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## THE SOVIET DECISION FOR WAR AGAINST FINLAND, NOVEMBER 1939: A COMMENT

By TIMO VIHAVAINEN

D. W. Spring (*Soviet Studies*, XXXVIII No. 2 (April 1986) pp. 207-26) has written an interesting article about the possible factors which influenced the Soviet decision to attack Finland on 30 November 1939. His central thesis, which holds that the attack was not a result of Stalin's commitment to the revolutionary cause, but of more complicated circumstances (p. 209), is quite convincing. It is obvious that Stalin was trying to get military bases by means of negotiations if possible. The Soviet demands were not made in order to create an opportunity for intervention in a revolutionary style. Even the Finns have begun to consider them 'both rational and moderate', as does Spring, echoing A. F. Upton (p. 208).<sup>1</sup>

Spring, however, makes too much of the non-ultimative character of the Soviet demands (p. 220) and too little of the Kuusinen government (p. 219), because he does not take seriously the significance of the Soviet ideological commitment. This has tempted him to misinterpret the import of the *Pravda* reports from Finland on 3-26 November (p. 218) and to give too much weight to a passage of the Khrushchev memoirs (p. 221). Unlike any other government in a similar situation, the Soviet government never made ultimative demands. The effect of an ultimatum on Finnish public opinion could have been quite shaking in 1939. As long as there was none, the task of convincing the Diet of the necessity of ceding the country's territory to a foreign power was hopeless. Few people in Finland reckoned seriously with the possibility of war, especially in the second half of November 1939, when Moscow was silent and made no new proposals.<sup>2</sup> An ultimatum would have meant an unequivocal break with the image of Soviet policy and its qualitatively novel character, but the Soviet scenario for the Winter war did *not* mean this, contrary to what Spring maintains (p. 207). The very reasons which prevented the Soviet Union from openly threatening war also made the Kuusinen government necessary. Here political practice was dictated by the commitment to a political philosophy and it should not be considered as cynical and a matter of propaganda only.<sup>3</sup>

Spring's image of the Kuusinen government is rather unimpressive (p. 219): he holds that a government entering Finland in the train of the Red Army was unlikely to convince many Finns or foreign observers; it could only help to explain the war for the Soviet people. However, the student of the Soviet press of the beginning of December 1939 will be very impressed by the immense historical significance which was given to the 'Soviet-Finnish treaty' of 2 December 1939.<sup>4</sup> The treaty included a chapter about territorial adjustments,

which amounted to a donation of vast Soviet territories to Finland. This, if anything, was a proof of a novel kind of foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> It was without precedent in the history of humanity. The official Soviet story had it that the Soviet troops were not waging war against Finland; on the contrary, the Soviet Union had most cordial relations with Finland as represented by its new popular government, which had asked for Soviet help in fighting the unpopular white bandits.<sup>6</sup> The Soviet version of the situation in Finland maintained that there was bitter class struggle and the masses hated the leaders. Now, dissatisfied with the bourgeois government, which had malevolently opposed the Soviet proposals and was, instead, ruining the economy by military mobilization, the representatives of leftist parties and mutinying soldiers had formed a new, provisional government, which had succeeded in arranging relations with its mighty eastern neighbour and even in realizing the reputedly age-old national dream of the reunion of Eastern Karelia with Finland.<sup>7</sup>

The official Soviet story may now seem all too fantastic to have been credible, but this is largely due to the subsequent occurrences, which we now know. It had strong elements of credibility and it actually gained many supporters in the West, particularly in Britain.<sup>8</sup> It is true that the Soviet Union was voted out of the League of Nations because of its attack on Finland, but this was effected by not too great a majority and only after a time of fighting, which proved that there really was a war. Had there been no fighting at all or next to none, the Soviet version of the Finnish reality would have been so compelling that even a critical historian, with incomplete source material at his disposal, would have been likely to accept it.<sup>9</sup> After all, it was no small surprise for the Finns themselves that the poorer classes were willing to fight the Soviet forces.<sup>10</sup>

