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Executive Summary

Title: The Struggle for the Karelian Isthmus during the Winter War of 1939

Author: Major Landon Dunaway, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: On the Karelian Isthmus during 1939's Winter War, Finland, aided by one of the harshest winters ever recorded, impeded the Red Army's invasion despite a huge disproportionate troop strength ratio. To accomplish this, Finland made the most of tactical advantages, created by superior battlefield leadership and the resiliency of the Finnish civilian populace and defensive force led by Commander in Chief, Marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim.

Discussion: 1939's Winter War was an attempt by Stalin to enhance his security and prevent the invasion of foreign powers. For the Soviet Union, controlling the Karelian Isthmus was the key to protecting the highly populated city of Leningrad against an invading force. Russia's control of the isthmus would also prohibit enemy ground movement from Finland into the heart of the Soviet Union. Since Finland's troop strength was inadequate to defend the entire border, the focus was on protecting the Karelian Isthmus, which was believed to be Russia's most likely avenue of approach. As the Red Army advanced toward the heavily defended Karelian Isthmus, it was here where victory or defeat would be decided.

The Finnish forces were extremely outnumbered and ill-equipped compared to the Soviets, who were considered one of the world's largest and most powerful military forces. However, the Finns were able to inflict large numbers of casualties on the Red Army prolonging the war for 105 days before a peace treaty was signed. While there were numerous battles that occurred during the war, the fighting on the Karelian Isthmus determined the outcome of the war. This study analyzes the battles that took place on the Karelian Isthmus and the struggle for the Mannerheim Line during the Winter War. Additionally, this study examines how the Finns were able to impede the Red Army's advance despite their disproportionate troop strength and lack of modern equipment.

Conclusion: The Finnish forces were able to repel the attack of the Red Army on the Karelian Isthmus while inflicting heavy casualties on the invading force. The Finns' ability to hold the Mannerheim Line and maintain control of the Karelian Isthmus slowed the Soviet advance and repelled its seizure of Helsinki. The battles that took place on the Karelian Isthmus provide examples of superior leadership, battlefield ingenuity, and tactical proficiency that can be applied to today's military training.

When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell. Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should rise against me, in this, I will be confident.

Psalm of David; Psalm 27:2-3

At the far eastern edge of the Baltic Sea, between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, lies a narrow strip of land known as the Karelian Isthmus. While the land is extremely beautiful, covered with numerous clear blue lakes and thick evergreen forest, it has little value. The soil grows very few crops and the limited amount of mineral resources are hardly worth the labor of extraction.¹ Yet, this narrow piece of land is worth fighting over, and the reason is purely geographic. The Karelian Isthmus connects the large territory of Russia and Asia to the wide-open Scandinavian peninsula to the west.² An uncontested military force could easily attack east from Finland, and be in the center of Russia's second largest city within hours.

Prior to the Winter War, Finland had a long history of conflicts and border changes as a result of sitting between the two powerful rival states of Sweden and Russia. In 1808, Russia annexed the territory of Finland from Sweden. This annexation finally ended in 1907 when Finland was granted its own parliament. In 1917, Finland claimed its independence, and in 1920, signed a peace treaty with the Soviet Union known as the Treaty of Tartu, solidifying the Russian-Finnish border. The new border lay only 20 miles to the west of Russia's Leningrad and gave Finland sole territorial rights to the isthmus. The Soviet Union and Finland continued to treat each other with distrust and suspicion after 1920 stemming from religious, political, and ideological differences. Finland continued to anticipate a Soviet invasion that would attempt to annex its territory and people once and for all. As the European situation became increasingly

unstable by the late 1930's, Finland began fortifying the border on the isthmus. They established barriers, obstacles, concrete-reinforced machine-gun bunkers, underground shelters, and trenches aiming to provide Finland with a fortified defense in depth. The defenses stretched north to south from Lake Ladoga to the Gulf of Finland and received the title of the Mannerheim Line, named after Marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim. The Mannerheim Line was key to both Finnish and Soviet operational strategies, and was where the Winter War would ultimately be won or lost.

Not surprisingly, the Karelian Isthmus proved strategically important for both the Soviet and Finnish forces in 1939. For Russia, the unrestricted terrain allowed for easy avenues of approach to the Finnish cities of Viipuri and Helsinki. For Finland, establishing a defense-in-depth on the isthmus was vital to delaying a Soviet advance into the heart of Finland.

On 30 November 1939, one of the world's most powerful militaries initiated a massive attack against the ill-equipped Finns. Without declaring war, Russia invaded Finland hoping for a quick and decisive victory, with Russian planners estimating the conflict would last no more than 12 days. They were stunned by the Finnish defense, which stubbornly held for more than 100 days. Finland waged a David-and-Goliath defensive struggle of grit and determination as the entire world watched, sacrificing blood in the name of freedom.³ During what became the Winter War, Finland, aided by one of the harshest winters ever recorded, blocked the vaunted Red Army's advance despite a huge disproportionate troop strength ratio. To accomplish this, the Finns made the most of advantages created by superior battlefield leadership, the resiliency of a Finnish civilian populace, and defensive forces led by Marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim.

