

Finland's Relations with the Soviet Union, 1940-1986

by Peter Botticelli

Seldom has a country's history been interpreted with as much irony as Finland's post-war history. While Western countries are continually warned of impending "Finlandization" with its essential reduction of independence and security and its necessary deference to the Soviet Union, the Finns have, during the past four decades, never lost an argument with the Soviets over basic Finnish interests.

Finland is a small, Western, liberal democracy that has seen the Soviet Union invade it twice, attempt to subvert its government, issue ominous demands and hurl a dizzying volume of threats. Yet Finland has emerged with its democratic institutions unscathed, with a strong economy and with every reason to believe that the status quo, so skillfully crafted by Finnish leaders, will remain intact indefinitely.

In order to understand the influences behind Finland's post-war foreign policy and policy toward the Soviets, it is necessary to examine the events from 1939 to 1944. In 1939, Stalin demanded significant portions of land north of Leningrad ostensibly as a buffer zone against attacks from the north, and a port close to Helsinki for use by the Soviet navy.

Finland was willing to give up the land (in Karelia) but refused to give up a port that could be used as a base for subversion against Finland. Stalin's winter invasion soon followed. Furthermore, Stalin set up a puppet government of exiled communists as the invasion commenced. Thus, it was a tremendous blow to Stalin's prestige when his forces were stopped and plans for the new communist government were discarded. <1>

It appears that by the 1943 Tehran Conference Stalin had actually decided against the annexation of Finland. Nevertheless, Stalin launched a major offensive against Finland in 1944 to retaliate against Finnish attempts to reclaim at least the territory lost in the Winter War. Stalin now clearly wanted to occupy Helsinki. <2>

However, the fierce Finnish resistance, their willingness to expel German troops and to give reparations (especially industrial equipment), as well as the less strategic position of the country all played a role in dampening Stalin's desire for taking Finland. The biggest factor, however, was that more Soviet troops were needed to win the race to Berlin and to secure control over eastern Europe. <3> Thus, Stalin decided to sign an armistice with the Finns, which cleared the way for the development of the post-war status quo.

Although the Armistice of 1944 foreshadowed (among other things) the self-imposed restrictions Finland was later to accept as the price of independence, the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 was even more important in influencing the policy goals of Finland in the post-war era.

Ratified by the Soviets and Great Britain, the treaty gave most of the Karelian isthmus, the Petsamo region and the use of the Porkkala base for 50 years to the Soviets. It also reaffirmed the demilitarization of the Aland Islands and the limits on the Finnish military set in the armistice. <4> The Soviets obviously wanted to improve the security of Leningrad by controlling possible approach routes, and this they accomplished.

Most significant to the Finns was the part of the treaty that called for Finnish neutrality, which was to be the foundation of post-war Finnish foreign policy. The treaty inspired the "national realism" policy of Urho Kekkonen in which Soviet interests would be respected and served over the interests of Germany or other countries in order to retain Finnish independence. <5>

The war had certainly shattered Paasikivi's policy of serving German interests to retain independence. To Kekkonen, the Soviets would have to be strongly convinced that Finland would never accommodate the military interests of a Soviet enemy. At this point, all that remained in the task of creating the Finnish-Soviet status quo was to define the particular ways and means through which the two (now friendly) countries would interact in meeting their needs.

On Feb. 26, 1948, Stalin sent a note to President Paasikivi indicating a Soviet desire for a "radical improvement" in Soviet-Finnish relations through a "treaty of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance analogous to the Hungarian-Soviet and Romanian-Soviet treaties." <6>

This was obviously a great turning point in Finnish history, and it hardly appeared favorable at the time. General Mannerheim said it was "merely the beginning of the end" of Finnish independence. Paasikivi attempted to delay the negotiations on legal grounds, and certainly the ongoing breakup of the Western-Soviet wartime alliance did nothing to alleviate Finnish pessimism. <7>

What was even worse was that Finland at the time fit neatly into the pattern of eastern Europe under Soviet pressure. Finland's prime minister and minister of justice were pro-Soviet and the ministers of the interior and social affairs were leading communists. The head of the State Police was also a communist firmly loyal to the interior minister. <8>

This was the challenge faced by Finnish democrats as they tried to build a lasting basis for independence by signing historic agreements with a former enemy. That they succeeded as much as they did was one of the more remarkable accomplishments of modern political history.

