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Introduction

The whole story of the Finnish defence is like a page from an epic poem, except that their [the Finns'] victory has been won not merely by bravery, but also by intense study of the art of war as applied to a country like their own.

—*The Times* (London), December 26, 1939

No other episode of the Second World War has been as enshrouded in myth as the 1939–40 Russo-Finnish “Winter War.” How could it not be? At first blush, it may seem as if the 105-day war-within-a-war that began with the Soviet surprise attack on its northwestern neighbor and former Russian grand duchy was something out of Greco-Roman mythology. A nation of 3.7 million is attacked by another fifty times its size—and fights the towering, flat-footed invader to a standstill amidst the swirling snows of the Finnish fells, even besting him for the first six weeks, armed with little more than Suomi submachine guns, homemade Molotov cocktails, and a large supply of *sisu*, the Finnish equivalent of grit. The Finns were led into battle by their aristocratic septuagenarian commander-in-chief, Gustaf Mannerheim, also known as “The Last Knight of Europe,” a one-time chevalier in the court of Tsar Nicholas who had returned to his native land during the Russian Revolution to lead the White Forces against the Reds during the fratricidal Finnish Civil War whence modern Finland was born. It was a nation hoping against hope that her sister democracies, particularly the Allies, as well as Sweden and the United States (prior to its formal entry into the war), would hasten to her aid, not with rhetoric and “ice shows,” as the sympathetic but still steadfastly neutral Americans did, but with planes, tanks, and ammunition. These the Finns ultimately received from the Swedes and the Allies to varying degrees, before the infuriated Soviets mounted their final, overwhelming drive on the Mannerheim Line and time ran out on the nation whose cause was so compelling as to inspire thousands of young men from around the world to sail, fly, ski, or walk to *Suomi* (Finland) to fight for her.

Mannerheim bolstered the *legenda* of the *Talvisota*, as the Finns call it, by declaring that Finnish forces were fighting “a Thermopylae every day” and by issuing similarly mythic pronouncements from his headquarters in Mikkeli in eastern Finland before returning to his map tables to ponder his next move against “the hereditary enemy.”¹ Given such powerful rhetoric, along with the corresponding

flood of dispatches from the northern front about the Finns' spectacular—if deceptive—early successes against the stumbling Red Goliath, one can understand why the Manichean drama taking place above the 60th parallel inspired writers around the free world to write their own allegories.

Robert Sherwood, author of such celebrated entertainments as *Petrified Forest* and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, and probably America's best-known contemporaneous playwright, was so moved by the Winter War—as well as frustrated that his own country was not doing more to help “Brave Little Finland,” as *Suomi* was then known—that he decided to write a play about it that revolved around the family of a peace-loving Finnish doctor who reluctantly but firmly decides to take up arms against the invader. Sherwood feared that the Winter War would not last long enough for *There Shall Be No Night* to see the light of day. He was nearly right: the play debuted on March 28, 1940, sixteen days after the overwhelmed Finns were forced to put down their arms following the final overwhelming Soviet assault. Still, *There Shall Be No Night* continued on stage for another two years, until Finland's confusing and unpopular decision in the West to join forces with Germany after the latter's invasion of Russia fifteen months later forced the play's producers to close it. Thus the myth engendered by the war, in works such as Sherwood's play, far outlived the actual war.²

And so the myth continues today, particularly in Finland, where the *legenda* of the Winter War has become one of that country's origin stories alongside that of the *Kalevala*, the nineteenth-century epic poem that was instrumental in the development of Finnish identity, while its publishing industry continues to churn out monographs about “the last glorious war.” Thus the mythic aura surrounding this anomalous conflict persists, posing a major challenge for any historian who essays to write about it. What is true? What is not?

Playwrights weren't the only ones who were caught up in the fervor surrounding the Winter War or who contributed to the myth surrounding it. So were a number of prominent British and French politicians, including the ardently pro-Finnish British Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill. “Only Finland, superb, nay, sublime in the jaws of peril,” Churchill declared in a speech over the BBC on January 19, shortly after the stunning Finnish victories at Suomussalmi and Raate Road. “Finland shows what free men can do.”³

Churchill was also one of the principal instigators of the daft Allied plan, also known as the “Finnish wild goose enterprise,” to relieve the Finns by dispatching an Allied expeditionary force across Norway and Sweden, over the protest of both of those avowedly neutral countries—an operation that, in the unlikely event it had come off, would have seen British and French forces fight their future Russian allies on Finnish soil and changed the complexion of the rest of the war.

Adolf Hitler, for one, was certainly paying attention. As Albert Speer and other intimates of the Führer have attested, Moscow's initial, flat-footed performance during the war was a factor in Hitler's decision to invade the Soviet

Union in June 1941. If the once-vaunted Red Army had such difficulty in putting down the vastly outnumbered Finns, Hitler evidently concluded, then the vast land and air armada he had assembled for the invasion and conquest of his erstwhile ally ought not to have too much trouble putting down the befuddled Red Army, either.⁴

The German dictator was so impressed by the instant legend of the Finnish superman that he didn't apprehend how rapidly and effectively the Russians had strengthened and revamped their forces. Hitler was wrong, of course, but not by much: the *Wehrmacht* was indeed stopped, but not before it had reached the gates of Moscow; Stalingrad could have gone either way. One of the reasons why the Red Army ultimately gained the upper hand and defeated Hitler, many historians believe, was because of the changes and reforms it enacted following the April 1940 postmortem that Stalin ordered. These included dispensing with the clumsy dual politico-military command structure by which unit commanders had to vet their orders with their *politruks*, the tactically obtuse political commissars assigned them, and which had proven so disastrous during the *Talvisota*. Conversely, noted historian Roger Reese, author of *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers: A Social History of the Red Army, 1925–1941*, contends that the Red Army became overly preoccupied with the lessons of the Winter War and was actually handicapped as a result. In any event, it should be clear that, contrary to a sometimes-heard notion, the Winter War was far more than a mere sideshow.⁵

The Western media was also swept up in the origin myth of the Winter War and played a pivotal role in both creating and propagating it, as evidenced by the absolutely massive volume of newsprint that exists from the war.

A small press contingent, mostly from Scandinavia, was already installed in late November 1939 at the Hotel Kamp, the storied hotel located in the center of the Finnish capital, to cover the mounting tensions between the USSR and Finland, after the on-and-off negotiations between the two neighbors over Soviet demands for Finnish territory broke down.

Nevertheless, it is safe to say, all the pressmen on hand that day were as shocked to see Russian bombers appear in the leaden skies over Helsinki as were the local populace. One of those astonished reporters was Herbert Elliston, the British-born correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*.

“It was a perfect winter morning, with the sun coming out of a blue sky, unflecked save for one cotton woolly ball cloud,” the awestruck reporter wrote. “Inside that cloud were Russian planes. Through the trailing steamer of the cloud a couple of planes could be seen in nebulous outline. With its destructive weight, the solitary cloud moved across the heavens like a Spanish galleon in full sail.”⁶

Nary six months later, after the so-called “phony war” had come to an end, and the German blitzkrieg had overrun Norway, the Low Countries, and France, bringing such atrocities as the terror bombing of Rotterdam in its wake, such naïve, even romantic language would seem as dated as it does today. But this,

after all, was November 1939, when the press was still referring to the new war as the European war.

