zhdanov’s position in policy making on the Baltic should not be exaggerated.34
It is also necessary to take account of Kuusinen himself. Both Tuominen and
Aino Kuusinen confirmed that Kuusinen was closer to Stalin than to Zhdanov.
He hardly ever left Moscow and there was no special trust between him and
Zhdanov. There had even been tension and conflict over the purging of Finnish
communist leaders in the Karelo–Finnish SSR in 1937–38. Even if the details of
Aino Kuusinen’s tale of December 1935 may be treated with caution, the central
idea that communists would only come to power with the success of the Red
Army does not seem incredible. And that Kuusinen had the special confidence
of Stalin in the discussion of Soviet policy towards Finland was shown by Stalin’s
consultation with him before the Military Council meeting in June 1939 and his
advice to Meretskov to consult him directly on Finnish affairs, and not Zhdanov.
Khrushchev’s reminiscences also confirm Kuusinen’s close involvement with
Stalin and Molotov on the eve of the war.35 It was perhaps unfortunate for
Finland that when the issue of war or peace was in a delicate balance in 1939,
when so many other foreign communists had been liquidated, that the Finn,
Kuusinen, had survived close to Stalin and with his confidence. It gave sufficient
credibility to the idea, contested amongst the military, that military action
against Finland could be a walkover and would not produce complications.

The tactic of the Kuusinen government was based on the conception that
Finnish society would not be cohesive enough to fight against the Soviet Union.
Derevyansky and Lisin, the Tass correspondent in Helsinki, have been
considered by some writers to have been responsible for this impression.36 But it
was one thing to propagandise the commonplace view (to Soviet readers) that
bourgeois societies could not long fight against the Soviet Union because of their
class divisions; it was quite another for the political leadership to be convinced
enough of it in a particular case to use it as an essential basis of policy. It is
difficult to accept that Derevyansky and Lisin were influential enough to
determine so significant a change of policy. Derevyansky had not been trusted
with any serious negotiations with Finland in 1938–39 and what is most
significant about the reports of Lisin is that the decision was made in Moscow to
publish them, rather than that they were written. The reports, which appeared in
Pravda between 3 November and 26 November, were confined to page 5 and
most were only short notices based on the more left wing Finnish newspapers.
They are not evidence that the Soviet public was being prepared for the war
between the failure of the negotiations and the Mainila frontier incident on 26
November. If the substance of these short reports were to be believed, Finland
would shortly find itself bankrupt as a result of the burden of mobilisation and
would be forced to come to some kind of modus vivendi with the Soviet Union.
The corollary of this was that military action would not be required: it was only
the Finnish government which was trying to provoke it.37

