

Washington's Special Case in the Early Cold War: The United States' Foreign Policy towards Finland, 1945-1953

Brooks Stephenson

Abstract: In 1945, Finland was in a precarious condition after the Second World War. After losing land to the Soviet Union after the Winter War (1939-1940), Finland allied itself with Germany in 1941 and invaded the Soviet Union. This decision cost the Finns, as they were punished by the Soviets after the war. While the situation in Finland was not as dire as it was for the Eastern European nations, in which communism was established, the Finns still had to cope with losing lands such as Karelia and having to pay 300 million U.S. gold dollars in reparations to Moscow. However, this paper argues that the United States was very much interested in maintaining Finland's sovereignty, and that the political, cultural, and, most importantly, the economic actions taken by the U.S. did just that. By differentiating Finland from the other Soviet satellite states, bringing Finns to America to study, broadcasting the Voice of America to Finland, and giving loans to Finland, the United States kept Finland free from communist control.

On the night of July 12, 1950, a junior official of the Finnish Foreign Office felt a tap on the shoulder. Upon turning around, the Finn recognized the man as J. V. Bakey, a Russian attaché from the Soviet Legation in Helsinki. The two ended up talking for a few hours. The Russian seemed most interested in where Finland's allegiance truly lay. In his opinion, Finland was not genuinely loyal to the Soviet Union, even though the two countries had signed a treaty of mutual defense and assistance two years prior. He said, "Finland cooperated formally, but not with her heart."¹ The Russian's comment was a fair assessment of the situation. Finland indeed did not participate in the treaty with its heart. This was because Finland was closer with a different country: The United States. This paper deals with the early Cold War years, during which Joseph Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union. The U.S. never made any strong public declarations of their support for Finland's independence during this period, but they were deeply interested in keeping Finland within the Western camp. This led the United States to make political, cultural, but especially economic policies early in the Cold War to maintain Finnish sovereignty. By differentiating Finland from the other Soviet satellite states, bringing Finns to America to study, broadcasting the Voice of America to Finland, and giving loans to Finland, the United States kept Finland free from communist control.

Before considering the actions taken by the United States to secure the independence of Finland, the unique position of the Finns must be understood.² In 1939, when the Nazis and the Soviets both invaded Poland, the Soviet Union also launched an invasion of Finland. While the Finns inflicted severe casualties on the Soviets during the winter of 1939-1940, known as the Winter War, they were forced to the negotiation table in March of 1940. Finland had to cede 10% of its territory, including Karelia. Losing Karelia was a severe cultural loss, but it was also a dire economic setback. Much of Finland's forestry industry was in the region, which made up a fair portion of its exports.³ In 1941, following Hitler's invasion

¹ CIA, *CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN FINNISH DO OFFICIAL AND SOVIET LEGATION ATTACHE*, July 12, 1950, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp65-00756r000600020022-0>.

² For a general overview of Finnish history, see Jason Lavery, *The History of Finland* (London: Greenwood Press, 2006).

³ Jari Eloranta and Jari Kauppila, "Guns and Butter—Central Government Spending in the 20th Century," in *The Road to Prosperity: An Economic History of Finland*, ed. Jari Ojala, Jari Eloranta, and Jukka Jalava (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2006), 222.

of the Soviet Union, Finland declared war on the USSR and allied itself with Germany, thus beginning the Continuation War. The Finns quickly took back much of Karelia, and they even took land to the east of it. They eventually halted their advance though. Once Russia began pushing Germany back, Finland was put under more pressure. The Soviets launched an offensive campaign on the Finnish defensive lines in August of 1944. Although Soviet gains were slim, the Finns knew they could not indefinitely withstand a prolonged attack, so they again were forced to negotiate. They lost Karelia yet again, and they were required to expel any remaining German troops in Finland. This resulted in the Lapland War, which was a series of minor skirmishes between Finnish and German troops while the Germans retreated to Norway. While the German army was retreating, they deployed scorched earth tactics in Lapland, causing even more devastation in Finland.

To make things even worse, the Soviets demanded that Finland pay three-hundred million U.S. gold dollars to them over the next few years in reparations. The next three years were challenging for Finland. While they were not starving, their quality of life had dropped dramatically in comparison to pre-WW2 levels.⁴ Furthermore, communists controlled about a quarter of the seats in parliament.⁵ The situation turned even darker in 1948 when Stalin sent a letter to Finnish President Juho Kusti Paasikivi calling for treaty talks.⁶ The Soviets carried out a communist coup in Czechoslovakia, the last bastion of democracy in Eastern Europe, that same year, so Stalin's "request" for treaty talks with Finland caused pangs of fear among both the Finns and Western observers that just like Eastern Europe, Finland too could fall under control of the Kremlin.