As regards the institution of puppet government in Soviet policy, Osmo Jussila has shown that it is a device which was always used when the Soviet Union reconquered territory of the former Russian empire.<sup>11</sup> Because of its professed novel nature the Soviet state could not pursue territorial goals 'by mean of violence'. It could only support the revolutionary cause when asked to do so by those who had the right to speak on behalf of the masses, be they the peasants or the proletariat, depending on the stage of development of the area in question.<sup>12</sup> This, in turn, had the significant corollary that the Soviet Union could not wage a war with restricted goals (a revolution in one Finnish province for instance!), but was forced to stage a revolution in the whole of the country.<sup>13</sup> The Soviet Union was not going to wage war against Finland in 1939, but envisaged rather a police operation. It was the war which made the difficulties with the new page of Finnish and Soviet history, which had been neatly written beforehand.<sup>14</sup>

I can agree with Spring that the Soviet aggression of 1939 should not be simply considered as a reversion to a policy aim long held and one which represented 'real' Stalinist foreign policy (p. 209). What I object to in Spring's interpretation of the sources is that the *Pravda* reports from Finland between 3 November and 26 November give the impression that the Finnish government, bankrupted by the burden of mobilization, would eventually be forced into some kind of *modus vivendi* with the Soviet Union, implying that no military action would be

required (p. 218). The reports necessarily could not hint at a Soviet attack. War was not a weapon of Soviet foreign policy but was used to support righteous revolutionary causes.<sup>15</sup> The Soviet press stressed the growing bitterness of the class struggle and the growing unpopularity of the bankrupt government.<sup>16</sup> This was exactly what was needed for the Soviet scenario for Finnish history, in which the Kuusinen government was to play a prominent role. It is also impossible to accept Spring's thesis that the Soviet Union would still have offered the Finns a genuine possibility for a peaceful solution after the Mainila incident, and the adjacent proposal that the incident was fabricated locally or simply used to emphasize the seriousness of the situation (pp. 220–21). Spring makes too much of the fact that the note after Mainila was not cast in an ultimatory fashion: it could not have been. What was important here was the pretext for denouncing the non-aggression pact of 1932, which Mainila provided for the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> Spring thinks that the Soviet Union still left open an opportunity for the Finns to consent to the demand to withdraw their troops from the border after Mainila. In fact the Finns did consent, but it was of no use, for Kuusinen was already there.<sup>18</sup> The only source which supports the idea that the Soviet Union was still, at the last moment, ready to throw away its manuscript, is the passage in Khrushchev's memoirs, which Spring cites. As he himself notes, the passage is confused (p. 221): Khrushchev is speaking about a non-existent ultimatum. I think that this source cannot stand against all the other evidence, which contradicts it. As a possible explanation for Khrushchev's distorted image of the situation I suggest that he may not have been wholly privy to the preparations which had been made for the new course of Finnish history.

The problem of the Soviet decision to attack in 1939 will remain without a final solution in the foreseeable future. Spring's sober interpretation cannot be very wide of the mark, but, as I hope to have shown, when placed in the whole of the relevant ideological setting, it does not entirely fit into the picture. The discrepancy here may seem to be a minor one, consisting just of a couple of weeks' difference in the timing of the decision to attack. On the whole, however, as regards the possible avenues of action left for the Soviet government, or when we try to understand the reasons which might have led to the founding of the curious Karelo-Finnish Socialist Soviet Republic, the importance of the Soviet ideological commitment will become very clear, as I have tried to show elsewhere.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The conventional wisdom about the modest nature of the demands has, of course, been acquired *ex post facto* and is not absolute. If Greater Germany had demanded from Britain Dover and the Channel Islands this would evidently have been no less rational and moderate.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance J. K. Paasikivi, *Toimintani Moskovassa ja Suomessa 1939–41*, I, (Porvoo 1959), p. 114

<sup>3</sup> Alain Besançon has written an interesting piece about the nature of the Bolshevik good faith. See his *The Intellectual Origins of Leninism*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1981), p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> See the front pages of *Pravda* on 3 and 4 December 1939. *Pravda* 3 December even contained a whole page map of the new Finnish borders.

<sup>5</sup> *Pravda*, 30 December 1939.