Marski

Mannerheim, nicknamed Marski, was well educated and an experienced military officer. Throughout his teen years he attended the Calvary Military School in Leningrad before graduating and receiving a commission in the Russian Chevalier Guard. He fought for Russia during the conflict with Japan in 1904 and in World War I. After returning home to Finland, he led Finland's Army of Liberation against the pro-Bolshevik communist party during the 1918 Finnish civil war. In 1919, Mannerheim ran for president of Finland but lost in a staggering defeat. After losing the election, Mannerheim minimized his role in politics and became involved in charitable organizations. He founded the Mannerheim Child Welfare Association in 1920, and in 1922 he became chairman of the Finnish Red Cross and a board member of the International Red Cross.⁴ In both of these organizations he established strong, effective administrations and linked them to international networks and social establishments.⁵ Mannerheim also served as chairman of the supervisory board for the Bank of Helsinki as well as a board member of the Nokia Corporation. In 1931, under the newly-elected president, Mannerheim returned to the political scene and was appointed Chairman of the Defense Council responsible for Finland's defense budget, training, and manpower.

Situation

As Hitler's Germany continued to rise as a global military power, Russia became increasingly concerned about Finland's declaration of neutrality, as well as uncertain about

Germany's future intentions. Despite signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact in August of 1939, the Soviet Union remained wary of the rapidly deteriorating international situation. Stalin believed that Hitler would eventually ignore the pact and invade the Soviet Union. Consequently, the only viable option for protecting Soviet territory in the event of war, was to advance as far as possible to meet the enemy, a strategy which described a preemptive attack.⁶ To accomplish this, the Soviet Union required Finland's full cooperation.

In the Spring of 1938, Boris Yartsev, a Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs official, briefly discussed the matter of the Karelian Isthmus with Finnish Foreign Minister, Rudolf Holsti. Yartsev requested an additional meeting in order to explore the future threats posed by Germany. This meeting examined the possibility of Germany using Finland as an initial staging base for an invasion of the Soviet Union. Despite Holsti's reaffirmation of Finland's strict neutrality, Yartsev offered a proposition. The Soviets requested the Finns lease their islands in the Gulf of Finland near Leningrad. In exchange, the Soviets agreed to provide economic and military assistance to Finland, as well as improved trade relations. The Soviets intended to use these islands as forward operating bases to provide early warning and detection of German amphibious forces. Holsti staunchly resisted the offer and reiterated Finland's commitment to strict neutrality. Throughout the spring and summer of 1939, the discussions continued, but every Soviet proposition was turned down by the Finnish Government.

On 12 October 1939, in the wake of the German and Soviet invasion of Poland, Moscow held its first official meeting with the Finns where Stalin proceeded to assert his demands. Given the chaos that had recently consumed Europe, Stalin had serious fears about the possibility of a German attack against the city of Leningrad from the Gulf of Finland, or from the Finnish mainland.⁷ The Soviet's demanded Finland move their boundary on the Karelian Isthmus to the

northwest, away from Leningrad, Russia's second largest military and industrial city. Moreover, Stalin called for the removal and dismantling of the Mannerheim fortifications. Stalin also demanded that Finland cede the islands in the Gulf of Finland as well as the Rybachi Peninsula along the arctic coast. He further directed that the Finns lease him the Hanko Peninsula, southwest of Helsinki, with the right to station 5,000 Soviet troops for a period of 30 years.⁸

Soviet Demands of Finland 1939⁹



The Finnish government was willing to entertain some of the demands but countered others in an effort to remain a neutral and sovereign state. Furthermore, they were fearful that if they conceded to Soviet pressure, Finland would be forced to acquiesce to harsher demands placed on them by Stalin in the future. Unable to agree to having Soviet forces stationed on Finnish territory, the destruction of the Mannerheim Line, and its seaward approaches secured by the Red

Army, Finland chose to resist. As a result, Chairman of the Defense Council, Mannerheim, submitted his resignation in protest. He knew the capabilities of the Red Army and was aware of Stalin's intentions. He voiced his concern to Finland's parliament that the Finnish military would not survive against a Soviet invasion. Mannerheim believed it was in Finland's best interest to acquiesce to Soviet demands to avoid a costly war and Finnish defeat.

Mainilla, U.S.S.R. site of Soviet Bombing¹⁰



As the negotiations reached an impasse, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov, became disgusted and angrily spouted, "Since we civilians don't seem to be making any progress, perhaps it's the soldiers' turn to speak."¹¹ This was followed by a quiet two weeks, broken by the Soviets bombing their own village of Mainilla on 26 November. Using this event to generate popular support and fabricate outlandish accusations, Stalin denounced the 1932 Soviet-Finnish non-aggression Pact and severed all diplomatic ties with Helsinki. The Soviets then issued a statement:

As is well known, attacks by units of the Finnish armed forces against Soviet Forces continue not only on the Karelian Isthmus, but also at other points along the Soviet-Finnish frontier. The Soviet Union can no longer tolerate this situation. By reason of the situation which has arisen, for which the Finnish government alone bears responsibility, the Soviet government can no longer maintain normal relations with Finland, and is obliged to recall from Finland its political and economic representatives.¹²

Immediately following this declaration, Mannerheim withdrew his resignation and was appointed Commander in Chief of Finnish Forces. Mannerheim was keenly aware of Finland's state of military readiness. He also understood the Soviet troop disposition, strategy, and political and military leadership due to his Soviet military service in the early 1900's. Recognizing the strategic importance of the Karelian Isthmus, Mannerheim concentrated the bulk of his forces along the Mannerheim Line in an effort to hinder the Russian advance. This strategy was designed for survival. It was not designed to withstand the attack for an indefinite amount of time. Mannerheim's goal was to delay the advance long enough for external aid to arrive, or amass such a high number of casualties that Stalin would be forced into new negotiations.