It must first be recognized that the United States was initially hesitant to influence Finland. The two had a good relationship prior to WWII, as Finland had paid its debts to the U.S. even throughout the Great Depression.⁷ However, the U.S. followed a strict policy of neutrality before WWII, so it did not assist Finland during the Winter War. Also, the United States never declared war on Finland. This meant that only the British and the USSR signed the armistice which ended the fighting with Finland, thereby establishing the Allied Control Commission in Helsinki. The Commission only contained British and Soviet officials.⁸ In various documents, the United States recognized that Finland was positioned within the Soviet sphere of influence.⁹ The U.S. also did not concern itself much with Finland yet because war was still raging on in Europe and in the Pacific. While there was talk of the American desire to see Finland remain

⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1946, Paris Peace Conference: Proceedings, Volume III* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1970), 7. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v03/d44>.

⁵ Lavery, *The History of Finland*, 134.

⁶ For quick overview of Friendship Treaty, see Kimmo Rentola, "YYA and the fear of a coup in spring 1948," J. K. Paasikivi, accessed Nov. 8, 2023, <https://jkpaasikivi.fi/en/yya-and-the-fear-of-a-coup-in-spring-1948/>.

⁷ Robert J. Anzenberger, "THE EAGLE AND THE BEAR: US-FINNISH RELATIONS FROM 1917-1946" (Master's thesis, Texas State University, 2020), 15.

⁸ Lavery, *The History of Finland*, 134.

⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1948, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, Volume IV* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1974), 499-500. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d325>.

independent and democratic, and while America was in fact keeping a close eye on the situation, there were no political efforts made to secure these desires between 1945 and 1947.¹⁰

A new climate took hold of Europe in 1948 though. The ideological differences between the United States and the Soviet Union were becoming more clearly visible. In addition to the fall of Czechoslovakia to communism and growing East-West tensions in Berlin were also beginning to come to a head. It was in this environment that Stalin sent a letter to President Paasikivi regarding a treaty between the USSR and Finland. Throughout February, the American Minister in Finland Avra Warren sent telegrams to Secretary of State George C. Marshall about Finnish concerns about a pact with Moscow. Minister Warren even mentioned that President Paasikivi was trying to delay negotiations for a more favorable time.¹¹ Secretary Marshall finally replied on March 1 with instructions. Because the U.S. was interested in the “national integrity and independence of Finland,” Minister Warren was to inform the Finnish government that if they sensed a definite threat from Moscow was imminent that, even though Finland was not a UN member, “the way is open for Finland to bring its case before the UN Security Council under Act 35 of Charter.” Should they do this, the United States would support Finland.¹² Such instructions are the earliest example of an American promise to aid Finland politically in the face of Soviet aggression, with the purpose of protecting the sovereignty of Finland. When Minister Warren met with Finland’s Foreign Minister Carl Enckell the next day, he mentioned Act 35 of the UN Charter to Minister Enckell. When the Finn asked if his country would have access to the UN if its independence were threatened, Minister Warren replied that the U.S. would absolutely support them. According to him, Enckell’s eyes filled with tears.¹³

Later that same year, the United States took further action to make sure Finland remained free from Soviet influence. On July 12, the U.S. National Security Council released a report regarding civil air travel deals with the Soviet bloc. The report called for the cancellation of civilian air travel deals with the USSR and its satellite states due to the Soviet Union’s unwillingness to conclude reciprocal bilateral air travel agreements.¹⁴ Although the documents refer to Finland as being a satellite state of the Soviet Union, Finland was regarded as a “special case” in which restrictions should not be applied to, including a ban on air travel. While this of course slightly helped Finland economically, the politics behind this decision were far more important. By treating Finland favorably while at the same time acknowledging their status as a satellite nation, the U.S. sent a message to Finland that the West understood where Finland’s spirit really lies. This must have been a morale boost to the Finnish people, and it must have made them feel less isolated.

In the same year again, the U.S. treated Finland as a special case on another topic. In 1947 and 1948, various export items were banned from being shipped to Eastern bloc nations. These items included

¹⁰ Robert J. Anzenberger, “THE EAGLE AND THE BEAR: US-FINNISH RELATIONS FROM 1917-1946” (Master’s thesis, Texas State University, 2020), 104.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1948, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, Volume IV* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1974), 762-763. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d491>.

¹² *FRUS, 1948*, vol. 4, doc. 495, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d495>.

¹³ *FRUS, 1948*, vol. 4, doc. 49, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d49>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1948, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, Volume IV* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1974), 457-461. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d306>.

strategic materials that would assist in production.¹⁵ Such materials included items such as copper. However, Finland was once again treated differently from the other countries. In a memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs to the Secretary of State, Finland was taken into special consideration. It was stated that export licenses for goods going to Finland before July 1 be promptly given.¹⁶ This was because elections were being held in Finland in early July, and the U.S. did not wish to cancel exports and make Finland seem isolated. Just like excluding them from the air travel ban, this was a signal to the Finns how they were viewed by the West, which in turn caused them to better resist Soviet influence. This may partly be why the communists did so poorly in the July elections.¹⁷ Even if it were not the reason, it is still evidence that the United States was taking actions that they thought would influence Finland politically and preserve their independence from the Soviets.

