

The Naval War in Baltic: November 1939 – March 1940

By Donald Stoker PhD, Professor, US Naval War College¹

In September and October 1939 the Nazis and Communists quickly dismembered Poland, but this, of course, hardly brought the sudden descent of peace upon the Baltic. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 had not only opened the door to Poland's destruction, but also that of the Baltic States and their neighbor to the north, Finland. The Soviet colossus wasted little time in moving to seize its share of the spoils.

1. Preparing for war

The Soviets spent an enormous amount of time in the interwar decades studying how to fight in the Baltic Sea. They planned for war against their smaller neighbors, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic States, and Poland, as well as the region's dominant power, Germany, and to counter any repetition of British and French intervention during the Russian Civil War. The Baltic's geography, particularly the restrictive confines of the Gulf of Finland, exercised a great influence on their thinking. The Gulf is shallow, island studded, easily blocked and mined, and plagued by ice from December to April.²

The Soviets began their post-Civil War naval building with an effort directed primarily at coastal defense, but shifted to building an ocean-going fleet in 1936. The Red Navy of 1939, at least on paper, was a formidable force, combat units, from Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs) to battleships, numbered 454. Its forces in the Baltic included two refurbished dreadnought battleships, *Oktyabrskaya Revolutsiya* and *Marat*, each displacing 23,000-tons. Supporting these were one cruiser, a dozen destroyers, 56 submarines, as well as numerous smaller vessels and aircraft, including a naval air arm.³

Finland and the Baltic States prepared to defend themselves against further Soviet aggression from the moment they seized their independence in World War I's bloody aftermath. Each signed various military accords and treaties, secret and otherwise, and participated in various failed efforts to create some form of a Baltic Entente. Estonia proved to be the linchpin (albeit a weak one) of military cooperation in the Eastern Baltic. In

addition to their alliance with Latvia and their secret military arrangements with Poland, the Estonians also pursued military cooperation with Finland, an arrangement which the Finns eagerly reciprocated, and for similar reasons: a fear of the Soviet Union.

Naval defense preparation took the form of warships, aircraft, and coastal defense guns. The centerpieces of the Finnish navy were a pair of coastal defense ships, *Väänämöinen* and *Ilmarinen*, each displacing 3,900 tons. The Finns also had five small though fairly modern submarines. *Saukko*, at 114 tons, was the world's smallest true submarine, *Vesikko* was only 250 tons, and the three *Vetehinen*-class vessels displaced 493 tons each. The Germans helped build all of them, secretly (more or less) and illegally, experience that proved particularly beneficial to the Nazi regime's development of its U-boat arm. The Finnish navy suffered from very limited air assets, but additional vessels included 10 torpedo boats, four gunboats, and a number of auxiliary vessels. The Soviet Navy was ten times larger.⁴

The most important Latvian warships were the former German minesweeper *Virsaitis*, and two horrible French submarines built in the 1920s, *Spidola* and *Ronis* (390/514 tons). There were also some smaller ships, including a pair of minesweepers. The Latvian navy had 650 men at the end of the 1930s. Coastal fortifications included the works at Daugavgrīva (Dünamünde), armed with a variety of Russian, French, and British guns.⁵

The Lithuanians possessed one significant warship, the former German gunboat *Prezidentas Smetona* (500 tons) and six Coast Watch armored speedboats. All lost their home when the Germans occupied Klaipėda in March 1939. The Lithuanians had no other anchorage that could take the *Smetona*, but the Latvians gave her refuge in Liepāja (after the Lithuanians disarmed her).⁶

The most useful Estonian naval craft were a pair of Vickers-built submarines, *Lembit* and *Kalev* (620/850 tons). They also had a former German torpedo boat, *Sulev* (286 tons), *Pikkeri*, a 540 ton gunboat built in Estonia in 1939, and other small craft. The total complement of the Estonian Navy, including the 900 manning the coastal artillery, was 2,100.⁷

Estonia and Finland each inherited extensive Tsarist coastal fortifications. After the destruction of the Russian Navy in the Russo-Japanese war,

Russia built an extensive system of coastal defenses called the Peter the Great sea fortress. This entailed the construction of gun batteries on strategic islands and coastal areas in Russian-controlled parts of the Eastern Baltic. The fortifications were to prevent any possible enemy foray into the Gulf of Finland and protect the sea approaches to St. Petersburg. Many of these inherited sites were in poor condition.⁸

Typical of these installations were the Estonian emplacements on Nargen Island. Here, before World War I, the Russians had constructed two 12-inch turreted batteries, their revolving mechanisms identical to those of the Russian dreadnoughts built in 1914. In 1917, Russian naval officer Lieutenant Micklashevski, along with 36 men, destroyed the batteries and the island's other military installations to keep them from falling intact into German hands. A 1924 British visitor to the installation remarked that "there is no doubt that this officer had a thorough knowledge of demolition work." Nevertheless, the Estonians invested much time and effort reconstructing the batteries.⁹

The Estonians transported one gun from Nargen to Aegna Island. Guns from Dagö also found their way to Aegna. Eventually, the Estonians armed the old Tsarist fortress with four 12-inch guns paired in two concrete emplacements, as well as a battery of four 5-inch pieces. Aegna, and its sister island of Naissaar, collectively known as the Isle of Wulf, constituted two of the most important Estonian coastal defenses.¹⁰

To the north of Naissaar and Aegna, and just off Porkkala peninsula, lay the Finnish island of Mäkiluoto (MacElliot), which also held strong coastal fortifications. Between these two islands was the only spot in the Gulf of Finland that the Finns and Estonians (or any other power for that manner) could easily block, thus preventing entry to or exit from the Gulf. The distance between the two islands is only 35 kilometers, standard 6-inch guns have a range of 18 kilometers. The 12-inch guns on Naissaar and Aegna had a range significantly longer reach. Ten-inch guns (254mm) armed the important Finnish battery at Saarenpää on Koivisto (which is also known as part of the Björkö defenses). Through the use of artillery on the islands and the laying of mine fields between the fortresses, the Finns and Estonians believed, as did some foreign observers, that the Soviet fleet could be bottled-up in its Kronstadt base.¹¹

Cooperation between the military forces of Estonia and Finland began during Estonia's war for independence when a contingent of Finnish troops came to Estonia. The skill and bravery of the Finns played a significant role in winning Estonia's freedom and also laid a strong foundation for cooperation between the two states.¹² Ethnic and linguistic similarities, as well as the distinct threat of invasion from the Soviet Union, also served as stimuli for the strengthening of relations between the two.