The Winter War

At 10:30 A.M., on 30 November 1939, nine Russian bombers flew over Helsinki and released their payload. Their targets included railroad networks, shipyards, and airports, while a landing party from the Russian Baltic Fleet seized the disputed islands in the Gulf of Finland. From the first, Finland's strategic policy was to reopen negotiations with the Soviets and end hostilities as soon as possible.¹³ In the meantime, Mannerheim was to delay the Soviet's advance across the border and inflict such heavy casualties, that Stalin would reopen negotiations.¹⁴ Mannerheim and his staff knew that Finland could not defend itself from invading Soviet forces for an indefinite period.¹⁵ However, they were prepared to expend every last soldier and bullet in the hope that outside powers might intervene and external aid and support would arrive at some point.¹⁶ Meanwhile in Moscow, political and military officials were optimistic. Military leaders developed support plans and ammunition consumption rates for a period of war lasting no more than 12 days.

The Soviet strategy became clear from the beginning. The objectives were to seal off Finland from foreign aid and military support by seizing the arctic port of Petsamo in the north. Moreover, these forces would sever the rail connection to Sweden at the Finnish city of Oulu in the northeast corner of the Gulf of Bothnia. The Red Army's mission was to conduct a ground offensive throughout the frontier coupled with air raids intended to hinder Finnish communications.¹⁷ At the conflict's beginning, there were 10 different Soviet attacks happening simultaneously from one end of Finland to the other.

The first Finnish victory of the war came during the first week of December at Tolvajarvi, north of Lake Ladoga. Finnish forces executed a frontal assault combined with

flanking maneuvers and counterattacks which resulted in 4,000 dead Soviets and the capture of 580 prisoners. Additionally, the Finns seized 59 enemy tanks and 220 machine guns. This catastrophic defeat forced the Soviets into directing their main offensive to an alternate zone. Thus, it was the fighting that took place on the Karelian Isthmus which proved the most significant to Finnish defensive and Soviet offensive strategy.

On 30 November 1939, Soviet Forces prepared to storm the isthmus frontier with no less than 120,000 men, 1,000 tanks, and supporting fire from 600 artillery pieces.¹⁸ At the same time, Finnish soldiers hurriedly evacuated civilians from their homesteads and farms on the Karelian Isthmus.¹⁹ Finnish border guards, who organized the evacuation were impressed by the toughness and patriotism of the citizens who lived on this desolate terrain as they were being forced to leave their homes behind:

In one village, a detachment of border guards came to the home of an elderly woman and regrettably informed her that she must prepare to leave her home with only the belongings that she was able to physically carry on her back or in her horse-drawn sled. In the morning, they would be back to burn her house down so the Russians could not use it as shelter. When the border guards returned the next morning, they found the sled piled high with the woman's belongings and when they entered the house, they were shocked to find that the house had been scrubbed and whitewashed into pristine condition. Attached to the wall, the woman left a note saying that she had gone to fetch something at a neighbor's house and that she would return in time to drive the sled away accompanied by the guards. The note concluded that in the corner they would find enough

and ran the entire length of the isthmus consisting of over 20,000 men organized into four covering groups. Each group received a letter designation which corresponded to the group commander's last name. Groups U, M, and L fell under Second Corps, and Group R, the northernmost covering force bordering Lake Ladoga, fell under Third Corps. Strategic command of the entire covering force fell under the leadership of General Osterman. The mission of the covering forces was to stall the Soviet advance long enough so the Finns could fully man the Mannerheim Line prior to the Soviets reaching the main line of resistance. The covering forces were successful in holding the Soviets, and by the end of the first day, had struck the Soviets with a number of counterattacks that caused significant casualties and disorientation.

Finnish Defensive Forces November 1939.²²



The Finns destroyed and burned all inhabited structures across the frontier to keep the Soviets from using them as cover and shelter. Furthermore, they left the roads intentionally wide

open to allow for enemy movement, which left them vulnerable to Finnish flank attacks, sniper fire, and mobility kills.

It was the Soviet tanks however, which initially caused the most confusion and damaging impact on Finnish defenses.²³ Some officers had briefed their men on the psychological effects of tanks prior to the war, but that did not prepare them for the roaring, metal-clanking, steel beasts that the soldiers experienced firsthand.²⁴ However, after the initial shock wore off, the Finns desperately devised ways to destroy the enemy armor. They concocted a homemade bomb consisting of a mixture of gasoline, kerosene, tar, and chloride of potassium ignited by sulfuric acid taped to the neck of a glass liquor bottle.²⁵ Tank hunter squads then closed in on enemy tanks and unleashed these bombs, known as Molotov Cocktails (named after the much-hated Soviet Foreign Minister).

