

Back to the Finland Station

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For more than four decades the post-1944 Finnish-Soviet border appeared to be the most definitive of Stalin's World War II territorial dispositions. Allocated to Moscow's "sphere of influence" by the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact of August 1939, Finland eventually yielded in its 1939-40 Winter War with the USSR and was forced to cede Finnish-populated Karelia. Defeated again after it had joined in the German invasion of the USSR in 1941, Finland was obliged, under the 1944 Moscow armistice and the 1947 Paris peace treaty, to surrender not only Finnish Karelia but also some islands in the Gulf of Finland and the Petsamo (Pechenga) region in the far north. Thus did Finland lose over 12 per cent of its pre-war territory, while Norway acquired a common border with the USSR (see map). Thereafter, Finland's perceived need to take account of Soviet strategic interests (a condition for which the term "Finlandization" was coined) kept the lid on the territorial question. However, on the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 the ceded areas again became a live issue in Finland, where recent opinion polls have shown substantial majority support for negotiations with Moscow on their recovery. Finnish public awareness of the issue has been enhanced by the opening of the Karelia border, and the consequent ability of Finnish citizens to inspect areas once part of Finland, and by the campaigning of groups advocating the restoration of Finland's pre-war territory. To understand why, it is worth tracing the historical background in some detail.

Finland under Swedish and Russian Rule

Finland passed 500 years under Swedish rule and a further century as a possession of Tsarist Russia. An early Swedish attempt to drive the Novgorod Slavs from the eastern Gulf was defeated at the Neva river in 1240 by Prince Alexander, later surnamed "Nevsky". But Swedish dominion over most of what is now Finland was confirmed by the 1323 Treaty of Pähkinäsaari (Petrokrepost) with Novgorod, under which Swedish territory included the western half of the Karelian isthmus east of Vyborg (Wiipuri), whose great Swedish-built fortress dates from 1293. Novgorod remained the ruling power in eastern Karelia, where four Finnish Karelian uprisings were put down between 1278 and 1337. After the Swedes

had abrogated the Union of Kalmar with Denmark (1397 - 1523), Finland became a grand duchy of Sweden in 1581. In the 17th century the borders of Sweden/Finland in the east and south were extended, by military ascendancy and settlement, to include the whole of the Karelian isthmus and western Karelia north of Lake Ladoga. Of the same racial stock as the Finns, the indigenous Karelians had once owed allegiance to medieval Novgorod, from which many of them had acquired the Greek Orthodox faith, whereas after 1527 Lutheran Protestantism replaced allegiance to Rome in Sweden/Finland.

In the early 18th century Sweden was supplanted as the dominant regional power by the emergent Russia of Peter the Great, who in 1703 founded his new capital of St Petersburg at the mouth of the Neva to display Russia's new naval strength. Defeated by Russia in the Great Northern War of 1700-21, Sweden was compelled by the Treaty of Nystad (1721) to cede extensive regions on the eastern and southern littorals of the Gulf of Finland, including the Karelian isthmus up to just north of Vyborg as well as western Karelia. As a result of the 1741-43 War of the Hats, moreover, Peter's daughter, Tsarina Elizabeth, gained the adjoining Kymi region of Finland, to the west and north of Vyborg. Her successor, Catherine the Great, concentrated on more southerly expansion, notably in the partitions of Poland (1772-95), but in the Napoleonic era Russia's attention returned to Finland. After the 1807 Franco-Russian Treaty of Tilsit had given Tsar Alexander I freedom of action in the Gulf, Russia annexed the rest of Finland in 1809. Tsarist rule was confirmed by the Congress of Vienna (1814-15).

During the 19th century the grand duchy of Finland enjoyed substantial autonomy within the Russian empire. As a result of negotiations between Baron Gustav Armfelt of Finland and Tsar Alexander I in 1811, the grand duchy's borders with Russia proper were for the most part set at their pre-1721 position. This meant that Finland was deemed to include western Karelia north of Lake Ladoga as well as the Karelian isthmus down to about 50 km north of St Petersburg. The determining principles of the agreement were (i) that the border north of Lake Ladoga should follow the ridge dividing the respective watersheds of the Baltic and White seas, and (ii) that

only areas wholly Finnish in ethnic composition should be part of Finland (mixed areas being deemed to be part of Russia). In the late 19th century, Finnish representatives persuaded the Tsar to agree that Russia should transfer the Petsamo region in the far north (west of Murmansk), to give Finland access to the Arctic Ocean. This pledge remained to be implemented when World War I broke out in 1914.