“Storm over Europe!” Elliston exclaimed in quaint fashion. “What on earth had Stalin started in this part of the world? It was the beginning of a wild day.”⁷

In any case, it certainly was one of the wildest thus far. As it happened, Elliston missed most of the action, departing Finland after a week via the western port of Turku, where he and his fellow reporter, Curt Bloch of the *New York Times*, saw how the spirit of Finnish resistance and solidarity had galvanized Finland’s third largest city. Nevertheless, he was able to weave a book (of sorts) from his breathless dispatches. The overripe tome, which bore the title *Finland Fights!*, was rushed into print in a single breathless month in order to satisfy the American public’s intense interest in the Arctic war. And an interesting, even valuable book it is, particularly for its vignettes of the Finnish home front—although there technically wasn’t such a thing as a home front in the war since the Red Air Force ranged virtually over the entire country. Elliston’s description of the uncannily disciplined behavior of his fellow passengers on the machine-gun-riddled train from Helsinki to Turku provides an excellent snapshot of the Finnish character. If one wishes to understand *sisu*, the Finnish word that roughly translates as “grit” but means so much more, there it is, even if it has to be extracted from a mass of purple prose.

There was no shortage of journalists to take Elliston’s place in Finland, especially after it became clear that the outgunned and outnumbered Finns were indeed fighting and fighting very well, and that the Soviet aggressor was stumbling over himself. Ultimately several hundred journalists from around the world covered the Winter War, making it in proportionate terms one of the most intensively and extensively covered campaigns of World War II, at least from the Finnish side. (Unsurprisingly, the Kremlin didn’t allow any of the few Western correspondents accredited to Moscow to get near the battlefield—although Russian officials were so confident of easy victory that, at least initially, they didn’t even censor their dispatches.)⁸

There were a number of reasons why the foreign press descended on Helsinki in such droves in December 1939. For one, of course, there was the remarkable nature of the conflict itself, which saw some of the most spectacular fighting in modern military history. For another, at that early juncture of the European war, the Soviet’s blatant aggression reminded many of the German invasion and “rape” of Belgium that had outraged the world at the onset of the previous world war. Here, it seemed, was the story of Belgium violated again—except that this time the innocent being violated, Finland, was fighting back and, to all appearances, fighting extremely well.

Or, as Richard Collier puts it in *Warcos*, his excellent if forgotten book about the correspondents—“warcos”—of World War II: “Here for the first time since World War One was a David and Goliath situation with Finland standing in for ‘Brave Little Belgium’; the Finns, fighting against odds fifty to one, were battling

with a determination that the Poles never mustered. Before the war was a week old 100 correspondents had flooded in to cover it.”⁹

Put another way, here was a conflict custom-made for headlines. And for illustrations, who could beat those photos of the Finnish “ghost soldiers” skiing off single-file to do battle with the unseen barbarian invader? Or the bathetic images of the miserable Russian prisoners of war the Finns captured? Or, yet more horrifying, the pictures of the frozen Soviet carcasses after being cut down by the sharp-eyed Finnish riflemen, or who had simply frozen to death? Recall, too, that the press now had access to the radiophone, allowing reporters to send photos along with their copy to their eager readers in London, Paris, New York, and Salt Lake City. Newsreel camera crews were also there in force, including a pre-scient newsreel man who filmed the initial Soviet terror attack and provided several images that became fixed in the public’s imagination; among them was an especially gruesome one of the incinerated remains of a Helsinki passenger bus.

Another reason for the intensity of the press coverage of the *Talvisota* was that it took place in a virtual news vacuum, when the Western front (as such) was quiet. Situated in time between the invasion of Poland the previous September and the German blitzkrieg of the following spring, the conflict had not yet achieved its capitalized status as the “Second World War.”

The only story that competed for attention with the Winter War during that somewhat anti-climactic six-month span was the Royal Navy’s pursuit of the *Graf Spee*, the German raider that was chased down by Her Majesty’s South Atlantic fleet in late December and bottled up in Montevideo Harbor, before dramatically scuttling herself.

Of course, earlier that month there had also been the emergency session of the League of Nations that had been convened at Finland’s request over the aggression of its fellow member state, the USSR. That, too, was good for copy, albeit of the harder-to-chew kind.

Still, there was little suspense about how that diplomatic minuet would turn out, any more than there had been after the moribund body had met to “debate” Germany’s invasion of the Rhineland in 1936 or Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia the year after that. Still, as Geoffrey Roberts points out in *Stalin’s Wars*, the Soviets, who (it is well to remember) had striven to enlist Britain and France in a system of collective security before resorting to *Realpolitik* mode, were more unhappy about the League’s ultimate decision to expel them than they let on.¹⁰

In any case, who cared about the League of Nations when a drama of such spectacular dimensions was taking place amidst the snowdrifts above the 60th parallel? Here, at last, after all the walkovers the world had witnessed over the course of the past decade, was a “little nation” that was actually standing up to the authoritarian powers, no less in extreme conditions, including double-digit subzero temperatures, with no precedent in modern military history.

Or, as Martha Gellhorn, the noted war correspondent, who had covered the Spanish Civil War as well as the *Anschluss* and the Czech crisis and who arrived

in Helsinki just in time to catch the Soviet surprise attack, put it, “I like those who fight.” And the Finns, unquestionably, were fighting.¹¹

How could anyone—or at least any non-Communist—not sympathize if not outright identify with the stalwart Finns, while admiring their remarkable military prowess?

As it happened, both Elliston and Gellhorn were assigned the Finnish story, without having any notion as to just how big that story would become. Yet other members of the international journalist brigade came on their own, drawn by the urge to bear witness to this extraordinary match-up for their readers back home in London, Manchester, Paris, and Buenos Aires, as well.

One of these impassioned journalistic volunteers, who along with Gellhorn belonged to the small, growing band of distaff war correspondents, and who also happened to be Gellhorn’s best friend, was Virginia Cowles, the London-based correspondent for the *Sunday Times* and the North American Press Alliance. Cowles, who had also covered the Spanish Civil War, as had many members of the Kamp Corps, describes how she came to her somewhat impulsive decision at a London New Year’s Eve fete to fly to Helsinki in her superb, recently reissued memoir, *Looking for Trouble*. Like virtually everyone else, Cowles expected the Soviet invasion to be a snap. “When the headlines announced that Helsinki had been bombed I thought it would be another Poland—that the country would be obliterated so quickly that there would be little chance of getting there before it was over,” she recalls.¹²

That was before the aroused Finns started fighting back, and the Arctic mythmaking began: “Then the papers began recording the amazing feats of the Finns; incredible though it seemed, the Russian ‘steam-roller’ was being held in check.”¹³

