

85 years since Finland's alliance with Nazi Germany

Part 2

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4 January 2026

This is Part 2 in a two-part series. Part 1 can be accessed here.

Interwar “unity” and social democracy’s conspiracy against the working class

The sharp loss in the Winter War came as a surprise to many Finns, as emergency wartime censorship created the impression that their military was doing well and not on the verge of major defeat. This censorship was maintained after the Treaty of Moscow ended the Winter War and helped the government establish their turn to Nazi Germany in secrecy. The opinion of many right-wing figures across the government, including Mannerheim, was that the Winter War was a disastrous mistake for Finland. Juho Paasikivi, a leading member of the National Coalition Party (Kokoomus), would later write:

The Winter War certainly earned us honour and reputation and the goodwill of the world, but it did not prevent and it was no compensation for the unhappy peace of Moscow.

It is a striking testament both to the effectiveness of the censorship and the contempt of politicians for the Finnish public’s ability to understand events that doubts about the necessity of the war were publicly denounced as communist subversion. Modern claims that Finland democratically entered into an alliance with Nazi Germany have to be understood in the context of this government conspiracy to exclude the public from even basic knowledge of Finland’s real international condition.

Under the censorship regime, articles expressing sympathy for Norway and Denmark as they were invaded and occupied by the Nazis were barred. Brief factual notes on Nazi repressions across Europe were occasionally allowed as long as they included no criticism or discussion. While newspapers could praise the Nazi regime, any article promoting the Soviet Union was forbidden by the censors. This heavy-handed censorship was supported by the SDP ministers in government. The historian Anthony Upton described the impact of this:

The total effect of all this was undoubtedly to deny the ordinary Finnish citizen any chance of forming a realistic picture of the two great powers whose policies controlled his own fate.

Shortly after the Winter War, the left-wing of the SDP under Karl Wiik opposed Tanner and began agitating for an end to emergency measures and a free press, rallying a small parliamentary opposition centered on just six legislators known as the Wiik Group. A few months later in September, Tanner organized their expulsion from the SDP, denouncing their insistence on democratic rights. A serious historical question is how to gauge actual Finnish public opinion despite such a thorough effort to block public discussion by all parliamentary parties.

There are two main interwar developments that point to the large, but suppressed, opposition to the government’s increasingly pro-Nazi diplomacy. First, the rapid growth of the Finnish-Soviet peace and friendship society (SNS from its Finnish initials), and second, left-wing opposition in the trade unions. In May 1940, roughly 20 radicals expelled from the SDP and members of the underground Communist Party formed the SNS, to promote an orientation to the Soviet Union rather than to Nazi Germany. Within two months it had 115 branches and 35,000 dues-paying members, nearly 1 percent of the whole population.

The response of the government was police repression. By July, the secretary of SNS, Mauri Ryömä, was arrested for publishing an open letter to the parliament calling for an end to censorship and a new government oriented to the Soviet Union. The SNS organized meetings demanding his release. Police efforts to prevent the meetings led to daily protests in Helsinki. The government banned all gatherings of over 30 persons in the capital and turned the fire hoses on Finnish workers. At the peak of the protests in Turku, the police dispersed the crowds with live ammunition. The government proceeded to arrest other leaders of the SNS and formally banned the organization in December.

Similarly, although expelled from the SDP, the Wiik Group took its fight for democratic rights and class struggle into the trade unions. The Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) was holding its congress at the end of October and the left social democrats led a campaign against the corporatist wartime agreements. In a bitter fight against the SDP leadership, roughly a third of the union delegates to the congress were won to this platform.

Although beaten back with censorship and violence, there was a clear and militant opposition in the working class to the government’s antidemocratic measures and increasing orientation to Nazi Germany. But this groundswell of working class militancy could not grow into a revolutionary opposition without breaking from the class collaboration of the SDP or the bureaucratic nationalism of Stalinism. The Wiik Group opposed the illegal, underground organizing necessary for workers to fight the slide to fascism. For its part the SNS did not challenge the SDP’s domination of the labor movement; it instead agitated for Soviet intervention, leaving the majority of Finnish workers firmly under Tanner’s thumb. All the parliamentary parties united in suppressing this

opposition and, to prevent the Finnish working class from influencing events, handed over foreign relations with Germany entirely to a military conspiracy around Mannerheim.

Government by conspiracy

When Wehrmacht soldiers first arrived in Finland 85 years ago, the fact that almost no one from the Interior Minister on down even knew they were coming was not an aberration. The decision to garrison German soldiers in the country was made by Mannerheim after meeting with the Nazi envoy Josef Veltjens on August 18, 1940.