Seizing the opportunity presented by the overthrow of the Tsar in 1917, the Finnish Diet on 6 December 1917, declared independence on the basis of the Armfelt-Alexander borders. A civil war ensued in Finland between pro-Bolshevik Reds and anti-Bolshevik Whites, in which the former received support from the Russians and the latter from the Germans. Withdrawal from Finland was one of the conditions which the Germans imposed on the new Russian Bolshevik regime under the March 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Although Germany sued for peace in the west in November 1918, in Finland the Whites eventually emerged victorious. Under the Treaty of Tartu (Dorpat) signed with the Soviet Union on 14 October 1920, the new Finnish republic secured recognition for its independence within borders which included western Karelia north of Lake Ladoga as well as the Karelian isthmus north of St Petersburg (by then called Petrograd, later to be renamed Leningrad). Also included was Petsamo, which meant that Finnish territory extended to the Arctic Ocean.

World War II Territorial Settlement

The 1920 borders of Finland were not to survive World War II. After the Nazi-Soviet pact of 23 August 1939 had secretly listed the Gulf of Finland as a Soviet sphere of influence, Stalin demanded that Finland should withdraw from the area north of Leningrad. In return, he offered the cession of parts of eastern Karelia further north. When Finland demurred, Soviet forces launched a surprise attack. In what became known as the Winter War, brave Finnish resistance eventually succumbed to Soviet forces three times more numerous and much better equipped. Under the Moscow armistice signed on 12 March, 1940, Finland was compelled to make territorial concessions substantially greater than the original Soviet demands, amounting to the restoration of the 1721 line secured by Peter the Great. The areas lost were the Karelian isthmus and an adjoining area to points north and west of Vyborg, Finnish Karelia north of Lake Ladoga and a number of islands in the Gulf of Finland. In addition, the Soviet Union obtained the right to lease Hangö peninsula (at the western end of the Gulf) for the purposes of a military base, as well as the right of unrestricted transit for people and goods

through Petsamo to and from Norway. There was also a major border adjustment in the Soviet Union's favour in the area south of Petsamo, around the town of Kuolayarvi.

Embittered by the Soviet terms and subjected to continued political pressure from Moscow, Finland moved closer to Nazi Germany. In June 1941, three days after the start of the German invasion of the USSR, during which Finnish cities were bombed by Soviet planes, Finland declared war on the USSR. Finnish historians note that Finland signed no formal alliance with Hitler and that Finnish forces took no active part in the German siege of Leningrad of 1941-44. Britain's declaration of war on Finland in December 1941 is of interest to conflict theorists because it is a rare example of a war between two democracies; in fact, however, there were no actual hostilities between Finland and the Western allies. Instead, Finland concentrated on recovering the territory ceded under the March 1940 treaty and on extending Finnish rule in eastern Karelia. The outcome was a further defeat by the Red Army and an armistice (signed in Moscow on 19 September 1944) under which Finland was obliged to accept Soviet terms even more draconian than those of 1940. Not only were the Moscow treaty's territorial stipulations in the south restored; in addition, Finland was obliged to cede Petsamo province in the north and was thus deprived of access to the Arctic Ocean. Moreover, the Soviet Union, while it gave up its right to the Hangö lease, obtained similar rights to establish a military base on Porkkala-Udd peninsula, south-west of Helsinki. Following the armistice, Finland regained a measure of favour with the Allies by driving German forces out of the country.