Other than political actions, there is also evidence of the United States using culture as a means to ensure Finnish independence. In a Policy Statement written on December 1, 1949, the Department of State outlined the United States' objective in Finland.¹⁸ It stated its priority was to maintain the sovereignty of Finland. One of the ways it suggested this could be done was through the creation of a Fulbright agreement. In 1952, such an agreement was reached, and the first students were exchanged in 1953.¹⁹ When students study in a different country, they bring back some of the ideas and culture that country has to offer.²⁰ If the United States could get young Finns to import American thought back to Finland, this would further strengthen Finland's defense against Soviet ideology. However, Finns already preferred to study in America over the Soviet Union as early as 1950. This can be seen in the same conversation between the Finn and the Russian that was mentioned in the opening paragraph of this paper. Bakey asked the Finn, "Why, for instance, does everyone try to go to the U.S. for study?" To this, the Finn replied that maybe Finns would reconsider studying in Russia if the USSR created a "Stalin scholarship." For the Russian to have asked this question, Finns must have been studying in the U.S. at a higher rate than in the USSR, meaning that the Americans were winning the cultural war among the Finnish youth.

America also used radio broadcasting to influence Finland culturally. This was primarily done through the VOA, or the Voice of America radio. According to the VOA's website, the broadcast's intention was to communicate the truth to its audience, whether it be good or bad. In the late 40s, Congress began seeing it as "an instrument of U.S. foreign policy and as a "weapon" against the Soviet Union."²¹ While it is hard to say exactly when the VOA began broadcasting in Finland, it was likely post-1950, as one CIA document

¹⁵ *FRUS, 1948*, vol. 4, doc. 338, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d338>.

¹⁶ *FRUS, 1948*, vol. 4, doc. 334, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d344>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1948, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, Volume IV* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1974), 784-785. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d516>.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1949, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, Volume V* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1975), 443-450. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v05/d269>.

¹⁹ "History Unlike Any Other," Fulbright Finland Foundation, accessed December 10, 2023, <https://www.fulbright.fi/about-us/history-unlike-any-other>.

²⁰ For some information on the Fulbright Program, see "What is the Fulbright Program?," Fulbright Scholars Program, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://fulbrightscholars.org/who-we-are/what-fulbright-program>.

²¹ "VOA Through the Years," Voice of America, April 3, 2017, <https://www.insidevoa.com/a/3794247.html>.

from 1951 stated that the program was “recently inaugurated.”²² CIA documents also stated where the radio was broadcasted to. The 1951 document placed the radio in Lapland. Local communists were trying to prevent it from being received there. Also, a 1952 document placed the radio in Helsinki. In Helsinki, the Russians were jamming the radio there, which clearly means that they did not like whatever it was.²³ The combination of the facts that the radio was being broadcasted to the sparsely populated area of Lapland and that the Russians were jamming it means that a large majority of Finns were receiving American culture in the early 50s. The United States did this to further solidify Finland’s orientation to the West and provide further immunity to Soviet domination.

The most important policies made by the Americans regarding securing Finnish sovereignty were in the form of economics. Again, it must be understood that, initially, the United States acted as more of a bystander in Finland. This was not just because of the desire not to step on Soviet toes as mentioned earlier. They were also adamant that American money must not be used to pay war reparations to the Soviets.²⁴ This affected their position on credit for reconstruction of Finland because the U.S. felt that this would still be assisting the Finns in paying off their reparations indirectly. Later in 1945, the opinion of the United States changed.²⁵ While it is not clear what exactly caused this sudden change in policy, there are a couple of clues. Official diplomatic ties between the United States and Finland were reestablished at midnight on the 31st of August 1945. Because the legation in Helsinki meant that the U.S. and Finland could now officially communicate, perhaps the Americans thought that they could now extend credit to Finland without too much complaint from Moscow. It was around this time that there was also just a general attitude among various American groups and individuals that Finland should receive aid. Once it was clear that diplomatic relations were becoming normalized again, on August 22, 1945, Secretary of State James Byrnes informed American representative Maxwell Hamilton that he should confirm his opinion that aid should be sent to Finland.²⁶ With this came aid from the American relief agency, the American Friends Service Committee, and the American Red Cross. The Finns were not expected to give anything in return for this aid, and it must have depicted America in a good light in Finnish minds.

