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Colonel Aladàr Paasonen

The unpopular head of Finnish WW2 Intelligence

The men are standing by a vast, shining writing table in the Kremlin on Saturday, 14 October 1939.

– May I ask you a question? the forty year old Finnish Colonel **Aladàr Paasonen** says to **Josef Stalin**, the Secretary General of the Soviet Communist Party.

– Please! Stalin smiles behind his pipe. He wears a brown military coat and jodhpurs.

– You have said, that the Soviet Union does not want one inch of foreign territory and will not give up one inch of its own. How does this agree with your claims for Finnish territory?

The face of the Finnish Counsellor of State **Juho Paasikivi** becomes even redder, due to sheer anger. Stalin remains silent for a while. Then he raises his finger, like a schoolmaster.

– I will explain it for you, please try to understand this. What we took from Poland was ours and what has happened between the Baltic States and the Soviet Union has only strengthened their independence. And as far as it comes to our proposition to Finland, you have to decide for yourself, whether you will agree or not.

On the 5 October 1939 the Soviet Foreign Secretary **Vjatšeslav Molotov**, Josef Stalin's closest associate, had contacted **Aarno Yrjö-Koskinen**, the Finnish envoy in Moscow. – The Soviet Union wants to discuss certain concrete political questions with the Finnish government, he had said.

Finland had decided to send a delegation to Moscow, headed by Counsellor of State Juho Paasikivi, the Finnish envoy in Stockholm.

– The government has not assigned any military advisor to the delegation, Colonel Aladàr Paasonen, the adjutant of the President **Kyösti Kallio**, had said to Field Marshal **Gustaf Mannerheim**. – Most of the questions to be discussed are going to be military ones.

– The Colonel is quite right, the Marshal had said. – How about it, would you like to go yourself?

That's why young Paasonen is in Moscow.

In the Kremlin Paasikivi reads a memo written by Colonel Paasonen. Paasikivi says that Finland is fully capable of defending its neutrality. – It is impossible for any navy to navigate the almost impassable waters of the northern shore of the Gulf of Finland without our assistance. The safety of Leningrad depends solely on who controls the shore of Finland.

Paasikivi hands over the memo to Stalin. – This would be an interesting article in a military journal, the Secretary General remarks. – But it does not give a satisfactory answer to the question of the defence of Leningrad.

The Soviet Union makes demands that Paasikivi is not authorized to discuss. The delegation returns to Helsinki to get further instructions.

Colonel Paasonen also attends the two succeeding delegations to Moscow, but no solution is achieved. On Sunday, November 26 the Soviet Union arranges an artillery provocation at the Finnish border in Mainila on the Carelian Isthmus and claims that Finland has bombarded Soviet territory.

The heroic Finnish-Soviet Winter War breaks out on Thursday, November 30 as Soviet tanks cross the border. The war lasts for 105 days and ends in a defence victory. Finland maintains its independence but has to surrender islands in the Gulf of Finland and vast territories on the Carelian Isthmus near Leningrad.

Colonel Aladàr Paasonen was a strange and mysterious person. Marshal Gustaf Mannerheim never promoted him to the rank of general, even though the old commander-in-chief trusted his head of intelligence in many ways. Paasonen belonged to his inner circle; during the Continuation War 1941–1944 he sat at the marshal's permanent dinner table in Mikkeli, where the Finnish HQ was situated.

Paasonen was described as a dark, quiet and somewhat secretive military officer. – Of course that agrees with being the head of intelligence, an adjutant in the Finnish wartime HQ says.

Aladàr Antero Zoltàn Béla Gyula Arpàd Paasonen was born in Budapest, Hungary, on 11 December 1898. His father was **Heikki Paasonen**, then a professor at the University of Budapest. Earlier Dr. Paasonen had been a professor in Finno-Ugric languages at the University of Helsinki. His mother was a Hungarian named **Mariska Paskay de Palàsth**.

The Finnish Independence and Civil War began in January 1918. Aladàr Paasonen fought on the white side and was promoted sub-lieutenant. He graduated as student from the secondary school in Hämeenlinna, Finland, in the same spring. After the war Paasonen attended the German *Fahnenjunker-course* in Hamina. He continued his military education at the Finnish Cadet School and was promoted lieutenant in 1920.

As Paasonen was skilled in languages he was sent to France to the *Saint-Cyr Infantry School*. After that he attended *École Supérieure de Guerre*, the French War College. At that time one of the teachers at the infantry school was a certain Major **Charles de Gaulle**, who attended the same war college course as Paasonen.

– De Gaulle was definitely one of the brightest officers attending the course, Paasonen said. – He was very confident. The teachers were careful in judging his solutions.