And off Cowles went by biplane—first to Amsterdam, then to Copenhagen, Stockholm, and finally Helsinki, which is how one traveled from London to Finland in those days—to join the press scrum. Unlike her friend Gellhorn, who famously had no truck with that “objectivity shit,” as she put it, Cowles prided herself on covering both sides of a conflict and had risked her life doing so in Spain, where she managed to file reports from both the Republican and Loyalist flanks. Getting the actual story of what transpired on the thousand-mile-long battlefield past the intense Finnish press censorship proved difficult enough. Nevertheless, Cowles’s sympathy for the hapless Russian men and women who were initially thrown with little or no preparation into the fight and who had little or no idea what they were fighting for, is evident in her poignant dispatches, which compose a major source for this book.¹⁴

No such empathy for the Soviets appears in the passionately pro-Finnish reports of another American, Leland Stowe, the noted correspondent of the *Chicago Daily News*, who also rushed to Finland at about the same time as Virginia Cowles. Like most of his colleagues, Stowe made no bones about whom *he* was rooting for—or against. Witness the following dispatch he filed in mid-January

from the Lappish front, where the white-hooded Finnish “ghost soldiers” were still raising havoc with the woebegone elements of the Russian 9th Army, which had been assigned the task of severing Finland and instead had been severed itself by the vengeful “white death.”

“It is breathlessly silent, and we still hear no sound, when suddenly a dozen white figures sweep across the crest of the hill to our left,” Stowe’s pulse-pounding report from the front line begins:

They dig their sticks into the tight hard snow and slide into formation, Indian file. Each wears a pair of Turkish-like white overpants, a white cape, and a white hood. Each carries a rifle slung across his back and a Finnish *puukko* at his belt. They wait for a moment. Then, with a low word of command they glide like ghosts down the slope and across the bridge. They slide swiftly, noiselessly past us and down, and as they pass I notice with amusement the last soldier in the line holds a half-smoked cigar clenched in his teeth. There is something marvelously Finnish about that. . . . They may be trapped by a Red army patrol. Some of them may not come back. But as you watch them fade like phantoms and disappear into the crystalline forest you feel a warm, deep pride, as if these were our people. You know that no people on earth could be braver or stronger or more gallant than they are.¹⁵

Stowe, who went on to become one of the most famous correspondents of the Second World War, was a diehard Fennophile. So was the whole Western world—outside of orthodox Communists, who continued to tout the official Moscow line about the war being a “liberation action” requested by the notional Finnish proletariat—it seems, at least for those remarkable 105 days.



Obviously, Stowe’s dispatches, like those of most of his fellow scribes, must be taken with a sizable piece of salt, particularly in light of the considerable obstacles put in their way by the increasingly restrictive Finnish press censors, who were anxious to put the best possible light on Finnish operations for foreign consumption without compromising security (as press censors are wont), including a ban on photographs of Finnish casualties.

Nevertheless, as I pored over the hundreds of articles and dispatches filed by the American and British press from the war as well as the numerous memoirs that came out of the now obscure conflict, I was consistently surprised by how much new information I found.

One example was the Soviet Union’s use of paratroopers. Neither Allen Chew nor William Trotter, the authors of the two better-regarded—if considerably dated—previous histories of the war, *The White Death* (1973) and *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish War of 1939–1940* (1991), respectively, has anything to say on

the subject of Russian airborne troops during the war. Nor did any of the Finnish military historians I consulted know anything about it. Perhaps one or two individual Russian troops had been dropped behind Finnish lines, but certainly not more.

And yet the *New York Times* and the *Times* of London carried numerous reports of such drops during the initial stage of the war. Evidently these airborne operations were a disaster for the Soviet Union, as the easily spotted Red paratroopers were quickly hunted down by Finnish troops—which also helps to explain why Moscow abandoned the use of airborne troops until much later in the war. The reports, often based on second-hand information, may well have exaggerated the number of such assaults, as well as the number of troops who participated in them.

However, there is little doubt that Moscow dropped several groups of paratroopers on Finland. And there is no denying the fear these inspired in the Finnish populace, along with the related fear about the use of poison gas, a hangover from the First World War that fortunately proved unfounded.¹⁶

This was news to me, as it was to the surprised Finnish military historians to whom I showed copies of those dispatches. I also was surprised to read about at least one dramatic battle, the battle of Pelkosenniemi—or the battle of Kemijarvi River, as British correspondent Geoffrey Cox calls it in his gripping memoir of the war, *The Red Army Moves*—which I had not heard of before. That crucial engagement, where an adroit Finnish battalion stopped and destroyed an armored Soviet regiment that had previously been rapidly advancing across northern Finland at the tiny riverside village of Pelkosenniemi, clearly presaged the larger and much better known battle of Suomussalmi that occurred later in December, including the use of *motti*—cordwood—tactics, the technique by which Finnish ski troops blocked off the front and rear of a Soviet column and proceeded to methodically “cut it up” that made the latter battle so famous.¹⁷

In addition to being one of the first outright Finnish victories in the north, the battle of Pelkosenniemi was as much of a strategic reverse for the Soviets as was Suomussalmi, if not more so, effectively halting the Soviet 9th Army’s advance across southern Lapland. Cox, rightly, gives this now all but forgotten battle a whole chapter in his book. I don’t go quite that far, but I try to give this pivotal engagement its rightful place in the larger story of the war. If I hadn’t read Cox’s memoir, I doubt I would have mentioned it.

A lot of information about the war, it is clear, is hiding in plain sight—right there in the old microfilm reels of the *New York Times* and the *Times* of London, as well as the numerous memoirs of the many journalists who wrote about the war, which together form a valuable trove on their own.

Nor was all the information I discovered in these secondary sources flattering to the Finns. It was in Cowles’s and Cox’s memoirs that I learned just how repressive the Finnish military press censors were. That hidebound attitude toward the press also helps explain why both the Finnish Army and the Finnish

populace had little or no idea of what was actually happening during the climactic phase of the war, in late February and March 1940, when the beleaguered Army of the Isthmus was losing up to 1,000 men a day.

This helps explain why both the nation and many if not most of the troops in the field were genuinely shocked when the war suddenly came to an end. It seems that the Finns, too, had come to believe their own press. And how could they not, when the Western press was continuing to shower them with laurels while casting their struggle in such Manichean terms? Moreover, as the late Max Jakobson, the great Finnish diplomat and historian and one of those who encouraged me to write this book, pointed out, it was helpful if not necessary for Finns to believe in their myth, along with the corresponding notion that the Western powers were coming to Finland's aid, which, to the Finns' everlasting bitterness, proved false.¹⁸

Fortunately, the Finnish Army was too busy fighting to pay much attention to the mythological ballyhoo the media was whipping up. From a secondary source of a different kind—in this case, a Suomussalmi tourist brochure—I learned to my considerable astonishment about the 269 Finnish civilians who were seized by elements of the Soviet 163rd Division when it overran that central eastern Finnish district at the start of the war, another revelation that considerably altered the picture I had of the war (as well as the competence of Finnish civil authorities).

Too, a great deal of information can be found in the memories of the rapidly thinning ranks of the few thousand surviving veterans of the war—or those who were young enough at the time to remember anything about it. One of the reasons I was impelled to write this book was that I knew that this was my last chance to mine the memories of the relatively few extant survivors, either Finnish or Russian, of the *Talvisota*. And so it was: about half of the two dozen or so Finns, Russians, and Swedes whom I or my researchers spoke to have since passed on.