The resourcefulness and sheer toughness of the Finns was crucial in overcoming the communist threat. The Social Democrats (unlike in eastern Europe) were quite effective in infiltrating the communist ranks and in actively opposing communist policies.

The Constitution of 1919 enabled the president and parliament to block extreme cabinet policies and even allowed the president to dismiss cabinet members. The communists

were soon voted out and removed (if they refused to leave) from the cabinet. The State Police were disbanded at this time, removing a considerable threat even though the army and the regular police were beyond communist influence.

Also, the communists were weakened by leadership rights while the trade unions grew increasingly anti-communist. From this evidence it seems highly unlikely that the communists could have won without full-scale intervention by the Soviet military - a price the Soviets were apparently unwilling to pay in light of the reparations, trade benefits and commitment to neutrality offered by the Finnish democrats. <9>

It was the greatly embellished independence resulting from the democratic victory that probably enabled the Finns to negotiate a favorable Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (or FCMA). In fact, the Finns actually wrote most of it themselves. <10>

The crux of the treaty was that the two sides would consult on the need for mutual assistance in the event of an attack on Finland or the USSR through Finland. To Paasikivi, the reasons for consultation were more strictly defined than in the eastern European treaties, and the level of military responsibility (including military interaction to "prevent" attacks) was less for Finland.

The Finnish Constitutional Committee declared that the need for assistance "has to be confirmed by both states" since, in the treaty, an "expression of mutual will" was called for. However, Kekkonen later admitted that the Finnish position that joint consent for consultations was necessary was a "unilateral interpretation" by the Finns. In the Note Crisis, though, the Soviets acted as though mutual consent was needed, which reaffirmed the Finnish position. The Finns have decided to assume that their independence is not threatened by joint military actions and that Finnish forces will always remain under Finnish control and will operate only in Finnish territory. <11>

There are interesting explanations for the leniency of the Soviets in the FCMA negotiations. A more stringent treaty would certainly have had negative repercussions in Norway, Denmark, and even Sweden (they would have moved even more to the Western camp), and also would have done nothing to alleviate the tension and fear that gripped all of Europe at the time. The Soviets thus wanted to downplay any military commitment of Finnish forces and to emphasize their acceptance of Finnish independence. <12>

For these reasons the Finns took a harder line in negotiations than they otherwise would have in terms of the specific demands made and the use of pressure in negotiating. The Foreign Affairs Committee of Finland went so far as to declare that the Finns were "very serious and our demands unconditional." <13> The Finnish Foreign Minister, Enckell, attributed the mildness of the treaty to the "particular geographical position" of Finland in relation to the eastern European "friends" of the Soviets. <14>

There were other reasons as well for the new status quo created by the FCMA treaty. The fact that Finland was one of the few non-neutral countries in Europe (in addition to

Britain and the USSR) not to have been occupied during the war and to have retained its constitutional and political system, and the fact that no Finns remained under Soviet control (all were resettled) made acceptance of the status quo easier for the two sides.

The firm commitment of the Finns to neutrality was also a major factor. After World War II, most Finns became convinced that only neutrality could provide real security since no balancing powers existed in eastern Europe; the prospects for Scandinavian cooperation were at best remote; and the Western powers were neither willing nor able to guarantee Finnish security. <15> (Finland had been considered part of the Soviet sphere of influence at the Yalta conference). <16>

Of course, the status quo was not without costs for Finland. They had to refuse all Marshall Plan aid. Any agreements with the Common Market would have to be balanced with COMECON agreements that would have little economic value. Full membership in the EEC was out. In addition, political refugees would have to be returned to the USSR. <17>

After the FCMA treaty was approved, President Paasikivi articulated what would be the central precept of Finnish foreign policy to this day the "Paasikivi line." This stated that the USSR had legitimate interests in Finland, and therefore the (noncommunist) Finns would have to collaborate with the Soviets up to a point at which the Finns would actively oppose the spread of Soviet -sponsored communist activity in Finland. <18>

A number of developments occurred in the first years after 1948 that further clarified Soviet-Finnish relations. Negotiations for a Scandinavian defense alliance (1948-49) were declared unacceptable to the Soviets. Finland was warned to abandon "Northernism" or the "idea of the North" which the Soviets labeled as an American attempt to increase the influence of the Atlantic Alliance. The negotiations failed.

