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## ABSTRACT

Why did the Soviet Union choose to invade Finland in 1939? Perceptual realism attempts to provide an answer. The theory accepts realism's assumptions regarding power dynamics, but makes individuals the independent variables that interpret the balance of power and security threats. In this way, realism explains the context that incited tension, while the cognitive biases of Soviet leaders led them to choose war. I test the explanatory power of perceptual realism through two lines of inquiry: 1) whether the Soviets demonstrated misperception; and 2) whether misperception, not realism alone, explains their policies. The evidence supports the first hypothesis, but not the latter. Power dynamics alone explain the Winter War, while individuals influenced only the preparations for the conflict.

[http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections\\_Autumn\\_2009/Julia\\_Abelev\\_Perceptual\\_Realism\\_and\\_the\\_Winter\\_War\\_of\\_1939.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Autumn_2009/Julia_Abelev_Perceptual_Realism_and_the_Winter_War_of_1939.pdf)

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## Perceptual Realism and the Winter War of 1939

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Nestled within the great conflict of World War II was another lesser known contest—the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland. On November 30, 1939, the Soviet Union, an august entity with a population of more than 170 million, declared war on Finland, a country of four million.<sup>2</sup> Finland managed to extend the war to 105 days, even with only a small and underequipped military.<sup>3</sup> This far surpassed Soviet plans for a twelve day invasion.<sup>4</sup> The implications of the war were just as surprising, resonating far beyond the battlefield and impacting the course of World War II. First, Great Britain and France condemned the Soviet invasion of Finland as an aggressive act that violated the conventions of the League of Nations<sup>5</sup> and expelled the Soviet Union from the organization. The removal of such a large power weakened the League (neither Germany nor the United States were members) and ultimately contributed to its dissolution. More importantly, the Soviet invasion propelled Finland to the forefront of world politics and forged it into a key ally for Germany. Operation Barbarossa<sup>6</sup> hinged upon access to Finland's 800-mile border with the Soviet Union. The Winter War offered Germany the perfect opportunity to observe the Red Army and capitalize on anti-Soviet sentiment within Finland.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William R. Trotter, *A frozen hell: the Russo-Finnish winter war of 1939-1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Eloise Engle and Lauri Paananen, *The winter war; the Russo-Finnish conflict, 1939-40* (New York: Scribner, 1973). Vii.

<sup>4</sup> D. W. Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War Against Finland 30 November 1939," *Soviet Studies* 38, no. 2 (1986): 215.

<sup>5</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations; the struggle for power and peace* (New York: Knopf; [distributed by Random House], 1978). From the excerpt "Six Principles of Political Realism," <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/morg6.htm> (accessed November 20, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> A code name (*Unternehmen Barbarossa*) for the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Edwards, *The Winter War: Russia's invasion of Finland, 1939-1940* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2008), 15.

Several theoretical frameworks seek to explain the Soviet Union's choice to invade Finland — two of which I discuss here. First I consider *realism*, a theory of international relations developed after World War II by Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr<sup>8</sup> which is in many ways indebted to the philosophies of Nicolai Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. Realism generally defines international relations entirely in terms of state actors, all of which rationally strive for security in order to better serve their national interests. Second I discuss *misperception*, which applies insights from cognitive psychology to international relations theory. Proponents such as Robert Jervis, Peter M. Haas and Jonathan Mercer<sup>9</sup> suggest that the perceptions (or 'misperceptions') of individual actors play a significant role in determining state interests and foreign policy. Unlike realism, which characterizes the state as an abstract, unitary and rational actor, misperception allows space for individual limits and biases.

I propose an amalgam of realism and misperception, which I call "perceptual realism." Realism and misperception are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Integrating both accounts for the structure of the international system while anticipating 'irrational' or ideological decisions that may drive state policies on an individual level. Perceptual realism explains the Winter War in the following manner. Realism explains the tensions between the Soviet Union and Finland, Finland's importance for long-term Soviet strategy, and the steady escalation towards a potential conflict. Misperception contributes by allowing the Soviet Union to consider war the only option, leading to the actual outbreak of hostilities. In other words, realism provided a context, but individual perception acted as the true catalyst.

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<sup>8</sup> See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations; the struggle for power and peace* (New York: Knopf, 1967); *The impasse of American foreign policy* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1967); *In defense of the national interest; a critical examination of American foreign policy* (New York: Knopf., 1951); *Scientific man vs. power politics* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

See Edward Hallet Carr and Michael Cox, *The twenty years' crisis, 1919-1939: an introduction to the study of international relations* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001); Edward Hallet Carr, *Propaganda in international politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939); and *International relations since the peace treaties* (London [u.a.]: Macmillan, 1937).

<sup>9</sup> See Robert Jervis, "War and Misperception," *The origin and prevention of major wars*, Studies in interdisciplinary history, eds. Robert I. Rotberg, Theodore K. Rabb, and Robert Gilpin (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989); "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics* 20, no. 3 (1968): 454-479;

See Peter M. Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 1-35;

See Jonathan Mercer, "Rationality and Psychology in International Politics," *International Politics* 59 (2005): 77-106; and "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization* 49, no. 2 (1995): 229-252.

