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TITLE

Mannerheim, Marshal of Finland: A Life in Geopolitics

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A TIMELY REFOCUS ON 'UN-FINNISH-ED' BUSINESS

Finland has become a focal point for conflict watchers. With a nearly 900-mile frontier and a history of conflict and occupation, the relationship with its neighbour Russia has been complicated. The Soviet invasion in November 1939 has secured much renewed interest with its similarities to the war fought since February 2022 in Ukraine. Both instigated by Russian political leaders who presumed they would be short and decisive actions with little or no external interference, Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Putin each failed utterly to anticipate the resistance they would face from small but resolute neighbouring militaries. Added to this is the level of loss that the attackers have suffered. "So many Russians – where will we bury them all?" was the reported observation of one Finnish soldier who saw the enemy advancing towards his country.¹ More than 40 months since the disastrous attempt to seize Kyiv, this seems increasingly the case when considering the latest Russian-driven war. While casualty figures for both conflicts vary wildly, even the more restrained estimates run into the hundreds of thousands for the attacking side. Further aggression towards Finland is not inconceivable, reports earlier this year suggest that Russia is rebuilding and expanding military infrastructure along its borders.² The focus on the security of the Baltic region is not misplaced but the threat further north should not be underestimated or overlooked.

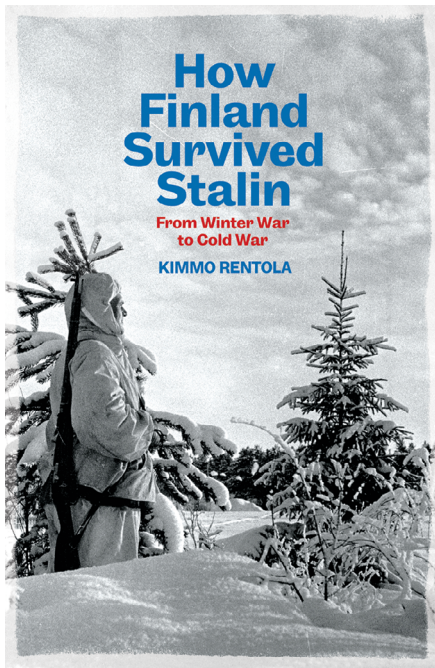
Two recently released books – *Mannerheim, Marshal of Finland: A Life in Geopolitics* and *How Finland Survived Stalin: From Winter War to Cold War*, which were originally published several years ago but have now been translated into English – provide important insights, both of the Winter War and the geopolitics and security of what today represents NATO's north-eastern flank. The conflict fought between the Soviet Union and Finland from November 1939 until the following March ultimately resulted in a defeat for the Finnish military and the

government was forced to cede territory to Moscow. It was though in many respects a hard fought victory, a much smaller country with a much smaller defence organisation had embarrassed, even humiliated, its much larger military neighbour and power. It is a conflict that has been well studied with a number of published accounts throughout the Cold War (some of which were translated into English). These latest additions offer a more developed appreciation, the first providing a biography of one of the leading national figures and the other a more expansive study of how Finland was able to hold Russia at bay and avoid the fate, at the end of the Second World War, of the Baltic states and those other territories annexed by the Soviets.

Henrik Meinander's excellent biography of Gustaf Mannerheim provides an important modern interpretation of an influential European political and military figure perhaps not so widely known outside his own country. Published in Finnish and Swedish in June 2017, marking the 150th anniversary of his birth, and subsequently in Estonian and Russian, *Mannerheim, Marshal of Finland: A Life in Geopolitics* is now available in English. With ten chapters and nearly 270 pages, and drawing almost entirely on secondary sources, the writer tracks a most remarkable career of what emerges as a sometimes reluctant warrior politician who tirelessly served his country, one which did not exist when he was born in 1867 into a Swedish-speaking aristocratic family in 1867 in what is today south-western Finland and was then a Grand Duchy of Russia. He served in the Imperial Russian military, first in the Russo-Japanese War and then the First World War's Eastern Front, rising by 1917 to the rank of lieutenant general. After the Revolution and being installed as commander-in-chief of the counter-revolutionary Finnish White Army, Mannerheim had defeated the Reds by May of the following year, securing not only Finland's independence but, as Jozef Pilsudski had also done in Poland with

¹Laurence Kenneth, 'What were the Red Army losses during the Winter War?', *Finland at War*, 6 September 2020, finlandatwar.com/what-were-the-red-army-losses-during-the-winter-war/; for those interested in the Finnish military, this is an excellent resource. Ann Marie Dailey, 'Molotov Cocktails in winter: What 1939 Finland tells us about Ukraine today', *New Atlanticist*, 2 March 2022.

²Ioana Cleave, 'Putin is building new force to take on NATO', *Daily Telegraph (London)*, 24 May 2025.



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TITLE

How Finland Survived Stalin: From
Winter War to Cold War

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his defeat outside Warsaw of Soviet forces, ensuring that communism would not spread beyond the Russian border. Appointed as the country's second regent for a short period, he was a candidate in the first Finnish presidential elections in 1919 but lost and withdrew from politics. After an absence of 12 years, in accepting the role of Chairman of the Finnish Defence Council in 1931 he did so with the agreement that he would also temporarily take over as commander-in-chief of the country's armed forces should there be a war. It was this that led him to command in November 1939 in what seemed from its first days to external observers as a hopeless battle against the Soviet Union.

