

# ***EUROPE AT WAR 1939 - 1940***

## **The Winter War**

The war between Finland and Russia – which lasted from November 30 1939 and March 13 1940, and is generally known as the winter war – was a direct product of the Russo – German non-aggression pact of August 1939. Once Russia had secured its share of Poland, it sought to secure the north western approaches to its territory. On October 5 the Finnish government was invited to send a representative to Moscow to discuss “concrete political questions.” The Finns already had a good idea what these questions might be. The USSR suggested the cession of islands in the Gulf of Finland to be used in the defence of Leningrad. These approaches were rejected, they were considered incompatible with Finland’s policy of neutrality.

Stalin explained that the demands were based solely on the defence of Leningrad. Stalin recognised that the Finns might not like the demands but Leningrad the second city of the USSR had population only a little less than the whole of Finland. Superficially the case was not unreasonable and if it had only been a matter of the security of Leningrad no doubt something may have been worked out. But for many years the Russian government had pursued a policy of russification in Finland which had provoked bitter resistance from the Finns. So it is not surprising that the Finnish government found the Russian approaches unacceptable. Both sides believed that if Finland allowed a war to develop she would have to fight alone and would be speedily defeated. Although there were gestures of sympathy from the outside world including the USA there is no evidence that power could offer effective assistance. Even more

disturbing, Germany the traditional counter to Russia in the Baltic urged Finland to accept the proposals.

When talks were resumed in Moscow on November 3 the Russian foreign minister Molotov said “we civilians can see no further in the matter, now it is the turn of the military to have their say.” the final meeting took place on November 9 at which Stalin sought a peaceful solution, but when it became clear that he could not achieve this war became inevitable. On November 29 Russia broke off diplomatic relations and on November 30 began an attack on Finland by land, sea and air. On December 1 it also prematurely announced a puppet Finnish People’s Government in exile and this single act did more than anything to unify the Finnish people to resist the Soviet attacks. Very quickly the Russians realised their mistake but it was too late.

With a population of just under 4 million the Finns had managed to raise an army of 9 divisions with a further 3 more following the declaration of war. There were serious shortages of equipment, particularly automatic weapons and ammunition. 45 Russian divisions took part in the winter war and on average a Russian division was larger than a Finnish division with 18,000 men against 15,000 men in an equivalent Finnish unit. The Russians however had significant weaknesses, the great purges of officers in the 1930’s had left their mark. They had no ski troops, they lacked winter camouflage and their vehicles and weapons were not protected against the severe cold. In early fighting which lasted until December 5 the Finns executed a strategic withdrawal towards their main defence on the Mannerheim Line. At this point they had inflicted heavy losses on the Russians and although most Finnish soldiers had never seen a tank they quickly discovered the effectiveness of the petrol bomb against the tank.

The main Russian offensive opened on December 16 and petered out on December 22 and the Finnish positions were largely intact – it constituted a major defeat for the Red army. Assuming that they were facing a disorganised and demoralised army the Finns counter attacked but such poor progress was made that it was called off almost immediately. There were two main reasons for the failure, the Russians far from being demoralised had dug in well and defended resolutely; also the Finns were not trained in offensive warfare. So the Finns suffered some 1,500 casualties and morale was severely shaken.

Meanwhile the Finnish government appealed to the League of Nations for help and on December 14 the League expelled the USSR and called on all members to give aid to Finland. Britain and France had plans to send help but these never materialised and all that arrived were small groups of volunteers. Sweden did provide some anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons but even these had no decisive influence on the outcome of the fighting. During January the course of the fighting seemed to be very encouraging to the Finns and the impression grew that the war was being won. Even so the Finns realised that it must eventually have peace and in late January the impression grew that the USSR might be willing to negotiate. A new Russian offensive began on February 1, and by February 9 the Finns exhausted after days of fighting in open trenches in the bitter cold were forced back once more. By February 17 they had completed a fighting withdrawal with companies reduced to just 40 or 50 men. By early March the main road leading to the Finnish capital Helsinki was under fire and the Russian advance continued until March 12 when having outrun their artillery and supplies they were forced to call a halt. On the Finnish side with all of their forces committed, most units were so exhausted that they were losing fighting value. Against

this military outlook it was clear that they must make peace on Russian terms.

Meanwhile the Allies had for some time been contemplating an intervention, but there were differences of opinion. The French wanted to open up a new front in Scandinavia to draw the war away from their frontier and the British wanted to cut Germany's access to Swedish iron ore. To do this meant seizing key points on the Norwegian coast notably Narvik, and since the railway line from Narvik was the only way to move troops into Finland and as the League of Nations resolution called for all members to give aid, this would provide the Allies with legal cover for their action. The Finns were aware of the Allied plans but were never very enthusiastic hoping instead that the prospect could simply be used to frighten Sweden into joining their cause.

Now at last the Finnish government had reached a point of decision, with the Allied plans still ambiguous and pressure from Russia to accept their peace terms they began to open negotiations. At this point the Allies seeing their plans in danger of collapse, intervened by stepping up their offer – they talked of 50,000 men by the end of March! Against this background of uncertainty and with Finnish resistance breaking down a peace treaty was signed in Moscow on March 13. It cannot be really known why from a winning position the Russians should have not continued the war, but it is clear that what was conceived as a military side show from a Russian perspective had become a major campaign and the Finns had inflicted such heavy losses – estimated at 200,000 killed - that the Red had suffered an incalculable loss of prestige.

The winter war was a sad episode in the stormy history of relations between the Russian and Finnish peoples. The frustration of the

Allied plans was not without consequences. The essentials of the original plan were turned into a new plan to close the iron ore route by mining Norwegian waters and using the expected German reaction as an excuse for landing troops in Norway. Thus indirectly the Finnish war did open up a new phase of fighting in the west.