## The Outbreak of War

April 14, 1938, marks the resurgence of the Soviet Union's interest in Finland and the vulnerability of the Russo-Finnish border. On that day, a month after Germany's annexation of Austria, Russia sent a low-level official, Boris Yartsev, to the Finnish foreign minister, Rudolf Holsti.<sup>10</sup> The Soviets feared that Hitler intended to eventually attack the Soviet Union on multiple fronts—with the very real possibility of Germany invading Finnish territory and using it to stage an offensive against Russia. Leningrad was located twenty miles from the Russo-Finnish border<sup>11</sup> and had a population of more than 3.5 million.<sup>12</sup> Hitler's incendiary militarism gave Russia little reason to believe that Germany would not conduct such attacks.

For eighteen months, Finland refused to accept Russian demands for bases on its territory. Both parties volleyed proposals and concessions with little tangible outcome. Russia moved cautiously until the August 1939 signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, dividing Poland between Germany and Russia and secretly granting Russia supremacy over the Baltic and Finland.<sup>13</sup> Stalin quickly forced Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into mutual assistance treaties that effectively permitted him to house bases on their territories.<sup>14</sup> The pact, however, did not serve to diminish Soviet paranoia regarding Finland. Stalin stated on October 14, 1939, "We have good relations with Germany now, but in this world everything can change."<sup>15</sup> He soon discovered that the new leverage gained through the Nazi-Soviet pact did not deeply impact the Finns. The 1920 Treaty of Tartu and non-aggression pact of 1932, renewed for an additional ten years in 1934, bound Finland and the Soviet Union to pacific relations.<sup>16</sup> Finland assumed an air of complacency and refused to accept Stalin's requests, even with increased concessions.<sup>17</sup>

Successive months only deepened the impasse between the two nations, leading Stalin to assume that military conflict would be more expedient than continuing

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<sup>10</sup> Max Jakobson, *The diplomacy of the winter war; an account of the Russo-Finnish War, 1939-1940* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1961), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Spring, 210.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Stalin and M. R. Werner, *Stalin's Kampf; Joseph Stalin's credo* (New York: Howell, Soskin & Co., 1940), 347.

<sup>13</sup> Jakobson, 98.

<sup>14</sup> Engle and Paananen, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony F. Upton, *Finland, 1939-1940*. London: Davis-Poynter, 1974), 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 16; Trotter, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Upton., 29-30.

to cajole obdurate Finns. Stalin feared that his time was limited, for he wished to reap the full benefits from his pact with Germany before Hitler had trounced the West and amassed the capability to campaign in the East.<sup>18</sup> The Manila incident, in which seven shots penetrated 800-meters into Soviet territory, killing four Russian soldiers and nine others, provided the Russians with sufficient pretext for liquidating the Soviet-Finnish pact.<sup>19</sup> A few days later, Russia began bombarding Finland on November 30, 1939.<sup>20</sup>

#### Realism and Misperception

Realism bases its perspective on the international level of analysis. Realists assert that power and the objective laws derived from it are the sole motivation for political actions.<sup>21</sup> The drive for power propels all policymakers towards an identical goal, superseding all differences and creating a unitary state. The nature of power and the capacity for its growth depend greatly upon the state's position within the international system. Thus, a given state's relative position within the international system determines its actions.

Realism proposes that all states rationally act within their self-interest, objectively assessing the respective costs and benefits of a scenario prior to acting.<sup>22</sup> "Realism," Morgenthau writes, "considers prudence—the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions—to be the supreme virtue in politics".<sup>23</sup> This implies that policymakers, as rational actors, do not individually matter for politics. They simply review the requirements of the state and act accordingly, with their personal belief systems never intervening. "Interests (material and ideal), not ideas, dominate directly the actions of men."<sup>24</sup> Since the international system is anarchical—lacking a supranational governing authority—states jostle for power and strive to entrench their position through either external or internal balancing. Importantly, all of these assumptions hinge upon the notion that the only actors worth noting are states.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jakobson, 143-44.

<sup>19</sup> Trotter, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Spring, 221.

<sup>21</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*.

<sup>22</sup> Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse, *International relations* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009), 45.

<sup>23</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Goldstein and Pevehouse, 45.

Misperception brings the level of analysis down to the cognitive sphere of individual actors. Robert Jervis defines misperception as "...inaccurate inferences, miscalculations of consequences, and misjudgments about how others will react to one's policies."<sup>26</sup> Misperception nullifies the "rational actor paradigm" and instead assumes that all policymakers act in accordance with their own biases and information filters, either of which could lead them in a direction that counters rationality.<sup>27</sup> The theory assumes an individual's personal appraisal of a situation is a decisive variable in state behavior. This dispels the possibility of states acting in a unitary manner, for all individuals bear their unique approaches to a situation. Though misperception does not assume that a state's position within the international system is inconsequential—policymakers ultimately define the state's approach to foreign policy by interpreting the international hierarchy.