Mannerheim claimed that he got authorization over the phone for this maneuver from Prime Minister Ryti, which is probably true, although Ryti consistently denied it. President Kyösti Kallio was not consulted, despite having constitutional authority over foreign affairs. The cabinet was only informed of the agreement two days after the soldiers had arrived. The two SDP ministers did not object but grumbled that they had only been notified after the fact. The parliament was never officially informed.

The lie crafted to obscure the establishment of a foreign garrison was that, while maintaining its neutrality, Finland would allow Nazi Germany to send troops and materiel through the country to relieve its soldiers in the northern extremes of occupied Norway. However, Hitler had already begun preparations for an invasion of the Soviet Union weeks before the agreement was broached. Concerned that the Finnish government would spark an immediate conflict, Hitler did not divulge the details of Operation Barbarossa, but Mannerheim and Ryti actively prepared and hoped for a Nazi invasion.

Particularly after the fall of France to the Nazis in June 1940, elite opinion in Finland solidified around securing Finland's place in the Nazis' New Order. Typical was the August 4, 1940 editorial in *Uusi Suomi*, the newspaper of Kokoomus: "[German influence in Finland] creates an undeniable connection, which cannot be broken without doing violence to the facts of history, and which is also not at variance with the feeling of comradeship in fate, of which Alfred Rosenberg speaks." Rosenberg was a leading Nazi racial theorist promoting antisemitism and *Lebensraum*. With the invasion of the Soviet Union, he became Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories and was later sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials for his numerous crimes against humanity.

Despite his longstanding and public distaste for the Nazis, the SDP leader Tanner similarly argued that Finland must accommodate itself to the Nazi domination of Europe. In a speech in Oulu on July 15, he declared that small nations "have no possibility of deciding their own fate during these tumults." The SDP would insist on the absurd fiction throughout the war that Finland was only fighting independently against the Soviet Union and not allied with the Nazis. They participated as ministers in a government, however, that subordinated every consideration to the fight against the Soviet Union and readily signed on to Hitler's anti-Bolshevik crusade regardless of the crimes involved.

In March 1941, Mannerheim and the government approved the formation of a Finnish volunteer Waffen-SS Battalion. Finnish Foreign Minister Rolf Witting expressed hope to the German ambassador that "Finland can march into membership of the Tripartite Pact [Axis]." The battalion was financed by the Finnish Defense Ministry and the volunteers dutifully swore their oaths of allegiance to the "Führer," participated in the invasion of Ukraine, and carried out numerous war crimes alongside the rest of the Wiking-SS division before being integrated back into the Finnish military with honors in 1943.

In April 1941, the cabinet was restructured to include the fascist and antisemitic Patriotic People's Movement (*Isänmaallinen kansanliike*, IKL)

in the government to form a unity coalition. With its inclusion, every parliamentary party held ministerial posts. The six independents led by Wiik were the only official opposition in parliament.

In the final weeks before Hitler launched his war of extermination against the Soviet Union, Ryti explained to his cabinet:

If a war is now waged between Germany and Russia, it may benefit the whole world. Germany is the only country that can now defeat Russia, or at least greatly weaken it, and it is not likely to harm the world, even if Germany weakens in that game.

Operation Barbarossa and its aftermath

On June 17, 1941, five days before the Nazis launched their invasion, Finland issued an order for a general mobilization. Their secret plans to invade the Soviet Union had been coordinated with the Nazi high command and included the placement of Finnish soldiers under German officers in the north of the country, with plans to invade on June 29. The working class immediately expressed its outrage. In addition to scattered reports of conscripts objecting to mobilization, the SDP stated its opposition to an offensive war. An emergency conference of socialist organizations and trade unions on June 19 demanded that the government live up to its claimed neutrality.

To head off working class opposition, Ryti and Mannerheim were adamant to the German command that a suitable excuse be found before launching attacks from Finnish territory. Regardless, the Finnish military occupied the Åland Islands on the morning of June 22—the day the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union—and cut telegraph communications to the Soviet naval base at Hanko. Mannerheim officially gave Germany authorization to use Finnish airfields after midnight on June 24 and authorized the Finnish Navy to lay offensive minefields. The next morning the Soviet Air Force bombed targets in southern Finland to disrupt communications and mobilization efforts. Ryti seized on this as a suitable pretext to justify the invasion from Finland that was already in motion.

The Finnish parliament met in secret session that day and received a lying report from the government that presented the Soviet air raids as aggression and then gave a unanimous vote of confidence. Even Wiik, who never broke decisively from Second International social democracy in spite of his opposition to the SDP's role in government, and the other independents voted to support the government despite their criticisms. They were repaid for their loyal opposition by being arrested on trumped up charges of treason shortly into the war. They remained imprisoned by "democratic" Finland for three years, only receiving their freedom when Mannerheim concluded a separate peace with the Soviet Union.

