Finland Throws in its Lot with Germany

The mood of the people in Finland after the Winter War was characterized by bitterness, defiance, uncertainty and fear. There was a strong feeling that Finland deserved restitution for the great wrong committed against her. The injustice of the Peace of Moscow was unendurable, and the country’s isolation in the war had left a deep trauma. It was widely believed that the Soviet Union was only biding its time and waiting for a new opportunity to put an end to Finland’s independence. Finland’s continuing isolation and the fear of a new invasion weighed heavily on people’s minds.

A period of peace that lasted a little more than fifteen months after the Moscow Peace Treaty ended with the outbreak of a new war against the Soviet Union on 25 June 1941. Finnish historiography has dubbed this period the ‘Interim Peace’. It was a time in which Finland adjusted to the conditions created by the ongoing world war. The guns were silenced, but the state of emergency continued. A considerably greater force of men was stationed along the country’s frontiers than in normal times of peace. New young recruits were trained to replace the men lost in the Winter War. There started to be a shortage of foodstuffs, and more and more items began to be rationed. Economically, the country had to bear a double burden: on the one hand, it was important to rebuild the country, take care of the displaced Karelian population and clear new land for farming; on the other, it was necessary to prepare for a new war by rearming and building fortifications. The mobilization of industry and business that these tasks required was carried out under conditions where foreign trade was at the mercy of the belligerent great powers. The crisis necessitated a concentration of power, which was effected during the months of the Interim Peace. Parliament surrendered a considerable portion of its power to the
President and the Cabinet, and civilian authorities were superseded by the military.

Defence of the country came before everything else. Defence appropriations rose to account for nearly half of government spending. Finland’s ability to defend itself had been considerably weakened by the territorial concessions that had been imposed on it. On the southeastern frontier, the Soviet Union had acquired a far more favourable platform for an attack, from Hanko it could threaten Finnish maritime connections as well as the cities of southern Finland, and from the Salla area in the north the road network of Finnish Lapland was now within the reach of the Soviet forces. Little more than a week had passed after the end of the Winter War when the Commander-in-Chief issued an order to fortify the new frontier. This became the largest construction project the country had ever witnessed, ultimately employing over 30,000 men and women. By the summer an unbroken chain of fortifications began to rise in the most crucial areas – between the Gulf of Finland and the Saimaa lake region, and across the Hanko peninsula. Further north, as far as Pechenga, the major roads and the narrows of the lakes were fortified.

After the peace treaty was signed, Ryti formed a new government. He chose its members from the five parties that had constituted the previous government together with leading representatives of industry. It was necessary to find a new foreign minister to replace Tanner, whose name was anathema to Moscow, and who was not particularly liked in Berlin either. Ryti hit on Professor Rolf Witting, who later became identified with a pro-German orientation, although in spring 1940 he was not particularly known for any close associations with Germany. To the Soviet Union he was an unknown quantity. Tanner continued to be a member of the Cabinet as Minister for Public Welfare. General Rudolf Walden, an ex-soldier, an industrial magnate and a personal friend of Mannnerheim, became Minister of Defence. Paasikivi was not a member of the new Cabinet, but under pressure he had eventually been persuaded to accept the post of Finnish envoy in Moscow.

The most urgent of the pending social problems was the settlement of the evacuees. Some 420,000 Finns, nearly all of them Karelians, had left their homes as a result of the war and the new frontier. More than half of them were of farming stock, and they were eager to get back to tilling the land. For this reason, and also to ensure the supply of food for the nation, it was necessary to clear new land for them to cultivate. The Karelians’ own associations were extremely active in urging their case, and their representatives carried considerable political weight. In