Perceptual realism argues that realism does not independently operate causally within the international system. Instead, it creates a context for tensions and the strategic importance of countries. The policymakers' perception of the balance of power and security threats drives the final decision to initiate war. The Soviet Union's misguided assessment of the situation and Finland's place within it was the true causal factor. By fusing the individual and international levels of analysis the theory does not undermine the integrity of either. Policymakers may assume they act rationally and make every effort to do so, but misguided information processing and a conflict's opacity may thwart their efforts.

Even in realism, much depends upon the clarity of the policymakers' deliberations. Morgenthau writes that it is important to know a statesman's, "intellectual ability to comprehend...foreign policy, as well as his political ability to translate... [it] into successful political action."<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, not all politicians are capable of fully grasping the international situation, much less properly applying the information they gather; thus, this component of foreign policy allows ample opportunity for individual errors to influence state actions. In fact, realism does not dispute this and grants sufficient space for the presence of other theories. As Morgenthau writes, the realist theory doesn't disregard "the existence and importance of...other modes of thought. It rather implies that each should be assigned its proper sphere and function."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Jervis, "War and Misperception," 101.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *Between peace and war: the nature of international crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 101.

<sup>28</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Realism is a legitimate means of assessing the international situation, the respective diffusion of power and the security concerns that dominate the state's interests. However, perceptual realism abandons the assumptions regarding unitary action and states serving as the sole agents.

Perceptual realism instead grants a role to misperception by arguing that individual leaders personally assess the system, allowing their internal intellectual constraints to causally influence policy.

This theory provides two hypotheses for the cause of the Winter War, both of which I test in Parts III and IV, respectively. First, Stalin and his officials repeatedly displayed symptoms of misperception (i.e. irrational consistency and historical analogies) when reviewing the situation. Second, the assumption that realism alone cannot explain the war's outbreak implies that war was not in the Soviet Union's rational interests and could only result from misperception.

#### Misperception's Indelible Presence

**B**efore testing whether realism could have operated causally, I must determine if misperception was actually present. I will focus upon two biases that Jervis and Lebow believe policymakers frequently exhibit: irrational consistency and the use of historical analogies. The former led the Soviets to overestimate Finland's hostility and the latter to underestimate the costs of war. Analysis indicates that these biases were present and deeply influential.

Irrational consistency results from the distortion of a normal cognitive process known as cognitive consistency. Individuals process information in accordance with internal rules. In the case of cognitive consistency, this involves sorting our expectations in such a way as to make them consistent with our beliefs and actions (Lebow 103).<sup>30</sup> This procedure permits us to schematize our behavior and act predictably. This process ceases to operate effectively when individuals form an inflexible cognitive framework. Lebow states that policy makers, "are more responsive to information that supports their existing beliefs," and when "confronted with critical information, they tend to misunderstand it, twist its meaning to make it consistent, explain it away, deny it, or simply ignore it".<sup>31</sup> Throughout the entire pre-war period Stalin and his officials demonstrated this pattern of behavior.

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<sup>30</sup> Lebow, 103

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

The Soviet Union's belief that Finland was both hostile towards the Soviets and in collusion with Germany stemmed from the two countries' tumultuous historical relations. From 1890 to 1917 the Russian Empire ruled Finland. Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, Lenin granted Finland its independence, while furtively assuming that he could later re-annex it by using the Russian soldiers that remained.<sup>32</sup> Instead, a Finnish civil war between the White Guard, comprised of the bourgeoisie and nobility, and the Red Guard of Russian revolutionaries began. Some of the White Guard commanders had been part of the group of 2,000 Finnish boys sent to Germany for military training between 1915 and 1916.<sup>33</sup> The White Guard, fearing defeat at the hands of the Reds, requested and received assistance from Germany in April 1918. Six weeks later, the Reds surrendered.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, the Germans employed the Aaland Islands to reach Hanko, an island off the southern coast of Finland.<sup>35</sup> Such a precedent brought Soviet attention to the vulnerability of the Gulf of Finland. Logic dictated that if Germany could employ the route with such ease, what would stop it from going a step further and staging an attack against the Russian border? Needless to say, the civil war resulted in tense relations between Finland and Russia. Finnish Prime Minister Pehr Edvin Svinhufvud even tactlessly told a German official in October 1937, "Russia's enemy [Germany] must always be the friend of Finland".<sup>36</sup>

History left an indelible mark upon the Soviet Union, leading it to perceive all Finnish actions in terms of complicity with Germany. During the 1930s, minority political groups in Finland questioned Soviet practices in Soviet Karelia, a territory that the Finnish government regarded as its legal trustee. The outspokenly militant youth that gravitated towards the cause incensed the Soviet Union and instilled within it the belief that such unrest was the majority view. Maxim Litvinov, Soviet foreign minister, believed that Germany, Poland and Finland were clandestinely allied in the hopes of annexing Soviet Karelia.<sup>37</sup> The territory additionally fueled Soviet assumptions that a large state could offer Soviet Karelia as a bribe for the Finnish government in exchange for access to the Russo-Finnish border.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Utpon, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Trotter, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>35</sup> Jacobson, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>38</sup> Trotter, 7.



