



By: Iuliia Mendel, TA Kyiv

The Ukrainian Scenario: What History's Precedents Do—and Don't—Tell Us



Have you seen **The Winter War** (Talvisota, 1989), the Finnish film about the Soviet invasion of 1939–1940? As the movie nears its conclusion, their commander summons the handful of battered survivors and asks them to maintain their line until the very end. The protagonist, hollowed by exhaustion, answers: “Probably, we can. We will stand until the end, until we all perish.”

The film offers one of the most unflinching portrayals of the conflict, marked by graphic depictions of combat — bodies torn apart, soldiers freezing in trenches, and the relentlessness of artillery fire. It ends with bombardment by the Soviet army and collapse, reflecting the grim reality faced by Finland.

In the Winter War, roughly 26,000 Finnish soldiers were **killed**, more than 44,000 wounded, and over a thousand civilians lost their lives.

On March 12, 1940, President Risto Ryti signed a peace **treaty** in Moscow. It ended the Winter War and inaugurated the policy later described as “Finlandization”: survival as a sovereign state purchased through painful concessions to the Soviet Union.

Under the treaty, Finland ceded more territory than Soviet troops had managed to occupy during the fighting.

This included the Karelian Isthmus and Western Karelia, the country’s second-largest city of Viipuri (Vyborg), access to the shores of Lake Ladoga, and islands in the eastern Gulf of Finland. The Hanko Peninsula was leased to the Soviet Union for thirty years to serve as a military base.

Peace was greeted with a mixture of resentment, despair, and relief. Among the many telegrams received by Foreign Minister Väinö Tanner was one that read, “We will never recognise this swinish, disgraceful peace.”

Support for the war wanes

Today, Finland’s President Alexander Stubb is attempting to carve out a role in negotiations between Ukraine and Russia.

So far, he has managed to **balance** ties with Donald Trump while maintaining **support** for Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Yet he has offered little clarity on Finland’s future role in securing peace.

At a recent meeting in Paris, Stubb **told** Finnish media, “We are not sending Finns to the war front in Ukraine. Finland will participate in one way or another when the time comes.”

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the post-war stage?**

As support for the war wanes, and with it the practical military efforts to sustain Ukraine — Germany, for instance, **allocated** ten billion euros less than the MoD requested, while the United States questions the value of financing an open-ended conflict — analysts at home and abroad have begun to invoke “Finlandization” as a possible solution.

Last week, President Alexander Stubb **visited** Kyiv, where he found himself cast as a convenient target for populist attacks by former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a close ally of Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Johnson publicly **confronted** Stubb, challenging him as the EU’s representative on the issue of frozen Russian assets and pressing him on why a “coalition of the willing” had not yet sent troops to Ukraine. Stubb remained composed, deflecting every criticism by pointing to the post-war period.

But the central question remains: how does one realistically reach the post-war stage?

An unjust peace

Stubb was among the first to **respond** to Zelenskyy’s call to accompany him to

Washington for the latest meeting with Donald Trump.

He has already drawn on the history of the Finnish-Soviet war, suggesting that Ukraine now faces a similar choice.

Ukraine, he said, can either dwell in the past and lament the unfairness of the outside world, or it can pick up the pieces, reconstruct, and believe in its own future — eradicating corruption, fostering freedom and social justice.

Finland's history shows how an unjust peace, when combined with political will and public support, can transform a country into one of the most successful in the world.

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Today, Finland not only tops global **rankings** of happiness but also **ranks** as the 13th freest economy. It is a member not only of the European Union but now also of NATO — precisely the outcome Vladimir Putin once sought to prevent.

As efforts continue to move closer to peace in Ukraine, policymakers, experts, and international organisations are weighing the experiences of other states: Israel, South Korea, Georgia, or—in the worst case—Belarus, which became a Russian satellite without a war.

In its latest **report**, JP Morgan described the “Georgia model” as the most likely scenario if foreign troops and substantial Western backing are not made available.

In that case, Ukraine “would face ongoing instability, stalled economic recovery, and weakened international support.”

The Ukrainian scenario

Volodymyr Zelenskyy has recently said that he does not rule out a Korean scenario for Ukraine either.

When the Korean War (1950–1953) ended without a peace treaty, the peninsula remained divided: the North under communist rule, the South on a path to prosperity.

Zelenskyy emphasised that South Korea's success has been inseparable from the support of its main ally, the United States, which has ensured that the North could not seize control of the South.



For Ukrainians, any outcome will carry an element of injustice, because the boundaries of justice are uncertain

Still, he added, “South Koreans continue to live with risks. Their economy thrives, and they are protected, but as long as North Korea remains what it is, South Korea will never be completely secure.”

At the same time, Zelenskyy pointed out the limits of such comparisons. North Korea's population is just over twenty million, while Russia's exceeds 140 million.

Studying the experiences of other countries — especially those that endured long, brutal wars and continue to live on the borders with their enemies — it is important to recognise that Ukraine's trajectory is unique. No scenario ever repeats itself exactly.

For Ukrainians, any outcome will carry an element of injustice, because the boundaries of justice are uncertain. Even if the 1991 borders were restored, the scale of death, the

tens of thousands missing, and the lack of accountability for Russia's leadership would leave a deep sense of wrong.

Yet Ukraine is unlikely to be in a position to reclaim all its territories in the nearest future with military means. More plausibly, the struggle ahead will be to prevent further losses.

And who knows, maybe next year, the world will find itself studying a new case of how a bloody war might end—the Ukrainian scenario.