With growing interest across the British Army, the 27-page chapter devoted to the Winter War will make a particularly useful addition to resources for study albeit detailing considerations at the strategic level of the war. The discussion is relatively short, perhaps in part because of the author's conviction that there have been plenty of military histories already published on the conflict. What is insightful is his conclusion that, as the Soviet war machine finally started to demonstrate "the vastly unequal strengths of the warring armies", "it is a small miracle that things did not go worse for the Finns". He also provides an interesting discussion on Mannerheim as a military commander, a 72 year-old aristocratic field marshal with no staff college education who exerted top-down control on the war's conduct but ensured the political leadership retained overall control. As he argues, no other contemporary commander-in-chief combined his qualities and public support. The author also explains how the war ended just as there were more tangible signs of international backing from the United States and the Western powers. He notes that Stalin struck a swift deal with the Finns driven in large part by intelligence reports from London and Paris that preparations were being made to send large numbers of troops and aircraft, an intervention which could have had implications far beyond the Baltic. **Meinander** concludes: "The terms of the peace treaty were, of course, extremely harsh from a Finnish perspective, but they did not correspond at all to what Stalin had expected to gain from the Winter War." It is to be wondered if a future stage may come where a similar calculation is made in Moscow about continuing the previously termed 'special military operation' or accepting that the costs of prosecuting the war in Ukraine to a conclusion are greater than the rewards.

Both **Meinander** and **Kimmo Rentola** also

examine the second war fought against the Soviets. From 1941 to 1944, there was a military alliance with Nazi Germany as the Finns contested what was known as the 'Continuation War' to recover the territory they had been forced to cede. The Finns were never committed fellow travellers with the Nazis, this was very much a marriage of convenience as the country sought to recover what it had been compelled to give up. The pursuit of national interests forced on Mannerheim and the Finnish leadership difficult decisions and, as **Meinander** notes, "not surprisingly, the Marshal has been both adulated and vilified for the decision taken during those troublesome years". Once amongst the most vocal of supporters, Winston Churchill declared war on Finland and was particularly harsh in his criticism of their actions as the conflict came to a close; this was perhaps one of his more hypocritical wartime actions when considering his own unanticipated marriage of convenience with his former implacable foe the Soviet Union.

This is a biography of "the nation's pre-eminent hero" who had "such a long and action-packed life, full of contradictions and remarkable twists" and played a critical role in Finland's national history (for those who are interested, the two final chapters *Responsibility* and *Legacy and Posterity* are especially illuminating in providing the context of why Mannerheim was and remains so important). Reading this fascinating study, it is easy to understand **Meinander's** conclusion that it is "completely impossible to understand Finland's twentieth-century history without him".

In *How Finland Survived Stalin: From Winter War to Cold War*, **Rentola** provides a fascinating examination of Finnish-Russian relations and in this context those interested in the Winter War will not be disappointed. The author acknowledges that post-Ukraine "many analysts turn to the past to fight historical precedent" and that, in terms of today, "the Winter War offers many similarities and plenty of food for thought [as] Moscow surely underestimated its neighbour's defensive capacities and will to survive". He notes that while ideology had no part to play in the Soviet decision to go to war – a simple case of strategic calculation, national interest and intelligence-based predictions of the intentions of the European powers – it did influence "how the attack was politically framed and sugar-coated". As was the case prior to the invasion of Ukraine (and worryingly is being repeated in the rhetoric aimed at the Baltic states), this was portrayed as a defensive war, redressing perceived

wrongs and restoring what had previously been Russian. As is reported to be the case now with Vladimir Putin, Stalin also attached some significance to the importance of history.³ According to **Rentola**, it framed his strategic thinking but – as with his successor – his failure to accurately understand events condemned him to disaster. He never believed the Finns would resist and if they did it would be a short war. The result was a series of cascading outcomes that stretched far beyond the bloody fighting in the snow and forests of the Finnish-Russian frontier. The author's concluding thoughts – what he terms 'Consequences' – is particularly important for a non-Finnish reader, not least to understand how a war that lasted a little over 100 days had a significant impact on subsequent events running through the Cold War and continues to be of such importance to this day.

Although the book was written 10 years ago, it has been updated with the translation to English (this can be a little literal at times, but the text is easy to follow) and includes additional material and the range of source material is impressive. As would be expected for a book written by a distinguished Finnish academic, and which received considerable acclaim when published in Finland and Sweden in 2016, Finnish and Swedish text provide a strong framework and there are

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some limited references to British archival material which adds value. It is, however, the extensive reference to Russian sources which is critical in raising the reader's understanding and the author is right to lament – as the Cold War has resumed – that Moscow's archives and libraries are once again no longer available for study.

While there are other texts and sources that will provide the reader with far more specific detail and analysis about the battles of the Winter War, these volumes still offer a great deal. A particularly strong theme for **Rentola** is the role played by intelligence in the conflict, a focus of his previous research, and it is interesting that this highlights the degree to which there was understanding and also ignorance on both sides of events that were

taking place around them. Rational actors are supposed to make sound, reasoned decisions based on the information available to them. In 1939 and 2022, the leadership in Moscow had no shortage of this but still chose to make poor choices which had far-reaching effects. For those who are keen to promote the merits of artificial intelligence decision-making, here is a valuable example of just how difficult it will remain to anticipate how political and military leaders make decisions to go to war and the degree to which miscalculation will endure as a constant risk.

More importantly, these books increase our understanding of what influences the modern Finnish character and strategic outlook. As one of the writers notes, it is increasingly impossible to overlook the strategic challenge as "Finland's border with Russia constitutes the longest and, in some senses, the sharpest frontier between civilisations in Europe...". Increasingly central to European security and NATO's collective defence, any opportunity to learn more about increasingly close British partners is to be welcomed.

³This is discussed in a recent CHACR study, 'Defending NATO's front-line?', 18 June 2025, chacr.org.uk/2025/06/18/defending-natos-front-line