The Molotov Cocktail caused serious effects on enemy tanks and the high casualty rates among the tank-hunter squads was considered a price worth paying. Although the Molotov Cocktails and the few 37mm antitank guns the Finns did have were successful in eliminating enemy tanks, the number of Soviet replacements seemed inexhaustible. By the end of the first week, most of the covering force withdrew to the Mannerheim Line leaving little to no forward zone ahead of the main defense.

Taipale Sector

Much to the surprise of the Finnish commanders, Soviet forces failed to attack the southwestern-most sector of the isthmus known as the Summa Sector. The easiest and fastest route to the populated cities of Viipuri and Helsinki was through that area. However, Soviet

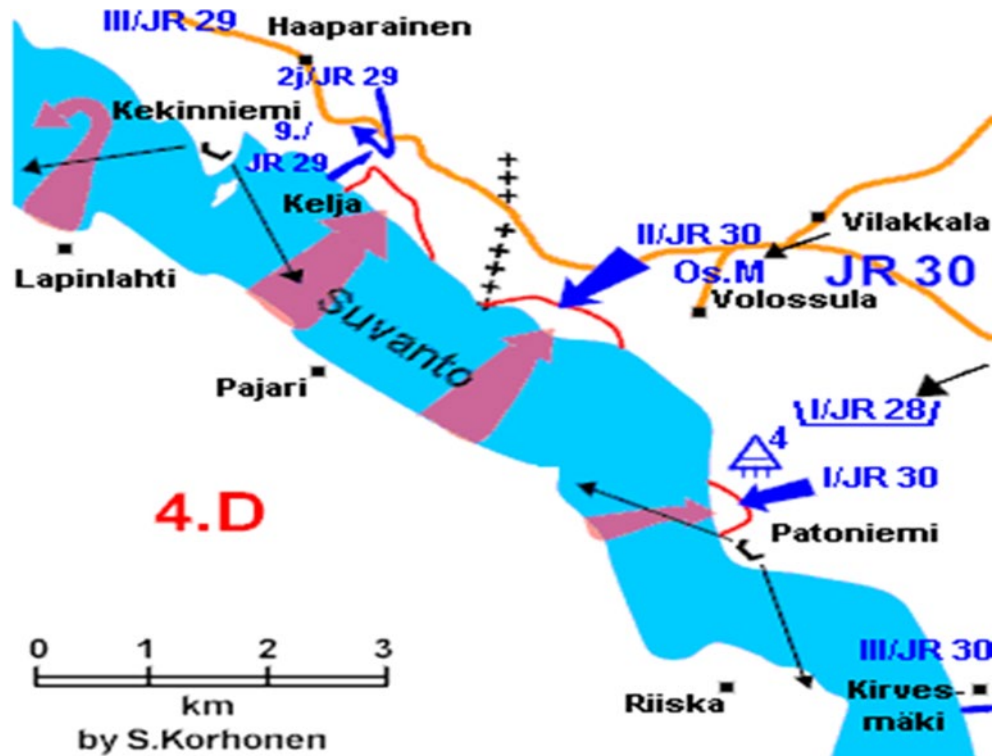
forces intended to first execute a diversionary attack in the northeastern district of the Karelian Isthmus known as the Taipale Sector. This represented an attempt to draw Finnish reserve forces from the Summa Sector toward Taipale to allow an easier advance on Summa. Mannerheim recognized General Meretskov's deception, (Russian Commander of Leningrad's 7th Army), and held his reserves in place. On 6 December, the Soviets began their attack on Taipale beginning with a four-hour barrage, followed immediately by waves of Red Army infantry. Unbeknownst to the Soviets, the Finns had the entire area ranged and pre-targeted for artillery fire. Once the enemy was in position, Finnish artillery blasted the attackers and caused hundreds of casualties.

The Finns then counterattacked, and the Soviets fled, pursued by artillery fire and infantry forces. Throughout the following week, skirmishes and exchanges of artillery fire continued, to little or no effect. On 16 December, a second wave of Red Army infantry advanced on Taipale, this time with an additional Soviet division and 57 artillery batteries. The Soviets launched a full-scale frontal attack, preceded by artillery fire to shape the battlefield for the infantry. As the barrage lifted and Soviet infantry advanced, accompanied by 50 tanks, the Finnish artillery fired again as the enemy crossed another pre-plotted site. The attack collapsed and what remained were three to four hundred dead enemy with 18 destroyed enemy tanks.

The Soviets then hurled an additional division at Finnish defenses but that too collapsed under Finnish artillery fire and counterattacks. On 24 December, a fourth division joined the three Soviet divisions directly in front of the Taipale Sector. On Christmas day, under cover of seemingly impenetrable smoke and fog, the Soviet forces crossed the Suvanto Waterway and established a lodgment on the bank at Patoniemi. However, once the fog lifted, Soviet forces became instantly visible and the Finns ambushed nearly 500 Soviets. At Kelja, as the dense fog burned off the waterway, the Soviets came under attack, starting an intense all-day battle, which

did not end until the following morning. That morning, the Soviets withdrew, leaving behind 2,000 dead who littered the ice, coating the Suvanto Waterway.