Paasonen was promoted captain in 1923. In the next year Paasonen was commissioned to the Finnish General Staff. He was promoted major in 1926 and was made the first commander of the newly founded army Service Battalion. In 1929, at the age of only 31, he was promoted lieutenant-colonel.

In 1931 Paasonen was sent to Moscow and two years later to Berlin as military attaché. In 1935 he was appointed as assistant to the commander of the Finnish War College. He was also appointed as senior teacher of tactics.

After the presidential elections in Finland in 1937 Lieutenant-Colonel Paasonen was ordered to report to the newly elected president Kyösti Kallio. Paasonen was a nominee as senior adjutant to the President.

– What kind of diet do you prefer? was the president's first question. He was using a Finnish euphemism for drinking.

– Mr. President, I'm not a teetotaller, but not a drinker either, Paasonen replied. – If you accept me as your senior adjutant, I will always tell you my opinion frankly. Even, if we would disagree on the matter.

– I will be happy to have you with me, Kallio said.

In 1937 Paasonen was promoted colonel. In the following year he married a Hungarian girl named **Flóra Ilona Barta**. They had three children; **Aladár Heikki Gyula**, **Flóra Tuulikki** and **Anna-Maria**.

The meeting of the Council of State on the day the Winter War began was dramatic. Red-starred airplanes flew low over central Helsinki and the sounds of bombardment were heard. The Russian airplanes were shooting at defenceless civilians. After the meeting the President and Colonel Paasonen decided, however, to walk from the Council building to the Presidential palace.

At the palace the junior adjutant asked how the Finnish government had decided to respond to the provocation.

– Gunpowder! President Kallio, 66, said in a loud voice waving his hands. – That's what they deserve.

On 5 December 1939 Paasonen was appointed to the delegation which was sent to the Geneva-based League of Nations to present the Finnish plea to condemn the Soviet aggression. But Paasonen wanted to fight.

– I will do as I'm told, Paasonen said to the Foreign Minister **Väinö Tanner**. – Even though I was going to ask for a war commission.

–You will have time enough for that when you return, the Foreign Minister said.

In Geneva the Swedish delegation crushed every attempt to a united proposal from the Nordic countries to expel the Soviet Union from the League of Nations.

– If Finland had asked the Swedish government, we would have told them to be moderate, the head of the Swedish delegation **Gösta Undén** said at a meeting of the Nordic countries.

The head of the Norwegian delegation, the chairman of the Parliament **Carl Hambro**, was a keen friend of Finland. He smiled scornfully at the Swede. The meeting was a fiasco.

– The timid Swedish attitude was criticised in the League, Paasonen said.

However, on December 14 the Soviet Union was expelled from the League of Nations. The Scandinavian countries abstained. The League recommended the members to provide material and humanitarian aid to Finland.

After Geneva Colonel Paasonen was sent to Paris to buy weapons. The list was long: Howitzers, cannons, anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, machine-guns, rifles, hand grenades, ammunition, airplanes...

The purchase of weapons went well. The Prime Minister of France **Éduard Daladier** also proved to be a keen friend of Finland. The French airplanes were in Finland before the Winter War ended. France sent to Finland fourteen shiploads of war material through Norway. Part of this arrived before the end of the war.

More weapons, including bombers, were bought from France, Britain and the United States. The head of the Polish exile government, General **Wladyslaw Sikorsky**, promised several thousand men, but Sweden refused to permit them to pass through Sweden.

France and Britain promised to send four elite divisions, 57 000 men, to Finland through Norway and Sweden. They were to be in Finland in the beginning of March. This is to be compared to the Finnish fighting force of 275 000 men at the beginning of the war.

– It would be a horrible thing if the allied troops really were to come, the old king of Sweden **Gustaf V** sighed in his Stockholm castle. – But we can't stop them, can we?

The need for intervention troops ended when Finland signed the peace treaty in Moscow on March 13 1940. But the plan to send allied troops helped Finland in the peace negotiations.

– The allied intervention threat increased the need for the Kremlin to negotiate, Paasonen said. – It also led to the abandoning of the pro-Soviet **Otto-Ville Kuusinen** puppet regime in Terijoki on the Carelian Isthmus.

The Finnish-Soviet Continuation War began on 25 June 1941. President Kallio had resigned in December and died on the same day of a heart attack at Helsinki railway station. In June Colonel Paasonen asked the new President **Risto Ryti** to relieve him from his duties as senior adjutant. He told the commander-in-chief **Gustaf Mannerheim** that he was available for service at the front.

– Two days later the HQ phoned me, Paasonen said. – The Marshal offered me the command of the 5th Infantry Regiment.