The Kuusinen government could be needed, it was expected, within a
fortnight of the beginning of a conflict. But it is difficult to believe that Stalin was easily convinced of its practical value and that the dropping of a few leaflets on Helsinki and the Finnish army was going to produce a revolt in the name of a ‘government’ most of whose members were not known in Finland. He knew that many of the better known émigré Finnish communists such as Gylling, Mäkinen and Hyvönen had been disposed of in the purges. In Finland many communists were in prison, and the Kuusinen government had no way of organising or contacting them. Further, it was known by 23 November that the general secretary of the Finnish Communist Party, Arvo Tuominen, refused to have anything to do with the ‘government’. Yet even after this disappointment, the Soviet leadership persisted in its wishful thinking: the idea served other purposes. The government entering Finland in the train of the Red Army was unlikely to convince many Finns or foreign observers. But the judgment of the situation in Finland reflected in the puppet government preparations helped to counter the doubts put in the minds of the Soviet political leadership by the professional military about whether a military campaign could be conducted without complications. As Molotov later commented to a Finnish emissary: ‘... at that time we did not intend to fight with you’. It was also necessary to explain the war to the Soviet people. Finland had not attacked the Soviet Union and was not likely to. Yet the Soviet leadership considered the modification of the frontier and acquisition of a naval base to be of vital significance at least until the end of the state of war in Europe. But how was it to be attained? Simple unadorned aggression would destroy the whole aura of Soviet policy. The Kuusinen ‘government’ enabled the war to be presented to the Soviet people as a ‘liberating mission’. In a front page picture in Pravda on 2 December Stalin and Molotov appeared at the signing of the ‘treaty’ with Kuusinen, thus linking the highest Soviet prestige with the scheme. At the same time Soviet pronouncements and propaganda to their own troops claimed forcefully that the Soviet Union had no wish to threaten the independence of Finland. This can only have been expected to convince their own people. It was only developments resulting from the frontier incident at Mainila on 26 November that produced the final decision to go to war. On that day at the village of Mainila on the Soviet side of the frontier on the Karelian isthmus four Soviet soldiers were reported by the Soviet authorities to have been killed and more injured by Finnish artillery. This has been considered by Soviet historians to have been a provocation and the immediate cause of the train of events which led to the Soviet action on 30 November. The Finns, however, claimed that they had no artillery close enough to fire into the Soviet village concerned and that the Finnish frontier guards had noted at the time in their reports that the shots sounded as if they came from the south-east and thus from Soviet territory! The evidence suggests that this incident was either some kind of an accident on the part of Soviet troops or a Soviet fabrication. This view has been strengthened by the publication in Moscow in 1970 of a collection of documents on the Soviet frontier guards units. The introduction to this volume for the period 1939 to 1941 makes no mention of the Mainila incident, but only of the two rather minor infringements said to have occurred on 28 November, which could hardly be
considered adequate ‘provocation’ for war. More significant is the fact that in
the collection of documents itself, for the Mainila incident, only the Tass report
is published. This could hardly be considered convincing first hand evidence on
the incident which Soviet writers consider to have provoked the war, and the
Soviet version of which has been contested. It contrasts with the lengthy reports
from the frontier guards on the spot for the trivial incidents on 28 November.
Clearly the frontier guards' reports on Mainila, if they existed, were not suitable
for publication. In his memoirs Khrushchev also admits that he had doubts about
the Soviet view that ‘the Finns fired first’.41

If it was a Soviet fabrication, was it planned by the policy makers to provide an
excuse for the war? This is doubtful. Although the incident was immediately
followed by orchestrated factory meetings—in the middle of the night—calling
for retribution on the Finns, and Pravda of 27 November was held up until
mid-day to enable the protests to be published, yet Molotov’s note of 26
November to the Finns clearly left a way out. He did not wish, he wrote, ‘to
exaggerate the importance of this revolting act committed by troops belonging to
the Finnish army owing perhaps to a lack of proper guidance on the part of their
superiors . . .’. But, he asked the Finns to move their forces 20–25 kilometres
away from the frontier on the Karelian isthmus. The Soviet note was not cast in
an ultimatory fashion and left some room for negotiations on how to avoid such
frontier incidents. The Mainila event was not therefore used as an immediate
justification for the war. In making the proposal for withdrawal, Molotov cannot
have been sure that the Finns would not accept and thus defuse the situation.42
Such a withdrawal would certainly have breached the Finnish defensive line in
the north of the isthmus; and if they accepted this unilateral withdrawal, they
would be recognising their responsibility for the Mainila incident. But for
the Soviet leaders it was possible that their actions would now have at last
convinced the Finns that they needed to give way, as in extremity military action
would be taken. In Finland, however, the key political figures still remained
unconvinced that the Soviet Union would actually decide to embark on a war as
long as the Finns showed a stubborn resistance to pressure. Even at this late
hour the Finnish Foreign Minister, Erkko, found the oblique Soviet threats
unconvincing. As J. K. Paasikivi later wrote, ‘right was on our side, but were
wisdom and good sense as well?’ But if the Finnish leadership made an error, it
was an error of misjudgement over a common phenomenon of international
relations: what pose is more likely in any given situation to deter a demanding
and stronger opponent—reasoned compromise or stubborn maintenance of
rights? The Finnish tactics only may have been wrong in that the war was not
prevented. But there is no certainty that a more appeasing stand would have
satisfied the Soviet leadership. The war came about not because the Finns were
not conciliatory enough, but because the Soviet leadership felt itself to be in a
position to pursue its diplomatic demands successfully by other means. As
Paasikivi wrote: ‘moral foundations, as we small nations understand them, one
should not expect to find in the policies of the great powers, at least not in their
relations with the small powers’. But yet, aware of the fact that the great powers
are only led by men who are no different from those who lead small powers in
essence, he recognised that although 'all great powers are imperialistic . . . perhaps only the powerlessness of small powers prevents them following the same road'.