Suvanto Waterway attacks: 25 December.²⁶



The Taipale defense continued to destroy the Soviets trudging across open terrain and ice only to be mowed down by Finnish machine-gunners. The Finns watched in awe as the enemy continued to pour into the open countryside against dug-in defenses as if Soviet manpower was inexhaustible. In a number of cases, Finnish machine-gunners were removed from the front lines after becoming emotionally unstable while inflicting mindless, continuous slaughter.²⁷

Summa Sector

By the middle of December, the Soviets shifted their forces from Taipale to Summa. On 17 December, the enemy initiated a five-hour artillery and airstrike bombardment on Summa and the Lahde road junction behind the Mannerheim Line.²⁸ As the barrage lifted, tanks and assault vehicles charged the heavily fortified Finnish line. During their advance, the Soviets set off charges creating paths through the obstacles and wire leaving sufficient space for the enemy infantry to push through the gaps. Through it all, Finnish soldiers remained in place, convinced that if they repelled the infantry's advance, the Soviet tanks would eventually withdraw.²⁹

While the Finns endured heavy casualties, the plan succeeded and the tanks withdrew in search of supporting ground troops. The Soviet's then attempted to use the thick ice of the lakes and swamps that surrounded the Summa Sector as avenues of approach to the Mannerheim Line. The tanks, however, could advance toward only a few exits off the ice due to the forested terrain. As Soviet armor made their way toward land, Finnish forces attacked from pre-established machine-gun nests and destroyed 35 enemy tanks. In another location, Soviet forces repeatedly advanced across an open mine field, and the exploding mines ripped gaps into their ranks.

Dark Lull

By 27 December, the military council of the Soviet Union decided to suspend further offensives on the Karelian Isthmus.³⁰ Thus, the month of January on the Karelian Isthmus became a lull period compared to the fighting that had occurred in December. Soviet infantry attacks remained limited. Air and artillery barrages, however, increased by nearly 150 percent,

harassing the Finns along the Mannerheim Line and restricting Finnish road and rail traffic to hours of darkness.³¹ Soviet leadership remained convinced the seizure of the Karelian Isthmus was the key to a Finnish defeat. In early January, Stalin assembled his military commanders and announced the creation of a centralized directorate of operations. Its mission was to coordinate the attack against the Mannerheim Line and seize the Karelian Isthmus before the spring floods arrived. In the aftermath of the first four weeks of the war, Stalin had realized that it would take a larger force and detailed planning to break the Mannerheim Line.

The Soviets planned the offensive as a frontal assault that would span ten miles against the heart of the Mannerheim Line within the Summa Sector. After the Red Army's dismal performance in December, Stalin and his staff reviewed the failures and studied the after-action reports from the previous assaults. The Red Army High Command issued initial guidance to General Timonshenko, Soviet Commander of the Northwestern Front's 7th Army, responsible for the planned offensive. Timonshenko was directed to refrain from speedy, unnecessary forward advances. Instead, his forces were to move slowly and methodically with due regard to security and communications. The mass bunching of formations was not to occur, and the infantry were not to attack until Soviet artillery had destroyed Finnish concrete bunkers at the forward edge of the defense.

For the remainder of January, Timonshenko prepared his troops for the planned offensive. They spent weeks training and introducing new tactics that would prove effective in defeating Finnish defenses. Timonshenko went as far as to recreate a mock version of the Mannerheim Line and defensive obstacles nearly two miles behind the front lines. Soviet forces rehearsed their assault tactics and continued preparations throughout January while Soviet air and ground patrols attacked Finnish targets. Soviet artillery continuously shelled concrete

bunkers, artillery pieces, and strong points of the forward defensive line. Soviet heavy artillery and air pinpointed and destroyed roughly 75 percent of the bunkers in the forward zone, and up to 40 percent of those fortifications deeper within the Mannerheim Line throughout the month of January.³²

Logistical preparations by the Red Army were key to the success of the upcoming operation. The capacity of the railroads coming out of Leningrad to Soviet forward positions expanded and the Soviets constructed new roads and bridges in an effort to speed up logistical resupply. Food, fuel, weapons, munitions, and other combat related supplies for more than 500,000 troops reached the front lines in support of the attack. In total, the Soviets moved over 2,800 artillery guns into position. In one area within the Summa Sector, over 400 Soviet artillery pieces faced a Finnish defense that possessed only 64 artillery pieces.³³ By the end of January, the Soviet 7th Army had amassed nine infantry divisions, five tank brigades, one machine-gun brigade, and ten artillery regiments to the front of the forward position.³⁴ Moreover, the improved tactics, detailed planning, and updated intelligence created a tactical advantage lacking two months prior. The Summa Sector resembled a gigantic time bomb ticking off its final seconds.³⁵ Finnish battle dispositions were as follows:³⁶

- Fourth Division: Located on the right flank of the Mannerheim Line bordering the Gulf of Finland coast.
- Third Division: Located on the left flank of Fourth Division covering the Viipuri Gateway.
- First Division: Located on the left flank of the Third Division.
- Second Division: Located on the left flank of First Division from Lake Muolaa to the Vuoksi Waterway.

- Seventh and Eight Divisions: Covered the extreme left flank of the Mannerheim Line.
- Reserves: Elements of the Fifth, Twenty-first, and Twenty-third Divisions; tasked with strengthening the rear line and anchored to the city of Viipuri.