In the 1920s though, the Estonians proved much more eager to reconstruct the old Russian coastal batteries than did their Finnish neighbors. The peace treaty signed with the Bolsheviks in 1920 required Finland to dismantle the strongest coastal batteries, those on Ino Island, because their proximity to Kronstadt worried the Soviets. Before destroying these, the Finns removed and stored the guns.¹³

At the time, the responsibility for Finland's coastal defense lay with General Oskar Enckell. Enckell, one of the most talented Finnish officers, and a veteran of the Russian Army, headed a government-appointed committee to examine the problems of Finland's coastal defense and develop plans for a Finnish Navy. Enckell and his committee spent a year studying the issue and published their findings in a four volume report. Coastal fortifications did not play a large part in Enckell's plan, and his committee only recommended the construction of batteries for the defense of Helsinki. In 1926, the Finnish parliament's defense committee, the Revision Committee, released its findings. Derived partially from the work of General Sir Walter Kirke's mission, this report also argued against the reconstruction of the coastal fortifications.¹⁴

In the mid-1920s, after the expulsion of the former Russian officers from Finnish service, the Finns adopted a much more active operational plan for the defense of their coast. The plan, VK-27, was prepared under the direction of Colonel K. M. Wallenius. In addition to increasing contacts with Sweden, Wallenius' program examined the potential of military assistance from the Baltic States in the event of a conflict. The change in focus also brought about a search for a means of preventing the potentially dangerous passage of the Soviet fleet out of the Gulf of Finland. Such an event could prove fatal to Estonia and Latvia, two potential Finnish allies, as well as dangerous to Finland itself. The Finns determined that the reconstruction of some of the old Tsarist batteries could possibly prevent this. Strategically, the most important Finnish island fortifications were

those on Mäkiluoto Island, which was, of course, directly across from the Estonian artillery on Naissaar and Aegna, and in the narrowest part of the Gulf of Finland.¹⁵

The idea of cooperation between Estonia and Finland apparently resurfaced through the efforts of Estonian Admiral Hermann Salza in 1930. There had been some contacts between the military forces of both states in the 1920s and there was an unsuccessful bid on the part of Estonia for a firm military agreement between the two nations in January 1922. Finnish military authorities would not approve formal ties, believing that Estonia stood to gain much more from this than Finland. But some elements in Finnish political and governmental circles had an interest in such a deal. The leadership of Finland's Coast Defense forces was reportedly "ready to co-ordinate the system of Finnish coast defense with that of Estonia."¹⁶

In 1927, the two states signed an agreement allowing the military officers of each nation to serve in the forces of their counterpart. Despite this, relations between Finland and Estonia became strained in 1929. Finland had refused to agree to the Litvinov Accords (a Soviet-sponsored extension of the Kellogg-Briand Pact). This brought criticism from Estonia. An incident in September 1929 generated additional bad feelings. An Estonian patrol boat mistakenly fired upon a Finnish customs craft and the Finns demanded that the Estonian's conduct an investigation. An apology from the Estonian Frontier Guard Headquarters smoothed ruffled feathers. Neither incident proved a barrier to future cooperation.¹⁷

The British secretly believed that the Finns should not become involved in any entangling agreements with the Baltic States. On 26 January 1922, Sir Esmond Ovey of the Foreign Office wrote that "if Finland remains outside the orbit of the Baltic States she should never be attacked (if she were attacked by a reconstituted Russia the Baltic States could not save her)." The British believed that the best course for Finland would be to tie herself to a permanently neutral Baltic bloc. Ovey wanted the Finns informed about Britain's opinion, even though he realized that it was not really proper for the British government to tell another state how it should conduct its foreign policy. Lord Curzon, the Foreign Secretary, reasoning that since British advice had not been asked and that therefore it "would be a serious responsibility to volunteer it," killed Ovey's suggestion.¹⁸

In the spring of 1931, the Finns began to rebuild Mäkiluoto, off Porkkala, something the Estonians were eager for them to do. The Finns themselves saw this as an urgent task even before the suggestion from their neighbor. Both believed that by cooperating they could make the Gulf of Finland very dangerous for Soviet warships. They reconstructed the Obuchoff turret and outfitted it with a pair of 12-inch guns. When the project was completed in 1933, the Finns had one of the strongest and most effective coastal guns in the world.¹⁹

Effective functioning of the Mäkiluoto battery depended upon cooperation with the Estonian guns across the Gulf. Estonian officers made no effort to conceal from a Swedish military attaché Estonia's intention to cooperate with Finland in this way. Estonia and Finland also planned to lay mines in conjunction with the use of their guns, discussed measures for cooperation among their submarine forces, holding combined maneuvers with these boats in the Gulf of Finland in July 1939. The two navies also exchanged operational plans. The Soviets were well aware of what the Finns and Estonians were up to through the activities of their agents in Tallinn, and even possessed copies of all of the Estonian Navy's operational plans.²⁰