These tensions gave way to an invasive form of irrational consistency. Soviet Marshal Tukhachevski in a January 1936 speech claimed that Finnish airfields could not be for the small nation's protection.<sup>39</sup> In 1938, the Finnish air force consisted of 150 planes, but the country harbored enough aerodromes to accommodate 2,000. This led the Soviets to believe Finland expected a "guest-fleet."<sup>40</sup> This was a reasonable conclusion, but the Soviets immediately assumed that Germany would be the chief provider. Tukhachevski's claims were coupled by two September 1936 announcements from Moscow: Finnish and German forces had allegedly attempted to ruin the Murmansk Railroad and the German navy's visit to Helsinki indicated planned joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Finland.<sup>41</sup> Andre Zhdanov, Communist leader of Leningrad, on November 29, 1936, conveyed the impact of such rash conclusions on Soviet foreign policy: "If in some little countries, Finland for instance, feelings of hostility to the USSR are being kindled...and preparations are being made to make their territory available for aggressive action by fascist Powers, ...these little countries alone...will be the losers."<sup>42</sup>

The Soviet Union regarded seemingly innocuous commemorative parades as a sign of Finland's common cause with Germany. On April 12, 1938, veterans of the German expeditionary corps, which had assisted the White Guard during the 1918 Finnish Civil War, visited Finland for a military parade honoring their comrades. The Soviets interpreted this affair as an indication that the Germans wished to continue their battle with the Reds. Two days later, the first Soviet-Finnish negotiations began.<sup>43</sup> Another instance of such a mentality occurred when Finland and Sweden began discussing plans to remilitarize the Aaland Islands in the Gulf in 1938. The Soviet armed forces newspaper proclaimed in response, "fascist Germany...tries to achieve two aims at once—to establish a military base against the Soviet Union and to safeguard her supplies of Swedish iron".<sup>44</sup> Immediately the Soviet Union incorporated Germany, even when no evidence for such deception existed. The Soviet Union ignored German attempts to ensure the neutrality of the Aaland Islands, instead imposing a behavior that better fit its assumptions.

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<sup>39</sup> Jacobson, 17.

<sup>40</sup> W. P. Coates, Zeld K. Coates and Frank Owen, *The Soviet-Finnish campaign: military and political, 1939-1940* (London: Eldon Press, 1941), 20.

<sup>41</sup> Jacobson, 17-18.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

Soviet suspicion extended beyond neighboring nations. They also implicated the British in colluding with Finland. A contributor to the Russian paper *Light Industry* declared in a 1939 article “No intrigue or provocations by the incendiaries of war . . . can prevent the Soviet Union from securing the safety of its . . . frontier.”<sup>45</sup> Political cartoons in other papers indicated that the writer included more than Germany among the “incendiaries.” A *Komsomalskaya Pravda* cartoon conveys a hand emblazoned with a British flag holding a magnifying glass before the figure of the Finnish Foreign Minister, making him appear threatening. The caption slyly states “Why Errko has an exaggerated opinion of himself.”<sup>46</sup> The implication is more than clear—Finland is only resisting Stalin’s demands because it feels that external support will deter any Soviet action. The paranoia was best demonstrated in a telegram sent by a Soviet envoy to his diplomatic headquarters. “In Helsinki there has been a sudden increase in the number of Englishmen, the great majority of whom speak Russian. Finland is conducting military discussions.”<sup>47</sup> Russia had little patience for external intrusion and consistently feared that such signs of collusion only further substantiated its concerns for the border.

In a speech presented on October 31, 1939, to the Supreme Soviet, Vyacheslav Molotov, Litvinov’s successor, proclaimed that the negotiations had stalled because “the influence of outside powers on Finland [had] been observed.” Even Leningrad Radio incredulously offered its own analysis of Finland’s obdurate resistance to Soviet demands. “Who is Finland relying on? There was another country [Poland] which also expected promised assistance [from Britain] and what did it get?”<sup>48</sup> It had not occurred to the Soviet Union that Finnish resistance stemmed from the fact that the Soviet demands would effectively nullify Finland’s independent defense system.<sup>49</sup> The Soviet Union, however, did not consider the relative impact of its requests. Stalin insisted that he desired only the bare minimum.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> G.E.R. Gedye, “Russians Charge British Abet Finns,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1939, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki 1939*. 58

<sup>48</sup> Upton, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Trotter, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Jacobson, 124.

