

The Winter War The Soviet Union's Invasion of Finland (1939-40)

The Second World War was a vast conflict with hard-fought clashes in places such as Stalingrad, Normandy, North Africa, Italy and the Pacific Theater. These operations are discussed in a hundreds of books and can be found on an infinite number of websites. Their names conjure up noble images of heroism and the sacrifice as well as the more sobering imagery of destruction and death. For 105 days, the tiny nation of Finland fought a war that typically merits only a footnote in a history book, or a passing remark in a WWII documentary. Taking on the vast manpower of the Soviet army, the Finns put up a fanatical defense of their homeland, inflicting horrific casualties on the invading Soviet army. Eventually the overwhelming number of Soviet troops and tanks sent into Finland forced the Finns to sue for peace, but they walked away from the conflict with their much bigger neighbor with their independence and national pride intact. Their struggle influenced the landscape and direction of the entire world war that followed, and perhaps the outcome as well.

The winds of war were beginning to drift across the world during 1930's. Japan sought to secure territory to increase its sources of raw materials and expand its empire. Hitler's power and ambitious plans were ever growing storm clouds on the European horizon, threatening to overtake the entire continent and dragging a very reluctant America into the fray. The Russian Bear in the East also sought to exert its influence, all the while casting a wary eye towards Hitler's Germany and the conflict Stalin knew would eventually come to pass between them. When Germany conquered Poland in 1939 and introduced the world to a very new type of warfare, the Blitzkrieg, it struck the match that engulfed the entire world in the flames of conflict. The largely uninhabited country of Finland could have never realized that Hitler's success in Poland would serve as inspiration for Stalin's invasion plans of their country only three months later. Within a year, convinced of the Soviets military vulnerabilities from their struggles against the Finns, Hitler chose to launch Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union, in the spring of 1941. What he did not realize is that the lessons the Soviets learned from their struggles against the Finns in The Winter War would help prepare Stalin and his military to push the Wehrmacht from Russian soil, and combined with the other Allied nations, help defeat Germany and its Axis counterparts.

On August 23rd 1939 the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a mutual non-aggression treaty, was signed between Germany and the Soviet Union. This treaty included a secret agreement to divide the independent countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states into 'spheres of influence' with Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Finland falling in the Soviet sphere. Even with their treaty in place, Stalin did not trust Hitler, and sought to solidify the buffer zones between the two nations. Representatives of the Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian and Finnish governments were quickly called to Moscow. Given the relative weakness of their positions, all but Finland quickly signed "mutual assistance" treaties with

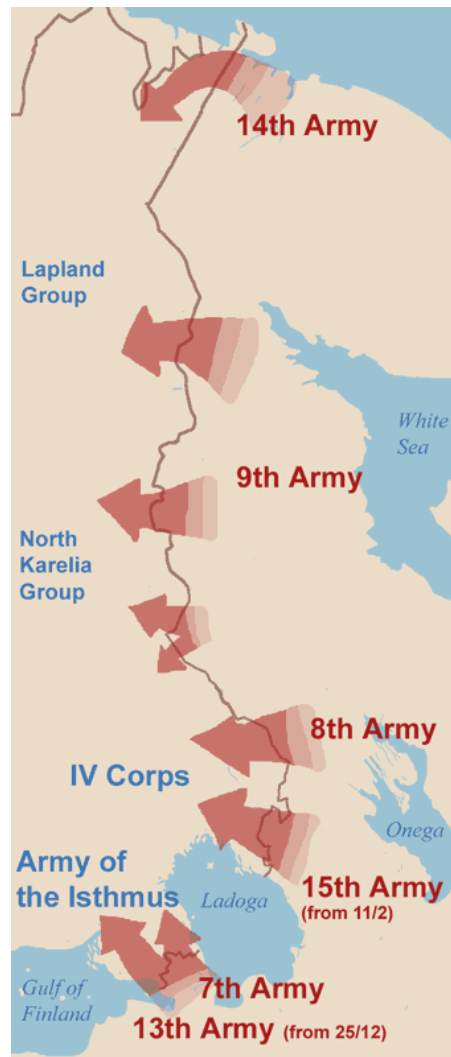
the Soviet Union. These treaties allowed the placement of Soviet troops, aircraft and naval units in their countries, basically transforming the nations into Soviet satellites, absorbed into Stalin's empire. Despite a ten year non-aggression treaty between Finland and the Soviet Union signed in 1932 and reaffirmed in 1934, the Soviet government put increasing diplomatic demands on Finland to cede vast territories on the Karelian Isthmus close to Leningrad, the destruction of all fortifications within that region, as well as the cession other northern lands and islands in the Gulf of Finland. The result of this would have been the abandonment of Finland's strongest line of defense, the Mannerheim line, leaving the country virtually defenseless.



