

[Hidden History of the Winter War](#)[Print](#)

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November 30, 1939 marks the 70th anniversary of one of the most misunderstood wars of the 20th Century, the “Winter War” between Stalin’s Red Army and Finland.

About some things there is no doubt: Hitler and Stalin relegated Finland, along with Estonia, Latvia, and the eastern half of Poland, to the Soviet sphere of influence in the Non-Aggression Pact. Nazi Germany occupied its part of Poland in September, 1939. Very quickly, the Soviet Union occupied its half of Poland as well as effectively annexing Estonia, Latvia, and — to Hitler’s chagrin — all of Lithuania. Despite a few squabbles, the Nazis and the Soviet Communists acted as if their Non-Aggression Pact was a true alliance between compatible powers, not an ad hoc alliance. This genuine partnership showed up in different ways.

Trade between the resource-rich Soviet Union and the technologically and industrially sophisticated Nazi Germany made the British and French blockade of Germany farcical. Oil, wheat, cotton, and a diverse number of non-ferrous metals were shipped across occupied Poland directly to Germany, and nothing the French and British could do made any difference. The Soviets even went to the trouble of acquiring and shipping natural rubber to the Nazis. Russia profited from its trade with Germany as well. What historians have tended to deny or simply ignore is that the Soviet-Nazi Pact was not a treaty of convenience but a genuine alliance between like-minded powers.

Nazis and Soviet Communists rhetorically defended each other to their own captive populations as well as to the world. Louis Fischer, in his May 1940 book, *Stalin and Hitler: The Reasons for and the Results of the Nazi-Bolshevik Pact*, observed that the Soviet Communists and the Nazis were doing everything possible to avoid acts that displeased the other. Soviet Communists did not merely justify their own deeds in Poland, but they also defended what the Nazis were doing in Poland.

*Izvestia* on October 9, 1939 stated that “the government of the Soviet Union and the government of Germany undertook the task of establishing peace and order on the territory of the former Poland and to give to the peoples inhabiting that territory a peaceful existence which would correspond to their national characteristics.”

Schulenburg, the German Ambassador to the Soviet Union, noted that the Soviet Communists were not just trying to influence public opinion in the democracies, but trying as well to convince the people of the Soviet Union that the Nazis were benign, writing: “The Soviet government is doing everything to change the attitude of the population toward Germany. The press is though completely transformed. Attacks on Germany have not only ceased completely, but the portrayal of events in the field of foreign affairs is based to an outstanding degree on German Reports.”

Rom Landau, in his 1941 book, *Hitler’s Paradise*, tells how Nazis described Soviet Communists during their 22 months as allies: “For twenty-two months the German workman was told that the Nazi paradise was hardly different from ... the Russian, and that the social principles of the two states were practically identical.”

The Winter War was another example of the true partnership between Moscow and Berlin. Finland was neutral and peaceful, although it maintained a robust self-defense force. Finland was the only nation in Europe that did not default in its loan payments to America. The Finns were free, democratic, and sought friendly relations with other nations. But Finland lay in the way of Stalin’s territorial designs, so 70 years ago, after weeks of browbeating, the Red Army attacked a neighbor 40 times smaller. After three months, punctuated by humiliating defeats for the Soviet military, Finland was finally forced to accept an unfavorable peace treaty.

The Nazi friendship toward the Soviet Union included supporting Stalin during his Winter War with Finland. Before the Winter War with Finland even began, Germany had threatened Sweden with reprisals if it provided military support to the Finns against the Soviet Communists. Nazi Germany was stonily silent about the war, saying nothing negative about the Soviet Union, saying nothing

positive about the Finns, and allowing no military supplies to aid the Finns from traveling through Germany. Nazi military advisers inside the Soviet Union showed the Russians how to break the Mannerheim Line — the defensive line that had kept the Red Army at bay — and Hitler bullied the Finns into accepting the peace terms offered by Stalin by threatening to send German military forces to attack Finland from the rear. In February 1940, when the Red Army was stopped by the pillboxes of the Mannerheim Line, German military advisers devised new and highly sophisticated tactics which the Soviet general staff, almost completely liquidated by Stalin's purges, lacked the ability to do.

Not only did Hitler help the Soviets with direct technical support, but he threatened Sweden and Norway if those nations allowed Allied forces to intervene to help Finland defend itself. Fischer, at that very time, wrote that Hitler stopped Italian airplanes from reaching Finland, and that on January 3, 1940 the Nazi propaganda apparatus simply reproduced an article from the Moscow Red Army daily, *Red Star*, declaring that the Allies induced Finland to attack the Soviet Union. Fischer went on to note that Hitler manifested his sympathy for Stalin in many ways. This included German help in reorganizing the Red Army. German military advisers in the Soviet Union gave a list of point-by-point recommendations to the Soviet military to restore its effectiveness, which included: (1) complete dissolution of the military commissars; (2) reintroduction of ranks in the army and navy; (3) strict insistence upon the salute and other features of military discipline; and (4) the formation of elite formations. German military advisers were installed in the Defense to aid in the reorganization of the Red Army, and ironically these very reforms are credited by the overwhelming majority of military historians with allowing the Soviet Union to stop — barely — the German onslaught against the Soviets in late 1941.

Although Finland would later fight beside the Nazis after Hitler attacked his Soviet ally, the Finns scrupulously limited their war aims to recovering lost Finnish territory and the Finns refused to turn over Jewish citizens to the Nazis.

There is no difference between the sibling spirits of Marx, the Nazis, and the Soviet Communists. During the Winter War, the true colors of both Soviet Marxism and that variation of Marxism which we call Nazism was clear to the world. Both found peaceful, neutral, and free nations like Finland intolerable. This is the hidden history of the Winter War.

*Photo of Finnish soldiers during the Winter War: Library of Congress*