



Finnish skiers at defensive positions Photo: Wikipedia/Imperial War Museums

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## One hundred days of frozen hell

HISTORICAL ERA

(1939-1945) II wojna światowa

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They appeared out of nowhere in snow uniforms, attacked and disappeared – the Finnish volunteer troops. The Soviet soldiers feared them greatly. In Finland, the heroic defence of 1939 came to be known as Talvisota – yet an ordinary Russian knows nothing about it.

It is hell here. Some men are crying, other screaming and begging to be finished off after suffering excruciating wounds... Animal instincts, dreadful fear of Finnish snipers...

These words were found in a journal of a fallen Soviet corporal. He wrote them in a letter from the frontline in December 1939. He was one of the 300 thousand people who lost their lives when on November 30<sup>th</sup> Stalin sent the Red Army to conquer the small nation which fiercely defended its independence for one hundred days and nights. The simple Soviet soldiers believed in their country's propaganda stating that "the Finnish workers and farmers wait to be freed", while in reality the Red Army had to face death not only from the Finnish hands but also from the striking cold and hunger, as well as from the bullets of the NKVD marching behind them and making sure that they wouldn't retreat.

### **The Mannerheim's line**

The Finnish expected this war for years - they knew what the consequences of neighbouring the USSR were. Carl Mannerheim, the chief of the State Defence Council ordered in the 1930s to build a line of fortifications on the 135 km long and 90 km deep strip of land between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga. 160 concrete defence structures were built.

Our rounds bounce off the Finnish fortifications - wrote a Soviet soldier to his father. - If you come across these fortifications, machine gun nests immediately open fire and rain hell on infantry and tanks.

Even if fear doubled all for the Russians, the Mannerheim's line with five artillery forts, cannons, bunkers, barbed wires, anti-tank and anti-infantry traps was truly magnificent.

What's more, since 1932 reserve soldiers were trained as well: lumberjacks, foresters and hunters who expertly knew the terrain. A Citizens' Guard counting more than 100 thousand soldiers was created and a women's aid service counting double that.

### **The Soviet invasion**

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact gave away not only the eastern half of Poland, but also the Baltic states and

Finland to the “Soviet area of influence” as it was diplomatically called. Following the attack on Poland, Stalin tried to take precautions against the Germans who were their allies for the time, yet the alliance was very thin and could break at any second. What if the Germans were to attack from Finland or the Baltic states? In October, Moscow demanded from Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia an approval to station its garrisons – which it received.

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The Soviet intentions towards Finland were clear: invasion, murder and deportation of the population to gulags; a total destruction of the country. Stalin decided to use a provocation. At the end of November 1939, the Red Army shelled a Russian village of Mainila – yet Moscow accused the Finnish of the attack.

Stalin announced that “the Finnish artillery committed a hostile act” and, on November 30<sup>th</sup>, sent a million men, six and a half thousand tanks and armoured vehicles and thousands of planes at the Mannerheim line... This invasion was almost three times bigger than the Allied landing in Normandy in 1944. The first bombs fell on Helsinki. The Finnish enlisted around 600 thousand men.

### **The defeat of the initial advance**

The main attack came through the Karelian Isthmus – from the south, as the 1200 km long border from north to south was covered in lakes and thick forests. There, at the lands impenetrable by tanks, the Finnish moving swiftly on skis consistently diminished the Soviet infantry marching in deep snow. They broke entire columns, dividing them into smaller groups which they later destroyed or kept surrounded until the Red Army soldiers died from hunger and exhaustion.

In the meantime, the Soviet armoured divisions coming from Leningrad towards the Mannerheim line had to

drive on roads which couldn't fit all the tanks, artillery tractors, armoured vehicles and trucks. Chaos broke out, the tanks were stuck, and the march of the Red Army became desperately slow. All this weakened the strength of the initial advance and sealed its fate.

The West was left in shock. The British and French governments even considered sending expeditionary corps, but in the end only condemned the USSR and excluded it from the League of Nations which made Stalin as worried as Putin today with western sanctions. Other Scandinavian states turned their backs on Finland, yet 8 thousand volunteers from Sweden and 800 from Norway and Denmark enlisted to help.

For three months, the border defence line held back against the Red Army's offense, not allowing it to go deep into the country. Fights for every metre of the land, fought with changing luck on both sides, were documented in battle journals.

We were attacked by around 50 tanks on a front line more or less 500 metres wide - wrote a Finnish corporal on December 17<sup>th</sup>. Behind the tanks was a sea of soldiers. This day was special to me, as my job was to kill as many *homo sapiens* as possible.

Carl Mannerheim wrote in his journals:

The Russians came at us in mass attacks during which they were slaughtered by well-placed machine gun nests. Some soldiers operating the machine guns were on the edge of mental breakdowns having to cause such massacres day by day.

## **The White Death**

A battle on Christmas brought yet another defeat for the Russians.

The Ruskies opened a hellish machine gun fire, they fought for every inch of the ground, enemy tanks entered the battlefield. Our men are tired from the lack of sleep. All companies mixed together during the fighting, officers attacked shoulder to shoulder with privates, encouraging them to fight. The Ruskies' spirit broke down. They began to flee.

