

# **To what extent was the Finnish attitude towards the USSR the main reason behind the outbreak of the Winter War in November 1939?**

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## **Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources**

This investigation aims to explore the question: ***To what extent was the Finnish attitude towards the USSR the main reason behind the outbreak of the Winter War in November 1939?*** The relationship between Finland and the Soviet Union is highly complex and will therefore be discussed and analyzed in order to understand who holds the responsibility of the war.

The first source that will be evaluated in depth is Albin T. Anderson's journal article "*Origins of the Winter War: A Study of Russo-Finnish Diplomacy*" published in 1954. The origin of the source is highly valuable since the author is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Nebraska and an expert in modern European and Soviet history, indicating that he is knowledgeable in the topic discussed. However, the author is from the US and did his Bachelor's degree; MA and PhD in the US. Because the article was written a long time ago a lot of research has been done since, yet, it does provide hindsight. The journal article was published by the Cambridge University Press and is a secondary source. This origin serves the credibility of the source and the knowledge provided from the author can be trusted and seen as valuable. Since journal articles are shorter than books and written about specific topics, it creates a definite focus to the research question being investigated. However, since it is a secondary source there is a high likelihood that the information is biased to argue for a specific view.

The purpose of the journal article is to explain the disagreement between Finland and the Soviet Union over finnish territory, leading to the invasion. This is valuable since it allows for a wider understanding of the historical background leading up to the war as it analyzes the nation's political relations prior to the war. On the other hand, since the author has covered a longer time period rather than focused on the year of invasion, its value is limited to an historian studying the Winter War over a shorter time period. Furthermore, since

the journal article provides mainly political content it could be interpreted that the author has a political agenda of debating for Finland's independence gained only as a consequence of the war.

The second source that will be evaluated is the book "*Vinterkrigets diplomati 1939-40*" written by Max Jakobson in 1967. Jakobson is a Finnish author, diplomat, and journalist who was involved in Finland's politics during the Winter War and therefore has a lot of insight, providing credibility, especially since it is a primary source. However this could create a bias as the reader is only granted the perspective of the author and his experience of the events. The purpose of the book is to provide insight into the Finnish relations to the USSR and the book constructs a wider implication of the Finns attitude through Max Jakobson's point of view. The intention of the author may perhaps be to demonstrate Finland's oppressed position in history caused by the Soviet Union and emphasize Jakobson's fight to maintain the country's neutrality.

The content of the source provides the reader with valuable information from a person experiencing the actual events being discussed and holds a further detailed account into the decisions being made, the people involved, and the origin of the conflict during this time period.

## **Section B: Investigation**

The Winter War, also known as the First Soviet-Finnish War fought between Finland and the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1939-1940 lasted for 103 days. The background leading up to the war stretches beyond the Finnish Declaration of Independence gained in 1917 after the Russian Revolution, which transitioned into the Finnish Civil War and the Soviet-Finnish negotiations prior to the outbreak of the war.

In 1809, Finland became an independent part of the Russian Empire and had its own government (the Senate), parliament (Lantdagen), administration, military, currency, laws, and language.<sup>1</sup> Hence, granting Finland a lot of freedom inside the Russian Empire. This situation transformed not until the end of the 19th century when growing nationalism, the unification of Germany and the creation of different alliances in Europe made the Russian Czar Alexander III (1881-1894) concerned about the independent parts of the Russian Empire. In turn, this led to a period of russification of Finland beginning in the 1880's and thereby a growing suspicion from Finland against Russia.<sup>2</sup> The relation between the nations worsened once Eugen Schauman, Finnish activist and assassin, shot the Russian General Governor Bobrikov in June 1904. Repression against Finland would have been expected, yet, since the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) had just begun, Russia experienced a turbulent year resulting in Czar (Nicholas II) accepting several reforms, such as the November Manifesto of 1905 which ended the russification of Finland.<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet Union claimed that gaining Finnish territory would reinforce Finland's sense of security as the relations between the two great nations, Germany and the Soviet Union, caused great distress.<sup>4</sup> The Aaland islands dominated the entrance into the Finnish

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<sup>1</sup> Lindholm, p. 14ff

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 50ff

<sup>3</sup> Lindholm

<sup>4</sup> Jakobson

gulf<sup>5</sup>, leading to what's formerly known as Petrograd and later known as Leningrad and Saint Petersburg, located in the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> The islands were considered an area of hostility to the Soviets and since Finland had no significant use of it in a neutralized condition, the USSR argued that they could take over the land in order to prevent a Nazi attack through Leningrad's exposed position.<sup>7</sup> The Soviets wished to install air and sea defenses on the islands in order to guard Leningrad and oppose the presumed German attack, leading to the various proposals given to Finland by the USSR.<sup>8</sup> The Finnish President, J. K. Paasikivi, emphasized that if Finland remained their distance from military alliances and maintained a friendly relation to the Soviets, they would in turn honor Finland's independence and cause them no harm.<sup>9</sup> However, as Colonel General Volkogonov, Soviet historian and colonel general, told Max Jakobson, "Stalin was guilty. He alone decided to start the war without caring about the objections of the marshals."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it was claimed that Stalin, like any other leader of a country, did not wish for war, but he wished to get results.<sup>11</sup> What actions these results implied were unknown, yet it was obvious that the USSR was eager to strengthen their defense. The Soviet's uncertain intent of their demands caused Finland to remain doubtful, especially due to past historical events and disputes between Finland and the Soviet Union. Since Finland was fully aware of what the USSR previously had been capable of doing in order to retain or even expand their powers, it was reasonable to believe that they would not honor Finland's independence and thereby for Finland to object to the proposals given.