Molotov’s Mainila protest note was a last chance for the Finns which illustrated the Soviet reluctance to embark on military operations. Khrushchev’s reminiscences lend support to this view. He reports a dinner with Molotov, Stalin and Kuusinen (but not, it seems, Zhdanov) at the end of November 1939 at which they agreed ‘the Finns should be given a last chance to accept the territorial demands’ otherwise ‘we would take military action’. After they had ‘sat around for a long time’ and the ‘ultimatum’ had expired, Kulik was despatched to supervise the bombardment of the Finnish border. In response the Finns fired back and the war had begun. In Khrushchev’s garbled account from memory all this happens on the same night. Although the Finnish reply about Mainila had already been received on 28 November, Khrushchev’s description could be of the night of the 28–29 November. The order to attack was given on 29 November. The artillery bombardment began at 8.00 a.m. on 30 November and Soviet troops crossed the frontier at 8.30 a.m. Khrushchev was not fully conversant with the development of the situation. He had only been at the meeting by chance, which accounts for some of the confusion in his story, but what does emerge from this unique evidence from Stalin’s headquarters is the feeling immediately before the war that the Finns should be given ‘a last chance’. In the light of this, it seems that the Mainila incident was either fabricated locally or simply used in order to emphasize the seriousness of the situation and to try to obtain a ‘final’ concession, rather than as an immediate excuse for the war. It was a further confirmation that although the Soviet leadership was responsible for the decision to go to war, there was considerable equivocation over it.

The Soviet decision to make the non-aggression pact with Germany in August 1939 was not made out of sympathy for Germany or because of an identification with an authoritarian regime, but out of cool calculation that it was the best way to avoid involvement in a war which would be likely to bear heavily on Soviet efforts as it would start over Poland and would therefore be focused in eastern Europe. Hitler’s pressure on Poland was the initiative to which the Soviet leaders had to respond if they were to come to an agreement with him. The Soviet leaders were not the initiators of the move for dynamic changes in eastern Europe. They were still the potential opponents of the Nazi regime. The agreement of 1939 had been entered into in order to avoid war with Germany. As an agreement between two such ideologically hostile opponents, the danger was that it would be interpreted on the German side as a sign of Soviet weakness. The agreement therefore necessarily influenced the style and character of Soviet actions on the international scene. Having entered the Nazi–Soviet pact the Soviet leaders needed to show their comparable virility as a great power, able like Germany to impose their will on smaller powers. It was in the context of these pressures on Soviet policy makers that the Soviet–Finnish conflict arose. That in the end the Soviet leaders were unwilling to accept the status quo, having made the Finns aware of their isolation and the pressure they could bring to bear, was not simply a result of the importance to them of the
issues of the closeness of the Finnish frontier to Leningrad and the need to block the entrance of the Gulf of Finland by a base on the Finnish side, but substantially of their need not to appear weak to their erstwhile accomplice in eastern Europe, who had recently secured yet another dramatic success in the Blitzkrieg against Poland. Hitler's style in international relations was contagious, though some were perhaps more susceptible to it than others.