## Selective Lessons from History

Much of the Soviet rhetoric framed Finland in terms of prior experiences with Poland. Indeed, Soviet leaders looked upon the two countries as essentially identical foes, with the same tactics applicable to both. This misperception in particular resulted in a gross underestimation of the costs of war. The Red Army's success in Poland and its admiration for Germany's blitzkrieg generated the belief that such methods could apply anywhere with equal effect. In only a few days, the Soviet Union had overrun a state with eight times the population of Finland, gained thirteen million subjects, 196,000 square kilometers of fresh territory and all at the low cost of 737 men. The German invasion on September 1, 1939, had softened the Soviet campaign, but Russia believed reenacting the annexation with a smaller nation would prove just as simple, even without assistance.<sup>51</sup> Stalin indicated the prominent role of this framework during an October 12, 1939, meeting with a Finnish envoy. "When I asked Ribbentrop why Germany had attacked Poland, he replied, 'We had to move the Polish frontier farther from Berlin.' ... We ask that the distance from Leningrad to the border... be 70 kilometers."<sup>52</sup> The Soviet Union had desires similar to Germany's. Of course, Germany had not made such a concerted diplomatic effort and had moved the border a full hundred kilometers. The Soviet Union, in contrast, wished to shift the border a mere fifty kilometers and offered in exchange for all of its territorial requests twice as much land.

When Soviet diplomatic efforts with Finland failed, Stalin began to believe that war might be a more expedient option. The simplicity of the Polish campaign partly fueled this view. Yet it stemmed from a superficial and highly selective analysis of the similarities and differences between the two countries, and in particular their vulnerability to blitzkrieg. Firstly, German tactics were meant for the tame terrain and modern road systems of Central Europe. Finland, in contrast, had a largely undeveloped network of roads.<sup>53</sup> Twenty percent of Finland was covered by swamp, almost twelve percent consisted of lakes and the country was widely regarded as the most densely wooded in Europe.<sup>54</sup> This impeded any form of mechanized warfare. Only small pockets of territory could accommodate battle, minimizing Russia's manpower advantage and allowed insufficient space for coordinating the massive forces blitzkrieg requires. In

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<sup>51</sup> Allen F. Chew, *The white death: the epic of the Soviet-Finnish Winter War*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1971), 2-3.

<sup>52</sup> Jacobson, 117.

<sup>53</sup> Trotter, 34-35.

<sup>54</sup> Coates, 2.

addition, Russia's human capital did not match the degree of cohesion, drive and independence carefully honed by Germany in order to ensure blitzkrieg's success.<sup>55</sup> These factors alone point to the possibility of drawn-out warfare, not a quick foray.

Stalin and his officials, however, rejected the concerns of some in the Soviet military, refusing to let go of an appealing analogy. General Shaposhnikov, chief of staff of the Red Army, submitted a proposal indicating the need for a large build-up, deployment of the elite forces and incorporation of soldiers from across the Union.<sup>56</sup> Stalin did not heed such warnings and instead believed Zhdanov's claims that only the Leningrad forces were required.<sup>57</sup> General Meretskov, the commander of Leningrad's forces, even went so far as to publicly claim that the campaign would require two weeks at the most. Interestingly, in private, he bemoaned the difficult terrain and believed that a quick victory was not attainable.<sup>58</sup> The Soviet Union, assuming an easy victory along the lines of Poland, had neglected to calculate the adversary's unique geography and its own demographic capabilities, both of which could equalize the Soviet's initial military advantage. Nonetheless, the Russian press continued to urge that Finland act to "escape the fate of Poland".<sup>59</sup>

#### Rational Calculation Versus Individual Perception

The mere existence of misperception does not mean that it was a necessary condition for the outbreak of the Winter War. In order to test this, I first assess whether or not realism can explain the war's occurrence and to what extent. Then, I evaluate whether misperception operated causally, or merely influenced auxiliary elements of the war. The evidence indicates that realism is capable of explaining the conflict, while misperception mainly drove Soviet preparations for the war.

If realism provides a causal explanation for the Winter War, the Soviet Union's actions must be considered rational. A realist interpretation of the Soviet position would frame Soviet perceptions as justified in terms of the Soviet need to preserve its influence and security in the international system. In World War II Europe this was no easy task. Stalin responded to the rising German militarism

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<sup>55</sup> Trotter, 36.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>57</sup> Upton, 45.

<sup>58</sup> Trotter, 34.

<sup>59</sup> *The New York Times*, "Red Blitzkrieg," December 3, 1939, 85.

by securing any vulnerability along Russia's borders. Finland's strategic position made it exceedingly important in this regard. Certainly, Finland posed a sincere threat to Russia, for Finnish territory provided ample access to resources and a vantage point from which to fire over the border.