The Mannerheim Line in the Karelian Isthmus

Stalin, rebuffed by Finland's government for several months, angrily broke off negotiations in mid-November and began plans for the invasion of Finland. As Finnish units began to prepare for the war most felt was inevitable, an artillery bombardment on the Soviet side of the line near the border post of Mainila reportedly killed four Soviet soldiers and wounded nine. Clearly as a pretext for war, the Soviets angrily accused the Finnish military of the aggression, despite investigations that indicated that the shelling came from behind the Soviet lines. Stalin quickly dissolved the non-aggression treaty and broke off all diplomatic relations with Finland. Having witnessed Hitler's successful invasion of Poland earlier in the year, Soviet leaders were convinced of a quick and decisive victory, with some bold estimates that the entire operation would take less than two weeks. On the morning of November 30th, 1939, the Soviet Union unleashed its vast military might on its defiant neighbor. Soviet medium bombers attacked the Finnish capital of Helsinki, and immense Soviet resources in men and material surged across the entire length of the border in an attempt to crush the overmatched Finnish military and bring the defiant Finns in line. Instead of the rapid Blitzkrieg type victory Stalin's high command predicted, the ill-prepared and poorly led Soviet Army marched into a frozen, desolate meat-grinder, learning the

meaning of “Sisu”, a Finnish term that could be roughly translated as strength of will, determination, perseverance, and acting rationally in the face of adversity. Instead of fleeing from the vast Soviet onslaught, the Finns fought bravely, using their knowledge of the land, and pulling from their fierce national pride and ‘sisu’ to inflict massive casualties on the invaders, and earning themselves the nickname of The White Death. The Winter War had begun.



Soviet Invasion Routes into Finland

Along with the bombardment of Helsinki, four Soviet army groups surged across the entire length of the Finnish border with an estimated 600,000 troops, several thousand tanks and artillery. The 7th Army, composed of 12-14 divisions with three tank brigades had the main objective to push across the Karelian Isthmus, taking Finland's second largest city, Viipuri, after smashing through Finland's strongest line of defense, the Mannerheim line. That accomplished, the plan was to push westwards towards the capital city of Helsinki. The 8th Army was four divisions and two tank brigades strong. Its objective was to negotiate around the northern part of Lake Ladoga, to turn against the relatively weak northern flank of the Finnish forces defending the Isthmus, then push through to

attack the Mannerheim line from the rear while the 7th Army attacked the line from the front. In one of the few Finnish miscalculations of the Winter War, the Soviets were able to amass far more military strength on this front than was expected, and caused severe complications in the execution of the rest of the Karelian defense. The Soviet 9th Army, comprised of five rifle divisions and a meager assortment of armor and supporting weaponry, was charged with pushing as far west as possible, cutting Finland in half “at the waist”, and severing all lines of communication with neighboring Sweden. As 9th Army received nowhere near the support that the other Soviet armies possessed, and was forced to traverse a widely spread and poor road network, its performance turned out to be the worst of the entire war for the Soviets. The 14th army, three divisions with weak armored support, was charged with preventing any potential help from reaching Finland by taking the arctic port town of Petsamo, then cutting the northern communication lines within the city of Rovaniemi. The Soviet plan was a simple one, push hard into Finland with overwhelming force, smash through the Mannerheim line, capture the capital of Helsinki and push through to the border of Sweden. Had the initial invasion plan been implemented more carefully and with better preparation, it may have been successful, but when Stalin purged his military of most of its officers and senior NCOs in the 1930s, replacing them with more politically loyal, but far less experienced commanders and their accompanying ‘commissars’, he deeply wounded the Soviet army’s ability to wage an effective campaign. This, coupled with the Soviet ill-preparedness for the brutal Finnish winter conditions, their underestimating of how fiercely that the Finns would fight to defend their country, as well as the overall poor training and morale of the soldiers, especially after they began to take heavy losses, led the Soviets to plunge head-long into disaster. Rather than rolling across the country, the masses of Soviet soldiers and tanks clogged the primitive roads that ran westward through Finland, becoming bogged down through the dense forests, deep snow and brutal cold, leaving themselves as opportune targets for the guerrilla-style tactics the Finns utilized.