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1 Akten zur deutschen auswärigen Politik, 1918–1945, Ser. D, Vol. 5, (Baden-Baden 1953), p. 206. Soviet historians continue in print to deny the validity of this document, as expressed, for instance, in the following reference to 'falsifications' in a recent collective work: 'Attempting to remove the responsibility of the imperialistic powers for the outbreak of the Second World War, Western historians even spread the idea of a "deal" between the USSR and Germany on the basis of some kind of "division of spheres of influence in Europe"'. P. P. Sevost'yakov in E. M. Zhukov et al., (eds.), Prichiny vozniknoveniya vtoroi mirovoi voiny (Moscow, 1982), p. 158. In discussion, however, there seems to be less readiness simply to deny the fact of the secret additional protocol: see A. Hillegruber, 'Der Hitler–Stalin Pakt und die Entfesselung des zweiten Weltkrieges', Historische Zeitschrift, Vol. 230, 1980, p. 341. In early 1979 there was a Soviet protest to Finland about a reference in a Finnish TV film to the inclusion of Finland in the Soviet sphere of interest in the secret articles of the Soviet–German agreement. The Finnish historian, Keijo Korhonen, as a representative of the Finnish Foreign Ministry, confirmed that in the view of Finnish historians, Finland had been secretly included in the Soviet sphere: Russkaya Mysl (Paris) 15 March 1979, No. 3247, p. 8.

2 In particular in relation to Finland, the Soviet repudiation of the Soviet–Finnish non-aggression treaty, on the grounds that the Finns had violated it by 'concentrating a large number of regular troops in the vicinity of Leningrad' was the immediate diplomatic prelude to the war: J. Degas, Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy, Vol. 3 (London, 1953), pp. 402–3. The treaty and agreement on 'definition of aggression' do not provide any basis for the Soviet claim, and in any case ignore the fact that the Soviet authorities had also 'concentrated a large number of regular troops'. For the Soviet–Finnish treaty of non-aggression (21 January 1932) see Dokumenty vneshei politiki SSSR (hereafter DVP), 21 Vols. (Moscow, 1959–78), Vol. 15, No. 32; also No. 41 (Litvinov's interview on the subject); No. 175 (Convention on arbitration procedure, 22 August 1932); and Vol. 16 (Convention on the definition of aggression, Finland's accession, July 1933), Nos. 202–5, 232–3, 239, 251. In general for Soviet foreign policy in Europe in this period I have used Jonathan Haslam, The Struggle for Collective Security, 1933–9 (London, 1984).

3 H. M. Michaelis et al., Ursachen und Folgen (Berlin, n.d.), Vol. 14, pp. 63–5. The concurrent Soviet–German agreement of 28 September emphasise the deterioration of the Soviet position vis-à-vis Germany in that they committed themselves to bringing Britain and France to make peace with Germany, which would have been directly contrary to Soviet interests as it would have left them facing a victorious Germany alone in Eastern Europe: see Akten . . . , op. cit., Ser. D, Vol. 8, pp. 128ff. This weakness of the Soviet position, and yet the need not to appear as weak before Germany, needs to be taken into account in an analysis of Soviet decisions in the autumn of 1939.