Furthermore, the Soviets kept Finland out of the Nordic Council in 1952 by using the same argument. Naturally, the continuing uncertainty in Soviet-Finnish relations at the time led the Finns to act carefully and deferentially regarding any policy of Nordic cooperation. This stance was eased considerably beginning in the mid-1950s as the "years of danger" (1944-48) receded further into the past. <19>

In 1955 President Paasikivi said that "friendly discussions and judicious settlements are the course which has to be taken in the arrangement of our affairs with the Soviet Union." <20> This belief received its highest vindication with the return of Porkkala in 1956, after which Paasikivi could claim that Soviet interests in Finland were indeed defensive and that Finland had fully won Soviet trust. <21>

These good relations would be put to a critical test, however, in the 1961 Note Crisis. This happened at a time of increasing Western ties in Denmark and Norway and of Soviet concern about how permanent the Paasikivi-Kekkonen (now president) line really was. The Berlin crisis was also underway; this led to great concern in Finland since the FCMA treaty specifically mentioned German actions as a subject of consultation.

So, when the note proposing consultations arrived in Helsinki on Oct. 30, 1961, it was generally interpreted as a warning to Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden (less) that their actions threatened Finnish independence. The note emphasized Germany's increasing influence in the Baltic, its Berlin policy and its military buildup which made the Finns take it even more seriously.

However, the Finnish Prime Minister Miettunen was convinced that the note did not reflect a change in relations since no official criticism of Finnish policy was included in the note. This was later admitted by the Soviets. President Kekkonen provided a solution to the crisis by arguing that a retraction of the note would diffuse any military buildup in Scandinavia and would reinforce the peaceful coexistence doctrine. Kekkonen met with Krushchev in November 1961 and reached an agreement suspending consultations unless and until the situation in northern Europe and Germany grew worse. This agreement was part of the Novosibirsk Accords. <22>

These accords solidified the relationship between the two countries and led to a basic change in Finnish foreign policy. Essentially, Kekkonen agreed to become active in trying to prevent East-West conflicts that might spread to northern Europe that could result in the FCMA treaty being invoked. Thus, Finland became a proponent of Scandinavian neutrality, which would lessen the FCMA threat while allowing for broader economic and cultural ties among the Nordic countries.

This policy was directly manifested in two mid-1960s proposals by Kekkonen. He suggested that Norway should leave NATO and instead sign a defense agreement with Great Britain and the United States similar to the Finnish-Soviet agreement. This supposedly would have limited international military involvement (especially during a crisis) in Scandinavia. It was not seriously considered.

Kekkonen also suggested that the border between Finland and Norway be neutralized to reduce the possibility of East-West conflict involving Finland. This suggestion was also rejected.

The Finnish policies of the other Scandinavian countries can be described by what is called the "Northern Balance Theory." In this theory, a balance between Western (Scandinavian) and Soviet interests is maintained by a Finland friendly to the USSR, a neutral Sweden and minimal NATO members Norway and Denmark to whom the threat of closer NATO ties is necessary in preventing further military integration between Finland and the USSR. The theory is rejected by the Finns since the Paasikivi-Kekkonen line is based on Finland's ability to deal with the Soviets without third-party intervention. <23>

The stability and widespread acceptance of the status quo by the Finns has remained nearly constant during the past two decades. A 1974 poll showed that 80 percent of the Finns believed that the FCMA treaty is beneficial while only 4 percent believed it to be deleterious. The vast trade relationship between Finland and the USSR is also widely supported. Currently, two-thirds of Finland's total energy supply is imported from the

Soviet Union, and the Soviet share of Finland's total trade has been a consistent 15 percent to 20 percent. <24>

However, despite these good relations, the Finnish press has had - to maintain restraint in criticizing Soviet military and human rights policies. For example, a Finnish version of Gulag Archipelago was not published (a Swedish version was imported), <25> and the invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan were downplayed by the media. <26>