Much of the European working class had been thrown into confusion by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the quick victory of the Nazis over France. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union made the class issues unmistakable and signaled the shift across the continent from isolated or passive obstruction to growing strikes and armed resistance against the Nazis. The Finnish government, including the SDP, moved in the opposite direction. The invasion began the period of their closest collaboration with the Nazis and all their crimes. Finland participated in a brutal war of annihilation consciously planned and carried out by Nazi Germany that cost the lives of some 27 million Soviet citizens, including over a million civilians in Leningrad and millions of Jews in the Holocaust.

It was only once the Soviet Union turned back the German advance and pushed westward that Finland sought a separate peace. The Red Army liberated the Majdanek concentration camp in Poland on July 22, 1944.

Finland concluded a ceasefire with the Soviet Union in September. As part of the peace agreements, Stalin extracted additional territorial concessions and reparations from Finland but left the Nazi collaborationist government and legislature in place and opposed any class struggle against it. Finland was the only Nazi ally to maintain continuity of government institutions after the war.

Under pressure from the Soviet Union, Finnish courts tried Ryti, Tanner and six others for crimes against peace, giving them minor sentences between 2 and 10 years. The trials were primarily a diplomatic show and allowed the defendants to grandstand as proud patriots, while leaving their complicity in the Holocaust fundamentally obscured. Mannerheim, who had been appointed president to carry out the ceasefire and initial transition to peace, was never tried for his crimes. Those who were still serving sentences were all pardoned in 1949 by his successor as president, Juho Husti Paasikivi.

The Stalinist bureaucracy never pushed for a clear reckoning with the Nazi collaborators and allowed a completely absurd nationalist cult of historiography to emerge in the postwar period. The crimes of the Finnish Waffen-SS soldiers were hidden for decades, with three different Waffen-SS veterans going on to serve as government ministers over the years. It was only in 2008 that a doctoral student uncovered the records of Finnish police working closely with the German *Einsatzkommandos* to sort through Soviet prisoners of war for deportation to concentration camps and participate in “anti-partisan” activity in the occupied Soviet Union.

Eighty years on, the Finnish ruling class is once again attempting to mobilize the population as cannon fodder in an imperialist war of plunder to the East. While Helsinki’s enemy during World War II was the Soviet Union, today’s Finnish ruling class wants to serve as a tool of the fascist-minded President Trump and a resurgent German imperialism in the subjugation of Russia and China to semi-colonial status. To this end, the entire political establishment stampeded the public into NATO membership, transforming the country’s 1,300-kilometer (808-mile) border with Russia into a new front for a US- or European-led war of aggression.

The social character of the capitalist-restorationist regime under Putin has nothing in common with the degenerated workers’ state Finland attacked in alliance with Nazi Germany in 1941, but the ideological justifications for war remain largely unchanged. Like their Social Democrat and Shachtmanite predecessors, today’s SDP and pseudo-left parties portray Finland as a small “democratic” paradise confronting Russian and Chinese imperialism. As the Helsinki government signs agreements to supply American imperialism with icebreakers for war in the Arctic, Trump is threatening to seize Greenland and Canada by force and preparing to invade Venezuela.

The Finnish government withdraws from the Ottawa treaty banning landmines, buys arms from Israel during the genocide of Palestine, and turns its territory over to the world’s most aggressive military alliance, granting NATO a permanent presence directly on Russia’s border but would have us believe that the early stages of a third imperialist world war are in fact primarily about Finnish “national defense” and the preservation of “democracy.” This explains why Finland’s Nazi-collaborationist history must be passed over in silence by the political establishment or openly revived through the integration of far-right forces, like the Finns Party, into political life.

As in the 1930s and 1940s, the only viable way forward for workers in Finland to oppose war is by rejecting nationalism and unifying their struggles with the working class across Europe, which is beginning to move against the continent’s imperialist powers’ mad drive to impose the full cost of militarism and war on the backs of the workers. As Trotsky and the Fourth International insisted in the early stages of the Second World War:

The Fourth International builds its policy not on the military fortunes of the capitalist states but on the transformation of the imperialist war into a war of the workers against the capitalists, on the overthrow of the ruling classes of all countries, on the world socialist revolution. The shifts in the battle lines at the front, the destruction of national capitals, the occupation of territories, the downfall of individual states, represent from this standpoint only tragic episodes on the road to the reconstruction of modern society.

Independently of the course of the war, we fulfill our basic task: We explain to the workers the irreconcilability between their interests and the interests of bloodthirsty capitalism; we mobilize the toilers against imperialism; we propagate the unity of the workers in all warring and neutral countries; we call for the fraternization of workers and soldiers within each country, and of soldiers with soldiers on the opposite side of the battle front; we mobilize the women and youth against the war; we carry on constant, persistent, tireless preparation for the revolution—in the factories, in the mills, in the villages, in the barracks, at the front, and in the fleet.

Concluded.



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