The armistice terms were confirmed by Finland's peace treaty with the wartime Allies and associated powers. This instrument was signed in Paris on 10 February 1947 and entered into force on 10 September 1947. The terms meant that Finland lost about 12.5 per cent of its pre-war area, which had contained 12 per cent of its population and about 13 per cent of its national wealth. The new border cut dozens of road, rail and electricity links, as well as the Saimaa canal, which became derelict. Virtually the entire Finnish population of the ceded regions (about 420,000 people) moved to Finland within its new borders and were replaced by ethnic Russian, Ukrainian and even Asian settlers. The migration placed a great burden on the shattered Finnish economy, which also had to generate US\$300 million payable in war reparations to the USSR under the Paris treaty. It transpired that the ceded Petsamo region contained valuable nickel deposits, which became a Soviet asset. Not surprisingly, many Finns reflected on the contrast

between their post-war lot and that of Sweden, which had remained neutral in the recent hostilities and became substantially wealthier by trading with both sides (as it had in World War I).

In recognition of post-war strategic realities, Finland signed a Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance with the USSR on 6 April 1948. The first article of this treaty, which was renewed in 1970 and 1983, specified that Finland would fight "*with all the forces at her disposal*" to repel any attack on the Soviet Union launched through Finnish territory by Germany "*or any state allied to the latter*". In such an eventuality, continued the treaty, "*the USSR will render Finland the necessary assistance, in regard to the granting of which the parties will agree between themselves*". In return for this accommodation of Soviet strategic interests, post-war Finland was able to preserve its independence and democratic political system and to develop a prosperous market economy. Reparations were paid off by 1952 and in 1955 Finland secured the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Porkkala base. But Finland had always to tread carefully in the succeeding decades, aware that the rulers in Moscow would brook no interference with the territorial and security arrangements which had resulted from World War II.

As regards the administrative status of the territories ceded by Finland, the Soviet authorities made some significant changes in 1946. Before the war, Soviet Karelia had been an autonomous Soviet socialist republic (ASSR) within the Russian Federation (RSFSR). Following the signature of the Moscow treaty in March 1940, all the southern territory gained from Finland (except for an area around Leningrad) was added to the Karelian ASSR, which became the Karelo-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and the 12th full republic of the USSR. In 1946, however, the southern part of the Karelo-Finnish SSR, including the Karelian isthmus, was transferred to the Leningrad region (*oblast*) of the RSFSR and the remainder reverted to the status of an ASSR within the RSFSR, with its capital at Petrozavodsk. At the same time, the ceded Petsamo and Knolayarvi regions in the north became part of the Murmansk *oblast* of the RSFSR.

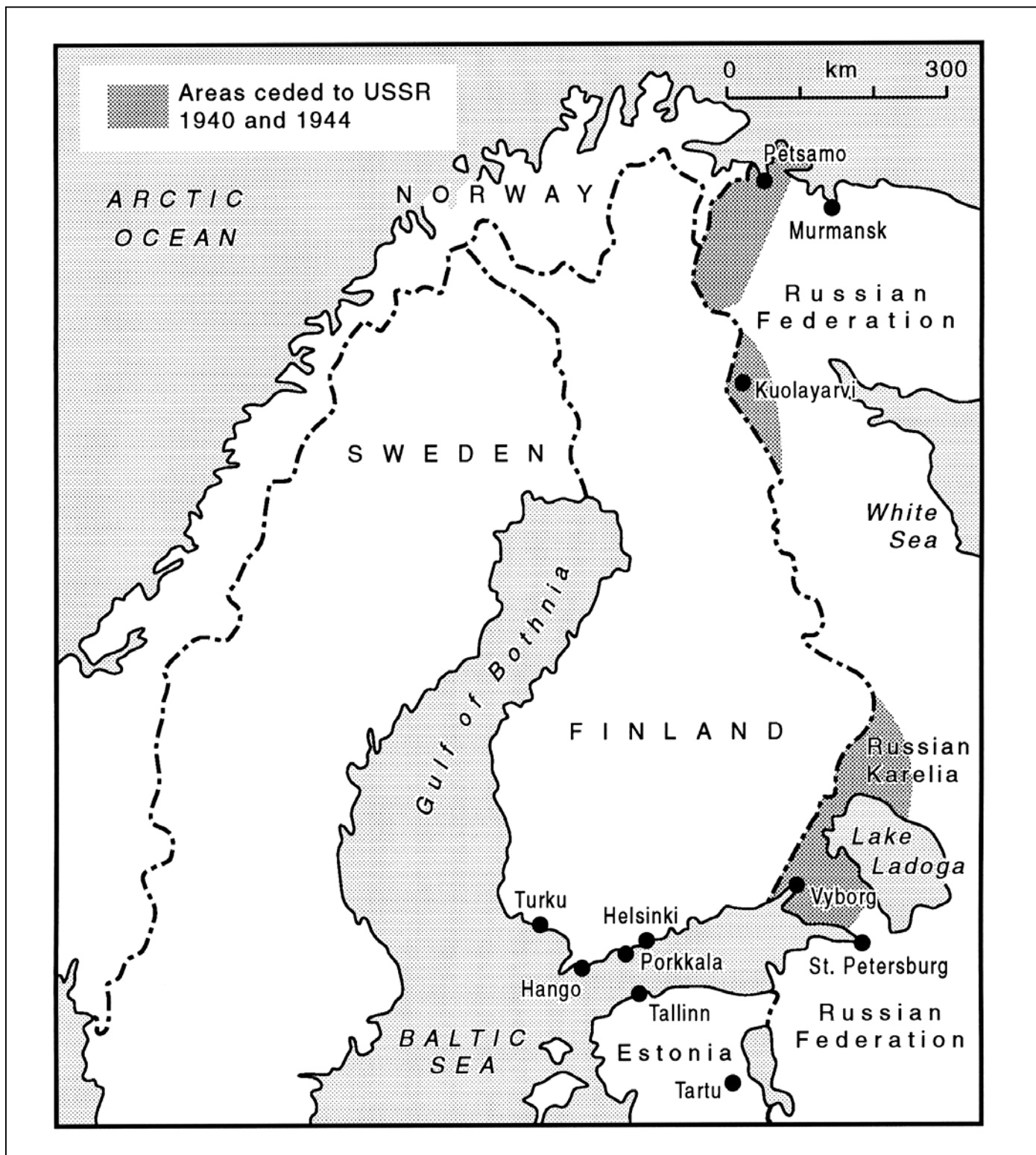
Revival of the Finnish-Russian Border Question