The forests gave perfect cover for small groups of snipers on skis – every Finn knew how to skii since he was little. The volunteers expertly knew the terrain. The actions of a certain Simo Häyhä, a sniper called “The White Death”, became especially legendary. He is believed to have been the best marksman in history. He sneaked to the enemy positions in temperatures reaching -40 degrees Celsius. So his presence wouldn't be compromised, he put snow in his mouth. Before he took his position, he poured water on the snow – otherwise the dust blowing in the air when shooting could point to where he was. He also never used an optic scope so sunlight wouldn't lead the enemy to his position. The Soviets desperately hunted the famous Finn: they sent their own snipers, bombed the area. Simo seemed indestructible, although one bullet wounded him in the face. His number of kills – more than half a thousand men – is truly shocking; however, it's worth remembering that he was merely defending his country against a barbaric aggressor.

### **To burn the Finns alive**

Stalin intended to quickly deal with Finland. The second offensive at the Karelian Isthmus began in February with an army of another 750 thousand soldiers, three thousand cannons, two thousand tanks and hundreds of fighters and bombers and was a revenge for the initial humiliation. The Finnish soldiers in bunkers burned alive as the Soviets began using flamethrowers which “spat” fiery liquids inside the fortifications.

Stones and wet pillows which were used to cover the walls from the inside did not help – recalled one survivor of one of the bunker crews. – Later, a certain officer came to look inside the bunker. When he returned, he said: "We need to put a guard in front of the entrance, so no one sees what's inside".

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What's more, the Russian air force levelled the entire battlefield with bombs.

"The exhaustion and sleep deprivation almost drove us mad. We knew, that we wouldn't survive for long. We had no idea what day it was; if it was still February or March already" - remembered one of the soldiers.

For ten days straight, over 2 thousand shells fell on the Mannerheim Line. On February 11<sup>th</sup> alone, 250 thousand of them exploded - it was the biggest artillery barrage since the battle of Verdun in the First World War.

In February 1940, when the Russians broke through the Finnish defences, commander Mannerheim decided that it was time to lay down the weapons. In March, the Finns signed a peace treaty with the USSR giving away several important military points and part of Karelia. Nonetheless, for the price of 25 thousand fallen soldiers, they defended their independence in the year 1940.



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**Finnish skiers at defensive positions**      **Photo:**  
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### **On a thin line between two powers**

Finland needed insurance in case the USSR decided to attack once again. Only one country in the world was its natural ally - the Third Reich. Even though, no official deal with Germany was signed, the Helsinki authorities allowed for the German troops to march through the country to attack the USSR from the north. The Finns declared war on the Soviet Union only in June 1941 following the first bombardments ordered by Stalin. Finland took part in the German advance and took back its lost lands in autumn. However, it declined to aid the Third Reich at Leningrad. Mannerheim, known for his reluctance to cooperate with the Germans, balanced between the two powers.

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A triumphant year came for the Soviets in 1944 – they were entering Central Europe. In June, they hit Finland once again breaking more and more defence lines. The front stopped with the end of summer. Using his temporary advantage, Mannerheim decided to negotiate with Moscow. Finland had to come to terms with its eastern neighbour. Following a cease-fire, a peace treaty, taking away the lands Finland just got back, was signed.

The diplomatic skills of Mannerheim's successor since 1946 – president Juho Paasikivi, made it possible to negotiate a deal until 1948 where the Red Army could only cross the Finnish border if the USSR was attacked by Finland first. Juho Paasikivi gave Moscow only as much as he thought was necessary to secure his country's existence. How did he pull it off? Many have tried to explain this phenomenon. Perhaps Stalin wanted to avoid another war? Maybe he didn't want to discourage western allies with his barbarism?

Or was it the experience of the two powerful Finnish figures who got Finland through its toughest period? Mannerheim was half a year older than Józef Piłsudski, while Paasikivi was three years younger than the Polish hero. Paasikivi became president when he was 76 years old and held this office for another 10 years, until his death. Mannerheim agreed to become president and signed the armistice with the Soviets when he was 77 years old. He left politics two years later. He believed, that his person might gather controversies and become an issue for Finland in the negotiations with the Soviets and the western countries. He put down roots in Switzerland where he stayed until his death in 1951.

### **It's worth fighting**

The term "Finlandisation" was first used in 1965 by German professor Richard Löwenthal to describe the relations between the USSR and Helsinki, but it wasn't popular among the Finns. It was perceived as a synonym of serfdom and subjection in exchange for a semblance of independence. The *modus vivendi* fought for by the Helsinki authorities was looked down upon by the same western world which later agreed to all of

Stalin's post-war demands.

For the Finnish, the treaty was an unavoidable evil. They had to give away a chunk of their freedom to the Soviets, first and foremost their independence in foreign policies and the most important state positions. They could not accept Marshall's plan. Nonetheless, the sovereignty of their nation was only partially limited – especially compared to Poland. Contrary to other Soviet occupied nations, the country's intelligentsia wasn't physically eradicated, the NKVD did not murder Finnish patriots with shots in the backs of their heads.

Can *Talvisota* be an answer to the returning question in Poland: to fight or not to fight? For now, for sure we need to keep building a stronger army, boost its morale and train volunteers. Because, as the Finnish taught us, it's worth fighting only when the nation is united and understands that a defeat would mean complete annihilation.

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