5 For the details of the negotiations see J. K. Paasikivi, Toimintani Moskovassa ja Suomessa, 1939–41 (Helsinki, 1958), Vol. I, pp. 37–98; V. Tanner, The Winter War (Stanford 1957), pp. 25–87. For secondary accounts see M. Jakobsen, The Diplomacy of the Winter War (Cambridge, Mass.), 1957, pp. 95–154; Upton, op. cit., pp. 25–50 and more generally on Soviet–Finnish relations in the inter-war years, Keijo Korhonen, Suomi neuvostodiplomiatasssa Tartosta talvistotaan, 2 Vols. (Helsinki, 1966, 1971), particularly Vol. 2 (1933–9), pp. 192–207. Jakobsen used unpublished Finnish Foreign Ministry sources uncited; Korhonen's study is more fully based on unpublished Finnish sources, but the second volume was written before most of the Soviet DVP volumes on the 1930s were published. The same applies to the much more detailed work of Juhani Suomi, which is very fully based on the Finnish archival sources: Talvisodan Tausta, Neuvostoliito Suomen ulkopoliitiikassa 1937–9, 2 Vols., Helsinki 1973. Also see the work of the Soviet historian, V. V. Pokhlebkin, Suomi vihollisena ja ystävänä, (1714–1967) (Porvoo, 1969), pp. 275–308. This is a serious historical work, but it was only later published in the Soviet Union and was clearly intended
to influence the debate in Finland. Its weakness in so far as the origins of the Winter War are concerned is that it only asks the Finns to recognise the errors of their policies between the World Wars and fails to recognise any validity to Finnish fears about how their Soviet neighbour might act. Typically it fails to mention either the secret articles of the Soviet–German agreement or the Kuusinen government.


7 Kivimäki memoirs, as quoted in Korhonen, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 124; W. von Bliicher, Gesandier zwischen Diktatur und Demokratie (Wiesbaden, 1951), p. 67 quoting conversation with Svinhufvud. DVP does not give the full report of Assmuss’ meeting on 17 June 1935. The instructions of Stomonyakov to Assmuss, 11 June 1935 (DVP, Vol. 17, No. 265) illustrate Soviet frustration with Finland’s pro-German position and the strongly anti-Soviet tone of the media and public organisations, and certainly provided an adequate context for Assmuss to have made clear to the Finns where their policies might lead. Litvinov had told the Finnish minister in February that ‘In no other country does the press conduct such a systematically hostile campaign against us as in Finland. In no other country is there conducted such open propaganda for an attack on the USSR and annexation of its territories as in Finland. This propaganda is conducted by a whole group of organisations, in particular the so-called AKS [Academic Karelian Society] in which there are extremely influential persons’, Ibid., No. 84, 27 February 1935.

8 Ibid., Vol. 18, see for instance Nos. 371, 397, 412, 428, 460, (1 October–31 December 1935); and Vol. 19, Nos. 43, 60, 132 (13 February–17 April 1936).

9 Degras, op. cit., vol. III, p. 226 (Pravda, 1 December 1936). The published version seems to have been watered down, according to the information given to the Finns by the Latvian minister, who was present and reported that Zhdanov had said that ‘the Soviet window could be widened . . .’. Korhonen comments, ‘the Winter War began with Zhdanov’s speech of 29 November 1936’. Korhonen, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 135–6, 141.

10 Ibid., pp. 135–42; Haslam, op. cit., pp. 207–8. Austri, the Soviet chargé d’affaires, in reply to Holsti’s enquiry, said ‘it was some warning that Finnish territory should not be handed over to an aggressor’. DVP, Vol. 19, No. 397, (4 December 1936).

11 Ibid., Vol. 19, No. 300, (9 October 1936); Korhonen, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 137.


14 Bliicher, op. cit., p. 67.

15 Litvinov told Holsti during the latter’s visit to Moscow in February 1937 and in the context of friendly assurances about the Soviet attitude towards Finland: ‘We do not of course fear an independent attack on us by Finland, but we must take account in those circumstances [the anti-Soviet tendencies in Finland] that in the event of a European war Finland could appear in the opposing camp and we are, of course, taking all measures of precaution on the Finnish frontier’. Assmuss was euphoric at the impression produced on the Finns by the respectful welcome and marks of attention during Holsti’s visit: ‘This was the correct policy. The Finns were flattered and disarmed by it. We could have done nothing better for changing the atmosphere. The results are evident. German policy on the Baltic has been given a serious blow. The atmosphere here is now different . . . our position here has been somehow legalised . . . ‘ DVP, Vol. 20, No. 40 (Litvinov, 8–10 February 1937); No. 67, (Assmuss, 12 March 1937). This atmosphere did not, however, last. And in the terrible year 1937, Assmuss, like so many others in the foreign service, was liquidated, his wife said to have been a friend of Tukhachevsky: Bliicher, op. cit., p. 23.