But what valuable testimony they were able to provide into such varied aspects of the war: the nature of combat on the Mannerheim Line; or what it was like to be in Helsinki on the first day of the war, as well as its sister city of Viipuri, bombed at the same time; or what it was like to be a young member of the *Lotta Svärd*, the Finnish women's auxiliary organization that played a wide range of roles during the war, manning the Russian bomber watch atop an icy forest platform.

I also found out what it was like to be a Soviet marine assigned the thankless duty of guarding a motorboat base on frozen Lake Ladoga. And from one bemused veteran of the Finnish People's Army whom I interviewed in St. Petersburg, with the aid of Russian-born Winter War historian Bair Irincheev, I learned of the surreal-comic nature of that ersatz army, which was designated to raise the Red star over the Finnish presidential mansion before it was abruptly disbanded and made to vanish at the war's end.

From the one Finnish internee I was able to track down from the original

unfortunate group from the Suomussalmi area, I learned what it was like to experience the shock of the initial invasion, as well as the dreadful conditions in the converted logging camp where she and her fellow hostages were held for the remainder of the war. I will forever be indebted to these survivors who shared their still vivid, sometimes sad, often haunting memories of the war, and occasionally provided me new information.

That said, there is general agreement among historians about the basic contours of this most unusual war. The essence of the Winter War can be summed up fairly quickly, as Roger Reese does in *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers*: “Before the [Red] army could do anything to correct the deficiencies that had been exposed during its engagements in Spain and Poland,” Reese writes, referring to the army’s previous involvement in the Spanish Civil War and the invasion of Poland, which had exposed systemic problems of coordination and efficiency in the supposedly invincible Red Army machine, “Stalin ordered it to attack Finland in November, 1939.”¹⁹

“The RKKK [Red Army] expected a quick and easy victory,” Reese continues. “With an unsound strategy and poor coordination of units, the Red Army blundered into the Finnish defensive line on the Karelian Isthmus only to be decimated by the outnumbered Finns. Only when the RKKK assembled a huge infantry and artillery ‘steamroller’ did the Army manage to overwhelm the Finnish defenses by sheer weight of men and materiel.”²⁰

To be sure, it is hard to find fault with Reese’s summary of the war, but perhaps we should expand on that, as well as add a few words about the path that led to it.

Technically speaking, the path that led to the Winter War began on October 5, 1939, when the Soviet Union “invited” the center-right Finnish government to send a delegation to Moscow in order to discuss a mooted Finnish-Soviet mutual assistance pact. The Kremlin had sent similar signals before via the Soviet embassy in Helsinki; however, the center-right government of Aimo Cajander, confident that the USSR did not wish to provoke Nazi Germany, with which Finland had enjoyed a fraternal relationship dating back to the Finnish Civil War, felt sufficiently secure not to respond to the “invitation.”

The shocking Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of August 1939, by which Berlin ceded Moscow freedom of action in the Baltic in return for allowing Hitler the same privilege in western Europe; the subsequent German invasion of Poland, which actually triggered the new European war; and the fairly rapid way with which the Germans and their odd new bedfellows, the Soviets, disposed of the Poles—all these convinced the Finns that perhaps they had better deal with Stalin after all.

Stalin and his new aggressive-minded foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, quickly taking advantage of their new freedom of action, had already sent similar subpoenas to the governments of the three smaller, neighboring former tsarist provinces of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The three obliged the Kremlin

by dispatching their foreign ministers to Moscow, whereupon all readily acquiesced to the new Soviet demands, which, in addition to the obligatory treaties of mutual assistance, also called for the stationing of Soviet troops and naval forces on the Balts' territory. Of course the three, with their negligible, respective armed forces, had little choice in the matter.

By contrast, the Finns felt secure enough not to accede to the Kremlin's demands. Finland possessed significantly longer and less penetrable defenses, including the much vaunted (though overrated, as it turned out) Mannerheim Line of fortifications and gun ports that stretched across the Karelian peninsula, as well as an intricate mass of forest and lakeland extending from the Karelian Isthmus to Lapland, plus a well-trained standing army of a third of a million. The demands included moving the Fenno-Soviet border eastward to a point only fifty-one kilometers west of Viipuri, then Finland's second largest city, which the Soviets felt was necessary in order to protect Leningrad in case of a future invasion from the west—a not unreasonable concern in light of the attack on that city that Nazi Germany would launch via Karelia with the aid of their Finnish co-belligerents two years hence.

Additionally, Stalin and Molotov wanted a thirty-year lease on Hanko, the strategic Finnish fortress overlooking the approaches to the Baltic, as well as the obligatory assistance pact. In return the USSR was willing to cede Helsinki two municipalities with twice the amount of territory it was demanding from Finland.

In addition to the harshness of these demands, which it knew the Finnish public would never approve, the Finnish government feared that granting these would only lead to more demands and the loss of Finnish sovereignty. Which of course is exactly what happened to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania the following year, when the three short-lived Baltic nations were formally annexed by Moscow. Nevertheless, although prepared for war, the Finnish cabinet was still prepared to negotiate on November 30, 1939, the day of the Soviet surprise attack.

Significantly, one of those who urged the government to reach some sort of territorial accommodation with Moscow before the outbreak of the war was Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, the uncompromisingly anti-Bolshevik top Finnish general. Amongst Mannerheim's well-founded concerns was the army's alarmingly low stockpile of ammunition and fuel, which could only sustain the army for several weeks at most. "The Army cannot fight!" insisted the one-time imperial Russian general, who had resigned several times over the Finnish cabinet's refusal to allocate more funds for defense. Of course if necessary, it would. And so would Mannerheim, who would be commander-in-chief in case of such a war, though he certainly wasn't angling for the job.²¹

For his part, Stalin may have been initially sincere about negotiating with the Finns. At the same time, it is clear, he certainly had a Plan B for invading and occupying his recalcitrant neighbor. Indeed, his ambassador and other agents in Helsinki had assured him, the downtrodden Finns would welcome such an eventuality. The Soviet general staff was prepared for it, having drawn up not

one but two operational plans for the conquest and absorption of *Suomi*. The first, developed by Boris Shaposhnikov, the Red Army chief of staff, called for a concentrated attack by a large Russian force on the main Finnish defense line in Karelia. Even then, the clear-eyed Shaposhnikov envisaged a difficult war lasting several months at a minimum. As a two-time former head of the Leningrad Military District (1925–27, 1935–37), the Soviet general knew whereof he spoke.²²

Nevertheless Stalin, who obviously did not share Shaposhnikov's opinion of Finnish capabilities, discarded that plan. "You are asking for such immense strength and resources to defeat a country like Finland," Stalin maintained. "Such strength is not needed." Instead the Soviet dictator ordered Kirill Meretskov, Shaposhnikov's successor as head of the Leningrad Military District, to devise a new plan for a multi-prong attack that would accomplish the same objective in a matter of weeks. The working deadline for the "liberation of Finland" was December 21, Stalin's sixtieth birthday, when Kliment Voroshilov, the incompetent Russian defense minister, intended to make a present of Finland.²³

Meretskov duly obliged, ultimately coming up with a plan for a nine-point attack. The main thrust of the Red assault would still be in Karelia, with other units crossing the border at the eight other points along the Fenno-Soviet border, up to and including the Petsamo peninsula overlooking the Arctic Sea—a mechanized blitzkrieg bearing a strong resemblance to the one Hitler successfully employed against Poland. Also similar was the *casus belli* Stalin used to start the war: a putative Finnish artillery attack that supposedly had caused the deaths of four Russian border guards, for which an apology was demanded, along with a demand that the Finns move their forces twenty to twenty-five kilometers from the border. Unsurprisingly, Helsinki denied responsibility for the mythical attack, rejected the Kremlin's new demands, and called for a joint Finnish-Soviet commission to investigate the incident.