As early as 1931, when the Finns embarked upon the reconstruction of Mäkiluoto, foreign observers began to notice this growing military relationship between Finland and Estonia. The two states never signed a formal agreement, primarily because the Finns pursued a policy of neutrality of which a strong element was a desire to avoid any potentially dangerous entanglements. This though, did not prevent secret military arrangements.²¹

British observers speculated that the Estonians were much more eager than the Finns to pursue military cooperation and that the Estonians also desired the conclusion of some type of firm military accord. General Johan Laidoner, the Estonian Chief of Staff, certainly wanted stronger relations, and once remarked that the Finnish and Estonian forces concealed nothing from one another. His October 1935 visit to Helsinki was another step toward furthering their collaboration. Few British diplomats thought a formal alliance existed, but by at least 1936 they believed the two Finno-Ugric nations had strong arrangements for cooperation in the event of war with the Soviet Union.²²

The Finnish and the Estonian war plans for the Gulf of Finland centered upon efforts to close it to the Soviet Navy. Would this have worked? The matter was never tested, but least one observer from the period did not believe that the Finns and Estonians could close the Gulf. A Swedish naval officer, S. Nordgren, after visiting Aegna in September 1936, commented on the high quality of the gun crews and their weapons, but observed that the Estonian artillery spotting and observation facilities were inadequate. This led him to express doubts about Estonia's ability to use the guns at their maximum ranges, as well as in cooperation with the Finns.²³

In the early 1930s at least one Finnish observer also expressed a lack of confidence in the possibility of closing the Gulf. An integral part of the plans involved laying substantial mine fields in key areas. At the time, the two states lacked sufficient mines to lay these fields.²⁴ In the early 1930s, Salza had planned to use the destroyers *Vambola* and *Lennuk* in cooperation with the Finnish Navy to sow the mines. Each of these vessels carried only 80 mines, making the laying of large fields before a sortie of the Soviet fleet virtually impossible. Moreover, the Estonians sold these two vessels to Peru in 1933, replacing them a few years later with two submarines that carried only 30 mines each. This made the successful fulfillment of their arrangements with Finland even less likely.²⁵ In theory, the Finnish-Estonian idea was sound; in World War II the Nazis closed the Gulf, but the Finns and Estonians lacked the means to fulfill their plan. And when the time to fight arrived, the Estonians lacked the will.

2. The fate of Baltic States

At the outbreak of World War II Estonia, like many other states, declared its neutrality. This though, could not keep Estonia safe. Moreover, the destruction of Poland directly impacted the small nation's navy. The Polish submarine *Orzeł* put in to Tallinn because its commander was ill, its subsequent escape from Estonia's effort to intern it brought about a shake-up in the leadership of the Estonian Navy. Captain Valev Mere, the Navy's Commander-in-Chief, along with his Chief of Staff, Captain Rudolf Linnuste, lost their posts. Mere had become the head of the Estonian Navy on 1 November 1938 when he succeeded Captain Grenz upon the latter's retirement. Grenz had replaced Baron Admiral Herman Salza. In 1940, Salza immigrated to Germany with most of Estonia's Baltic German population. He unsuccessfully petitioned the Kriegsmarine for a commission, but he did receive a monthly pension of 500 reichsmarks.

Upon Mere's departure, Captain-Major J. Santpank became the acting Commander-in-Chief, and Captain-Major B.A. Linnenberg became the acting Chief of Staff. All of these men were former Tsarist naval officers.²⁶

The *Orzel* incident also provided the Soviet Union with an excuse it could use to apply diplomatic pressure upon Estonia. The Soviets contended that the Baltic situation constituted a severe danger to the Soviet Union, something *Orzel's* escape had made this increasingly clear. Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov insisted that the Soviet strategic position in the region had to be altered by securing naval and air bases along the Baltic coast that would enable Moscow to more efficiently defend Leningrad. The ultimatum presented to Estonian Foreign Minister Karl Selter said that "Suitable places for such bases are to be found on Estonian territory and Estonia must cede them to the Soviet Union." If the Estonian government refused, the Soviets promised the use of "more radical measures" as a means of altering the *status quo*.²⁷

The Estonians decided resistance was futile, which raises the question as to why they invested in a military force intended to fight the Soviet Union if they had no intention of using it, though their assessment of their strategic situation was undoubtedly apt. Moreover, the Soviets indeed planned to attack Estonia if Tallinn refused to bow. The Estonians tried to negotiate a settlement and dispatched a delegation to Moscow that arrived on 27 September 1939.²⁸

In Moscow, Molotov, as a means of applying further pressure, informed the Estonians that a Soviet steamer, *Metallist*, had been torpedoed by an unknown submarine. Obviously, the implication was that the submarine was *Orzel*. What is also as obvious is that Molotov. There was indeed a Soviet merchantman with this name, and it was torpedoed, but by a Soviet ship in order to manufacture a *casus belli* against Estonia.²⁹

The Estonians submitted to the Soviet ultimatum and the signature of a Soviet-Estonian mutual assistance pact followed. The treaty, signed on 12 October 1939, gave the Soviets four naval bases, as well as fuelling rights and temporary use of Tallinn until the completion of the construction of a base at Paldiski, 25 miles from the Estonian capital. The treaty became the prototype for those forced upon Latvia and Lithuania.³⁰

Soviet pressure had already fallen on Latvia. On 2 October 1939 the Latvian Foreign Minister, Vilhelms Munters, arrived in Moscow where he hopelessly pled Latvia's case for neutrality to Stalin and Molotov. On 5 October Latvia signed a Treaty of Mutual Assistance that gave the Soviet Union bases at Ventspils and Liepāja. Five days later, the Soviets turned on the Lithuanians, who also submitted. Immediately, the Soviets began using their new bases.³¹

The effort the Baltic States had invested in the formulation of cooperative agreements and defense forces proved wasted. During the important and critical days of September and October 1939 there was virtually no military or political cooperation between the Baltic States. The Soviet Union negotiated unilateral treaties with each, splitting them from one another. The respective leaders of the Baltic States only began to seriously consider military cooperation after the Soviets established their military bases in the three nations. By this time it was too late.³²

The treaties with the Baltic States improved the strategic position of Stalin's empire in the Baltic Sea and *vis-à-vis* Nazi Germany. Stalin even gained Lithuania, minus Klaipėda, a nation that had fallen in the German sphere of influence under the earliest terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The partition of Poland also extended the Soviet frontier. Stalin now turned to another area the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had designated as within the Soviet sphere of influence—Finland.