17 Paasikivi, op. cit., p. 72.

18 A. M. Vasilievsky, Delo vseh zhizni (Moscow, 1973), pp. 100–2; K. A. Meretskov, Na slazhe narodu: stranitisi vospominannya (Moscow, 1968), pp. 177–82; P. N. Pospelov, (ed.), Velikaya otechestvennaya voina sovetskogo soyunya. Kratkaya istoriya (Moscow, 1965), pp. 46–7. We do not know exactly when Shaposhnikov was ordered to draw up a plan of campaign. From Pospelov it appears to be after the Shtein mission. In this work the paragraphs giving Shaposhnikov’s view and criticism of Stalin (beginning ‘Why did the war against Finland take so long?’) are completely
omitted from the second edition (1970, pp. 48–9) and from the English translation (1974). Shaposhnikov does not seem to have been consulted further; when the war broke out with Finland he was on vacation and only heard about it from the press. Only in August 1940 did Stalin belatedly admit that ‘you were right and we were wrong’, thus suggesting that there had been a serious dispute about the matter: Vasilievsky, op. cit., p. 107; Seweryn Bialer, Stalin and his Generals (New York, 1969), p. 132; Roy Medvedev, Let History Judge (London, 1972), p. 445.


20 Ibid., Nos. 337, 352. The British general Walter Kirke also visited Finland including the Karelian isthmus between 18 and 25 June 1939 as part of the competition for influence. The Foreign Office detected a more favourable reception for Kirke than for Halder. But even though, unlike the Soviet leaders, they had more room to be understanding of the Finnish dilemma, they suspected that there had been conversations between the Finnish and German military about aid. The head of German intelligence, Vice-Admiral Canaris and Col. Piechombeck also visited Finland at the end of June, but we do not know whether the Soviet leadership was aware of this. Erkko claimed that they were only to prepare for Halder’s visit and exchange information with their opposite numbers about Russia. According to the head of the Northern Department at the Foreign Office, it was Canaris’ visit and not Halder’s which was ‘really suspicious’: Snow to Halifax, tel. 56, 30 June 1939, FO371/23636/64/N3234 and N3228; FO371/23648/ file 698 passim.


22 Kollontai from Stockholm: ‘. . . the Finnish military are completely in the hands of the Finnish fascists, who have often declared that they would never direct their guns against Germany from Åland . . . ’; DVP, Vol. 21, No. 44, Kollontai to Potemkin, 9 November 1938. The Finnish extreme right wing party, the IKL (the National Patriotic Movement) was small, but not insignificant. In the elections of 1936 it polled 8.5% of the votes and in July 1939, 6-3%. The Soviet authorities were unlikely to have drawn comfort from the fact that the attempt to ban the party and its press organ Ajan Suunta in December 1938 had failed because of legal difficulties, although the Communists were already banned.

Contacts between the Finnish and German military had been frequent as almost all the Finnish army staff were from the Finnish Jägers trained at Lockstedt in Germany in the First World War. And the widely held conviction that the German landing at Hanko in April 1918 had saved the independence of Finland gave regular occasion for celebration. In the summer of 1939 a delegation of Finnish officers under General Valvi visited Lockstedt to recall this ‘brotherhood in arms’: Pääesikuunta (Finnish Army, General Headquarters) Film Archive, No. 206. The view of Halifax in May 1939 was that although the Finnish General Staff are undoubtedly somewhat pro-German, by all accounts they are by no means beyond the reach of other influences’. General Oesch, Chief of the Finnish General Staff, had visited England in 1938, had been shocked by the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, and had been crucial in supporting Erkko’s rejection of the proposed Finnish–German non-aggression treaty in May 1939. General Österman had, however, supported the proposal: Snow to Halifax, tel. 54, 19 May 1939 and minutes, FO371/23655/64/N2560–1.