Opposing the Soviet forces were an estimated 170,000 Finnish troops and Home Guard units, led by former Russian Army Officer Baron Gustav von Mannerheim. As the invasion fell upon Finland, Mannerheim took command of the Finnish military and put together a defensive plan that would slow, but not completely stop the Soviet army. Mannerheim believed that by holding off the Soviets as long as they could, especially on the Karelian Isthmus, Finland could buy time for the outside world to come to their aid. The Finns would put up a fierce defense along the Mannerheim line, fight small scale battles, and employ hit-and-run tactics, ambushes, harassing actions, sniper fire. They would utilize their knowledge of the terrain and their mobility on skis to inflict massive amounts of casualties on the road-bound Soviets. Without much in the way of artillery, air support or anti-tank guns, the Finns made use of the infamous Molotov cocktail as well as dynamite “stick charges” to immobilize and destroy Soviet tanks. The infantry possessed weapons that were equal to that of their Soviet counterparts, as well as something their enemy did not have, the Suomi submachine gun.

Regarded as one of the best submachine guns of World War Two, the Suomi was the perfect weapon for the Winter War. With its high rate of fire and 70 round ammunition drum, the Suomi was a fire storm that could unleash an impressive amount of death on the stacked up Soviet formations and trench-lines. The most effective weapon, however, was the Finnish ski units who could move much more quickly, and were able to traverse long distances to get behind enemy lines and flanks, circling around the bogged-down Soviets as they slogged through several feet of snow or camped for the night, huddling around their fires and field kitchens. The darkly-uniformed Soviet soldiers stood out against the snowy landscape and made perfect targets for snipers. Soviet soldiers feared night patrols into the forests for the 'White Death' seemed to lurk everywhere, and many men seemed to simply disappear into thin air.

As the Finnish forces trapped, then encircled large formations of Soviet troops, 'mottis' were formed; these pockets of Soviet troops, often enormous concentrations, would hunker down in place and attempt to defend themselves as the encroaching Finns slowly squeezed the life out of them. Countless Soviet troops lost their lives either being trapped within a motti, or attempting to break out from one, culminating during the month long battle of Suomussalmi where the Soviet 44th Division was ambushed along a forest road, then blocked into place by the Finnish 9th Division, cutting the Soviet withdrawal route. The 44th was systematically cut up into smaller units and utterly destroyed. Over 23,000 troops were killed. The Finns, who suffered much smaller losses, captured huge amounts of equipment and weapons. The embarrassing lack of progress and the staggering losses forced Stalin to replace his leadership in February of 1940. Semyon Timoshenko took command of the Soviet forces in Finland; in doing so, he disavowed himself from the losses he knew the Soviets would have to suffer in order to finally defeat the Finns. He launched a massive assault through the Karelian Isthmus on February 1st that finally was able to breach the vaulted Mannerheim line on the 11th, at the cost of heavy casualties. The Finns dropped back to secondary, then tertiary lines of defense, but by the end of February into early March, could not continue to replace the troops they were losing. From March 1st through the 5th, fierce battles were raging in and around the city of Viipuri. Mannerheim was forced to commit his final reserves into the battle, but at this point the tide had irreversibly turned against the Finns. On March 5th, Mannerheim reported to his superiors that further resistance could not be sustained and that the situation was grave. Finnish representatives traveled to Moscow to sue for peace, and the cease-fire went into effect on March 13th. The valiant Finns' fight was over.



Finnish Territories ceded to the Soviet Union after the Winter War

The treaty signed between the Soviet Union and Finland ceded most of the territory that was demanded in 1939, about 10% of the country, including Viipuri and much of the industrialized sections of Finland, but the Finns were able to keep their sovereignty. Estimates of the losses on both sides vary wildly, especially that of the Soviet casualties; former Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev claimed in his memoirs that the Soviets lost a million men during the Winter War. Other more realistic estimates range from 100,000 to around 150,000 Soviet dead, with the Finns losing somewhere around 20,000. The Finns would go on to fight the Soviets in the Continuation War, acting as a co-belligerent nation with Nazi Germany starting in 1941. The Finns didn't align themselves with Hitler's ideology; they merely wished to reclaim their lost lands from the Soviet Union. When Germany fell, the Finns lost all of their territory again and were forced to pay the Soviet Union indemnities. Despite these disappointments, the Finns played an enormous role in the Second World War. Their struggle against overwhelming odds set the stage for epic struggles the rest of the world would experience, and the lessons learned during the Winter War would impact the course of the war.