Germany had vested interest in Finland because much of its war-making capacity depended upon easy access to Swedish iron ore and the area's rich deposits of nickel, making Finland's neutrality and independence important. Germany had also demonstrated its connection to the region by supporting the Finnish White Guard during the Civil War. After the Civil War Germany maintained cordial ties with the Finnish government. The Soviets understood this clearly, but were more unnerved by the border's proximity to Soviet arteries. The Russo-Finnish border ran a mere one hundred kilometers from Murmansk, the only ice-free Russian ocean port, and paralleled the Murmansk railroad that connected Leningrad to Murmansk.<sup>60</sup> Any interception of this route would greatly disrupt Russian trade and provisions for the bustling city of 3.5 million. Stalin considered Leningrad the Soviet Union's "second capital" because of both its symbolic value and its control of more than a third of the defense industry.<sup>61</sup> A hostile Finland would greatly inhibit Russian access to the Gulf. "In theory," Upton writes, "whoever controlled [Finland's southern coast] could block the Gulf of Finland and all sea access to Leningrad," making it exceedingly important for the Soviet Union to fortify the region's defenses.<sup>62</sup>

On the basis of geography, Finland posed a clear liability; historically, only a moderate one. During the Finnish Civil War in 1918 German troops had arrived on Finnish soil through the southern islands of Finland.<sup>63</sup> If such feats could be accomplished once, they could certainly be repeated by an army as formidable as Hitler's. Demanding southern bases was justified, but Russia interestingly demanded northern territory as well. Never in history have forces sought to besiege Leningrad by arriving from the north.<sup>64</sup> Soviets did not care for history in this regard and felt that every corner should be protected, with or without an historical justification.

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<sup>60</sup> Upton, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander O. Chubaryan and Harold Shukman, *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish war 1939-1940*, Cass Series on the Soviet (Russian) study of war (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 263.

<sup>62</sup> Upton, 14.

<sup>63</sup> Jacobson, 16.

<sup>64</sup> Upton 31.

These vulnerabilities, however, existed several decades prior, and did not foment war. Indeed, other strategic factors must have influenced the Soviet foreign policy. The main factor, by far, was Stalin's suspicions regarding Hitler's true intentions. Stalin believed that Hitler was merely attempting to dismantle the West before turning eastward and quenching his initial thirst for *lebensraum*, or living space.<sup>65</sup> With this pressing shortage of time in mind, Stalin could not tolerate extending the diplomatic negotiations further and began to sense that more stringent methods were required. In a speech presented to the Supreme Soviet on October 31, 1939, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov stated that the uncertain times provided the Soviet Union with, "not only the right, but also the duty...to adopt serious measures for strengthening its security."<sup>66</sup> When negotiations finally soured on November 3, 1939, he famously stated that "We civilians can't seem to do any more. Now it seems to be up to the military. It is their turn to speak."<sup>67</sup> Finland had left the Soviets little choice. Stalin could not risk allowing Finland to continue with its obduracy without conveying weakness to the Germans and an inability to manage affairs within his own sphere of influence. Finland had to be silenced, but the Soviet Union did not wish to do this unless it could remain uninvolved in the war between Germany and the European powers.<sup>68</sup>

Certainly, the daunting political atmosphere could incite warfare, but key considerations should have stalled any leader operating on rationality alone. For instance, beginning a war when the possibility of one with a major power looms on the horizon is hardly logical; unless one can be absolutely certain that the small skirmish will be quick and painless. The Soviet Union could not risk any prolonged battle, for if Germany conquered Britain and France, it would be able to turn against the Soviet Union while Stalin was still mired within Finland. Not only that, any setbacks during a Russo-Finnish war would lead the Germans to assume Soviet weakness. Khrushchev suggests as much in his memoirs. For Khrushchev, "Our miserable conduct of the Finnish campaign," encouraged Hitler in his plans for blitzkrieg."<sup>69</sup> Moreover, any loss of men and ammunition could prove decisive later in a war between major powers. Realism acknowledges all of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>66</sup> A.T. Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War: A Study of Russo-Finnish Diplomacy," *World Politics* 6, no. 2 (1954): 182.

<sup>67</sup> Engle and Paananen, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Jacobson, 142.

<sup>69</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, Edward Crankshaw and Strobe Talbott, *Khrushchev remembers* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1970), 156.

this and offers an explanation: rational considerations led the Soviet Union to assume a short conflict,

First, the war would have posed no risk to alliances and interactions with other states. Germany, Sweden and other European powers had firmly sought to convince Finland that acquiescing to Soviet demands was in its best interests. In fact, Germany had little desire to intervene on Finland's behalf, for such action would risk angering the Soviet Union and possibly lead to a Germany "nipped between two fronts".<sup>70</sup> Britain also had little desire to interfere; in fact, the British welcomed Soviet control in the Baltic as a means of diminishing German influence. War was not in anyone's interests, but having the Soviet Union depose Finland was not a matter over which the British were willing to risk their own men. Thus, the Soviet Union could easily attack Finland and not fret over fighting one of its fellow nations.<sup>71</sup>

Second, Stalin viewed this as a window of opportunity. In a speech delivered to his generals in 1940, Stalin defended the campaign as the only *rational* choice; "in the West," Stalin stated, "the three biggest powers were locked in a deadly combat—this was the most opportune moment to settle the Leningrad problem".<sup>72</sup> He understood prior to the war that no one in the international community sympathized with the Soviets, so any war with Finland would ultimately involve some Western interference.<sup>73</sup> Stalin anticipated that other states would support Finland materially, but he believed the pressing international situation would prevent them from offering anything significant or decisive.