23 26 July 1939, as quoted by Paasikivi, op. cit., p. 11.

24 Meretskov, op. cit., pp. 177–8. We do not know the exact date of this meeting; nor do we know whether any other contingency plans were made at the time, which would help to put the plans for Finland into perspective.

25 Kuusinen’s estranged wife claims in her memoirs (written, it must be said, thirty years later after years in Stalin’s camps) that on her last meeting with Otto in December 1935 he outlined a plan for her ‘to go to Stockholm as minister and help the Red Army to plot against my own country [Finland]’, because Communists were so persecuted that revolution could no longer be expected to occur spontaneously in bourgeois countries. Kuusinen claimed to have convinced Stalin of this view: ‘. . . there is going to be a war soon and probably a big one. As you know, the Germans have always had their eye on Finland and they are waiting for the moment when the Finns attack the Soviet Union, so that they can rush to their aid’: Aino Kuusinen, Before and after Stalin (London, 1974), pp. 115–9.


27 See note 5, supra.

28 Upton, op. cit., p. 33.

29 N. N. Voronov, Na slazhbe voennoi (Moscow, 1963), pp. 114, 116–7, 125, 132–6; Meretskov, op. cit., pp. 181–2; A. F. Chew, The White Death (Michigan, 1971), p. 256 quoting a captured report of Meretskov, Gagloev, the political commissar, noted approvingly in his diary even before Mainila that the feeling amongst the rank and file on the Karelian isthmus was that a conflict was inevitable and ‘Just let them give the order and we will throw the enemy into the rubbish tip’; N. Gagloev, ‘Dnevnik kommissara’, Znamya, 1940, nos. 6–7, pp. 40–4. But even the easy campaign in eastern
Poland had shown ‘deficiencies in the organisation and direction of forces’ according to the Red Army Political Directorate: Yu. P. Petrov, 

On 16 November 1939 an emissary reached Stockholm with a letter (dated 13 November) to Arvo Tuominen, General Secretary of the Finnish Communist Party, requesting him to return to Moscow on an urgent mission. He refused to go. A further request on 21 November revealed the plan more fully: Tuominen was to be Prime Minister and Kuusinen President of a new Democratic Republic of Finland: R. Seppälä, (ed.), Mainilan laukaukset. Muistelmi ja muistinpanoja tapahtumista Karjalal kannakelle syksy 1939 (Tampere, 1969), pp. 95–6, 157–8. Efforts were made to make the Kuusinen government appear to be not specifically communist in its policy proposals. When Pravda of 2 December published the photograph of Kuusinen signing the treaty with Stalin and Molotov, its caption referred to Mr. Kuusinen as if he was a mere bourgeois politician: Arvo Tuominen, Myrskyn aikaa (Helsinki, 1970), pp. 56–66. Finnish Communists have also followed this line, claiming subsequently that ‘in approving the formation of the so-called “popular government”, the CC only saw an honest attempt to change the direction of Finnish policy and not to establish Soviet power’: Tuure Lehen et al., (eds.), Iz istorii kommunisticheskoj partii Finlyandii (Moscow, 1960), pp. 110–20.

The evidence suggests that the Soviet political leadership believed their own propaganda on this matter. The internal instructions of the Red Army Political Directorate under Mekhlo to the Leningrad Military District political commissars on 27 November 1939 instructed them ‘to expose the lie of Finnish and other diplomats who shout that the Soviet Union wants to Sovietize Finland and incorporate it into the USSR’: Pogranichnye voiski SSSR, Sbornik dokumentov i materialov, 1939-–41 (Moscow, 1970), no. 19.

