

The Winter War

The Russo-Finnish Conflict,
1939-40

Eloise Engle
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A Westview Encore Reprint



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ELOISE ENGLE AND LAURI PAANANEN



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**To our mothers in their northern cheering sections:
Elina Paananen in Stockholm, Sweden, and
Lois Thomas in Anchorage, Alaska**

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PREFACE

Were you to travel from the Arctic Ocean to the city of Leningrad, along the Russo-Finnish border in the year 1939, you would have had a complex journey. The frontier itself separating the two countries was little more than a wide swath cut through the forests, or a line snaking around lakes and rivers. Dotted along the way were groups of border guards at various crossroads or other areas that seemed important for surveillance. On the Russian side, there had been large troop concentrations of late; railroads and highways had snuggled cozily against Finland's eastern border.

These border guards did not like each other, operating as they did under full view of one another's activities. They were described by a foreign correspondent as being "like angry bulls on neighboring farms, separated only by a barbed-wire fence." This in itself was not an uncommon factor; political geography has often produced border squabbles, particularly when opposing political views are involved. But this border was too close to Leningrad for Soviet security. Or so the Russians claimed.

It was here in the late autumn of 1939 that the so-called Winter War began. The Russians did not plan on Finnish resistance to a take-over of their country. Nikita Khrushchev said, in his memoirs, "All we had to do was raise our voice a little bit and the Finns would obey. If that didn't work, we could fire one shot and the Finns would put up their hands and surrender. Or so we thought."¹

The former Soviet premier continues: "The Finns turned out to be good warriors. We soon realized we had bitten off more than we could chew."² For 105 days in 1939-40 one of the toughest campaigns of the early World War II era was fought.

¹Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), p. 152.

²*Ibid.*, p. 153.

In the context of global war, it was relatively small and yet an estimated 2 million Russian and Finnish soldiers took part. It cost the Soviets a possible 1,000 airplanes and 2,300 tanks. It was not until 1970 that Khrushchev's memoirs revealed the loss of a million Russian lives in the Winter War.

With the Finnish resistance to the Big Bear's aggression came world-wide moral protest, universal sympathy, expulsion of the USSR from the League of Nations, and a Nazi secret chuckle over the fiasco in the north. Khrushchev says, "The Germans were watching with undisguised glee as we took a drubbing from the Finns."³ Here at last was the display of the Red Army in action. It was a campaign that perhaps changed the pattern of World War II, if not the history of the world.

Today, the Western world remembers the time "when the Finns beat the Russians" but the highlights have dimmed with the passing years. Western war colleges still request information on Winter War tactics, and in Sweden a textbook on the subject is the standard reference—not that any country would try to duplicate the feats of that era. The Finns today, because of their precarious geographical position, prefer to shrug their shoulders with characteristic stoicism and say, "Well, we lived through it. Now, let us go forward and not think about the past." Only the old war-horses in Finland sometimes reminisce about it over a late-night schnapps.

For the sake of simplicity in referring to Russian officers of general rank, the authors have chosen to use the Finnish designations. During the Winter War the Red Army experimented with such ranks as ComBrig (Commander Brigade), ComDiv (Commander Division), and ArmCom (Army Commander). These terms were dropped after the Winter War and generals became generals again.

This is not an authorized history and it has not been directed, subsidized, commissioned, or in any way controlled by any agency, government or private. But we must add that we have received great assistance from many individuals without whose help this book could not have been written. We owe every one of them a great debt of gratitude. At the same time, we take full responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation.

ELOISE ENGLE
LAURI PAANANEN

³Ibid.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When research on the Winter War first began, the authors fully realized that without co-operation and help from many sources, Finland's epic struggle could not be accurately and properly related thirty years after it all happened. It was only through the enthusiasm and dedication of those special people who gave freely of their time that this book was possible.

Our deep gratitude goes to Elina Paananen, the co-author's mother, who searched the book stores in both Stockholm and Helsinki for new and old volumes of Winter War material. She supplied clippings, photos, and always the badly needed moral support along the way. Her help was invaluable.