The Soviets also try to influence Finnish politics through the pro-Soviet faction of the Finnish communist party. The party has often been in governing coalitions, <27> although it has been steadily losing strength since World War II. <28>

Another turning point in Finnish history occurred in 1982 when President Kekkonen retired and a Social Democrat, Mauno Koivisto, was elected president. Clearly, Koivisto's candidacy was seen as a chance to reassert democratic structures that had become less important under the towering presidency of Kekkonen. This was partly because Koivisto had stood up to a direct challenge from Kekkonen to resign (over budget matters) and had won. <29>

Koivisto's lack of ties to the Soviets was also a major source of his popularity - the Soviet's preferred successor was rejected even as a candidate by his party. <30> So, as the vote was announced on Jan. 26, 1982, there was considerable trepidation as to how the Soviet Union would react. Any anxiety was quickly relieved as the Soviets acknowledged Koivisto's win immediately and even claimed it as a victory for the left. <31>

On March 9, 1982, President Koivisto embarked on the all-important first formal visit to Moscow. He had to assure the Soviets that there would be no change in the Paasikivi-Kekkonen line despite the change in president and party. The fact that the FCMA treaty was extended for another 20 years at this time indicates the success of Koivisto in dealing with the Soviet leadership. <32> In fact, it appears that the Social Democrats have been gaining on the Center party since the 1960s as the primary supporter of the Finnish-Soviet status quo, making them more acceptable to the electorate. <33>

Neutrality will certainly continue to be the foundation of Finnish foreign policy. It is a concept deeply rooted in Finnish history. For example, after the Winter War, the Finns chose to accept the harsh Soviet terms rather than British and French military aid in order to avoid involvement in a big-power conflict. During its association with Germany, Finland refused to sign any political agreements in order to retain at least the appearance of neutrality.

Even before the war, Finland's cooperation with the rest of Scandinavia was designed to achieve neutrality rather than a defensive alliance. Finland has carefully avoided taking sides in the Cold War; for instance, it formally recognizes neither Germany, and when negotiating for membership in the European Free Trade Association (1959-61), Finland took careful steps to protect its trade status with the USSR. <34>

Since World War II, the Finns have sought above all to gain the trust of the Soviet Union in order to establish a diplomatic status quo that would ensure Finnish independence and even prosperity through mutual agreements. Against stiff odds, the Finns have done exactly this.

Notes

1 Max Jakobson, "Substance and Appearance: Finland," *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1980), pp. 1035, 1039.

2 Jakobson, pp. 1019, 1037.

3 Roy Allison, *Finland's Relations with the Soviet Union, 1944-84*, (New York: St Martin's, 1985) pp. 1314.

4 Allison, pp. 14-15.

5 Allison. p. 17.

6 Arthur Spencer, "Finland Maintains Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* (Jan. 1953), p. 301.

7 Allison. p. 20.

8 Spencer, p. 302.

9 Spencer, p. 303-5.

10 Allison, p. 23.

11 Allison, pp. 24-25.

12 Allison, pp. 30, 23.

13 Allison. p. 30.

14 Allison, p. 22.

15 Jakobson, p. 1038.

16 Ralf Torngren, "The Neutrality of Finland," *Foreign Affairs* (July 1961), p. 603.

17 Gregory F. Treverton, "Complicated Coexistence," *Atlantic* (Dec. 1983), p. 12.

18 Spencer, p. 306.

19 Allison, pp. 31, 35, 36.

20 Allison, p. 38.

21 Allison, p. 39.

22 Allison, pp. 45, 46, 47-8, 49, 50.

23 Allison, pp. 59,61, 52-3, 54.

24 Treverton, p. 12.

25 Treverton, p. 12.

26 Jakobson, p. 1042.

27 Treverton, p. 12.

28 Jakobson, p 1040.

29 H. Peter Krosby, "Finland after Kekkonen," *Current History* (Nov. 1982) p. 383.

30 Treverton, p. 12.

31 Jakobson, p. 394.

32 Treverton, p. 11.

33 Krosby. p. 381.

34 Torngren, pp. 602, 606, 608-9.

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