The war took the regiment to the Carelian Isthmus and the re-capture of Viipuri and later to East Carelia. The regiment advanced to Petroskoi, the capital of Soviet-Carelia, and from there on to

Karhumäki. – During the seven months I gained good experience, Paasonen said. – I learned to respect the brave Finnish soldier and also the tough enemy. I thought then that every Finnish officer should take part in the unique fight of our people as a commander at the front.

In late January 1942 Paasonen was ordered to report to the HQ in Mikkeli. – I have recalled you from your regiment because I plan to appoint you as head of the HQ intelligence section, the Marshal said. – What do you think of such a transfer?

– I don't think you should replace anyone in that post in the middle of a war, Paasonen replied.

The Marshal was surprised to hear the refusal. – The Colonel might be right, he said after a while. – I will consider your point.

The next day Paasonen was again summoned to the commander-in-chief. –What you said yesterday might be true, the Marshal said. – But anyhow, I will make the replacement.

The matter was settled.

– I knew that it wouldn't be an easy job, Paasonen said. – From the beginning I had had doubts about German victory. I also understood what a defeat would mean to Finland. When our army crossed the old border I thought that we lost a great diplomatic asset, which would have given us a chance to come to an agreement with the allies and the Russians after the war. We might have had a chance to keep our old borders with only small changes. I knew that, because of my opinions, I would become very unpopular in the HQ.

Paasonen inherited from his predecessor, Colonel **Lars Melander**, an organisation that knew what it was doing. But there were also weak spots. – Most of the problems were in foreign intelligence. We didn't have a body for such intelligence analysis. We had neglected to collect intelligence data from Germany and its allies, mainly because of lack of personnel.

The HQ intelligence section comprised 2 400 persons. It included the 4th Detached Battalion, which was engaged in long distance reconnaissance patrols and sabotage behind the front line.

In July 1942 Paasonen accompanied Marshal Gustaf Mannerheim on a visit to the State Chancellor **Adolf Hitler** at the German HQ in Rastenburg, East Prussia. The reason for the visit was that Hitler had paid a visit to Finland on the Marshal's 75th birthday.

Colonel-General **Alfred Jodl** gave a survey in his bunker of operations. – We will make an offensive with *Heeresgruppe Mitte*, Jodl said. – And after that we will demolish St. Petersburg.

Hitler clarified Jodl's point. – Of course only, if Finland does not need St. Petersburg.

Gustaf Mannerheim, who had spent many years in the former Russian capital in the service of the Czar, looked somewhat aghast. – But he did not comment on the German proposal, Paasonen said.

Shortly before Christmas 1942 Paasonen travelled to Copenhagen, Denmark, to meet the head of the *Abwehr*, the German armed forces' intelligence organisation, Admiral **Wilhelm Canaris**. Paasonen had met Canaris six months earlier in Tallinn and wanted to discuss Canaris' views on the outcome of the war.

Paasonen told Canaris in private that Germany would inevitably lose the war. – The United States is a very rich country, Paasonen said. – Its participation in the war will be crucial. The resources of Germany and its allies are draining and the Red Army is still very strong.

Canaris stared for a moment at the Finnish head of intelligence. – *Herr Oberst*, I completely agree, the admiral said after a moment of silence. – Germany cannot win the war. As a matter of

fact, we have already lost it. The Red Army is not beaten and the resources of the Allies are inexhaustible.

Returned to Helsinki, Paasonen gave an account of the discussion to President Risto Ryti and later to his nearest superior, General of the Infantry **Erik Heinrichs**, the chief of staff in the Finnish HQ.

In February 1942 Paasonen gave a presentation in the HQ on the general war situation to the political leaders and the high military command. The German 6th Army commanded by Field Marshal **Friedrich Paulus** had been completely destroyed in Stalingrad in January. The Hungarian, Italian and Romanian troops had also been destroyed.

– Germany and its allies have lost sixty divisions, Paasonen said. – They can't be replaced. It is only a question of time before Germany will face a second front in the west. I am sure that Germany will lose the war – and with it goes Finland.

The listeners agreed with Paasonen, who was requested to make a report in the same terms to the Parliament in Helsinki.

– Be as realistic as you were with us, the Marshal said. – Let them hear it. Don't pull your punches. Most of them are guilty of the situation that we are in. If they had not hindered us in building our defences in the 30's, we would not be in this bad position.

The intelligence colonel told Parliament in a closed session the same things that he had said in the HQ. – A new Moscow peace is the best we can get, he said, referring to the outcome of the Winter War.

The response to his report was bad. – One MP of the right wing *People's Patriotic Movement IKL* said that they should have booed me. The Parliament was not ready for such a realistic analysis.

On the other hand, I got letters from Members of Parliament thanking me for a brave performance.