February 1940 Finnish troop disposition³⁷



New Beginning

The final Soviet preparatory bombardment started on 1 February 1940 and continued for 10 days. The effect was so destructive that the Finnish defenders were physically and psychologically exhausted, drained of warmth, sleep, and morale. As the shelling continued,

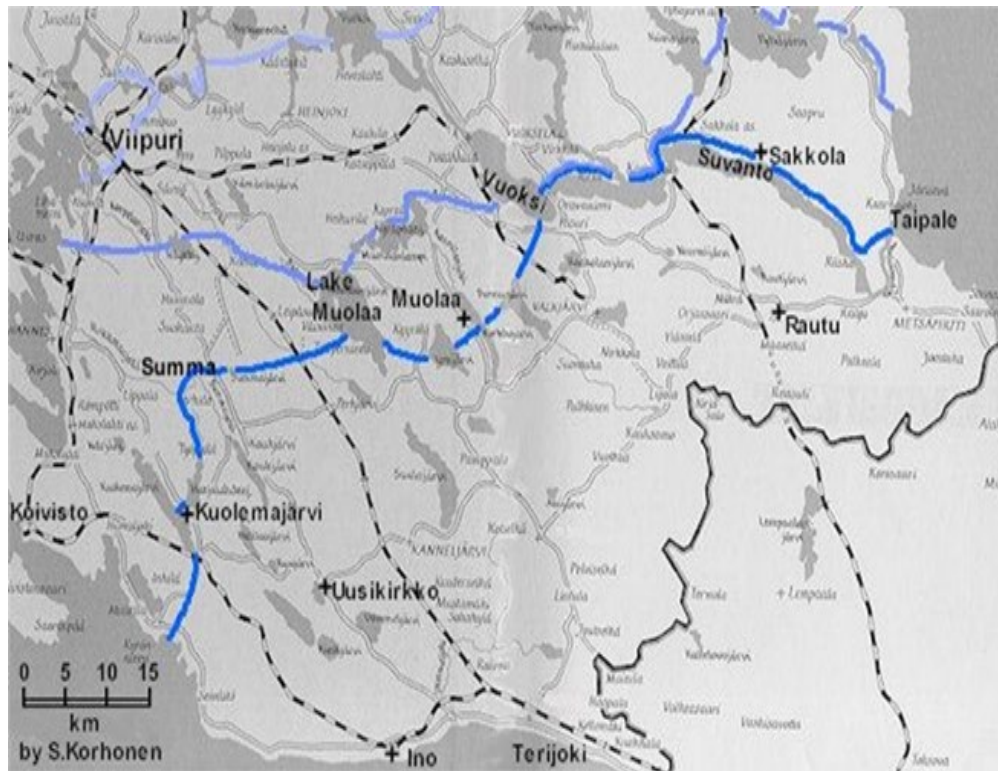
Soviet infantry poured across the forward defensive line in masses. Although they were supported by tanks and armored vehicles, Finnish machine-gunners repelled the attackers. Yet, the advance continued as if there was an infinite number of reinforcements. Psychological and physical exertion took its toll during the first few days of February as the unrelenting artillery barrage rained down on the Summa Sector. The defenders frantically repaired fortifications while transporting food, ammo, and wounded to alternate sites. The shock was so intense that one concrete bunker, which appeared to have sustained only minor damage, housed three dead Finnish soldiers without visible wounds of any kind. The presence of blood coming from their nostrils, ears, and eye-sockets, however, was a sign that the cause of death was concussion from the weight of enemy artillery.³⁸

Throughout the second week of attacks, the Mannerheim Line continued to hold. Still, frontal attacks continued to mount even as the Finns fought back as vicious as they had in December. “As the firing and shelling continued, it was a dance of hell. It was Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Shells bursting and guns firing in a continuous band. Like a veil of sequins which were flashing and flashing, only each one was a Soviet gun.”³⁹ As damage and casualty reports poured into Mannerheim’s headquarters, it became evident that field commanders were desperate for him to deploy the 5th Division in reserve. However, it was Mannerheim’s intent to hold the only remaining reserve force until deployment was absolutely necessary. Mannerheim was convinced that that the pleas for help were of a panicked nature from exhausted men and there was not yet a breach so dangerous that required the commitment of the reserve force.”⁴⁰

On 10 and 11 February, Soviet forces attempted to cross the frozen internal waterways and Gulf of Finland in effort to outflank the right side of the Finnish defenses.⁴¹ However, once the Finns spotted the enemy formation, they unloaded with their coastal batteries creating

massive holes and fractures in the ice. The Soviet forces disappeared in the frigid waters as hundreds of weighed-down Soviets drowned.

Mannerheim Defensive Lines⁴²



- *Dark Blue – Mannerheim Line
- *Lighter Blue – Intermediate Line
- *Light Blue – Real Line

In the middle of the forward zone, in bitter subzero temperatures, Timoshenko deployed 18 fresh divisions and five tank brigades in a last-ditch effort to break through the forward defenses. As a two-hour-long Soviet artillery barrage commenced, the forward defense bunkers shattered and buckled. Thousands of Red Army infantry, supported by Soviet tanks, penetrated the forward defense and advanced toward the Mannerheim Line. The Finnish forces on the Mannerheim Line withdrew to an intermediate defensive position but left behind nearly 1,200 Finnish casualties.