The Soviets had little to fear even if Finland received munitions from other nations. Per division, Russia had 40-50 tanks and 15 armored cars, while Finland had none. Russia had 14,000 rifles to Finland's 11,000; 419 automatic rifles to a mere 250. In fact, in almost all major forms of ammunition and total manpower Russia surpassed Finland.<sup>74</sup> If war was to be fought on the predictable plains of Continental Europe, Finland would have been a satellite long ago. Unfortunately for the Russians, this was not the case. Finland had other features that partially overrode the numerical advantage: namely, a geographical advantage and a highly

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<sup>70</sup> Lothrop Stoddard, "Finnish War Stirs Stormy Reich Echo," *The New York Times*, December 24, 1939, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Upton, 25-27.

<sup>72</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, 264.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>74</sup> Engle and Paananen, 158-59.

disciplined army that had been steadily building and training throughout the diplomatic negotiations.<sup>75</sup>

The Soviet decision for war was rational considering the tumultuous state of affairs and the potentially lethal German intentions. In order to counter Finland's defensive advantage Stalin would have to meticulously prepare his troops. At this point, the role of misperception becomes clear.

#### Soviet Misconception of Finland

Since realism provides a theoretical means of explaining the Soviet decision to fight, the question becomes determining if or what role of misperception may have played. Evidence indicates that it greatly influenced the manner in which the Soviets estimated the difficulty of the war and the preparations required. The Soviet Union understood that a short war would ensure the greatest use of the window of opportunity, so it set about ensuring that the war would not exceed two weeks. At this point, Stalin begins to demonstrate the muddled conception of Finland and its readiness.

Andrei Zhdanov pressed upon Stalin the absolute simplicity of fighting such a war. He argued this on the basis of two points. First, the Finnish military capacity could not withhold more than a "token" defense. Second, the discontented Finnish working class would fight on behalf of the Soviet "liberators".<sup>76</sup> The latter reflects a deeply rooted sentiment within Soviet politics. Even in 1938 Russian newspapers lauded the restless peasantry that would quickly "turn their weapons against the [Finnish government]."<sup>77</sup> In essence, the Soviets were hoping for a fifth column that would act as a force multiplier.

Soviet correspondents reported the disparities within Finnish society. The *Tass* correspondent in Helsinki wrote that the "Finnish working class was on the point of revolt" and the Soviets began to believe that the "Finnish 'masses' were ready to receive the Red Army with flowers and banners."<sup>78</sup> Zhdanov was so confident in the proletariat's support for the Soviet campaign he believed only the Leningrad forces would be required.<sup>79</sup> These assumptions, however, were based upon an extreme lack of knowledge, either willing or accidental.

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<sup>75</sup> Jakobson, 109.

<sup>76</sup> Trotter, 18.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>78</sup> Jakobson, 142-43

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.



In reality, the Finns were extremely supportive of their government and had no intention of defecting to their former master. The German Minister in Helsinki, Wipert von Blucher, provided an astute analysis of the Finnish people in an August 1938 dispatch. He stated that “eighty to ninety percent of the nation is democratically minded, and they will not deny their convictions in a war that is presented to them as an attack on democracy.”<sup>80</sup> In a letter to Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov, Finnish Foreign Minister Vaino Tanner described the popularity the Finnish government enjoyed. The dominant Socialist party in parliament received 42.5% of the working class vote in the summer 1939 elections. “Behind the Finnish Government and the policy they are pursuing,” Tanner wrote, “is a unanimous Parliament. And behind Parliament is a unanimous nation.”<sup>81</sup> More importantly, the Soviets represented nothing more than totalitarianism to the Finns, making it highly unlikely that they would be welcomed as heroes.

The amount of support granted to Finnish delegations before they left for Moscow should have informed the Soviet perception. On their departure to Moscow for negotiations with the Soviets, Juho Passikivi and his fellow diplomats were greeted by spontaneous throngs of joyous people who sang patriotic songs and sent well-wishes to the delegation. “Wherever the train stopped,” Jakobson writes, “there were more crowds to sing courage and faith into the hearts of the nation’s representatives.”<sup>82</sup> These were not hollow gestures, but the sign of a country willing to fight tooth and nail for its liberty. If Stalin and his officials had paid sufficient attention to the Finnish people, they would not have uttered “All we had to do was raise our voice a little bit, and the Finns would obey. If that didn’t work, we could fire one shot and the Finns would put up their hands and surrender.”<sup>83</sup>

The poor preparations rested upon more than supposed pro-Soviet sentiments in Finland. Soviet memoranda indicated a clear belief in the poor state of Finnish troops and affairs. A foreign policy official drafted a letter on November 12, 1939, that purported to explain the status of Finnish troops. In great detail he explained the number of troops, their caliber and the degree of preparations along the Russo-Finnish border. He chose to emphasize what he deemed the growing resentment among the reserve troops at being uprooted to face what

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>81</sup> Finland, *The development of Finnish-Soviet relations*, 113.