Finnish-Soviet relations remained set in their post-war mould for over four decades, during which barely a whisper was heard in Finland about the territories lost in 1940 and 1944. All Finnish governments, of whatever political complexion, followed the standard line emanating from Moscow, that the border question had been settled once and for all and that there were no

territorial issues between the two sides. Both countries were keen proponents of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which included a stipulation that existing European borders should be regarded as inviolable. But this Cold War logjam began to shift as a result of the post-1989 collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the accelerating process of disintegration in the USSR itself. The consequence for relations between Helsinki and Moscow was rapid progress towards "normalization" and the abandonment of the "unequal" elements which had operated hitherto. At the same time, Finns were free at last to debate the question of the ceded lands and to consider the prospects of a revision of the post-war territorial settlement. Highly influential on Finnish public opinion in this context was the example of the three Baltic republics in regaining their independence in 1991 and in thus reversing at least some of the results of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact.

In terms of formal relations, the main change was that the 1948 Finnish-USSR treaty was replaced by a new instrument which did not have the unequal aspects of the old one. Negotiations on a new text were completed in early November 1991, but before it could be signed the USSR had finally expired. Accordingly, a suitably adjusted treaty of good neighbourliness and mutual co-operation was signed by Finland and the Russian Federation on 20 January 1992. Unlike the 1948 text, it contained no military commitments (and did not mention Germany), specifying that future relations between the two countries would be based on international law and the accords of the CSCE. The parties agreed never to use force against each other and to respect the inviolability of their common border. Two other agreements signed at the same time covered reciprocal trade and economic co-operation in the Finnish-Russian border area. In the latter respect, Finland had in December 1991 made an initial allocation of Fmk30 million to assist reconstruction in the Russian regions of Karelia and St Petersburg (the name to which Leningrad had reverted in September 1991).

The new treaty was ratified by the Russian parliament on 14 May 1992. It was significant that in recommending ratification the chairman of the foreign affairs and trade committee, Yevgeni Ambartsumov, made positive references to Finland's role following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Recalling that the Finnish military commander, Marshal (Baron) Mannerheim, had been a Tsarist general before 1917 and spoke fluent Russian, Ambartsumov said that this background had been "*decisive for Mannerheim's limited advance over the old border, which in turn prevented the enemy* [i.e. the



Germans] from taking Leningrad". The Finnish Diet also ratified the treaty (on 22 May), ratification instruments being exchanged during a state visit to Helsinki by President Yeltsin on 11 July.