By the evening of 11 February, the Soviet advance had penetrated the Mannerheim Line and secured a major road junction which led to the Finnish intermediate line. On 13 February, a formation of nearly 50 Soviet tanks crashed through the Mannerheim Line. The rolling armor met little resistance as the Soviets immediately gunned down any final attempt by Finnish soldiers to repel the attack. During 14 and 15 February, the Red Army continued its attack causing the remaining defenders to withdraw from the Summa Sector. On 18 February, most of the Soviets had reached the intermediate line as they continued their attack with scores of infantry and armored assaults. On 24 February, as the Red Army closed in on the cities of Viipuri and Helsinki, Mannerheim continued to employ delaying forces in an effort to shore up the defense in a rear line and stall the Soviet advance. By 4 March, the Soviet forces, consisting of 30 rifle divisions, 1,200 armored vehicles, and 2,000 aircraft were tearing at the rear line and coastal defense forces along the Gulf of Finland. Mannerheim issued the order to evacuate all island positions, and the Fifth Division in reserve was deployed to Viipuri to begin to prepare for house-to-house defensive operations. By 11 March, the Finnish defense was rapidly deteriorating, but its forces continued to repel the enemy advance toward Helsinki.

Stalin's forces were denied the remaining kilometers to Helsinki before a cease-fire took effect on 13 March.⁴³ In the remaining days of the conflict, Mannerheim acknowledged the reality of the situation. As the rumors spread throughout the Soviet High Command about international support and military aid scheduled to arrive within days, it was in the Soviet's best interest to halt their forward movement and reach a peace deal as quick as possible. At this juncture, the Finns had not actually lost, and it allowed Finland to be slightly more aggressive during negotiations than if they had waited until the Soviets had reached Helsinki. The peace treaty was approved by the Finnish government once Mannerheim reviewed the terms. Although

the treaty was favorable to the Soviet Union, and the demands were harsher than originally proposed in the fall of 1939, Finland remained a sovereign nation.

The Finnish military began the war with approximately 150,000 men. By 10 March 1940, its casualties were estimated at roughly 75,000 and they were defending a line twice as long as it had originally held.⁴⁴ While there has been no official figure released on Soviet casualties, it is estimated that the Winter War consumed between 230,000 to 270,000 Soviets and wounded another 200,000 to 300,000.⁴⁵

The Continuation War

While Finland celebrated the peace treaty and its continued independence, the enthusiasm was short-lived. From 25 June 1941 until 4 September 1944, Finland fought the Soviets again in what was termed the “Continuation War.” In an attempt to regain the ceded portions of its territory that was lost in the 1940 peace treaty, Finland, aided by Nazi Germany, invaded the Soviet Union. Finnish forces advanced beyond the 1939 Russian-Finnish border on the Karelian Isthmus in an attempt to dislodge the Soviets on their territory. However, the Finns quickly discovered the Red Army’s numerical and technical superiority. The initial strength of Soviet forces thrown against the Finns included 450,000 men, 10,000 artillery pieces and mortars, over 800 tanks, and more than 2,000 aircraft.⁴⁶ The Finnish strength amounted to 260,000 men, 1,930 artillery pieces, 110 tanks, and 348 aircraft.⁴⁷

The Soviets were on pace to end the war with complete occupation of Finnish territory after defeating the invading forces of Germany. However, Moscow became more interested in its pursuit of Berlin and other Baltic states rather than the conquest of Finland.⁴⁸ As a result, a

final peace treaty between Finland and the Soviet Union was signed in September of 1944. The terms again proved harsh for Finland. The 1940 border between Finland and the Soviet Union was restored and Finland was required to pay over \$300 million in reparations.⁴⁹ Additionally, the treaty called for the cessation of Finland's northern Petsamo peninsula, and limitations were placed on Finland's military personnel strengths and weapons.

The casualties which resulted from the Continuation War amounted to nearly 63,000 Finns and 23,000 Germans, compared to approximately 300,000 Soviets. However, the Soviets proved that the advantage went to the side with numerical and weapon superiority. The Red Army's military strength and brute force allowed them to steamroll the Finnish and German forces which redeemed their embarrassment of the Winter War.

Conclusion

1939's Winter War represented an attempt by the Soviets to regain the territory it had lost at the end of World War I. For them, controlling the Karelian Isthmus was the key to protecting Leningrad against an invading force. Since Finland's troop strength was inadequate to defend the entire border, the focus was on protecting the Karelian Isthmus which they perceived to be the Soviet's most likely avenue of approach.

One of the main factors that enabled the Finns to repel the attack for 105 days was the superb leadership under Marshall Carl Gustav Mannerheim. For this, Mannerheim continues to be a life celebrated throughout Finland. There continues to stand a statue of him on horseback outside the Finnish parliament building. He is pointed neither towards or away from the politicians within the building, but as though he is on a path of his own. Mannerheim's

experience in the Finnish and Soviet military enabled him to make sound strategic and operational decisions during the stand on the Karelian Isthmus. In a 1940 speech broadcasted on the radio and printed and attached to the walls of churches throughout Finland, Mannerheim told Finns everywhere what he thought of his fellow countrymen:

“I have fought on many battlefields but I have not seen your equals as warriors. I am proud of you as if you were my own children, as proud of the man from the northern tundras as of the sons of the broad plains of Ostrobothnia, the forests of Karelia, the smiling tracts of Savo, the rich farms of Häme and Satakunta, the lands of Uusimaa and South-West Finland with their whispering birches. I am as proud of the factory worker and the son of the poor cottage as I am of the rich man’s contribution of life and limb.”