3. The Winter War

On 6 October 1939, even before the finalization of the treaties with the Baltic States, the leaders of the Soviet Union invited Finnish representatives to Moscow to discuss changes to their mutual border. The Soviets wanted territorial concessions that would make the approaches to Kronstadt, Leningrad, and Murmansk less vulnerable to a foreign invader. The Soviets also insisted upon the sale of some Gulf of Finland islands and the leasing of naval base facilities at Hanko (Hangö) at the Gulf's mouth. On all matters but the issue of the base, the Finns proved willing to negotiate. Field Marshall Carl Mannerheim, believing the army unprepared for war, urged the government to offer the Soviets Jussarö Island, east of Hanko, for their base, but the politicians refused. The Soviets considered the base the key issue. The Kremlin ended the Moscow discussions on 13 November and began preparing for war. On 30

November, the Red Army invaded Finland. With the issue of the order “Fake!” (Torch), the Soviets launched their naval war against Finland.³³

Despite the fact that the Soviet Navy had long-planned for this fight, the approach of hostilities caught them off-guard. The Finns had been expected to bend under diplomatic pressure, so little was done to ready the navy for war, especially one fought in winter. Admiral Nikolay Kuznetsov, the commander in chief of the Red Navy, scrambled to prepare an operational plan, which was only issued on 23 November. The Red Navy was given five tasks: destruction of the Finnish Navy; establishing a blockade of Finland; assisting the Red Army’s attacks; the seizure of various enemy Gulf of Finland islands; and protecting Soviet sea lines of communication (SLOCS). The Fleet Air Arm was to support the Navy’s efforts, provide air cover to Leningrad, and bomb Finnish fortifications at Björkö, Hanko, and Helsinki.³⁴

Finland’s heroic land and air defense of its homeland is famous, the naval aspects of what came to be known as the Winter War are less well known. At the outbreak of World War II, Finland had declared its neutrality and attempted, unsuccessfully, to maintain this position, while also instituting maritime defense measures. These included the laying of minefields and the stationing of troops on the Aland Islands. A 1921 treaty with Sweden prevented Finland from putting troops here except in the event of war.³⁵

When the Winter War began the Finnish Navy, commanded by Captain (later Admiral) E. Rahola, began adding to the mine fields it had already laid in the Gulf of Finland, and added a small field on Lake Ladoga. Sweden strengthened Finland’s strategic position by mining the Swedish side of the gap between the Aland Islands and the Swedish coast.³⁶ Finland’s two armored coastal defense ships, *Väänämöinen* and *Ilmarinen*, came into Turku to assist the defense of the port because of their anti-aircraft weapons. Finland’s five submarines, as well as a number of gunboats and patrol boats, patrolled the Finnish coast and coastal waters as far as the Gulf of Riga.³⁷

The coastal fortifications that the Finns had reconstructed during the interwar period played an important part in the nation’s defense. On the morning of 1 December, the Red Banner Baltic Fleet, under the command of Admiral V. Tributs, launched its first significant operations against the Finns. The Soviet cruiser *Kirov*, accompanied by two destroyers,

approached tiny but fortified Rusarö Island off the Hanko peninsula. The purpose was reconnaissance for a planned Soviet landing near Björkö. The Soviets had particular fears of the Björkö defenses because its guns could fire on ships entering or exiting the key Baltic Fleet port of Kronstadt. The Rusarö batteries opened fire at a distance of fifteen miles. The *Kirov* replied, but ineffectively. After three minutes a Finnish shell struck the destroyer *Stremitelnyi*. The ship withdrew to the south. The duel continued for 10 minutes more, until Finnish rounds hit *Kirov*. The Soviet cruiser sustained significant damage, the full extent of which is unknown. She proved unable to make it back to Tallinn, her base of operations, under her own steam, and had to be taken in tow.³⁸

Stiff Finnish resistance led to cancellation of the Björkö landing, but the Soviets mounted a number of other amphibious attacks, a harbinger of things to come during World War II. Between 30 November and 6 December, a force of 145 Soviet vessels landed troops on the undefended islands of Seiskari, Lavansaari, Someri, Narvi, Suur, Pien-Tytärsaari, and Suursaari along the far eastern shores of the Gulf of Finland. Soviet ships and shore batteries also lent gunnery support to Red troops fighting at Ino and Pumalo. Meanwhile, Soviet submarines operated from Tallinn and Libau, eventually sinking one German and one Estonian steamer.³⁹

On 9 December the Soviets attacked the Finnish coastal batteries at Koivisto Island. These guns, which provided security for the right flank of the Mannerheim Line, fought this minor duel with Soviet ships in the midst of a snowstorm. The Red Navy launched a serious attack against the island on 10 December. In the midst of fog, the Soviet battleship *Oktyabrskaya Revolutsiya* shelled the Saarenpää batteries at the south-eastern end of Koivisto for an hour. The ship lobbed 200 13-inch (350mm) shells into the island. Finnish casualties were light: two killed, and three wounded.⁴⁰