Paasonen saw Admiral Canaris for the last time in November 1943. They met at Zossen, south of Berlin, where the bureaus of the *Abwehr* had been evacuated. Paasonen had been ordered to speak about Germany's short-sighted policy in the Baltic countries and the Ukraine. The treatment of the national minorities had made it impossible for those countries to take part in the fight against the Soviet Union.

– It's too late, Canaris answered.

In April 1944 Paasonen was informed that Canaris had been removed from his post. Soon after that the Admiral was imprisoned and accused of conspiracy against Hitler.

– Canaris' life ended tragically, Paasonen said. – He was hanged very cruelly.

The Finnish peace negotiations failed in the winter of 1944 and Helsinki was bombed several times. – The breakdown of the German siege of Leningrad made me believe, that the Russians were going to launch a massive attack on the Carelian Isthmus.

General Lieutenant **Aksel Airo** was, as the quartermaster general in the Finnish HQ, head of the military operations. He thought that there would be no attack. – And if there would be one, that our main defence line would hold.

Colonel **Valo Nihtilä**, the head of the HQ operational section, agreed. – The main line will hold for at least a month, he said.

– How can it last for a month, when we don't even have tank barricades? Paasonen said. – We will not hold for one day.

It held exactly one day.

It became still clearer that the Russians were preparing for an attack on the Carelian Isthmus. – As from late March many new Red troops had arrived in the Isthmus. In the middle of May the enemy began to dig trenches towards the Finnish lines.

In the last week of April Colonel Paasonen suggested that the troops should be withdrawn from the uttermost front line. – We should only leave machine guns there.

Paasonen mentioned an example: The French tactics at the Champagne front in July 1918. Expecting a German offensive the French troops were withdrawn to rear lines. Only machine guns were left in the front line. The Germans shelled the empty lines and their attack failed at the rear lines.

– It was “*Der schwarze Tag der Deutschen Armee*”, Paasonen said. The Black Day of the German army. – But my proposal was not accepted. The troops had to retreat from the front line in disorder. The 10th Division almost completely collapsed and it also lost most of its artillery.

The Red Army's main attack was launched on 10 June 1944. – I have to admit one thing, the Marshal said to Paasonen the very same day. – I did put more weight on the opinions of General Airo than on yours. But what else could I have done?

Paasonen did not comment. – The moment was too tragic to tell the commander-in-chief what we could have done.

Expecting a massive enemy attack Paasonen had organized an intelligence operation in the lost territory. One-man radio patrols from the 4th Detached Battalion were left behind. They were supplied with provisions for two months.

– The HQ got immediate information of the moves of the enemy, Paasonen said. – In the middle of July we received information, which told us that the enemy was withdrawing artillery and tank regiments from the Isthmus. The attack was over.

All the patrols on the Isthmus survived, though they had to swim across the broad Vuoksi River. The patrols left behind in Eastern Carelia also all survived. – This was one of the finest Finnish intelligence operations during WW2.

Marshal Gustaf Mannerheim was elected President in August and a very harsh peace treaty was signed in September 1944. In July 1945 the Marshal told Paasonen to leave the country because Paasonen had been involved in the *Stella Polaris* operation, the evacuation of Finnish signal intelligence material and personnel to Sweden.

In the middle of July 1948 Paasonen got a letter from Lugano, Switzerland, in which the Marshal asked Paasonen to help him in writing his memoirs. Paasonen agreed. – Though I am not a historian, he said.

Paasonen outlined the contents of the memoirs and assisted the Marshal until January 1951, when the task was finished. On 20 January the Marshal was taken ill and died eight days later.

– There is a peculiar greatness in the death of the Marshal, Paasonen said. – He was predestined to pass away on the anniversary of his first crucial achievement in Finland. In the night of 28 January 1918 he disarmed the Russian garrisons in Finland. It was the basis for the fight for Finland's independence.

Colonel Aladàr Paasonen finished his own memoirs in April 1974 in Flourtown, Pennsylvania, where he lived his last years. He died on 6 July the same year.

The last journey of the President

On the evening of 17 December 1940 President Kyösti Kallio, who just had resigned from office, was to travel home to his farm in Nivala, situated in Ostrobothnia, Northern Finland. The President and his wife bid farewell to the personnel of the Presidential Palace and went by car to the railway station. The streets were crowded with students carrying torches.

The farewell ceremony was held at the presidential suite of the railway station. Present were the newly elected President Risto Ryti, Marshal Gustaf Mannerheim and other prominent government officials.

– That was without question the most burdensome day in the life of President Kallio, Paasonen said. – It was a great effort for him and he paid heavily for it. The band played the Finnish military anthem of honour *Porilaisten marssi*.

– When the president reached the guard of honour he stumbled. I was deliberately very near behind him. When he fell I managed to take him into my arms. I felt his last heartbeats.

The President was taken to his carriage. – The physician only had to confirm that his journey had ended.