Tuominen, op. cit., pp. 56–66; Blächer, op. cit., p. 173. For the ‘Zhdanov’s persuasion’ interpretation see Jakobsen, op. cit., pp. 144–6 and Upton, op. cit., 44–5. Zhdanov had been Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Supreme Soviet since 1936, a critic of Litvinov and full member of the Politbureau from March 1939.

Haslam, op. cit., p. 5; N. G. Kuznetsov, Oktyabr’ 1917, No. 9, p. 152; N. G. Kuznetsov, Nakane (Moscow, 1969), pp. 234–5. In the light of the military memoirs, Harrison Salisbury (The Siege of Leningrad (London, 1969), pp. 136–8) clearly exaggerates the significance of Zhdanov’s cruise with Kuznetsov, claiming that it was when the Winter War was planned.


Korhonen, op. cit., p. 169.


Chew, op. cit., pp. 2 and 255 note. This was also Erkko’s view: Snow to Halifax, 27 November 1939, FO37/1/2692991/6608.

After the first front page article (perhaps written by Zhdanov) as a frightener on 3 November when negotiations were still in progress, nothing of significance appeared on Finland until 12 November after the breakdown of negotiations. Then, until 26 November the reports were almost all very short and confined to page 5, about the burden of mobilisation and suggesting that discontent with the government’s policy was developing. This hardly amounted to a press campaign, in comparison with the outcry after Mainila when the Finnish situation was upgraded to pages 1 and 2. Not only was the space devoted to Finland between 12 and 26 November limited, but also on some days (14–15, 20, 25) there were no significant references to Finland at all. Tanner (op. cit., pp. 84–5) exaggerates the extent of the press campaign before 26 November and there were no references to factory meetings before the Mainila incident. Similarly there were no references to Finland in Krasnaya Zvezda between 4 and 12 November. It took a more threatening line on 14, 16, 19 November, and then between 20 and 26 November a much softer tone.

Thede Palm, The Finnish–Soviet armistice negotiations of 1944 (Stockholm, 1971), pp. 122–3. For Kuusinen’s disappointment see Tuominen, op. cit., pp. 56–8; for the purges of the FCP see A. F. Upton, The Communist Parties of Scandinavia and Finland (London, 1973), pp. 213–6; J. H. Hodgson, Communism in Finland (Princeton, 1967), 167–73. Of the 7 out of 13 ‘Moscow members’ of the Finnish CP CC elected at the last Congress in 1935, four had been purged (Gylling, Mäkinen, Hyvönen and Lehtosaari), one had died (Sirola) and only Kuusinen and Tuominen remained, the latter in Stockholm from the end of 1937: Tuominen, op. cit., p. 65.

Galgoev, op. cit., pp. 43, 64; Kuusinen government propaganda leaflets (British Library). Soviet studies of this subject do not analyse the significance of the Kuusinen government. For them the war was produced by Finnish provocation and the plans of ‘fascist elements in the Finnish ruling circles closely connected with the Hitlerites and having considerable influence in the army and

40 *Mainilan laukaukset*, *op. cit.*, pp. 115–6; Foreign Ministry of Finland, *The Development of Soviet–Finnish relations* (London, 1940), pp. 71–2. The nearest Finnish artillery was just east of Terijoki, about 6–7 km. from Mainila and with a range of only 1.5–2.7 km. The Finnish historian L. A. Puntila claimed that a Soviet general captured in the ‘Continuation War’ of 1941–4 had admitted that Soviet troops fired the shots: *Mainilan laukaukset*, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

41 *Pogranichnye voiska . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 11 and Docs. 17, 21, 25; *Khrushchev remembers*, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

42 Degras, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 401; *Pogranichnye voiska . . .*, *op. cit.*, no. 18; for the delay in appearance of *Pravda*, see FO371/23672/991/N6681 (27 November 1939).


44 *Khrushchev remembers*, *op. cit.*, pp. 177–8.