On 13 December, near the end of the second week of hostilities, Finland approached Great Britain for London's view of the legal situation that would result from a Finnish request for naval assistance in the form of the Polish destroyers that had escaped in August. The Finns had no illusions about the possibility of the destroyers re-entering the Baltic, instead, they asked the United Kingdom to dispatch them to the Arctic port of Petsamo, where the Finns had no significant naval forces. From there, the

Finns hoped the destroyers would interdict the flow of supplies to Soviet troops fighting in the area.⁴¹

The British replied that such a request would produce no change in the relations between Poland and the Soviet Union, but there were other difficulties. Technically, the Polish destroyers were under British control as an agreement signed between Poland and Britain had incorporated them into the Royal Navy. The British felt that military operations conducted by the Polish destroyers against Soviet forces would constitute an act of war against the Soviet Union on the part of Great Britain. The British didn't believe the Soviet's would go to war with the Allies over this, but they feared some form of Soviet reprisal, particularly the supplying of the Germans with submarines, as well as spare parts, something elements in the British government believed had already occurred.⁴²

The Foreign Office, though not attracted to the Finnish idea, broached it with the Admiralty. The Admiralty felt that nothing could be accomplished by sending the Polish destroyers to Petsamo and was generally unwilling to commit the ships to such an operation. They felt the craft were already performing valuable duty. On the other hand, the Admiralty believed assigning the Polish submarines to the area might prove militarily profitable. But using the submarines threatened to open the same diplomatic can of worms. Because of this the Admiralty argued against any such commitment and the Foreign Office, after consulting with the Poles, informed the Finns of the impossibility of committing Polish naval forces to the Arctic.⁴³

The Admiralty suggestion about the Polish submarines inspired some interesting discussion regarding their military and political usefulness. Three of the Polish submarines were interned in Sweden and Admiral Sir A. Dudley Pound, the First Sea Lord, suggested asking the Swedish government to release the boats for operations in the Baltic against Soviet warships.⁴⁴

The Foreign Office felt certain the Swedes wouldn't consider such a proposal because it violated international law. Also, the Germans might consider Swedish participation in such a scheme a direct act against the Nazi state. The general consensus was that the idea should wait. One Foreign Office official suggested that as a means of compromising Sweden's diplomatic position, and apparently of also pressuring Sweden

into a more pro-Allied stance, Great Britain should assist the escape of the interned Polish vessels.⁴⁵

While the diplomats wrangled the naval war continued. Shortly before noon on 14 December, two Soviet destroyers, *Gnevnyi* and *Grozjastsij*, appeared off Utö, a small island southeast of the Åland group. The Soviet ships opened fire from a distance of seven miles. The Finnish batteries on Utö replied, scoring a direct hit on the leading Soviet ship and starting an internal fire. A few minutes later, the Soviet ships withdrew.⁴⁶

On 18 December the Soviets launched a concerted effort to knock-out the guns of the Saarenpää battery on Koivisto. These weapons had been playing havoc with Soviet efforts to break through the Mannerheim Line. Several waves of aircraft attacked the island all through the 18th. Shortly after noon, *Oktyabrskaya Revolutsiya*, a destroyer leader, five destroyers, four patrol ships, and numerous minesweepers, to attack the island. The Finnish Air Force, at the request of the navy, sent two Fokker XXI fighters, one of them piloted by the Finnish ace Eino Lukkanen, to attack the Soviet spotting aircraft. The overworked Finnish anti-aircraft gunners shot down Lukkanen, who survived the crash.⁴⁷

At 12:28 *Oktyabrskaya Revolutsiya* opened fire on the Saarenpää batteries. The Finns replied, but the old, worn-out 10-inch artillery pieces soon broke down under the strain. The Soviet battleship drew closer to the island, but the Finnish gunners repaired one of their weapons and forced the ship to withdraw. The Soviet bombardment inflicted heavy damage on the island's facilities and forests, but did no real harm to the batteries themselves.⁴⁸

The Red Navy launched another attack the next day, this time with the battleship *Marat* and her escort of three destroyers. *Marat* opened fire at a distance of 13 miles, the Finns replied shortly thereafter with only one artillery piece to save ammunition and wear on their guns. The weak response encouraged the commander of *Marat* to close to 11 miles. The Finns then opened-up with a second gun, hitting *Marat*; the Soviet warships withdrew. Again, the Finnish batteries escaped serious harm. *Oktyabrskaya Revolutsiya* and many of her sisters returned to shell Saarenpää, as well as Tiurinsaari, between 30 December and 3 January.⁴⁹

The Soviets, like the Finns, also laid mines in the Gulf of Finland, but also asked the Nazis for assistance mining the Finnish coast. Hitler ordered the Kriegsmarine to offer its help, but then the Soviets withdrew their request a week later. The few mines the Soviets laid posed no serious threat as Finnish minesweepers quickly cleared the enemy fields. Finnish mines drew Soviet blood in January 1940, sinking the submarine *S-2*, the most significant naval loss of the war. A small German vessel was lost the same month to a mine laid by the submarine *Vesihäisi*.⁵⁰

The attacks on Saarenpää and Tiurinsaari marked the last serious naval bombardment of the war. The arrival of winter and its encroaching ice soon halted naval activity. During the winter many of the sailors on both sides found themselves formed into infantry units and transferred to other duties. During the course of the war the Germans demonstrated solidarity with their temporary ally. Two days following the 8 December 1939 commencement of the Soviet blockade of Finland, the Soviets inquired about German willingness to provide supplies to the Red Navy's submarines operating in the Gulf of Bothnia. The *Kriegsmarine* recommended undertaking the measure and Hitler gave his approval. The Germans began the necessary preparations, but the Soviets also cancelled this request before the Germans acted.⁵¹