For Russian and German translations, the authors were fortunate in finding Lydia Marshalka, Latvian, who is a translator for the Library of Congress. Her father was chief of police in Moscow until the Bolshevik revolution. Lydia was an opera singer in Latvia until the Russians took over her country, when she fled to England, then to the United States. She is now an American citizen. For these reasons, she did much work "above and beyond the call of duty."

Colonel Martti Frick, Embassy of Finland, Washington, D.C., was extremely generous with his time in sharing his personal experiences of the Winter War. He also provided the valuable tactics book, written by Colonel Y. A. Järvinen, which even today is used as a handbook in the Swedish military academies. Further appreciation is given to Colonel Järvinen's son, Major Olli Yki-Järvinen, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in

Helsinki, for permission to use his late father's reflections in this book's epilogue.

Colonel Keijo Mikola, Finnish army (ret.), formerly with the War Historical Institute in Helsinki, was personally acquainted with many of the officers of the Winter War era. He supplied the authors with biographical information along with other valuable data for use as cross reference. Commander Aarno Koivisto, Finnish navy, furnished the authors material on the navy's role during the conflict. Major Pertti Jokinen, Assistant Military Attaché, Finnish Embassy, loaned a very helpful book and provided liaison contacts. Colonel Olavi Lehti, Military Attaché at the Finnish Embassy supplied helpful first-hand information.

Photographs and maps to illustrate a thirty-year-old war were difficult to come by. Fortunately, Werner Söderström, publishers in Helsinki, most generously provided a number of fine photos that have not been seen outside of Finnish publications. Mrs. Sinikka Kurikka handled the authors' requests with efficiency and friendliness. Also, the Finnish Tourist Bureau, the Institute of Military History, and the Headquarters, Training Division, in Helsinki supplied the authors with further photos and biographical material.

Much of the research was centered at the Library of Congress where Mr. Legare H. B. Obeare, Chief of the Loan Division, allowed the authors to borrow books in several languages for this project. Pauli Pajupuro, along with Esko Lehmus of Lehmus Oy in Tampere, Finland, made available the Finnish war cartoons. Jaakko Jahnukainen, well-known producer of Finnish television documentaries, was instrumental in arranging very helpful contacts with knowledgeable historians.

The Fairfax County (Virginia) libraries, and in particular the Woodrow Wilson branch in Falls Church, Virginia, always stood ready to find needed material, regardless of the sometimes strange nature of the requests. There was also assistance in military terminology from Army information officers at the Pentagon.

Words cannot express the authors' gratitude for the advice, consultation, and encouragement of the fine husband-and-wife writer team who write under the pen names Erick Berry and Herbert Best.



INTRODUCTION

In 1924, when the Finnish National Airlines (FINNAIR) first began operations, pilots flying Junker F-13 monoplanes over the white-blanketed countryside of their homeland often became confused about where to land. Wearing fur-lined helmets, goggles, and with white scarves fluttering in the wind, they would swoop low over a farm field and shout, "Where is Finland?"

By 1939 a great many more people were asking that same question. Suddenly Finland was a very important pawn in world politics.

Not only, "Where is Finland?" but, "What is Finland all about?"

Finland is that rarity in the world, an underpopulated country with some 4.5 million people scattered over 130,000 square miles. A land of lake and forest, it is eight times the size of Denmark. In wintertime the country is very cold, with one third of the land above the Arctic Circle. It is bordered on the east by Soviet Russia and on the west by Sweden. The only thing that keeps it from being a Frozen North or another Antarctic is the warming influence of the Gulf Stream swinging south into the Baltic and north into the Arctic Ocean. Some northern ports, such as Petsamo, are never icebound. It is a country where only the toughest of people could survive. Only an extremely powerful and confident aggressor would dare attack it in wintertime.

The Finns are a pioneer people. They first entered their country during the earlier Iron Age, traveling across the narrow gulf from Estonia and Latvia. They are not Nordics, nor are they Mongols as many still suppose them to be. Their national language bears resemblance to the ancient

Finno-Ugric tongue, including Estonian and Hungarian, and their national epic, the *Kalevala*, which so appealed to Longfellow, is based on folk poetry and mythology of the Finno-Ugrians.