<sup>82</sup> Jakobson, 114.

<sup>83</sup> Khrushchev, Crankshaw and Talbott, 152.

appeared to be a non-existent enemy. “Within the Finnish army discipline is falling and it appears to be fragmenting. . . . On the streets of the capitol one can often see drunken soldiers roaming at night. . . . causing the citizen population to avoid them.”<sup>84</sup> The soldiers’ behavior could alienate public support for the war and the Finnish government that caused it. The Soviets reveled in these developments, for they saw the potential to erode Finnish popular will.

The author buttressed his assertion with the fact the Finland had burdened its own finances because of the extraordinary expense of its defense preparations. “The Finnish position continues to worsen,” he wrote. “Its main source of funding—trade—continues to fall as a result of war preparations on the East. . . . The government is eating away its 3 billion [currency not specified] war savings.”<sup>85</sup> The belief in Finland’s dire financial straits may have been well-founded, but the situation did not substantiate the writer’s conclusions. Finland had been fortifying the border since at least 1937. By the time Finland began depleting its war funds in 1939 much of the taxing work was already complete.<sup>86</sup>

#### Soviet Lack of Self-Awareness

Sagacity should have propelled the Soviets to look inward at their own level of preparedness, as opposed to speculating over that of Finland. The Red Army was not as battle-ready as Stalin would have liked and it most certainly was not fully prepared for a high-intensity conflict in densely wooded terrain. In 1937 Stalin had staged his infamous purge of the Red Army. He arrested 44,000 officers and executed at least 15,000. Those who escaped death suffered in labor camps and exile.<sup>87</sup> This served to dismantle the most experienced and intelligent core of the military, leaving only the infantry and milquetoast officers. Stalin’s purge eroded any sense of initiative among the officer corps, leaving a mass unwilling to take political risks in order to secure victory in battle. Oddly enough, this hard-line elimination was coupled by a lenient training regimen for those that remained.

The Red Army did not exercise or train when the temperature fell below 15 degrees centigrade and took hour-long naps each afternoon.<sup>88</sup> Brigade Commissar Semyonov recounted to Stalin the poor state of his troops. 20-30

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<sup>84</sup> *Dokumenti Vneshnei Politiki 1939*, 284.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Chubaryan and Shukman, 3.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

percent of those at the front had little combat training and large numbers of men were over 35 years in age, complicating logistics and frustrating commanding officers.<sup>89</sup> This lack of readiness was coupled with defunct army manuals that offered suggestions highly impractical for the demands of Northern warfare.<sup>90</sup> Even if realist considerations made the war a necessary route, Stalin should have considered the state of his troops and their potential to complicate matters at the outset. Yet, there was little planning on the part of the Soviets as they continued to assume their present state could allow for a quick incursion, even when ample evidence pointed to the contrary.

#### An Argument for Perceptual Realism

The international system forced Stalin to decide upon war, but misperception defined how he prepared for the conflict. All of his actions hinged upon seizing the window of opportunity and silencing the Finns. However, his infatuation with exploiting the state of affairs to the greatest possible degree resulted in hasty preparations and misguided assumptions. He misguidedly assumed that his current troops could offer the necessary intensity and strength to make the invasion short and swift. Stalin did not give his men the time to train, assemble and properly develop techniques. Ultimately, realism pointed towards a quick war, but misperception intervened.

Perceptual realism's core hypotheses may not apply to the Winter War entirely: however, this test does not preclude the theory from ever serving as an accurate explanation. The Winter War may have not fulfilled two key assumptions of perceptual realism.

First, *individuals have access to all of the required information*. Misperception and ignorance differ on how much knowledge is expected of the agent. Perhaps Stalin allowed for the troops to move with haste because he was not fully aware of their degraded condition or his advisors had not been veracious. In a 1940 discussion with his generals, Stalin was surprised when his generals spoke of their charges' abysmal training. Future research will seek to determine whether or not Stalin's surprise was genuine and the amount of information available to him in 1939.

Second, *comments made to the public convey the actual perception of advisors*. This includes cartoons, articles, speeches and perhaps even transcribed diplomatic

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 33.

meetings. I extract some of my evidence from such sources to determine whether or not the Soviet leaders were actually ensnared within historical analogies and cognitive inconsistency. Using public documents may be misleading in a totalitarian country firmly committed to controlling popular opinion. As a result, some of my examples may indicate the leaders' attempt to galvanize the public and may be entirely divorced from their personal views. Future research will focus on private discussions, journals and narratives as a basis for discerning the officials' opinions.

Even though this test is not yet definitive and only serves to offer insight into the variables at work during the months preceding the Winter War, it does demonstrate that individuals are integral agents within the international system. Even if they are not causally responsible for a war's inception, their presence and interpretations define how a state prepares for war. This in turn guides the progression and final outcome. Perceptual realism may have not entirely succeeded in explaining the Winter War, but individuals cannot be denied their place in international affairs.

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