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<sup>5</sup> Anderson

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>7</sup> Anderson

<sup>8</sup> Anderson

<sup>9</sup> Holsti

<sup>10</sup> Forss

<sup>11</sup> Forss

During the Russian Revolution of 1917 in February, the monarchy was overthrown and replaced by the Provisional Government.<sup>12</sup> Their intent was to eventually create a permanent democratic parliamentary polity, however, they were overthrown in October by the Bolsheviks, or “*the Reds*”.<sup>13</sup> At first, the Bolsheviks occupied parts of Petrograd and soon formed a new Communist government led by Vladimir Lenin who then established the Soviet Union. In contrast to the USSR, “*the Whites*” won the Finnish Civil War against “*the Reds*” and Finland became an independent state.<sup>14</sup> This is significant to the question investigating the outbreak of the Winter War as the history between Finland and the Soviet Union plays an important role in their attitudes and actions towards it. The segregation between “*whites*” and “*reds*” was still apparent prior to the Winter War, causing varied opinions upon the demands set by the USSR.<sup>15</sup> The tension between “*White Finland*” and “*Red Russia*” added to the growing rift between the nations leading up to the outbreak of the Winter War.

This resulted in a hostile relationship between the nations and the Finnish government’s disregard towards the Soviet’s demands as they generated an uncertainty of the retention of their independence. Stalin came to power after the death of Vladimir Lenin.<sup>16</sup> Even though Stalin’s only objective concerned the exposed position of Leningrad, there is an argument suggesting that the war could have been avoided if the Finnish government’s attitude was more lenient towards the idea that the Soviet’s aim was strictly to secure Leningrad.<sup>17</sup> Max Jakobson, Finnish diplomat and journalist, argued that the Winter War could have been avoided if Finland had agreed to Stalin’s demands.<sup>18</sup> However, Finland could not steer clear from losing its independence, which therefore led to the outbreak of the Winter

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<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>13</sup> Encyclopedia

<sup>14</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>15</sup> Toivonen

<sup>16</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>17</sup> Forss

<sup>18</sup> The demands concerned some territory north of Leningrad and a few islands in the Finnish Gulf

War.<sup>19</sup> Despite the pronounced pressure on Finland from the Soviet Union to give up part of their territory, Finland objected to the USSR's propositions, and it can therefore be argued that the main reason behind the outbreak of the Winter War was Finland's predetermined attitude towards the USSR and their inability to seek common ground with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Finnish attitude towards the USSR could be justified based on the fact that they had already experienced a civil war in which "*the Whites*" won. Hence, agreeing to the USSR's demands would perhaps jeopardize their independence and they would risk experiencing another russification.

In addition to the perspective that the Finnish attitude towards the USSR resulted in the outbreak of the war, it can be said that Finland found the war to be a crucial factor in order to retain their independence which in turn gave them a greater motive to fight against the Soviet Union. Finland's continuous struggle to defend their country and remain independent has built up a stubbornness expressed through nationalism and fights against other nations in order to prove their honor to their country. This nationalistic view is embedded within the country's history as the people have emphasized the importance of keeping their independence in the events where Finland has been depicted as an easy target in order to expand power and defense. Finland's ought to cease this image can support the perspective that their attitude towards the USSR resulted in the outbreak of the Winter War.

There are two different perspectives considering who owns the responsibility of the outbreak of the Winter War. One argues that the Finnish government's reaction towards the USSR's demands was unreasonable and that they held grudges from past historical events. Yet, the other suggests that the Soviet Union intended to expand their territory and gain power rather than simply protecting themselves from Nazi Germany in World War II. The Soviet Union made the decision to invade Finland because of their neglect to agree to their

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<sup>19</sup> Jakobson, p. 41

proposals suggesting to offer Finland support if ceding part of their land. Therefore, it can be concluded that the root cause of the outbreak of the Winter War was the Finnish attitude towards the Soviet Union to the extent that the USSR's main image of Finland was its vulnerability as a small nation and the benefits in which the Soviets could gain if invading it. The debate concerning who holds the responsibility of the war continues as the action of invasion was made by the USSR, yet the action became apparent because of Finland's decision of resistance.

## **Section C: Reflection**

Throughout the process of this investigation, I have learnt and developed a better understanding of the methods used by historians in their approach toward analyzing historical context. In contrast to the work of a scientist or a mathematician, it is more challenging to reach a rigorous conclusion as history is not constructed with the same elements of proof and an “*absolute truth*”. Instead, historians must carry out deep research into their subject by comparing contrasting points of views which enables them to reach a justified conclusion about, perhaps, a controversial or disputed topic. This, in turn, may create biased views or even flawed interpretations of historical events and it is therefore of great importance that historians reflect upon and question the given information. However, this might in turn allow for the historian to be more creative and interpretative through the building of one's own interpretation of an event based on the stories and historical documents found.

When doing my research, I began finding the background information of the invasion to get a clear view of the context that I thereafter had to interpret using the two perspectives of the cause of the invasion. However, I initially started by attempting to figure out who to hold accountable for the war yet came to realize that the research done must be criticized thoroughly in order to create the most accurate and justifiable results. When applying the methods of historians to my own work, I learnt the importance of questioning, analyzing and selecting sources in the least biased way possible in order to reach a justified and accurate conclusion. Hence, investigating the Winter War from different perspectives and realizing that there are always different points of views of the same event which are usually constructed by previous extended historical relationships.

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