When headlines around the world first began reporting the Soviet-Finnish boundary disputes, people only hazily understood the country of Finland and the people who lived there. Finns often traveled abroad but few Western tourists made the effort to visit this out-of-the-way little republic. Americans thought fondly of the painfully honest people as being the only debtors of World War I who had insisted on paying their bill to the United States.

Music lovers throughout the world had been thrilled by the music of Jean Sibelius, whose *Finlandia* so movingly portrayed his homeland, the political tensions and wars, and the spirit of the people. Finnish athletes in the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin won seven gold, six silver, and six bronze medals, placing fourth in the entire world, following Germany, the United States, and Italy. Earlier, in the 1920s, long-distance runner Paavo Nurmi had become a legend in three Olympics for his speed and endurance. In the 1930s beauty queens from Finland, with their lithe figures and blond, blue-eyed loveliness, captured more than their share of prizes, and many people had begun to suspect that Finns were not always fighting bears with knives or otherwise conducting themselves as barbarians.

It was known that the Finns had a passion for cleanliness, but their sauna baths were often viewed by conservative Americans with considerable suspicion; it seemed that entire families shared the ritual—without clothes! And oddly enough, wherever a Finn traveled, lived, or formed an acquaintance, his distinct personality made an impression.

For centuries Finland had been a punching bag for her powerful neighbors; first Sweden, then Russia. Because she was without any cohesive political or social structure to connect her widely scattered settlements, Finland was gradually annexed by the Swedes during the medieval era. By the end of the fourteenth century Finland was, in effect, a province of the Swedish Kingdom. Swedish political and cultural institutions were imposed on the newly acquired subjects; even the Swedish language was used for all official, educational, and literary purposes. It was only through sheer stubbornness that the Finnish masses refused to give up their ancient language, so that at the peak of Swedish power, not more than 20 percent of the Finns spoke Swedish either as a mother tongue or as an adopted one. Later Finland became a dual-language country.

During the three centuries before Finland was ceded to Russia she was

involved in war for a total of more than eighty years, and at times further weakened by famine or plague. Twelve major wars were fought between Sweden and Russia on Finnish soil, and during the Thirty Years' War Finland was forced to provide one-third of Gustavus Adolphus's army. Between 1710 and 1721 Finland was partly or completely occupied by Russian armies whose vandalism and destruction brought normal life to a standstill, ruined whole towns, and reduced the Finnish population by a quarter.

The cession of Finland to Russia in 1809 was part of the redrawing of the map of Europe which took place during the Napoleonic Wars. During the 1800s Finland as a self-governing Grand Duchy provided Russia with some four hundred generals and admirals and a steady stream of other officers. The most notable was Field Marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim who entered the Imperial Guards in 1890. He later led the Finns to independence in 1918 and fought the Russians during the Winter War.

Although social life between the two peoples was cordial, a number of Finns became concerned that such harmony would lead to total Russification. The slogan of the time—"We are no longer Swedes, we will not become Russians, so let us be Finns"—was echoed through the years but the political movement never matured to any great extent.

With Alexander II's assassination in 1881 came a whole new era of oppression under Alexander III. The Russians took over control of Finnish universities, the law courts, and the press, but the worst was yet to come under the reign of Nicholas II. The new czar's Governor-General, Nicholas Bobrikov, appointed Russians to all administrative positions in Finland and Russian became the official language of the country. All Finnish legislation was transferred to the Russian government, the Finnish army was absorbed by the imperial forces, and any Finn who resisted these orders was sent to Siberia. A favorite sport of the Russians during Bobrikov's period of power was bull-whipping civilians from horseback in the Helsinki squares. By 1914 the degree of self-government the Finns had known came to an end. Hatred for Russia was deep and seething.

During this period, small activist groups had been working to overthrow the Russian rule and establish Finnish independence. Because she had no army during World War I, Finland used this time to develop her own military strength. With Sweden proclaiming her neutrality, the Finns turned to Germany, who was then at war with Russia.

The Germans gladly responded to the plea for help and in 1915-16 secretly accepted 2,000 young Finns at their Feldmeister School in Lock-

stedt, near Hamburg, where they were formed into the 27th Royal Prussian Jaeger Battalion. The first basic unit of 183 Finns was led by a handsome German major, Maximilian Bayer, whose severe training whipped the young individualists into a first-class group of military leaders.