In addition to Mannerheim’s leadership, the Finnish soldiers innovated and adapted throughout the conflict in order to gain the advantage over their numerically superior opponent. Mannerheim’s philosophy of decentralized execution proved invaluable in their ability to seize the initiative and achieve surprise against their enemy. This strategy was contrary to Soviet doctrine in which every tactical decision required approval by the Soviet High Command before taking action. Langdon-Davies explains that Finnish military training deliberately emphasized the quality of every soldier possessing the ability to think for themselves. He writes, “in a patrol of twelve or less there is a leader, but every other member of the patrol is deliberately trained to be able to take up the leadership if the leader is killed.”⁵⁰ The Finnish soldiers learned quickly

that in order to defeat the Red Army, they must adapt and innovate while remaining committed to Mannerheim's intent.

Mannerheim's concept was to concentrate on the ways in which Finland's geography and national pride could be developed into assets rather than liabilities.⁵¹ In the months prior to the war, infantry training employed a new doctrine and curriculum. Heavy emphasis was placed on adaptation to Finnish terrain, small-unit operations, and guerrilla-style warfare. Additional skillsets such as marksmanship, mental agility, woodcraft, orienteering, camouflage, and physical fitness were also refined.⁵²

The most advantageous skill, however, was the Finns' ability to survive the harsh environmental conditions in the perilous wilds of the Karelian Isthmus. Finnish soldiers used the cold, the snow, and long hours of darkness to their advantage.⁵³ They endured subzero degree temperatures maneuvering often times by the light of the moon due to the limited hours of daylight from December through March.

For the Finns, winter is a way of life. The economy, culture, and livelihood are reliant on the Finns' ability to live and thrive in the subarctic environment for long periods of time. Most Finns have grown accustomed to building villages and infrastructure in the unforgiving conditions. The mastery of woodsmanship and orienteering starts as a child, and as they reach adulthood, most Finns become avid cross-country skiers and year-round campers and hikers. Finns, in short, are able to adapt to their environment because they feel as if they are part of it. While this feeling exists during peacetime, it was amplified during the Winter War.⁵⁴

The battles that took place on the Karelian Isthmus provide examples of battlefield ingenuity and tactical proficiency that can be applied to today's military training. Additionally, the Winter War provides a case study of how an ill-equipped, outnumbered military force

overcame challenges and hindered the Red Army's invasion. Studying aspects of the Winter War, such as the effects of cold weather and arctic terrain, provide today's military leaders an example in the importance of cold weather training while preparing for arctic operations. Langdon-Davies writes, "Equipment and armament are not the only structures which reveal adaptation to the harsh environment. There is also the brain and general nervous system of the soldier. The close adaptation to the environment which was seen characteristic of Finnish military forces in every other particular, extends to their mental education."⁵⁵

NOTES

¹ Trotter, William R. *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War of 1939-40*. New York: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991.

² Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

³ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

⁴ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

⁵ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

⁶ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

⁷ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

⁸ Chew, Allen F. *The White Death: The Epic of the Soviet-Finish Winter War*. Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1971.

⁹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Finland-Soviet_Union_Oktober-November_1939.PNG

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shelling_of_Mainila#/media/File:Mainila.png

¹¹ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

¹² Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

¹³ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

¹⁴ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

¹⁵ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

¹⁶ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

¹⁷ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

¹⁸ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

¹⁹ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

²⁰ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

²¹ Jordan, Ulla. <https://ullajordan.wordpress.com/winter-war-maps/>

²² https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karelian_Isthmus_Finnish_positions_1939.png

²³ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

²⁴ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

²⁵ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

²⁶ Korhonen, Sami. H. E. <http://www.winterwar.com/Battles/Kelja.htm>

²⁷ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

²⁸ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

²⁹ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*.

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- ³⁰ Chew, The White Death.
- ³¹ Chew, The White Death.
- ³² Chew, The White Death.
- ³³ Chew, The White Death.
- ³⁴ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ³⁵ Chew, The White Death.
- ³⁶ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ³⁷ Citino, Robert, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/white-death>
- ³⁸ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ³⁹ Voices of the First World War: The First Day of the Somme, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-the-first-day-of-the-somme>
- ⁴⁰ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ⁴¹ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ⁴² Korhonen, Sami. H. E. <https://winterwar.com/M-Line/M-Line2.htm>
- ⁴³ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ⁴⁴ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ⁴⁵ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ⁴⁶ Chew, The White Death.
- ⁴⁷ Chew, The White Death.
- ⁴⁸ Chew, The White Death.
- ⁴⁹ Peck, Michael. "How Finland Lost World War II to the Soviets, But Won Peace." The National Interest. August 19, 2016. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-finland-lost-world-war-ii-the-soviets-won-peace-17412>.
- ⁵⁰ Langdon-Davies, Invasion in the Snow.
- ⁵¹ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ⁵² Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ⁵³ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ⁵⁴ Trotter, A Frozen Hell.
- ⁵⁵ Langdon-Davies, Invasion in the Snow.

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