Moscow, in turn, denounced the Finnish response as hostile and renounced the seven-year-old Fenno-Soviet non-aggression pact. In the meantime, the Finnish Army completed the mobilization it had begun earlier that summer.

Nevertheless, being prepared for war was not quite the same as being totally ready for it. Government officials continued to exist in a state of partial denial, as evidenced by the scandalous failure to properly evacuate the civilian population living close to the border, as well as the corresponding failure to devise a plan to evacuate the capital. Although a number of light anti-aircraft artillery guns had been installed around the city, the notion of anyone actually bombing Helsinki from the air, something that had never happened before, was still unthinkable. The general sense was that some sort of solution to the crisis would be found. Certainly most Finns hoped so.

That illusion was roughly dispelled on the morning of November 30, 1939, when the first flight of Russian SB-2 bombers appeared in the skies over the city and began dropping incendiaries and high explosives. Mixed with these were leaflets written by an anonymous Finnish-speaking Red pamphleteer urging

the supposedly repressed Finnish proletariat to rise up against the “Cajander-Mannerheim” clique, as Moscow still harbored hopes of changing hearts and minds. The surprise attack interrupted a meeting of the Finnish cabinet, which had been deliberating how to respond to the Kremlin’s latest sally.

Any notion that Moscow was amenable to negotiation was further retired the following day when Radio Moscow announced that it had come to terms with the government of the People’s Republic of Finland, a puppet regime it had installed for that very purpose. Additionally, this new government had, not surprisingly, readily agreed to all of the Kremlin’s territorial conditions, while also agreeing to a treaty of mutual assistance. This act of political flummery was confirmed the next day when *Pravda* carried a photo of Molotov signing the USSR’s new pact with the Democratic People’s Republic of Finland, as Stalin, appearing very much like the cat who had swallowed the canary, looked benignly on, along with a blank-faced Otto Ville Kuusinen, the so-called president of the DPRF. In one fell swoop, the legitimate Finnish government had been made to vanish, or so it seemed, and replaced with a more cooperative understudy.²⁴

The rest, Stalin was confident, would be a formality. Stalin was so sure of himself that he didn’t even take a meeting, according to Nikita Khrushchev, then the top Ukrainian *apparatchik* and later Stalin’s successor as premier. “He thought that all he had to do was to fire a few shots and the Finns would surrender,” he wrote in his autobiography. So did the rest of the world.²⁵

But the world didn’t know the Finns, and neither did Stalin. Soon came reports that the Red colossus had become bogged down in the Finnish fells, that the Finns were skiing rings around the Reds, even decimating them. Thus, on December 18, the nineteenth day of the war, *Time* breathlessly reported:

A blinding blizzard, which grounded aviation, smashed tanks against half-concealed boulders and granite tank barriers, gave the Finns an almost even break. The Russians, who had thought they were starting a *Blitzkrieg*, were still hammering desperately at the [Finnish] defenses. . . . Finally there was the snowstorm. Out of the swirling blizzard poured the Finns themselves, almost invisible with white capes covering their grey-green uniforms and white fur caps on their heads. Their machine guns barked and their knives were loose in their sheaths and they did not take many prisoners.²⁶

Actually, that was not true. The Finns wound up taking quite a sizable number of prisoners—5,600 in all.

And what prisoners! The Western correspondents who were allowed, even encouraged, to interview and photograph them were uniformly astounded at the woefully inadequate clothing and general abysmal state of the Russian POWs. Typically, and not inaccurately, Leland Stowe wrote: “The Russian troops the Kremlin has thrown against the Karelian bottleneck are probably the most miserable-looking creatures to be seen in uniform in this part of Europe since

Napoleon's half-starved soldiers straggled back from Moscow. None of the men had high boots, and several of them, as a result, had feet so frozen they could hardly walk." One unnamed Finnish colonel told Stowe, "Such infantry we have never seen. They are not soldiers."²⁷

The public's image of the war, which was mirrored in the dispatches of other Western correspondents who were allowed near the front line, was set: Finnish ski soldiers pouring out of the snow, machine guns barking, the wretched Russian soldiers being cut down and, if they were lucky, being taken as prisoners.

The truth, of course, was a little more complicated. On the main front in Karelia, the Russian monolith had indeed bogged down as the Seventh Army's initial thrust petered out before the withering Finnish fire. The farthest initial westward penetration was made by the Soviet 19th Regiment, which secured a slim bridgehead on the west bank of the River Vuoksi before it was beaten off.

However, in the far north, the 14th Army had already captured its main objective, the port of Petsamo, after overcoming light Finnish resistance, and was rapidly advancing down the Arctic Highway for its intended link-up with the 9th Army, the westward-moving Russian force that was about to attack the strategically located eastern central town of Suomussalmi, site of its future Golgotha. North of Lake Ladoga, the 8th Army had similarly overwhelmed the meek Finnish defenses, capturing the town of Suojarvi along with a large number of civilian hostages, and also seemed to be making progress toward its ultimate objectives in the heart of the Finnish lake country.

Still, on the whole, the image of the Soviet Goliath stumbling over itself while the fleet, white-hooded Finns harried him on the ground and the tiny Finnish Air Force badgered him from the air, was accurate enough to cause mounting distress in Moscow. Already by December 9, operational control of the four armies assigned to the initial assault, as well as the Baltic and Northern fleets, was moved from the Leningrad Military District to the direct control of *Stavka*, the Red Army High Command. At the same time, Meretskov, the author of the misconceived Russian invasion plan and top Soviet field commander, was relieved and reassigned to command the 7th Army, while commissars Lev Mekhlis and G. I. Kulik were dispatched to the 9th and 8th Armies, respectively, in order to help those units intensify their attacks.²⁸

Not that any of this did the mostly second-rate Russian forces assigned to the invasion much good. The Finns' superior fighting skills and leadership, coupled with both their knowledge of their home terrain and their indomitable will to resist, came into full play in the second and third weeks of the war, causing the 7th, 8th, and 9th Armies to suffer a remarkable and well-publicized series of humiliating defeats. The relatively forgotten battle of Tolvajarvi, where an augmented Finnish regiment engaged in a running fight with two Soviet divisions before nearly destroying one of them, was the first outright Finnish victory and a major morale booster for the Finns.