The impact of the March, 1917, revolution in Russia left Finland wondering what her position would be. On December 6 Finland formally declared her independence and on the last day of 1917 Lenin's government recognized the new state. Finland now stood alone before the storms that were raging abroad and brewing at home.

Technically, the transfer of power from Russia to Finland was a simple exercise, because Finland had long been a separate unit from both Sweden and Russia. She had her own democratic constitution and governmental machinery, but politically, she lacked experience. The years without normal government had created serious social problems and many reforms were long overdue.

In January, 1918, a wave of terror ushered in a tragic civil war. To oppose the terrorists was the White Guard led by (then) General Mannerheim, who had recently returned from Russia.

Although the issues were mainly domestic, there were still some 20,000 Russian soldiers in Finland that had not been withdrawn and who had joined forces with the Finnish Red Guard. It became Mannerheim's primary aim to rid Finland of these Bolshevik troops, but the Finnish government, in its impatience, requested aid from Germany. Against Mannerheim's wishes 8,000 German troops landed in Finland in April and by the middle of May, the Independence War was all over.

Finland had avoided communism but had emerged as a distinctly pro-German state. There were many unsolved constitutional problems and political divisions which would take years to heal. The armistice in November brought World War I to a fortunate end and Finland was faced squarely with the independence which she had so long desired yet which she had begun to fear when it was within her grasp.

Eventually a republican form of government was agreed upon and in July the first president of Finland, Professor K. J. Ståhlberg, took office.

The Treaty of Tartu officially ended the Russian domination; independent Finland was born, not with a silver spoon but with a dagger in her mouth.

On the Russian side, the Communists bitterly hated the Finns' stubborn, unyielding struggle for the right to live their own lives. They constantly regretted "giving" Finland her independence but many were con-

vinced that clever subversion, propaganda, and economic pressure would bring the Finns to heel.

As for the Finns, they had developed an almost fanatical loathing of communism, and a sense of frustrated superiority towards Russians. Their knowledge of the Russian way of thinking and acting came from long association rather than from any similarity in ways of living, outlook, or common origin.

In addition to personality conflicts, the Finns felt they had established a much higher culture and living standard than had the Russians during the past twenty years; they had eased their poverty load and compensated for their production and trade inequities by forming one of the most successful co-operative systems in the world. They did not want to be pulled down to the Russian level just as things were beginning to seem brighter.

Because of their land and history, Finns were extremely complicated personalities. Wayward, stubborn, often enigmatic individualists, they had emerged from their uncertain parentage with their own language, dialects, and racial eccentricities. Their diversity of appearance and temperament was greater than in many countries with ten times their population, so that the "blond, blue-eyed Finn" of the travel folder could not be considered representative of national type.

In spite of the several kinds of Finns who had reached their country by different routes, settled in one area, and remained there, all shared the national characteristic of *sisu* which loosely translated means guts and the equally strong trait of tenacity. Both are admirable in the form of determination to overcome all difficulties; but exasperating in the form of downright cussedness. These qualities had helped the Finns surmount historic and geographic obstacles. Should an enemy attack occur, these traits would be the people's chief support.



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PROLOGUE

In November, 1939, the sky over the Kremlin was cold, gray, and gloomy. The people in Moscow, Leningrad, and in other parts of the Soviet Union were somewhat confused but nevertheless excited about the latest "liberation" plan. With the might of the powerful Red Army, the people of Finland would soon be set free. Soviet leaders were confident that the task would be easy.

The conference room was brightly lit as General Kirill A. Meretskov, commander of the Russian forces committed to the Finnish campaign, stood and smiled confidently to greet G. I. Kulik and L. Z. Mekhlis, deputy people's commissars of defense. The only solemn face was that of Chief Marshal of Artillery N. N. Voronov.

The meeting proceeded as Kulik addressed Voronov. "You have come at the right time. Do you know about the dangerous situation in Finland?"

Voronov nodded.

"Have you given any thought to the number of shells that will be needed for possible combat operations on the Karelian Isthmus and to the north of Lake Ladoga? What kind of artillery support is needed? What can we count on?"