Chronology of the Winter War

1939

<i>November 13</i>	Negotiations between Finland and Moscow are broken off. Plans for an invasion are ordered by Stalin.
<i>November 26</i>	An alleged Finnish shelling of Soviet positions near the border post of Mainila occurs, staged by the USSR as a pretext for war. The Soviets claim 4 killed and 9 wounded in the incident. Finnish investigations into the shelling prove that it came from behind the Soviet line.
<i>November 27</i>	The Soviet Union dissolves the nonaggression treaty with Finland.
<i>November 29</i>	Moscow formally breaks diplomatic ties with Finland.
<i>November 30</i>	Soviet army invades Finland with ~19 divisions and 5 tank brigades. Finnish capital of Helsinki is bombed by Soviet SB-2 medium bombers. Total Soviet strength is estimated at ~600,000 men. Former Imperial Russian army officer and leader of the Finnish Government forces during the Finnish Civil War of 1918, Baron Carl Gustav Mannerheim becomes Commander-in-Chief of all Finnish forces.
<i>December 1</i>	A Soviet puppet government, The Democratic Republic of Finland, is established in the captured village of Terijoki.
<i>December 7</i>	The Battle of Suomussalmi begins as the Soviet army reaches the Karelian Isthmus, the main line of Finnish resistance.
<i>December 11</i>	Soviet 9th Army advances on the city of Oulu. Soviet 163rd division is cut off. Finnish 9th division begins counterattacks.
<i>December 12</i>	Battle of Tolvajärvi. 139th and 75th Divisions reach Tolvajärvi and are attacked by 7 Finnish battalions. An estimated 5,000 Soviet soldiers are killed.
<i>December 22</i>	After taking huge losses, Soviet forces pull back from Mannerheim line. Finns launch a poorly organized counter-attack with negligible gains.
<i>December 29</i>	Soviet 163rd Division at Suomussalmi is surrounded, attacked, and broken. Finnish forces capture 11 tanks, 25 artillery pieces, and 150 trucks.
<i>January 8</i>	Soviet 44th Division is trapped on a road and is systematically cut up and destroyed. Soviet losses are estimated at ~27,000 killed. Finnish forces suffer less than 3000 casualties.
<i>February 1</i>	Russians begin all-out offensive on the Karelian Isthmus under their new commander, General Semyon Timoshenko. Temperatures reach thirty below zero.
<i>February 11</i>	Soviet breakthrough of the Mannerheim line in the Lahde sector. In the following days the breach is widened. Finnish forces withdraw and take up new defensive positions.
<i>February 13</i>	Soviet forces break through near Summa taking heavy losses in the process.
<i>February 24</i>	Soviets seize island fortress of Koivisto in the Gulf of Finland.
<i>March 1-5</i>	Fierce battles in and around the city of Viipuri; Mannerheim commits last of reserve forces to the battle.

<i>March 5</i>	Mannerheim reports that further resistance is no longer possible.
<i>March 5-8</i>	Finnish delegation travels to Moscow and sues for peace.
<i>March 12</i>	Russo-Finn peace treaty is signed.
<i>March 13</i>	Cease-fire takes effect at noon, after a final extensive bombardment by Soviet artillery.

1941

<i>June 22</i>	Beginning of Continuation War. Finland attacks the USSR as a cobelligerent with Nazi Germany.
<i>December 6</i>	Great Britain declares war on Finland, but does little to prosecute the declaration.

1944

<i>August 4</i>	Mannerheim becomes 6 th President of Finland.
<i>September 19</i>	Soviet-Finnish Armistice. Finns lose all lands re-gained during Continuation War and are forced to pay reparations to the USSR.

