NATIONAL RESILIENCE

Robert Hall *considers the important lessons learnt from Finland's Winter War and the parallels that can be drawn with the current conflict in Ukraine*

Picture credit: Ukraine MOD

Several commentators have highlighted the similarities between the first Finnish Winter War (1939-40) and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. While not absolutely a case of history repeating itself – it never does – the two conflicts do have many uncanny parallels. While it is premature to compare and contrast the outcomes, it is possible to draw some lessons for today on the nature of national resilience as revealed by two defenders facing a much larger aggressor at different historical moments.

The value of the analysis here is in not just the historical significance but also the applicability of elements to a national resilience strategy. This is perhaps particularly true for the UK, which launched its long-awaited national Resilience Framework in December 2022. As anticipated, the framework addresses aspects of transparency, preparedness and a whole-of-society approach.

The first Soviet-Finnish War took place between the Soviet Union and Finland in 1939. In spite of a Soviet-Finnish Non-Aggression Pact, Joseph Stalin thought that the pro-Finnish movement in southern Finland posed a direct threat to Leningrad (now St Petersburg) and that the local area of Finland could be used to invade the Soviet Union or restrict fleet movements. He saw an invasion as the way to prevent this.

The war began with a sudden Soviet invasion of Finland, three months after the outbreak of the Second World War: it ended three-and-a-half months later. The capital, Helsinki, was one of the first Soviet objectives. Despite superior military strength, especially in tanks and aircraft, the Soviet Union suffered severe losses and initially made little headway, failing to take the capital. The League of Nations deemed the attack illegal and expelled the Soviet Union.

In the end, the aggressor's larger forces prevailed. Finnish concessions and territorial losses exceeded pre-war Soviet demands. Finland ceded 9 percent of its territory with the largest portion of land close to Leningrad, as well as its second largest city, much of its industrialised territory, and 30 percent of its economic assets relative to March 1938. About 12 percent of Finland's population (at least 422,000 people) were evacuated and lost their homes, but all were taken in by fellow Finns and were provided with their own homes by 1945.

Ukraine has survived with considerable support in armaments from Western nations

The belief by the aggressor that a short war with the early capture of the capital would ensue because the opponent was weak, unprepared and ill-equipped proved wrong in Finland's past as well as Ukraine's present. The latter has survived with considerable support in armaments from Western nations, an asset that the former was denied particularly towards the end of its war and part of the reason for it seeking a settlement. In both settings, the belligerent's fear that his territory was (falsely) under threat was the cause of the hostilities.

The initial assessment that the aggressor would not attack also proved unfounded in both cases. Finland's ferocious resistance in the Winter War convinced Stalin to leave Finland independent even though some territory was surrendered. This may well be one outcome in Ukraine if a negotiated settlement materialises.

Another common feature is that when small tactical groups are defending local territory, they can have disproportionate effects on a much larger attacker. Finnish soldiers were fighting for their country, their families and their independence, just as Ukrainian soldiers are today. Finnish forces initially deployed tactics that were suited to fighting an inflexible foe. Russian forces invading Ukraine have been prone to similar inflexibility from the start of the current conflict. The common experience has shown the value of task-oriented or mission command as an operating principle whereby units have the agility to apply orders depending on the circumstances on the ground. Western armies have adopted this concept for many years but Russia has long resisted in line with its political indoctrination.

THE UK LAUNCHED ITS NATIONAL RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK IN DECEMBER 2022

At the top levels of leadership, there are also parallels. In Finland's case, General Mannerheim was a master of allocating scare resources, judging relative dangers posed by Soviet threats on different fronts, keeping a cool head in difficult circumstances, and retaining the confidence of his troops. President Zelensky of Ukraine is a latter-day proponent. Nonetheless, because of its resistance and tenacity, Finland did retain its sovereignty over most of its territory and certainly elevated its international reputation. Yet, the war had a profound effect on Finnish psyche and subsequent political positioning: Ukraine may experience a similar outcome today.

National motivation based around homeland identity and core values generates a force multiplier of immense proportions. The Finnish and Ukrainian experiences are cases par excellence of national resilience. Both nations are based not on institutions or ethnicity but on self-reliance, national identity and solidarity. These are important factors that in the final analysis trump wealth and prosperity, and are worth preserving and nurturing in other countries.

As Finland and Ukraine demonstrate, national resilience is most focused when it is in response to a clear and present danger, and the population can be readily mobilised and motivated to resist. The danger can be internal or external, environmental or human. When the danger is not so apparent or a 'slow burn', the task becomes more difficult, but nevertheless still demands careful preparation, planning and communication.

Resilience begins with a strategy, but it can only be effective when translated into meaningful actions for those on the ground to apply. These actions must be accompanied by resources and clear plans. Other essential requirements include: sound leadership at all levels; trust in politicians and decision makers; partnerships across the public, private and voluntary sectors; subsidiarity as localism is where tactics are best applied; and a wide communication network with consistent, clear messaging.

Finland and Ukraine prove that resilience is about individuals, communities and organisations working together for the national good. It is more than simply having emergency measures in place: it is about a collective mindset in the civil society that can be translated into agile and adaptive behaviours across the board when circumstances demand and the spirit wills. As Lord William Hague wrote in the press: "An individual can prepare for the new age of resilience by buying a generator, storing water purification tablets and fortifying the garden gate in readiness for the apocalypse". He describes that as retrenchment. It is better, he argues, to adopt a principle of developing contacts with neighbours, communities and partnerships so that everyone knows how help can best be delivered thereby allowing the whole community to stand together: that is reinvention. Quite simply, Finnish history and the latest events in Ukrainian reveal that we can be greater than the sum of our individual parts but those parts need to be oiled and motivated in advance. That is one reason that Finland (together with Sweden) decided to apply for NATO membership and Ukraine is keen to do likewise.

NATIONAL MOTIVATION GENERATES A FORCE MULTIPLIER OF QUITE IMMENSE PROPORTIONS

Ukraine reinforces the lesson that the classic forms of armed warfare on European soil have not become redundant and that in spite of modern weaponry, brutal, attritional military operations still play a key role in deciding sovereignty. This will cause planners to rethink the scale of ammunition stockpiles and logistics, the veracity of the rules of war (the Hague and Geneva Conventions) and the role of the public-private sector in equipping forces for sustained battles. It also raises the question of how we prepare all parts of our societies for national emergencies that we thought had receded into history or chosen to ignore.

As public safety is the number-one task of any government, it is incumbent on those in authority to communicate to the population at large the need to prepare for shocks and stresses, as well as the importance of a social contract whereby individuals are aware of their societal responsibilities in a national emergency. As Covid-19 vividly illustrated, we are all in a national crisis together. Without such a focus, there is a danger of introspection – which can easily result in divisions along political parties, as well as ethnic and single-interest groups. That can only diminish our national resilience ●

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