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IX. LETTER, DATED DECEMBER 9th, 1939, FROM THE
DELEGATE OF FINLAND TO THE
SECRETARY-GENERAL

(Translation)

Geneva, December 9, 1939

(From League of Nations Official Journal
November-December 1939)

I beg to send you herewith the following document:

(1) Aide-memoire;

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(Translation)

The Frontiers of Finland

By the Treaties of Peace and Non-aggression, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics expressly, and of its own free will, recognized the political frontiers of Finland. The territorial composition of Finland has, moreover, been fixed for centuries past. The western section of the frontier crossing the Isthmus of Karelia goes back to the year 1323; and the eastern section, to 1618. As regards the frontier running north from Lake Ladoga, the southern section (as far as Nurmes) goes back to 1618; and the northern section, to 1595. The modifications of the frontier on the Arctic coast took place in 1920, when, in accordance with a promise made in 1864, the U.S.S.R. ceded the Petsamo region to Finland in compensation for a territory which was then incorporated in Russia. This arrangement was also intended to compensate Finland for the loss of free access to the Arctic Ocean in 1826, when the territory

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previously regarded as belonging jointly to Russia, Finland and Norway was partitioned between Russia and Norway. From 1809 to 1917 during which period Finland was united to Russia as a Grand-Duchy enjoying complete internal autonomy, her frontiers with Russia were exactly delimited.

Negotiations between Finland and the Union of
Soviet Socialist Republics

In the course of the negotiations in October-November 1939, to which the Government of the U.S.S.R. invited the Government of Finland on October 5th last, the U.S.S.R. made detailed proposals prejudicial to the territorial integrity of Finland.

The majority of the proposals of the U.S.S.R. were actuated by strategic considerations which it was attempted to justify by a desire to guarantee the security of Leningrad. In point of fact, these considerations had already been taken into account in the Treaty of Peace of Tartu, whereby the outer islands in the Gulf of Finland and the Island of Suursaari were demilitarised. The treaty further provided that certain fortifications on the Finnish side of the Isthmus of Karelia were to be destroyed and that freedom of military action on the eastern coast of the Gulf of Finland was to be subject to certain restrictions. Finland has scrupulously observed all her undertakings. Now the U.S.S.R. has made proposals regarding the cession of certain territories by Finland by grant of lease or by exchange. In order to reach an agreement with the U.S.S.R., Finland has adopted the most conciliatory

attitude possible. The limits of the concessions beyond which Finland has thought it impossible to go was determined by the two following considerations:

(1) Compliance with the considerations of security advanced by the U.S.S.R. must not be allowed to prejudice Finland's security or her possibilities of defence;

(2) The policy of neutrality followed by Finland and recognized even by the U.S.S.R. must not be jeopardised.

The proposals to which the U.S.S.R. firmly adhered were for the cession of a naval base at the entrance to the Gulf of Finland and a modification of the frontier on the Isthmus of Karelia. They would have meant the renunciation of the above-mentioned principle.

In the counter-proposals, whereby Finland endeavoured to discover new means of satisfying the demands of the U.S.S.R., there was finally contemplated -- in addition to partial acceptance of the territorial demands of the U.S.S.R. on the coast of the Arctic Ocean -- the cession to the U.S.S.R. of five of the outer islands in the Gulf of Finland and the southern part of the Island of Suursaari, together with the removal of the line of demarcation to a distance of approximately 20-25 kilometres from the very ancient frontiers in the Isthmus of Karelia in the north-eastern part of the Gulf of Finland. The cession of these territories, which from the remotest times have been inhabited by a Finnish population, would have meant the renunciation of the principles of nationality

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recognized by the founders of the U.S.S.R. Nevertheless, the Government of Finland was ready to make this heavy sacrifice, in order to meet the demands of her great neighbour.

There was a limit beyond which the Government of Finland considered it impossible to go in making concessions. The principle that its importance or the size of one of its towns entitles a State to require the cession of territory from a smaller State is unknown in the political life of the West. A large country is protected by its very size. To require a small State to renounce its means of defence is tantamount to destroying that State's liberty. By giving up its means of defence, the small State either falls under the domination of the great Power by which the demands were presented or becomes the battlefield of great Powers. The U.S.S.R. is not exposed to any danger of indirect aggression by a great Power through Finnish territory. The most effective way of guaranteeing it against such a danger for all time is to allow the Finnish people the possibility of ensuring -- as it is firmly determined to do -- the application of its policy of neutrality by effective defence designed to maintain the independence of its country, and not to deprive it of that possibility.