December 19, the twentieth day of the war, when the Soviets experienced

setbacks on various fronts—and the date that serves as the climax of the first part of the book—was a major watershed. Thus, in the course of twenty-four hours, in Lapland, the 9th Army was simultaneously stopped at Pelkosenniemi, while to the south, the 7th Army was thwarted again in Karelia in close fighting in which the Russians lost nearly seventy tanks. That same day the Bristol Bulldogs of the Finnish Air Force blunted the latest Russian aerial offensive, shooting down over a dozen Soviet bombers, while at sea—the Winter War also included a limited naval war, even a submarine war of sorts—the battleship *October Revolution* mounted an unsuccessful attack on the Finnish island fortress of Sarenpaa before being driven away by its artillery. The Finnish military star was now clearly on the ascent. Or as *Time* mordantly (and not inaccurately) put it, “After three weeks of war, Russia’s planned *Blitzkrieg* had definitely failed to blitz. All in all, Joe Stalin did not have a happy birthday.”²⁹

And the Finnish star continued to rise for the remainder of December and into early January, through the back-to-back “annihilation victories” at Suomussalmi and Raate Road, where Colonel Hjalmar Siilasvuo, using the same *motti* tactics displayed at Pelkosenniemi, methodically eliminated the Russian 163rd and 44th Divisions in that legendary battle, the high point of Finnish arms. Meanwhile, in Karelia, on December 23, the Finns were sufficiently emboldened to launch their one and only counteroffensive against the surprised Russians in front of the Mannerheim Line with a two-sided encirclement. The Finnish attack ran out of steam, but it came close enough to the headquarters of the 50th Corps, which Meretskov was visiting at the time, to give the Russian commander a bad scare—as well as to help persuade Stalin and his cronies that maybe they needed a Plan B, after all.³⁰

Impressed by the Finnish show of force, the British and French now committed themselves to the notion of dispatching a combined relief force to succor the Finns. This was the same harebrained operation that would come to be called Operation Avon Head, or the “Finnish wild goose enterprise,” as British general Alan Brooke—then head of British Southern Command, later chief of staff—accurately dismissed it. At the same time, the Allies continued to send the Finns a considerable amount of guns, ammunition, and planes, just enough to encourage Helsinki to think that they would eventually, somehow, come in with both feet, which in fact had been the ultimate aim of Finnish strategy: to force the rest of the world to come to their aid before they were annihilated. As a result Finnish morale couldn’t have been higher. It was further bolstered by the famed fighting speech from Winston Churchill, then Lord of the Admiralty, on January 19, 1940, in which he exhorted, “Finland, superb, nay sublime in the jaws of peril, Finland shows what free men can do.” The generally pessimistic Mannerheim was in such buoyant spirits that he told a British military envoy, General Christopher George Ling, that he could hold off the Russians until May.³¹

This, of course, was fantasy. Mannerheim, it seems, had begun to believe his own myth, which all those reporters squeezed into the Hotel Kamp had helped

create for him. However, neither he nor they had seen the real Red Army—at least yet. They would shortly. Mannerheim also seems to have misjudged the American political situation, and particularly President Franklin Roosevelt’s latitude for action; he sent the president a “very urgent,” if somewhat unhinged, telegram asking the United States to dispatch 150 pursuit planes and thirty-six two-engine bombers to Finland, not fully appreciating that Americans, though ardently supportive of the Finns, just as ardently wished to remain neutral.³²

Meanwhile, also during the January interregnum, the Finnish government, which was still anxious to find a way to make peace with Moscow even though the latter no longer recognized it, managed to establish an unusual back channel with the Russians via the Fennophile Soviet ambassador to Stockholm, Madame Alexandra Kollontai, and her friend, the left-wing Estonian playwright Hella Wuolijoki. The results of this conduit, which involved a series of *sub rosa* meetings at Stockholm’s Grand Hotel, ultimately became serious enough to merit the attention of both governments. Molotov, who was also keeping an eye on the battlefield, where the Finns were still besting the Russians, signaled on January 19 (the same day that Churchill made his pro-Finnish speech) that the Kremlin was willing to do business with the Finnish government—not the Finnish People’s Democratic Republic, which was promptly made to vanish, but the same “White Guardist regime” it was supposed to depose. By now, Stalin, realizing his folly (as well as how badly served he had been by his advisors), had given up any notion of “liberating” Finland. As Geoffrey Roberts writes, “Stalin was blinkered by his ideology, not blinded by it.”³³

Indeed, if anything, whatever fissures that existed in the Finnish commonweal between left and right had been soldered shut by the Soviet invasion. There were a number of cases of espionage and sabotage committed by Finnish soldiers to the Communist cause at the start of the war, but no more than a handful, and even that number dropped as the war progressed and the inhumane character of the Soviet regime became clear, as spectacularly manifested by the pathetic state of its own captive, frostbitten troops. There was no fifth column in Finland to speak of; even Stalin could see that now. So negotiations there would be.

But first, Stalin decreed, the battered prestige of the Red Army had to be restored. The prevailing image of the clumsy, ill-clad Soviet Goliath stumbling about in the Finnish snowdrifts, underscored by the back-to-back Russian disasters at Suomussalmi and Raate Road, which the press eagerly peddled as well as exaggerated, could not be allowed to stand.

Geoffrey Roberts drily summarizes what happened next: “In January 1940, the Soviets regrouped, reinforced their armies and Stalin appointed Semyon K. Timoshenko to overall command of the Soviet assault. In mid-February Timoshenko launched a well-prepared offensive, again concentrated on the Mannerheim Line. This time the Soviets succeeded in breaching Finnish defenses and in driving back Mannerheim’s men along a broad front.”³⁴

Western observers, used to tales of Finnish military prowess, as well as of Soviet military incompetence, were surprised and disappointed by how quickly the revamped Russian juggernaut was able to break through the main Finnish defense line. They ought not to have been. The massive initial artillery barrage on February 11, in which the Russians threw over 300,000 shells in a twenty-four-hour period, was the heaviest such barrage since the Second Battle of the Somme. More important, the crack, expertly led, well-motivated echelons who now charged the pulverized Finnish defenses were of a different order altogether than their woebegone predecessors. So were their tactics and equipment, which included tank-drawn snow sledges and other innovations.³⁵

Finnish military historian Otto Manninen, who advised the author on this book, accurately describes the dramatically changed tenor of the fighting on the Karelian front:

Fighting was fierce from the start. The attackers had to cross a zone full of granite posts and anti-tank ditches, fields of barbed wire, minefields, obstacles, and entanglements. The infantry attack took place under the protection of the artillery's avalanche of fire. The distance of impact for the infantry was to be 200 meters at most, and the tanks were to advance to holes cleared in the obstacle zone on a level with the first echelon of infantry, and then cover the infantry and make way for it while fighting alongside it. The assault troops attacked behind the first echelon of the infantry. After the artillery preparations, the strike detachments set off to capture bunkers and firing nests.³⁶