Voronov glanced at his enthusiastic comrades, then carefully replied: "In my opinion, everything depends on the situation. Are you planning to defend or attack? With what forces and in what sectors? By the way, how much time is being allotted for the operation?"

The pause was only momentary, "Between ten and twelve days."

Voronov said, "I will be happy if everything can be resolved within two or three months."

Everyone laughed.

"Marshal Voronov," Kulik said sternly. "You are ordered to base all of your estimates on the assumption that the operation will last twelve days."¹

¹N. N. Voronov, *Na sluzhbe voennoi* (Moscow, 1963), pp. 136-37.

1

"IT IS NOT POSSIBLE FOR YOU [IN FINLAND] TO REMAIN NEUTRAL"

Cold wind swept across the wooded, snow-covered fields of the Karelian Isthmus. It stung the men's exposed faces with little needles of icy spray that blew from the ground and from the trees. But the Russian soldiers, singing around their campfires, playing accordians and balalaikas and warming their chilled bodies with liberal rations of vodka, were light-hearted and gay. In a few days they would liberate Finland from the evils of capitalism; they would be heroes as soon as they crossed the border and made their purposes known.

General Meretskov, forty-two-year-old commander of the Russian 7th, 8th, 9th, and 14th Armies, was pleased with his inspection tour of that afternoon. As he emerged from his staff car, however, he was thankful for his fur-lined cape which smartly covered his olive brown tunic of light-weight material. The troops, with their summer uniforms, seemed quite comfortable at the moment. Overcoats would not be needed, since the campaign was scheduled to last only a few days.

Hundreds of tanks lined the network of roads that led into Finnish Karelia. Because of the cold snap, engines were periodically run so they would be kept warm. The tanks were ready to lead the massive infantry forces when Meretskov gave the order to move. Unfortunately the short hours of daylight at this time of year would prevent extensive air operations in support of his initial attacks, but there was sufficient time for Soviet planes to paralyze the cities on bombing runs from Estonian bases. Soviet bombers and fighters numbered 3,000, to neutralize the Finnish air force of 162 antiquated biplanes and Fokkers. Also, the air arm had

done a splendid job of reconnaissance these past few weeks. Roads, ports, industrial areas and fortifications had been duly photographed in spite of Finnish protests against overflying. Intelligence reports had indicated that the Finns had only a few old light-weight tanks and probably fewer than 100 small-caliber anti-panzer guns.

It was the night of November 25, 1939, and although war had not formally been declared and in fact never would be by the Russians, it was only a matter of waiting for final word that plans had proceeded as scheduled.¹ The awaited "incident" should take place the next day, and four days later the mighty Red armies under Meretskov's command would swarm into Finland. At the Karelian Isthmus alone more than 250,000 soldiers were overflowing the local barracks. There were Red troops as far as the eye could see along the 90-mile front. This was almost as many combatants as the entire country of Finland could muster, even if old men and boys were included. In spite of the fact that troops marching toward the border in the north were experiencing casualties from frostbite and cold, the general anticipated no real difficulties with the Finnish campaign. A quick victory would insure the plaudits of Stalin, Molotov, and Communist Party members all over the world.

General Meretskov had come a long way from his peasant origin. A factory worker in Moscow, he had entered the Party in May, 1917, as a member of the Red Guard. The following year he had become a political commissar in the Red Army. Steadily he had worked his way through the hierarchy of the system and by 1938 had become commander of the Leningrad Military District.

On this important evening he studied the wall map that hung in his headquarters. The only serious fortification that he would have to combat along the entire 800-mile Russo-Finnish border lay in the 90-mile front on the Karelian Isthmus between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga. The strength and fortifications of this Mannerheim Line were somewhat uncertain in Meretskov's mind but the challenge of breaching it was an intriguing one. The press likened it to the Maginot Line in France and would certainly call attention to his victories there. The 600-mile front north of Lake Ladoga to the Arctic Ocean would be virtually defenseless against the twenty powerful divisions he placed in those key areas.

The Karelian Isthmus would be strongly defended, but with the fall of

¹The Soviets would recognize only the puppet government of Finnish Marxist Otto Kuusinen, set up after the invasion began.