The negotiations conducted at Moscow were broken off by the U.S.S.R. on November 13th. In Finland, however, the hope was explicitly expressed that negotiations would be continued and conducted to a successful conclusion. The Soviet allegation that the "intransigent" attitude of Finland towards the territorial demands

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of the U.S.S.R. was prompted by certain foreign Powers is devoid of all foundation. Indeed, the fundamental instinct of self-preservation obliges every State to organize its defence and independence on solid foundations. The same instinct of self-preservation also obliges the small States to hold aloof from the conflicts of the great Powers and scrupulously to maintain their neutrality. The allegation that in the negotiations Finland gave evidence of intransigence and of a hostile attitude towards the U.S.S.R. is untrue, as Finland advanced no demands and preferred no threats against the U.S.S.R. Far from threatening, she was prepared to make to her neighbour concessions in the national and military spheres which should have afforded a sufficient guarantee for the security of Leningrad.

Even during the negotiations at Moscow, the air forces of the U.S.S.R. committed several violations of the territorial integrity of Finland. Between October 10th and November 14th some thirty such violations were recorded. Finland drew the attention of the U.S.S.R. to this fact through the diplomatic channel, but she was careful not to exaggerate its importance, so as to avoid tension in the relations of the two countries and also in order to facilitate the negotiations then in progress. After the negotiations were broken off, the U.S.S.R. embarked upon a systematic campaign of wireless and Press propaganda against Finland, but it was not until November 26th that the anti-Finnish measures began to take on a more aggressive and cynical tone. This last phase continued until

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November 30th, on which date the aggression of the U.S.S.R. against Finland took place.

It was on the first-mentioned date -- that is, November 26th -- that the U.S.S.R. launched an accusation against Finland to the effect that Finnish troops had opened fire with cannon on the Soviet troops lying on the other side of the frontier in the neighbourhood of the village of Mainila, in the Karelian Isthmus. The Government of the U.S.S.R. professed to conclude from this that the concentration of Finnish troops in the vicinity of the frontier threatened the city of Leningrad and constituted a hostile act against the U.S.S.R. It proposed that the Government of Finland should, without delay, withdraw its troops on the Isthmus of Karelia to a distance of 20-25 kilometres from the frontier to preclude the possibility, as it alleged, of the renewal of such provocation.

Finland, being ready to prove her innocence and desiring to avoid any possible misunderstanding, proposed, on November 27th a joint enquiry to elucidate the circumstances in which the alleged incident had taken place, and declared, inter alia, that there was no artillery in the immediate vicinity of the frontier. She further proposed negotiations with a view to the withdrawal of the troops on both sides of the frontier. In reply, the Government of the U.S.S.R., on November 29th, unilaterally denounced the Treaty of Non-Aggression, in flagrant contradiction to the treaty's express provisions.

Finland then proposed the conciliation procedure laid down in the treaty, which was to be employed more particularly to ascertain whether the non-aggression obligation had been violated. Alternatively, she declared herself willing to submit the dispute to neutral arbitration, in order to furnish conclusive proof of her desire to reach agreement with the U.S.S.R. and to rebut the latter's allegations. Finland declared herself willing to come to an agreement with the U.S.S.R. for the withdrawal of her defence troops in the Isthmus of Karelia to such a distance from Leningrad that any possibility of a threat to the safety of that city would be eliminated.

Outbreak of Hostilities

But before the Minister of Finland in Moscow had an opportunity of transmitting Finland's reply to the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, the U.S.S.R., on the evening of November 29th, broke off diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, the Finnish reply to the notification of the U.S.S.R. regarding the denunciation of the Non-aggression Treaty was handed to the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs immediately after 12 o'clock on the night of November 29th-30th. The note should have fully convinced the Government of the U.S.S.R. of Finland's unwavering desire to reach an agreement regarding the movement of her troops in the Isthmus of Karelia away from the U.S.S.R.; but on November 30th, the latter nevertheless began its aggression against Finland.

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The wireless propoganda of the U.S.S.R. against Finland reached its climax on the evening of November 29th and during the following night, as Finland was, without foundation, accused of several violcations of the frontier, although, to avoid any possibility of incidents, the Finnish troops and frontier-guards had been withdrawn to a stated distance from the frontier, and therefore unquestionably remained throughout in Finnish territory, refraining from all military action. The Soviet troops, on the other hand, crossed the frontier near Puumanki, to the north-east of Petsamo, as early as the evening of November 29th and took prisoner three Finnish frontier-guards.

The above-mentioned Soviet allegations were denied by Finland the same evening, and the serious violation of the frontier was concisely reported. Little by little, however, it became clear that the U.S.S.R. had decided to open hostilities against Finland, though the latter could not expect them to begin so soon -- the following day in fact -- particularly as no declaration of war or even ultimatum had been sent. Still less was it to be imagined that the U.S.S.R. would open hostilities, even against the civil population.