This was the real Red Army. Put another way, the Red Army had learned from its mistakes, and quickly. In the end, the Soviet High Command proved more adaptable than anyone gave it credit for, especially Hitler, who wound up taking the wrong lesson from the Winter War. In this, Geoffrey Cox, perhaps the best military analyst amongst the Kamp corps, compared the Red Army's performance to that of the British Army in the Boer War:

The Soviet High Command showed a willingness to learn from its errors so that in the end it emulated the habit ascribed to us [the British] of losing every battle but the last. Just as in the Boer War we recovered ourselves and worked out tactics suitable for the country after we had suffered disaster upon disaster by sending troops in scarlet coats in close formation, the Russian commanders worked out their way of bringing the great ponderous weight of the Red Army machine against the elusive [Finns].³⁷

Moreover, those "elusive" Finns were a spent force. Desperate for replacements, the army once again lowered its requirements. Convicts serving light sentences, men up to age forty-six, and those once rejected for physical

infirmity, were now rushed into uniform. Meanwhile, the shell-shocked veterans who peered over the parapets of their trenches or through the embrasures of their battered bunkers, awaiting the new Soviet juggernaut, had been reduced to virtual zombies. Yet these same men managed to hold off the new, massive Soviet assault on the isthmus. Still, with a well-coordinated land and air armada now numbering 460,000 men, divided into two massive armies—the 7th Army, led by Meretskov, on the left, and the 13th Army, led by the Finnish-born Soviet general Vladimir A. Grendahl (formerly Wladimir Grundahl), on the right—and backed up by 3,350 artillery pieces, 3,000 tanks, and 1,300 aircraft (just the portion of the total force allocated to the isthmus), it was only a matter of time before the Russians broke through.³⁸

To be sure, there was still good news for Fennophiles if they knew where to look for it, especially north of Lake Ladoga, where in late February the Finnish 23rd Division, using the by now tried and true *motti* tactics, completed the destruction of another Soviet division, the 18th. However, on the main Karelian front, where, after intense fighting, the Russians forced the first breach in the Finns' defenses in the Lahde district and were continuing to pour through, time was fast running out. On February 17, by which time the break in the Finnish defense line had been expanded to eight kilometers, Mannerheim, having sized up the situation himself after a rare visit to the front line, authorized a general retreat of the Second Finnish Corps, led by General Harald Ohqvist, to the intermediate Finnish line running from Vuoksi to Kamara. Meanwhile, on the eastern side of the isthmus their comrades stubbornly continued to resist the assaults of Grendahl's force.³⁹

Four days later the hard-driving Russians broke into that as well, and Ohqvist's men were forced to withdraw to their final line, running from the Vuoksi, in the middle of the isthmus, through Viipuri itself. Pausing only briefly, Timoshenko now sought to reduce the city once known as "the Paris of Finland," now a smoking shadow of its former self, with a double envelopment, as one Soviet force moved by land from the east while another came up from the south, via the ice-bound Bay of Viipuri. There, in another one of the war's forgotten battles, the new Red juggernaut sought to gain the western shore, while the sparse Finnish artillery pounded holes in the ice and Finnish fighters strafed them from the air.⁴⁰

Once again, as in December, readers and listeners around the world—for radio was now present, too—were stirred by new tales of Finnish heroism. However, despite the Finns' tenacious defense, it was clear that the Winter War was in its final act. Even Finland's staunchest friends, including her friends in the press, following events as best they could from Helsinki, could see that now; correspondents were no longer allowed to go near the isthmus by paranoid Finnish press censors. Thus, on February 27, a sad but clear-eyed Virginia Cowles wrote in her dispatch for the *Sunday Times*: "It is impossible for journalists to make predictions. One can only draw the obvious conclusion that a small force of approximately 300,000 men cannot hold out indefinitely against an army with an unlimited supply of manpower and which can afford to fight a war of attrition.

Unless Russia is diverted in another direction or several hundred thousand troops arrive in Finland the country is bound to be conquered in the end.”⁴¹

Russia was not diverted in another direction. Indeed, it was precisely Stalin’s fear that he would be diverted by the half-baked Allied rescue mission, which he seems to have taken quite seriously, and would have to fight the British and French in Scandinavia, perhaps alongside his German allies—a prospect that he understandably dreaded—that led him to drive Timoshenko to push his men on. Indeed, somewhat paradoxically, even though it was never actually launched, the now forgotten Operation Avon Head wound up playing a significant role in the Winter War. The very threat of the Allies landing in Sweden and making their way to Finland—even though the paltry subforce was assigned to the secondary objective of assisting the Finns, rather than Avon Head’s original Churchillian objective of seizing Sweden’s iron ore deposits—was sufficient to make Stalin anxious. Doubtless it was also a factor, if not the main factor, in making Stalin decide to bring the war to a halt before Finland could actually be conquered. First, however, the prestige of the Red Army had to be restored.

A brief aside, if I may: I daresay that the story of the Winter War, the complete story, with its cat’s cradle of interwoven political, diplomatic, military, and intellectual strands, is far more complex than meets the eye. On the one hand, one cannot understand the military dimension of the war without taking into account the political-diplomatic context in which it took place; on the other hand, it is folly to write about the political and diplomatic dimension if one takes one’s eye off what was actually taking place on the battlefield. I try to do both in my account of this still dimly understood war, which really was an extended fifteen-week-long battle—hence the Finnish title of the book, *Taistelu Suomesta* (*The Battle of Finland*)—while alternating between its constantly shifting planes. At the same time I devote the preponderance of my attention to the battlefield, which was still the main driver of the war. It was, of course, because of how well the Finns had done on the battlefield during the first month of the war—as well as how well and dramatically the Finns’ initial military successes and corresponding Soviet debacle were conveyed by the Western media—that convinced Stalin and Molotov to change their minds and negotiate with the true democratically-elected Finnish government, and not the ersatz Democratic Republic of Finland, in late January, while the world was still agog at the graphic photos of the horrific aftermath of the decimation of the Soviet 44th Division at Raate Road.

The off-stage political and diplomatic developments and shenanigans also have their place in the saga. If Timoshenko and the highly motivated cadres of the second Soviet wave had had their way, they would have indeed been pleased to make a belated birthday gift of Helsinki to Stalin, as now seemed increasingly feasible. That, Stalin—the palpably incompetent Voroshilov having been discreetly removed from the scene—decided, with his eye nervously cocked towards Narvik, where the first boatloads of the putative Finnish rescue force were supposed to land, would be nice but no longer necessary. He would treat with the Finns again. Also, doubtless, the extraordinary fight the Finns had put up, as well

as their remarkable show of unity—had persuaded him that even if he was able to conquer Finland, he would have at least as much difficulty governing the Finns as had the tsars. Yes, Stalin decided—the entreaties of Madame Kollontai also quite likely played a role here—he would talk to the Finns again. But first the prestige of the great Red Army would be restored.