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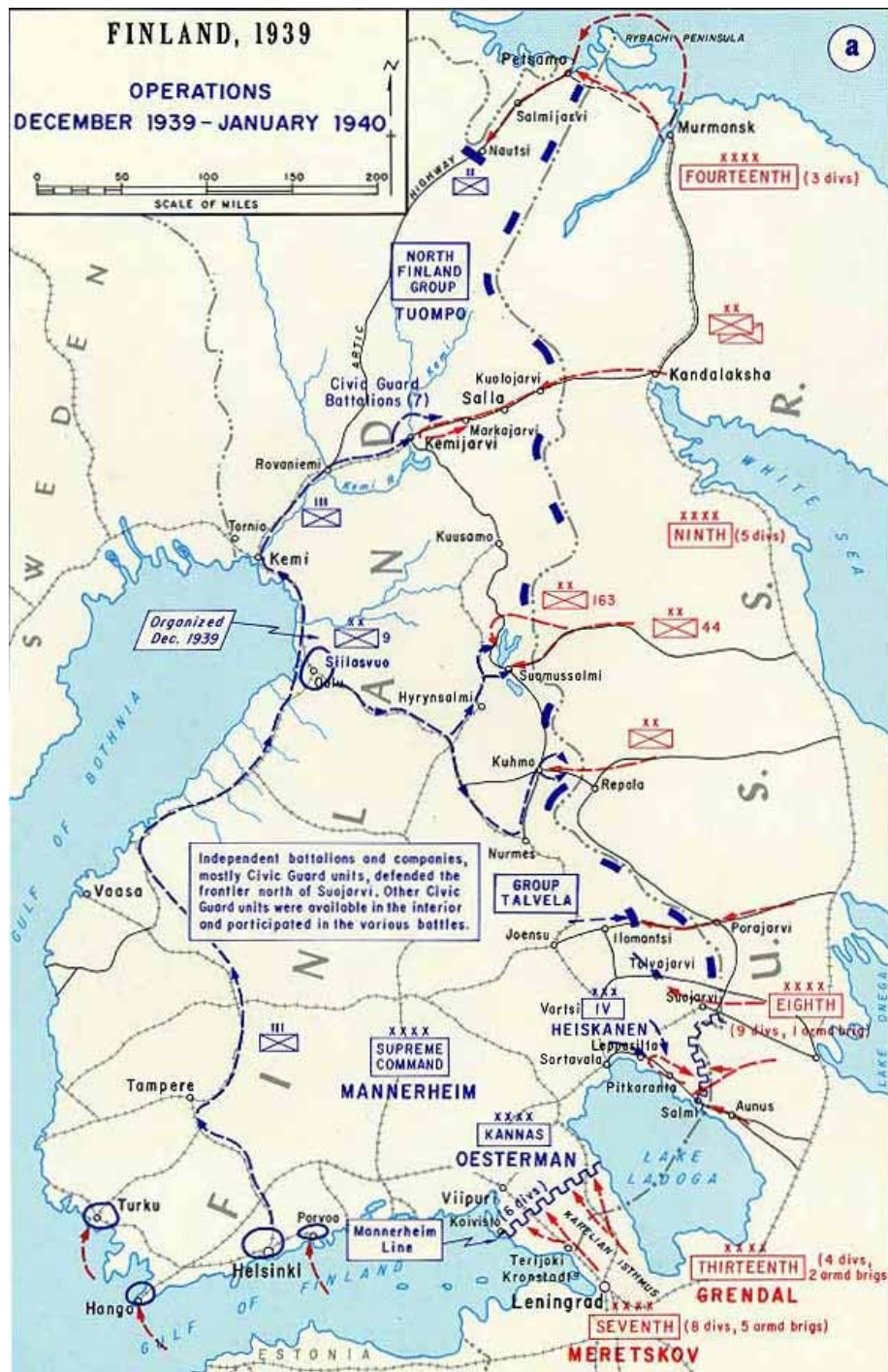
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Winter War Scenario Designer's Notes

The Russo-Finnish conflict of 1939-40; "The Winter War" or "Talvisota" as Finns called it is virtually a forgotten war. There are very few books written in English, most of the historical studies are naturally in Scandinavian languages such as Swedish, Finnish or Russian. The best english work on the Winter War is William Trotter's "A Frozen Hell". Although it lacks the tactical scale Squad Battle designers and players need, Trotter's book is a solid starting point for any wargamer interested in this area. There are certainly more english books written on the subject and some very well made websites like Sami Karhonen's "Winter War". However as a designer, I noticed that such operational level sources don't have the level of depth we need to recreate many tactical situations. I am thankful to my Swedish friend Set Karlsson who entered at a point during the development and provided invaluable sources in Swedish; sources an english reader can't find anywhere. With Set's help we had access to the huge Scandinavian literature written on the conflict. I am also grateful to the online translators which opened the doors for many Russian re-enactment groups working on the Winter War.