In February, the Soviets tried to sever Finland's sea communications with Sweden by concentrating their air attacks on Finland's icebreakers. Throughout the war Red submarines had been trying to cut-off Finland from the outside, failing miserably in their attempts. This new effort proved just as ineffective as Soviet aircraft consistently failed in their bomb attacks against moving ships; ice prevented the use of torpedoes. The end of the month saw the Soviets secure the long sought-after Björkö guns—after the Finns evacuated them.⁵²

Overall, one must give low marks to the Soviet Navy's performance. The force failed to accomplish virtually all of its primary missions. It never instituted a solid blockade of Finland, or cut Finland's SLOCs, nor did it destroy the miniscule Finnish Navy. Indeed, the Soviet loss of the submarine *S-2* to Finnish mines meant that Soviet losses to enemy action exceeded that of the Finns, who lost only the coastguard ship *Aurora*, and this to the accidental explosion of one of its own depth charges. The Red Navy did successfully seize a number of Finnish islands, but all of these landings were unopposed.⁵³ The war ended on 13 March 1940.

The effort that Finland had expended in developing military cooperation with Estonia paid the Finns no dividends during the Winter War. Estonia actually assisted the Soviets where it could and adopted a policy of benevolent neutrality toward Stalin's regime. The Estonian government's foreign policy took on a decidedly anti-Finnish bent and was seen that way in Helsinki.⁵⁴

4. The aftermath

The end of the Winter War allowed Stalin to once again turn his attention to the Baltic States. The Baltic States gave in to further Soviet demands, including the formation of governments sympathetic to Moscow. Latvian political leaders asked the Germans to send troops into the Baltic States in a final effort to keep out the Soviets. Berlin was deaf to their calls.⁵⁵

Lithuania would be the first of Baltic States to again suffer Communist demands. On 30 May 1940, the Soviet Union issued new demands and falsely accused the Lithuanian government of arresting some Soviet soldiers and forcing them to betray military secrets. The best efforts of the Lithuanian government failed to sway Moscow. The Soviets made more demands regarding the stationing of Soviet troops, as well as the composition of a new Lithuanian government. Having no confidence in their ability to fight, much of the leadership fled abroad and the Soviets occupied Lithuania.⁵⁶

On 9 June 1940 the Soviets ordered Vice Admiral V. Tributs, the commander of the Red Banner Baltic Fleet, to prepare to move against Estonia and Latvia. He was ordered to take all the Estonian and Latvian warships and merchant vessels, land troops in Paldiski and Tallinn, blockade the Gulf of Riga, support the Red Army forces that would be advancing against Rakvere, and establish coastal patrols to sever Estonian and Latvian communications. Air units were meanwhile to prevent Estonian and Latvian aircraft from escaping to Finland or Sweden.⁵⁷ When the descent came the Soviets used 120 ships, from torpedo boats to the battleship *Oktjabrskaya Revolutsiya*, as well as extensive air assets. The operations also included the seizure of Aegna and Naissaar islands.⁵⁸

On 16 June, the same day Soviet military units crossed into Lithuania, the Latvian and Estonian governments received identical notes from Molotov

demanding, among other things, the right to base additional Soviet troops in the two states. He gave both states eight hours to reply. The Soviet Union also falsely accused the both governments of attempting to form a quadripartite alliance between the three Baltic States and Finland. At nearly any other point in the preceding two decades such a statement would have been a true one because of the numerous attempts made by various political leaders of the Eastern Baltic to create a system of collective security. The Latvians and Estonians accepted the Soviet demands and Red Army troops entered the two states on 17 June. The independence of the Baltic States had ended.⁵⁹

When the Soviet Union occupied Estonia it took possession of its navy, which included the two Vickers built submarines *Lembit* and *Kalev*. Both served in the Soviet Navy in World War II. *Lembit* survived the conflict and is now a museum ship in Tallinn. The warships of the Latvian Navy also passed into Soviet hands. Most, including the French-built submarines, did not survive the war.⁶⁰

In the end, all of the effort the Soviets expended to secure their Baltic flank did nothing to help them once the expected war with Nazi Germany began. The Germans quickly overran the Baltic States, while the Finns, driven into the Axis camp by Stalin's invasion, fought to retrieve what they had lost. Together, they bottled-up the Red Navy in its Leningrad-area bases until Finland changed sides in 1944. Soviet aggression in 1939 only ensured that the Finns would join the larger war, thus forcing the Soviets to fight on a front that otherwise would have remained peaceful.

1 I am indebted to Hege Carlson, Kristi Felter, Pekka Smolander, and Lisabeth Sitonnen for translating some of the materials used in this article.

2 On Soviet planning see Gunnar Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy in the Baltic, 1921-1941* (London: Frank Cass, 2005). For the geographical issues see *ibid.*, 26.

3 *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1922-1946* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1980), 320, 323.

4 Donald Stoker, *Britain, France, and the Naval Arms Trade in the Baltic, 1919-1939: Grand Strategy and Failure* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 144-52, 166; *Conway's*, 365; Gene C. Stevenson, "Submarines of the Finnish Navy," *Warship International*, No. 1 (1986), 38. The *Vesikko* is now a museum ship on Suomenlinna, outside Helsinki.

⁵ Stoker, *Britain, France, and the Naval Arms Trade*, 70, 168; *Conway's*, 353; Edgars Andersons, "The Military Situation in the Baltic States," *Baltic Defence Review*, No. 6, Vol. 2 (2001): 132.

⁶ Stoker, *Britain, France, and the Naval Arms Trade*, 170-1; Andersons, "Military Situation," 143; *Conway's*, 354.

⁷ Stoker, *Britain, France, and the Naval Arms Trade*, 125; *Conway's*, 352-3; Andersons, "Military Situation," 138.