It was pointed out in Finnish government circles that the new treaty provisions did not exclude the possibility of border changes being peacefully agreed by negotiation within the CSCE framework. As things stood, however, neither the government nor any of the

mainstream parties advocated that a claim should be made in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, members of the populist Rural Party began to call for a formal reopening of the territorial issue, while discussion of the question in the Finnish media and in

political circles was no longer taboo. By early 1992 opinion polls in Finland were showing that some 60 per cent of respondents believed that the government should take up the question of the ceded territories.

Moreover, the easing of border restrictions meant that Finns who had left Karelia in the 1940s (or their descendants) could now visit their ancestral homes. There was accordingly increasing media exposure of conditions in the former Finnish territories, particularly of the neglect, dilapidation and pollution which Finns found there. In the absence of any agreement for restitution or compensation, some Finns initiated the process of trying to buy their former properties from the Russian authorities.

In what in March 1992 became the Karelian autonomous republic of the Russian Federation, the demise of the USSR also stimulated renewed interest in the border question. Forming about 20 per cent of the republic's population, the Karelian Finns looked to Finland for economic and cultural support, as they began openly to rediscover their national identity. A congress of Karelian Finns held in Petrozavodsk in November decided to press the demand for legal recognition by the Russian government (as had been granted to the Volga Germans), although it stopped short of calling for sovereignty for Karelia. A sizeable minority at the congress voted to send a telegram to President Yeltsin demanding that the territories ceded in 1940 and 1944 should be returned to Finland. In 1993 both Karelian and Finnish Finns are staging events to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the founding of the Vyborg/Wiipuri fortress, and decrying its delapidated state and the general physical decay which the former Finnish areas experienced under Soviet rule.

In the revival of Finnish interest in the territorial question a prominent role has been played by a group called the Tartu Peace Movement, which advocates that Finland should seek by negotiation to recover the borders established under the 1920 Tartu treaty. According to the movement's chairman, Dr Martti Siirala, the 1920 borders reflected the ethnic boundary between Finns and Russians which had existed for a millennium, and which had been recognised by the Russians themselves when Finland was a Tsarist possession. He has argued further that recovery of the ceded areas, and their resettlement by Finns, would not only recreate "*truly friendly relations*" between Finland and Russia but would also be to the latter's economic benefit. The movement sees as the priority the formal reopening of the territorial question,

contending that the detailed shape of a new settlement should be discussed only after negotiations begin. In contrast, other Finns have come up with full scenarios as to how the ceded territories might be recovered. These include a detailed plan, recently published by a Finnish industrialist and a former civil servant, for the economic and social development of the ceded areas on the basis that they are restored to Finnish sovereignty. Under the plan, southern Karelia would become a demilitarized "special area" of Finland, while the northerly territories would be incorporated into adjoining Finnish municipalities. Under this particular plan all of the existing population would have the right to remain, although pre-cession inhabitants (or their descendants) would be able to buy back their former properties. Other Finns, however, contend that a large proportion of the present population of the ceded areas, especially military personnel and their families, do not constitute genuine inhabitants as defined under international law, and would be expected to leave if Finnish sovereignty were restored.

In May 1993 the Tartu Peace Movement and like-minded organisations launched a national petition seeking popular support for the proposition that the territorial question should be formally reopened with the Russian government. The aim was to collect at least 500,000 signatures and, as a first step, to force a parliamentary debate on the question. It remains to be seen what effect, if any, this initiative will have on official thinking. In the meantime, the Finnish government has gone no further than proposing that Russia should lease it the port of Petsamo/Pechenga, in exchange for a reduction of Moscow's US\$1,400 million current debt to Finland. Unsurprisingly, the Russian reaction to this suggestion has been cool.

* Alan J. Day compiled the Europe section of *Border and Territorial Disputes* (3rd edition), published by Longman Current Affairs (UK) in November 1992. The present article is an edited and updated version of the Finland-Russia chapter of that volume.