Now, to paraphrase Molotov, it was the soldiers' turn to speak, and they were speaking well. The Soviet pincers were indeed closing fast. On March 5, the 123rd Soviet Division entered the suburbs of Viipuri, while its sister unit, the Soviet 28th Corps, continued with its remarkable island-hopping campaign, ruthlessly overcoming the garrison at Tuppuraa fortress (which plays a supporting role in the narrative), as well as those on the surrounding islands of the Viipuri archipelago. Sensing that the gulf was the most sensitive and vulnerable point of the Finnish rear line, and cognizant that they only had a limited time before the ice began to break up, the Russians now shifted the greatest weight of their entire offensive effort in that direction, sending wave after wave of men and machines out over the frozen-over bay, while Finnish planes and artillery blasted holes in the ice, causing many to fall in. No matter: there was no stopping the Soviets now.⁴²

Desperate for the Finns to hold on, Eduoard Daladier, the French prime minister, who had tied his own political fortune to the success of the “Finnish wild goose enterprise,” recklessly offered to send several more times the relatively paltry force of 15,000 men assigned to Avon Head. However, the Finns, after some hesitation, correctly perceived the desperation of Daladier's gambit, which achieved nothing except to get several thousand more Finns and Russians killed, and refused to issue the official public appeal for help that the Allies insisted on in order to legitimize the seaborne assault: such niceties were still important at this relatively civilized point of World War II.⁴³

On March 5, the same day that Timoshenko's men assaulted Viipuri, his forces to the southwest stormed ashore and established their first beachhead at the village of Vilianiemi, on the now blood-soaked western shoreline of Viipuri Bay. The gates to Helsinki were indeed open now. That same day a Finnish peace delegation led by Prime Minister Risto Ryti secretly set off for Moscow via Stockholm to begin negotiations with Stalin. Two days later the Finns finally reached Moscow, where they learned that the Kremlin's new terms were harsher than they had imagined. In addition to ceding all of Karelia, Molotov—Stalin himself did not participate, preferring to leave the affair to his chief political henchman—now also demanded the entire Ryabachi peninsula in the far north of Finland and a band of territory in the Salla district in Lapland. Ominously, the Finns were also now required to build a railroad connecting the Murmansk Railroad with the strategic port of Tornio on the Gulf of Bothnia, signaling the Soviets' possible intention to annex Finland after all, as per its original plan. Naturally, Helsinki also had to sign the obligatory treaty of mutual assistance. And, of course, the Kremlin still wanted a long-term lease to the strategic port of Hanko.⁴⁴

The Finns had arrived hoping to bargain with the Soviets, as they had done—or at least had tried to do—the previous November. However, there would be no bargaining this time. The bullet-headed Soviet foreign commissar made that very clear. The flustered Ryti tried to get Molotov to soften the terms. Nothing doing. The best Molotov would do, however, was to leave out the treaty of mutual assistance. Molotov gave the Finns two choices: sign or keep fighting.

While back in Helsinki, the dismayed Finnish cabinet deliberated on whether to accept, the Finnish Army, still in the dark, kept on fighting. And so did their no less blinkered Soviet counterparts, as they continued to batter their way into Viipuri.⁴⁵

At his headquarters, General Ohqvist, who had been ordered to hold Finland's second city at all costs, and who was still unaware of the Moscow negotiations, recorded in his diary: "This is an awful gamble we are taking. It is possible that we can keep Viipuri in our hands until tomorrow night. If we are ordered to continue resistance beyond that it means that either the city or the troops will be doomed."⁴⁶

That same day, March 9, after a final pessimistic situation report from Mannerheim and much wringing of hands, the cabinet reluctantly cabled Ryti and his fellow delegates instructing them to sign the dreaded treaty. There was no choice, really: the Finnish Army was losing a thousand men a day at that point. It was no longer possible to speak of a Finnish "line" on the gulf coast: from the Baltic shore to the farthest Russian advance, now just six kilometers from the edge of Viipuri, the entire shoreline was a chaotic series of savage delaying actions. Still, the men of the Finnish Coastal Group, stationed along the western shoreline of the bay, and the Second Corps, fighting in Viipuri city, refused to succumb. Try as they might, the Soviets were never able to close the last few kilometers that stood between them and final victory. On the day that the armistice was announced to the shocked Finnish nation, the Finnish flag still flew over Viipuri Castle.⁴⁷

One of the things that sustained the defenders of Viipuri, one must point out again, was the prospect of Allied, including American, support, as unrealistic as that was. Finns were unwilling to believe that America, their best friend in the free world, as well as the country they admired and identified with the most, could allow them to be annihilated. Naively, they had mistaken all the brave and bellicose words from the United States—including a spontaneous and impolitic anti-Soviet jeremiad that Roosevelt had delivered from the White House in February to a group of pro-Communist American college students—all gleefully conveyed by the equally naive Finnish press, for a desire to actually go to war for their hard-pressed Nordic democratic cousins.⁴⁸

This was indeed a tremendous letdown, as Carl Mydans, the famed *Life* writer-photographer who covered the Winter War, discovered up close during the days following the Finnish surrender, when he found himself on a train with a group of embittered Finnish soldiers. Before the armistice, his American accent might

have been greeted with a smile and a nod and a thumbs up. Not anymore. Now it was a liability. “Your country was going to help!” a Finnish officer angrily exclaimed to him, grabbing Mydans by the shoulders. “A half-dozen God-damned Brewster fighters with no spare parts is all we got from you! And the British sent us guns from the last war that wouldn’t even work!” Then he collapsed in tears.⁴⁹

That was an exaggeration, of course. In point of fact, America sent a dozen Brewster fighters; however, they were outmoded. And the British sent quite a few guns and planes as well, and not all of them were from the last war, either.⁵⁰ The main point is that, alongside their unshakeable love of country and formidable fighting skills, the Finns had also been sustained by the prospect of receiving significant material assistance and manpower from the Allies, over and above what they had already provided—in addition to the 12,000 volunteers from around the world, including the United States, France, and Britain. This is why in order to fully understand the war it is vital to understand the entire military-political and intellectual map on which it was conducted, not merely the relatively small square of Europe in which it was actually fought, as well as the outsized role the cheerleading Western media played.

In point of fact, the notion that America—or anyone—could really have saved the Finns once Stalin woke from his narcoma and put his best military foot forward was probably a delusion. It really was only a matter of time before the Soviets remedied their initial faux blitzkrieg strategy and overcame the recalcitrant Finns.

Indeed, once one peels away the layers of myth and examines what actually happened, as I tried to do during the three years I researched this book, both in Finland and in Russia, what is most striking about the war is how long and how well the Finns were able to resist. The truth is, even when one removes the distorting effect of the Western media, as well as that of the rigid Finnish press censorship, there is a core of truth to the *legenda* of the Winter War, which perhaps explains why it still has such abiding force in Finland. As such, the *Talvisota* clearly ranks among the great defensive sagas of military history, alongside Thermopylae, Masada, the Alamo, and the Battle of Britain.

Beyond that, I have tried here to do justice to the bravery and prowess displayed by both sides of this extraordinary conflict while also giving the reader some idea of why for 105 days in late 1939 and early 1940 the Winter War captured the imagination of the world, as well as why it continues to fascinate scholars and practitioners of the military arts up to the present day.

Gordon F. Sander

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