<sup>6</sup> Molotov's answer to the secretary general of the League of Nations, *Pravda*, 5 December 1939.

<sup>7</sup> See the leader in *Pravda*, 4 December 1939. The Soviet version called the Helsinki government a 'puppet government'. This meant that the old doctrine of the impossibility of small nations' bourgeois independence was quite consistently followed. See Osmo Jussila, *Terijoen hallitus 1939-40*, (Juva 1985), pp. 177-8.

<sup>8</sup> In the first days of the war *Pravda* marshalled many British names who were willing to testify to the loftiness of the Soviet and Finnish Popular case. On 4 December there was Stafford Cripps, who allegedly considered Russia's conduct wholly logical and understandable. (Others included Professor Haldane of London University, who held that the Soviet Union had a right to defend herself. News about solidarity with the new Finnish 'popular government' abroad was published almost every day throughout the war. There were such names as G. B. Shaw, John Steinbeck and Jawaharlal Nehru, not to speak about the domestic luminaries, who included the cream of Soviet literature.

<sup>9</sup> This is what D. N. Pritt, K.C., M.P., eloquently asserted in his book *Light on Moscow* (Penguin books, 1940). He forecast that in a few months the Kuusinen government would be the only one in Finland and, consequently:

'Any suggestion that this government is a puppet will have disappeared, as will the suggestion that the USSR is conquering or colonising Finland' (pp. 189-90).

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Veikko Huttunen, *Täysi-ikäinen kansakunta 1939-1973* (Porvoo-Helsinki 1974), pp. 47-48.

<sup>11</sup> See Jussila, *Terijoen . . .*, pp. 63-64, 85-133.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129-33.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 51.

<sup>15</sup> *Istoriya velikoi otechestvennoi voiny* (Moscow, 1960), tom I, p. 258 and most other Soviet sources until lately, did not speak about a 'war' in 1939-40, but about an 'armed conflict and its peaceful regulation'.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance *Pravda*, 13 November, 'Polozhenie v Finlyandii', 16 November, 'Antisovetskaya kampaniya v Finlyandii'; 19 November, 'Pravyashchie krugi Finlyandii provotsiruyut voinu s SSSR'; 22 November 'Polozhenie evakuirovannogo finskogo naseleniya'; 23 November, 'Razgul antisovetskoi kampanii v Finlyandii' and others. All of these had the same message: the Finnish government has lost all of its popular support. This was what the communiqués of the numerous meetings after Mainila also stressed: the Finnish government was bankrupt.

<sup>17</sup> The non-aggression pact left no possibility for renunciation (see *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, tom XV, pp. 45-48). Afterwards Soviet historiography has tried to motivate the gesture by a Soviet declaration which is included in the Soviet-Finnish borders treaty of 1922 (see N. I. Baryshnikov and V. N. Baryshnikov, *Finlyandiya vo vtoroi mirovoi voine*, (Leningrad 1985) p. 21). Jussila, *Terijoen . . .*, pp. 23-24, was puzzled by the apparently purposeless act of renouncing the non-aggression pact. I think, however, that a puppet government had to be located both in Finland and in Soviet-controlled territory to have any credibility; this was why an 'armed conflict' of a couple of days was deemed necessary and hence the need to renounce the pact.

<sup>18</sup> See Paasikivi, *Toimintani . . .*, pp. 104-6. *Krasnaya zvezda*, 28 November 1939, contains a report from the border, which very clearly hinted at what was coming. It described a commissar, who told the soldiers that 'the moment' was not far away. The soldiers were said to have become enthusiastic at the news. About Kuusinen's letter concerning the future war see Jorma Kallentautio, *Suomi katsoi eteensä. Itsenäisen Suomen ulkopoliittikka 1917-1955* (Helsinki 1985), p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> See my article, 'Neuvostolehdistö ja Suomen kriisi'talvella 1939-40', in *Historiallinen aikakauskirja*, 1984, No 1, pp. 34-46 and also *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 10, No 1, 'Internationalists' Ordeal. The Peculiar Story of the Red Finns in Soviet Russia', pp. 72-74.