In December of 1945, the first of many credit agreements was being worked out between the Finns and the Americans.²⁷ These lines of credit came from the American Export-Import Bank. When the Finns first requested 110 million dollars in credit to get their economy back in shape, the Export-Import Bank actually wanted to give them the full amount. However, the State Department shut this idea down, because

²² CIA, *CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE DAILY DIGEST*, April 30, 1951, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t01146a000200030001-7>.

²³ CIA, *SUPPLEMENT TO THE DAILY DIGEST*, January 28, 1952, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t01146a000700190001-5>.

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, Europe, Volume IV* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1968), 633-635. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v04/d624>.

²⁵ Pihkala Erkki, “The Political Economy of Post-War Finland, 1945-1952,” *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 47, no. 3 (1999): 31, <https://helda.helsinki.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/5f1711d5-d45e-4fe8-81f3-558ffd570ba6/content>.

²⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, Europe, Volume IV* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1968), 643. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v04/d643>.

²⁷ *FRUS, 1945*, vol. 4, doc. 649, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v04/d649>.

it was too big of a number in comparison to credit given to other countries. The Americans did not want to give the impression that they were especially concerned with the future of Finland. The amount of credit given amounted to 35 million dollars, and the U.S. Chargé d’Affaires, Benjamin Hulley, was instructed to inform the Finns on January 28, 1946.²⁸ In the instructions, it was made clear that he was to let the Finns know that this was for purely economic reasons. Later that year, however, the U.S. ambassador stated in a telegram that “It is of course to interest of USA that Finland continue as an independent sovereign country and retain and develop the progressive democratic political economic and social system which has characterized it for number of decades.”²⁹ By 1948, Finland received 130 million dollars in loans from America. The U.S. absolutely understood that by extending credit to the Finns to rebuild their economy that they were helping Finland become productive again, therefore indirectly assisting them pay off reparations to the USSR. This was beneficial to the U.S. though, because Finland was less likely to fall under Soviet rule if they could pay their reparations on time.

How exactly did this aid affect Finland, though? One of the main things it accomplished was put Finnish timber back on the world market. Before World War Two, Finland’s number one export was timber and paper products. The problem was that a lot of this industry was based in Karelia, which they were forced to cede to the Soviets after the Continuation War. Early in 1944, American Chargé d’Affaires Edmund Gullion listed what exactly Finland would lose if they had to give up Karelia. He wrote that Finland would lose “20% of its sawn timber woodworking industry, 23% of plywood industry, 25% of wood pulp board, 25% of chemical wood pulp.”³⁰ These were rather grim numbers for a nation that was then also required to pay back 300 million gold dollars in reparations. Finland also had to figure out what to do with the 400 thousand Finnish refugees from Karelia, furthering their economic burdens even more. However, the credit extended to Finland by the United States helped kickstart these industries again, and it also helped Finland deal with the refugee problem. A large portion of these credits were used to buy new lumber equipment.³¹ Finland then paid back the credit by selling timber and paper products to the United States.³² On December 3, 1948, Finnish Foreign Minister to the U.S. Dr. K. T. Jutila met with U.S. Director of the Office of European Affairs John D. Hickerson. Director Hickerson asked Dr. Jutila how Finnish exports to America were looking, and Dr. Jutila said that 200,000 tons of wood pulp and newsprint were being shipped to the U.S. annually. He also remarked that things were finally beginning to quiet down in Finland politically. Overall, he was optimistic and hopeful for the future of Finland, and he said the 130 million dollars of credit given to Finland by the Export Import Bank over the last few years “have made all the difference to Finnish recovery and have, in fact, placed export production on its feet.”³³

²⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1946, Paris Peace Conference: Documents, Volume IV* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1970), 242. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v06/pg_242

²⁹ *FRUS, 1946*, vol. 3, doc. 4, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v03/d4>.

³⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The British Commonwealth and Europe, Volume III* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965), 512. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v03/d513>.

³¹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1947, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union, Volume IV* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1972), 186. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v04/d184>.

³² *FRUS, 1945*, vol. 4, doc. 631, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v04/d631>.

³³ *FRUS, 1948*, vol. 4, doc. 519, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d519>.

In conclusion, the United States sought to maintain a democratic, independent Finland during the Cold War, despite their own recognition that Finland was geographically and historically within the sphere of Soviet influence. The United States did this in three ways. Politically, they promised to aid Finland through the UN Charter, by not restricting air travel to Finland, and by continuing to export goods to the country. Culturally, America engaged in educational exchanges with Finland and broadcasted the VOA radio to Finnish citizens. Most importantly, the United States ended up giving over 130 million dollars in credit to Finland to start up its economy again. Without this, their reparations may not have been paid on time, and it also would have been much easier for communists to have won Finnish elections. Considering the actions taken by the United States, it is little wonder that underneath their veil of neutrality Finland leaned toward the West.

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