⁸ Jukka Knuutila, "Entwicklung der Küstenartillerie in Finnland," *Marine Rundschau* 74 (May 1977): 227; N.B. Pavlovich, *The Fleet in the First World War* (New Delhi: Amerind, 1979), 56-8.

⁹ Egerton to Vaughn, 26 Aug. 1924, National Archive, Kew, London, Foreign Office [hereafter FO] 371/10382.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; Nash, Report on visit of Naval Attaché to Estonia [sic] and Latvia, 9th-19th September 1927, 24 Sept. 1927, FO 371/12551; Martti Turtola, "Aspects of Finnish-Estonian Military Relations in the 20s and 30s," in John Hiden and Aleksander Loit, eds., *The Baltic in International Relations Between the Two World Wars, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensia 3, Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia* (Stockholm: Center for Baltic Studies), 104.

¹¹ Carl O. Nordling, *Defense of Imperialism? An Aspect of Stalin's Military and Foreign Policy, 1933-1941* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 1984), 35; Turtola, "Aspects of Finnish-Estonian Military Relations," 104; Knuutila, "Entwicklung der Küstenartillerie," 231; Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 80-2.

¹² Veli-Matti Syrjö, "The Finns in the Estonian War of Independence," in Lars Ericson, ed., *The Boys from the North. The Nordic Volunteers in Estonia's War of Independence, 1918-1920* (Stockholm: Military Archives, 1993), 12-18.

¹³ Turtola, "Aspects of Finnish-Estonian Military Relations," 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* For a study of Kirke's mission see Stoker, *Baltic*, 102-19.

¹⁵ Turtola, "Aspects of Finnish-Estonian Military Relations," 103.

¹⁶ Rennie to Curzon, 7 Jan. 1922, in Rohan Butler, ed., *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939* [hereafter *DBFP*] (London: HMSO, 1961), ser. 1, 23:339; Rennie to Curzon, 9 Jan. 1922, *ibid.*, 340-1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 105; Pearson report, 4 May 1927, in United States, Department of State, *Records Relating to the Internal Affairs of Finland, 1910-1944* (Washington: NARSGSA, 1981) [hereafter *LAF*], microfilm, roll 1, file 760d., doc. 60i/4; Pearson report, 21 Mar.

1929, *ibid.*, file 760d., doc. 60i/8; Green report, 24 Sept. 1929, *ibid.*, file 760d., doc. 60i/11.

¹⁸ FO minutes, in footnote of Rennie to Curzon, 9 Jan. 1922, *DBFP*, ser. 1, 23:341.

¹⁹ Rosenberg report, Viron Meripolustuksesta, 22 Mar. 1932, Finnish Military Archives [hereafter FMA], file 2860/2, doc. 262/1/30 sal.; report by Oesch, Karikoski, and Rosenberg, 30 Jan. 1931, FMA, file 2860/2, doc 7:12; Turtola, "Aspects of Finnish-Estonian Military Relations," 105-7.

²⁰ Turtola, "Aspects of Finnish-Estonian Military Relations," 105-8; Laurits to Ingelius, 29 Jan. 1932, FMA, file 1403/16, doc. no. 082-31; Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 119, 124 fn. 11.

²¹ Sperling to Henderson, 29 June 1933, FO 371/15565; Grant Watson to Hoare, 31 Oct. 1935, FO 371/19402.

²² Gallienne to Monson, 22 Oct. 1935, FO 371/19402; Chancery to FO, 11 Dec. 1935, *ibid.*; Grant Watson to Hoare, 31 Oct. 1935, *ibid.*; Chancery to Northern Dept., 23 Jan. 1936, FO 371/20310.

²³ Nordgren to Statrådet och Chefen för Kungl. (Försvarsdepartmentet), 16 Sept. 1936, Svenska Krigsarkivet [henceforth cited as SvKA], Marinattachén i Tallinn, file Nr 7:E/36.

²⁴ Rosenberg, Viron Meripolustuksesta, 22 Mar. 1932, FMA, file 2860/2.

²⁵ Turtola, "Aspects of Finnish-Estonian Military Relations," 105; Egerton to Vaughn, 26 Aug. 1924, "Report on visit to Reval, 12th to 14th Aug. 1924," FO 371/10382; *Conway's*, 352.

²⁶ Estonia declared its neutrality on 2 September 1939, "Estonia Declares Neutrality," *The Baltic Times*, 13 Sept. 1939, 1; "Interned Polish Submarine Escapes from Tallinn," *The Baltic Times*, 20 Sept. 1939, 1; "Emigree [sic] Admiral Pensioned By Berlin," *The Baltic Times*, 4 Apr. 1940, 5; Gallienne to FO, 19 Sept. 1939, FO 371/23154; report, 13 Dec. 1938, Stockholm, SvKA, file Marinattachén i Helsingfors, nr Est: 9/38; report, 13 Dec. 1938, SvKA, Bilaga 1, *ibid.*

²⁷ *Izvestia*, 27 Sept. 1939, in Jane Degras, ed., *Documents on Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1941*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 3:376-7; Joseph I. Vizulis, *Nations Under Duress: The Baltic States* (Port Washington, NY: Associated Faculty Press, 1985), 25-6; Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 164.

²⁸ Vizulis, *Nations Under Duress*, 27-8; Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 164-5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; Evald Uustalu, *The History of Estonian People* (London: Boreas Publishing, 1952), 239; J. Rohwer, G. Hümmelchen, and T. Weis, *Chronology of the War at Sea*,

1939-1945: *The Naval History of World War II*, 3rd ed., (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 5.

³⁰ Uustalu, *History*, 239; Vizulis, *Nations Under Duress*, 28-30; Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 164.

