

the Finno-Soviet conflict of 1939-1945

In November 1939 a war broke out between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Finland. The causes of the conflict lay primarily in the world political situation. Germany had already begun a war of conquest by invading Poland September first of the same year. Soviet Union sought to protect its borders in view of surging fascist ideas and Germany's intents to expand.

The Soviet Union had primarily wanted to solve the dispute diplomatically before the outbreak of the war. To safeguard itself, the USSR had two aims: First, to move the Finno-Russian border further away from Leningrad, giving Finland a twofold area of land further north along the border in return. Second, to stop any outside force from attacking the Soviet Union through Finnish territories.

The Soviets also wanted some certain strategically important areas, including a few islands in the Gulf of Finland in order to prevent a landing to Finland or the Baltics.

The suggestions put forward by the Soviet Union were discussed between the states. The Soviet Union was interested in a mutual defense treaty with Finland. The Soviets and Finland would repel an attacker together should they tread on Finland. Representatives from both countries met over half a dozen times, but in the end the offer was refused. The reasons were numerous; the leaders of the state harbored an aggressive "Greater Finnish" ideology that they had fermented within the populace all throughout 1920's and 30's. The idea of Greater Finland was based on the goal of incorporating northwestern parts of the Soviet Union into Finland. The area was inhabited by Karelians and other peoples who were considered to be in the same Finno-ugric family as the Finns.

Finnish capitalists saw the vast natural resources within these areas as a great opportunity for exploitation. That's why the statesmen and the capitalist circles were reluctant to have friendlier Finno-Soviet relations and wanted to get closer to either German or British imperialists to achieve their goals later.

Väinö Tanner, chair of the Social Democratic Party from 1918 to 1926, served as the minister of finance at the outbreak of the war, and later during the war as the minister of foreign affairs.

Tanner was one of the central characters responsible for tying the Social Democratic Party and part of the Finnish working class into supporting the policies of Greater Finland and war. The party would become the only social democratic party to fight alongside Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1944.

The decisions made by the Finnish government were influenced by the strong connections the Finnish bourgeoisie had to Germany. In 1918 the bourgeoisie had called on the German military forces to crush the Finnish workers' revolution. The Germans landed in Finland in spring 1918, and suppressed revolts in Finland as well as in the Baltics. The Finnish bourgeoisie was most grateful for this, even if Germany was only fulfilling its own imperialist ambitions.

The Soviet leadership had all reason to treat the Finnish government with suspicion. Finnish fighters had attacked Soviet Russia numerous times in the so-called "kinship wars" in 1918-1920. The attacks were aimed mostly at White Karelia and Petsamo and were conducted with volunteer forces. The Finnish parliament approved to fund a military campaign to Olonets Karelia in 1919 with votes 160-80. The aim was to conquer and annex territory.

Bourgeois Finland was a semi-fascist, anti-communist state hostile towards the Soviet Union. The

Finnish state was headed by the same people who in 1918 had with the aid of German military drowned the Finnish workers' revolution in blood.

Losing the class war of 1918 led to the old social democratic party splitting in two. Taught by the lessons of the war, the leftists of the party founded the Finnish Communist Party in 1918. The party was illegal since its inception until 1944. The communists operated underground to fight for the rights of the working class, and to aid in developing peaceful relations between Finland and the Soviet Union. The communists also operated within the Socialist Workers' Party, which was declared illegal in 1924 and had its parliamentary group imprisoned.

The state police started to arrest and imprison suspected communists and socialists even before the start of the winter war. SAJ, the oldest central organization of Finnish trade unions, was outlawed in 1930. Finland was heading towards fascism and gearing for war. The supporters of the idea of Greater Finland who had started the kinship wars were already waiting for a new chance to attack Russia.

The Winter War (1939)

The Soviet Union had presumed they would win the war swiftly, but it had underestimated the amount of Finnish forces. As the battles started, both sides numbered at around 350 000, albeit the Soviets outnumbered the Finns in tanks, planes, and other such equipment. The Soviets suffered more losses, as they were the attacker, but they won the war.

Battles lasted for three months, after which the Finnish bourgeoisie sued for peace. The threat of the British entering the war and bombing Baku oil fields among other targets also persuaded the Soviets to end the war quickly. Thus began the so-called "interim peace" lasting from march 1940 to june 1941. As a result, the Soviet union got to move the border further away from Leningrad, received outer islands in the Gulf of Finland, Rybachy peninsula in Petsamo, and Hanko in southwest Finland as a military base.

The continuation war and Operation Barbarossa (1941)

The time of peace ended soon as the bourgeois government was displeased with the terms of the Moscow peace treaty. Finland joined the Axis powers and attack USSR together with Germany in june 1941 as a part of Operation Barbarossa. A contract had already been in effect between Germany and Finland since september 1940 which allowed the former to transport soldiers and materiel to northern Finland. Just as the Soviet Union had feared, hundreds of thousands of German troops were moved to Finland, which became Hitler's stepping stone to the east.

Lapland war and a new beginning to Finno-Soviet relations

As Hitler's forces were beaten in Kursk and Stalingrad, the tide of the war turned against the axis. The continuation war didn't see any particularly major battles between Finland and the Soviet Union, as the front was further east. As the fascists retreated, however, the red army approached Finland. Following major losses, Finland switched sides in 1944, signing a separate peace with the Soviet Union. The terms of the treaty demanded German troops to be either disarmed or driven out of the country. This led to the so-called "Lapland war," where Finnish infantry and Soviet air force fought Germans as they retreated to Norway through Finnish Lapland.

As the battles ended, a search for those responsible for the war began. Fascist organizations were outlawed and leftist ones legalized. This ushered in a new kind of democracy in Finland, and empowered the labour movement.

USSR got the territorial changes it desired. The utterly defeated bourgeois Finland had no leg to stand on anymore, meaning it had to accept all demands. The Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (YYA) was signed. Had this treaty been signed before, the tragedy of the war would've been averted, countless Soviet and Finnish lives would've been spared, and Hitler's plans would've been hindered.

Bourgeois mythology: "Spirit of the winter war"

A rightist mythology of a unified people defending itself from conquest has been woven around the winter war. This mythology is called "the spirit of the winter war," and it does not coincide with reality. The war wasn't mere self-defense, as the war-crazed bourgeoisie and the builders of "Greater Finland" were at least as much to blame for it as they rebuffed all attempts for a peaceful resolution from the Soviet Union. It was clear that the USSR could not have stood idly as Germany was marching toward.

In reality the Finnish bourgeoisie had hoped for Germany to crush the Soviets. They chose the side of the fascists, and for this the ordinary folk had to suffer.

The mythical unity of the people and the "spirit of the winter war" were constructed by imprisoning and suffocating the left and the peace movement. So much for harmony between classes. The class harmony the bourgeoisie peddled was based on naked class warfare and state terror. Colluding with them in this endeavor were Väinö Tanner's right-social democrats, who were the only legal "labour organization" that could operate in peace. Tannerites were one of the few "leftists" that would later ally themselves with Hitler.