On November 30th, Soviet aeroplanes appeared above Helsinki about 9 a.m. and bombarded the city and the neighbouring aerodrome. The attack was repeated the same day about 2:30 p.m., and on this occasion dozens of civilians, chiefly women and children were killed. The bombs destroyed several private houses and caused

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numerous fires. The same day, Soviet aeroplanes also bombarded other towns, such as Viipuri, Turku, Lahti and Kotka, together with various places in the interior of the country -- e.g., Enso, a large State factory. The destruction and material damage caused by these bombardments chiefly affected the civil population. The bombardments did not even spare the buildings specially protected by Article 27 of the Convention forming part of the Fourth General Hague Convention of 1907 respecting the laws and customs of war on land. A church in Helsinki and a hospital in Enso were, for example, set on fire by bombs. Altogether, 85 persons, including 65 at Helsinki, were killed during the bombardments carried out on the first day. The following day there was a further bombardment of several towns and other centres of population; there were several dozen casualties and much damage was done. The sole purpose of these air attacks was, without doubt, to annihilate the civil population and cause material damage. It may perhaps be suggested that the bombs fell accidentally on objectives other than those aimed at. But low-flying aeroplanes were seen to turn the fire of their machine-guns directly against private houses, schools, and women and children rushing to take shelter.

The land and naval forces have shown the same cruelty and the same flagrant disregard for the elementary laws of warfare; they have spared neither women, children, nor even shipwrecked civilians.

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Hostilities in general began on the morning of November 30th, when the troops of the U.S.S.R. crossed the frontier and attacked the Finnish troops at several points in the Karelian Isthmus and on the eastern frontier from Lake Ladoga to Petsamo. Hitherto, the Soviet troops have occupied part of Petsamo and certain other districts in the Karelian Isthmus and on the eastern frontier, the defence of which was abandoned for military reasons. Furthermore, a Soviet warship bombarded the Finnish coast in the neighbourhood of the Island of Russaro, but was obliged to withdraw after sustaining losses. Certain islands in the Gulf of Finland, which were demilitarised at the demand of the U.S.S.R. under the Treaty of Peace concluded at Tartu in 1920, have now been occupied by the armed forces of the U.S.S.R., which have taken advantage of the position. Hostilities are still proceeding throughout the length of the country's frontiers.

It is clear from the foregoing that the U.S.S.R. has unquestionably undertaken against Finland action within the meaning of Article II, paragraphs 2 and 3, of the International Convention for the Definition of the Aggressor, concluded in London on July 3rd, 1933, on the initiative of the U.S.S.R.; Finland acceded to the Convention in 1934. Hence the U.S.S.R., even in its own view should be regarded as an aggressor.

As early as the day following the opening of hostilities, the U.S.S.R. broadcast the intimation that it had set up a new "democratic" Government for Finland in the village of Terijoki in

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Finnish territory in the Isthmus of Karelia, near the Finnish-Soviet frontier. This Government is composed of Finnish Communists who almost all fled to Russia twenty years ago and who had been guilty of high treason and rebellion, of which offences some of them have even been convicted by the courts. Such a body, set up by a foreign Power, Finland -- presumably, like any foreign State regards as devoid of all importance and entirely without standing. The legal Government of Finland is still in the capital of the country, notwithstanding the allegations of the U.S.S.R.

On the day on which the troops of the U.S.S.R. attacked the territory of Finland, the United States offered their good offices with a view to the pacific settlement of the dispute. This offer was arrogantly rejected by the U.S.S.R., whereas Finland, though the injured party, gratefully accepted it. Finland has even gone further in her efforts in favour of peace in the North, and general peace. Attempting to forget the great injustice she had suffered and her irreparable losses of both human lives and property, on December 4th she approached the Government of the U.S.S.R., through the Minister of Sweden in Moscow, with a proposal for the re-opening of negotiations. At the same time, she declared her willingness to make new proposals with a view to the satisfactory settlement of the questions pending between herself and the U.S.S.R. This proposal was also rejected by the latter, which disputed the Swedish Minister's right to represent the interests of Finland, and replied that it was only prepared to negotiate with the above

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mentioned Government, which it had itself set up at the frontier of Finland.

The U.S.S.R. has thus clearly demonstrated its intention, regardless of everything, to continue its armed attack by every means until it has Finland at its mercy and can destroy both her independence and her existence, despite the fact that M. Molotov, Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the U.S.S.R., affirmed the contrary in a speech delivered in the course of the negotiations mentioned above.