³¹ Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 164-5; Izidors Vizulis, *The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. The Baltic Case* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 29. In the original secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact Lithuania fell into the Soviet sphere. In a subsequent supplementary agreement of 28 September 1939 Germany received territorial compensation in Poland in return for condoning the Soviet annexation of Lithuania, *ibid.*, 17-18,

³² Edgar Anderson, "The Baltic Entente: Phantom or Reality?" in Stanley V. Vardys and Romuald J. Misiunas eds., *The Baltic States in Peace and War, 1917-1945* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), 135.

³³ James Vanceslav Anzulovic, Jr., "The Russian Record of the Winter War, 1939-1940: An Analytical Study of Soviet Records of the War with Finland From 30 November 1939 to 12 March 1940," (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1968), 2-4; Olli Vehviläinen, *Finland in the Second World War: Between Germany Russia* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 38-9; Rohwer, et al, *Chronology*, 10; Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 184.

³⁴ Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 184-5.

³⁵ Knuuttila, "Entwicklung der Küstenartillerie," 230.

³⁶ Erik Wihtol, "Mine Warfare in the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland, 1939-1941," in *New Interpretations in Naval History. Selected Papers From the Ninth Naval History Symposium Held at the United States Naval Academy, 18-20 October 1989*, William R. Roberts and Jack Sweetman, eds., (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 183; Hans R. Bachmann, "Die deutsche Seekriegführung in der Ostsee nach Ausschaltung der polnischen Marine in Herbst 1939 (IV)," *Marine Rundschau* 68 (July 1971): 408; C. W. Koburger, Jr., *Naval Warfare in the Baltic, 1939-1945. War in a Narrow Sea* (Westport and London: Praeger, 1994), 15.

³⁷ Eloise Engle and Laurie Paananen, *The Winter War. The Russo-Finnish Conflict, 1939-1940* (New York: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1973) 25; Per-Olof Ekman, "Die Schiffe und Boote der finnischen Marine im Zweiten Weltkrieg," *Marine Rundschau* 77 (Dec. 1980): 714.

³⁸ Allen F. Chew, *The White Death: The Epic of the Soviet-Finnish Winter War* (Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 1971), 130-1; Koburger, *Naval Warfare in the Baltic*, 15; Knuuttila, "Entwicklung der Küstenartillerie," 230-1; Wihtol, "Mine Warfare," 200, fn. 2; David M. Crowe, *The Baltic States and the Great Powers: Foreign Relations, 1938-*

1940 (Boulder, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), 135; Rohwer, et al, *Chronology*, 10; Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 80-2, 186.

³⁹ Rohwer, et al, *Chronology*, 10; Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 186.

⁴⁰ Chew, *The White Death*, 131; Knuuttila, "Entwicklung der Küstenartillerie," 231.

⁴¹ Snow to FO, 13 Dec. 1939, FO 371/23645; Collier, FO minute, 16 Dec. 1939, *ibid.* See also Snow to FO, 21 Dec. 1939, *ibid.*

⁴² Collier, FO minute, 16 Dec. 1939, *ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*; Phillips to FO, 18 Dec. 1939, *ibid.*; FO to Snow, 22 Dec. 1939, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Dudley Pound Green Paper, 26 Dec. 1939, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; Barclay, FO minute, 1 Jan. [1940], *ibid.*; Collier, FO minute, 3 Jan. [1940], *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Chew, *The White Death*, 131; Knuuttila, "Entwicklung der Küstenartillerie," 231; Wihtol, "Mine Warfare," 100, fn. 2.

⁴⁷ Chew, *The White Death*, 131-2; Rohwer, et al, *Chronology*, 12.

⁴⁸ Chew, *The White Death*, 132.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; Rohwer, et al, *Chronology*, 12.

⁵⁰ Wihtol, "Mine Warfare," 183; Stevenson, "Finnish Submarines," 38-9.

⁵¹ Chew, *The White Death*, 130; Knuuttila, "Entwicklung der Küstenartillerie," 231; Eloise Engle and Lauri Paananen, *The Winter War: The Soviet Attack on Finland, 1939-1940* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 1973), 25; Wihtol, "Mine Warfare," 183-4; Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Germany and the Soviet Union 1939-1941* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 88-9, 174-5.

⁵² Åselius, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Navy*, 185-6, 194.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 185, 188.

⁵⁴ Evald Laasi, "Finland's Winter War and Estonian Neutrality," *Journal of Baltic Studies* XXIV (Fall 1993): 279-80.

⁵⁵ Vizulis, *Nations Under Duress*, 35; George von Rauch, *The Baltic States, the Years of Independence, 1917-1940*, Gerald Onn, trans., (London: Hurst, 1995), 220-3.

⁵⁶ George von Rauch, *The Baltic States, the Years of Independence: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 1917-1940* (London: Hurst, 1995), 219-20.

⁵⁷ Shaposhnikov to Tributs, 9 June 1940, Russia, Central Archives of the Naval Forces of the U.S.S.R., C.R-92, r.2c, f.671, 1-2,
<http://veterans.eesti.org.au/history/soviet-russia-occupies-estonia/1a-directive-of-the-peoples-commissar-for-defense-of-the-ussr/>.

⁵⁸ Excerpts from Tributs report, after 21 June 1940, Russia, Central State Archives of the Naval Forces, C.R-92, r.2.c, f. 672, 171-252,
<http://veterans.eesti.org.au/history/soviet-russia-occupies-estonia/1a-supplement-exerpts-from-the-report-of-the-commander-of-the-red-banner-baltic-fleetvice-admiral-vtributs/>.

⁵⁹ Rauch, *The Baltic States*, 220-1.

⁶⁰ Gallienne to FO, 4 Aug. and 1 July 1940, FO 371/24761; Mairin Mitchell, *A Maritime History of Russia, 848-1948* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1949), 373; *Conway's, 1922-1946*, 352-3.