The Winter War is very little known in the wargaming community. An ordinary wargamer possibly knows the names such as Mannerheim Line, the Finnish victory at Suomussalmi, guerilla raids conducted by the highly mobile Finnish ski troops or the unimaginative Russian tactics totally inadequate in obscured terrain and arctic climate. At least most of my knowledge was restricted to these when Rich Hamilton offered the task of completing the title about one year ago that had been started by Frank Harmon. However, after I started studying the conflict I was really surprised that there were many unknown aspects of the war. Comparing the sectors such as Summa, Taipale and Kollaa, guerilla raids were actually sideplays in the Winter War. Most of the conflict was indeed dominated by trench warfare where thousands of troops engaged in a bloody struggle where artillery was the god of war. Actually, Russian artillery barrages in the battles like Taipale River or Summa are comparable to the battles of Somme or Verdun. In the vital sectors of the Karelian Isthmus, Russian command committed hundreds of artillery pieces and thousands of shells to overwhelm the stiff Finnish resistance. Naturally Finns had never received sufficient amounts of artillery ammunition. They developed elaborate methods of artillery doctrine which were to be the basis for armies fighting in the upcoming Russo-German conflict. The scenarios that recreate the attritional warfare can be played in Taipale, Summa or Kollaa.

While Finnish troops conducted an attritional trench warfare and static defense in the Karelian Isthmus (the Mannerheim Line); the unpleasant surprise of the war was the strong Russian presence in the Middle and Northern parts of the country. In some sectors Finns stood against one or two Russian rifle division with a battalion. However the obscure character of the northern Karelian terrain helped the Finns conduct a special style of mobile warfare. The Finnish plan was simple; check and delay the enemy spearheads with minimum forces, attack its rear and flanks with light and mobile elements. Those raids seldom targeted the destruction of the enemy forces; rather they were attempts to isolate and exhaust the enemy who was in a hostile environment with an over-extended supply line. In those isolated pockets (Mottis) Russian troops endured the worst examples of starvation and frostbite. Most of the mottis were too powerful to be overcome by Finnish assaults; however their real enemy was time which brought hunger and cold; not to mention continuous harassing guerilla raids. Those more mobile battles can be fought in scenarios like Suomussalmi, Petsamo and Ladoga Karelia.



An important decision we had to make was including the 1941 year of the conflict when German-Finnish troops counterattacked and outflanked the Leningrad defenses during the Barbarossa Campaign. This period is known as the “Continuation War”. After some studying and discussion we decided to include the Finnish attack of 1941. The year 1941 was dominated by the Axis attack on the terrain that Russia invaded after the Winter War and most of the military situation was fluid all along the frontline from Karelia to Petsamo. The period between 1942 and 1944 was characterized by trench warfare where very little military action occurred. The Red Army was preoccupied with the fighting against the Germans and the Finns had little motivation to advance beyond the Russian frontier. The Russian attack of 1944 was way out of the title’s scope in terms of weapons systems and organizations. Therefore we included the 1941 year of the “Continuation War”. There are also scenarios where German troops fought against the Russian elements. As players will realize those battles were not as successful as the Blitzkrieg of the 1940 and 1941. German troops which were trained to fight a mechanized mobile warfare struggled in the broken terrain of northern Finland. An

experience German soldiers were to go through in the upcoming four years of the Eastern Front, especially in the Army Group North Sector.

As they play the scenarios, wargamer friends will notice how climate and terrain defined the tactical challenges both sides faced. Low visibility and obscured terrain generally limited the infantry fights to close quarters where suppression was more important than fire power and effective range. Russian troops which were equipped with long range rifles especially suffered in such terrain. The performance of the Finnish "Suomi" submachine gun, was notable at the tactical level. Finnish troops never had submachineguns in big quantities during the conflict but their usage of the weapon showed Russians the importance of rapidfire in rugged terrain. The Russian military establishment learned the lesson from the Finns and ordered the production of PPD submachine guns. Those weapons contributed to the Russian soldier's high performance after 1942 in historic battles such as Leningrad, Sevastopol, Stalingrad and Berlin.

Another aspect the Winter War put on the stage was the improved use of artillery. The Finns led the way with these improved tactics during the entire conflict. The rugged terrain and low level of ammunition forced new tactics. In most cases, Finnish troops designed carefully planned killing zones where artillery was zeroed. Machinegun emplacements directed Russian troops into such killing zones where short but intense artillery barrages caused enormous casualties on the advancing troops. Russians too learned the new role of artillery from the early defeats of Taipale and Summa. In 1940, they developed rolling barrages that provided close support for the advancing assault troops. Slowly Russian artillery methods evolved from crude operations into refined practices that paid attention to the realities of tactical infantry warfare. Those methods proved to be the king of the battle in the offensives of 1943 and 1944 that destroyed the fighting power of the Wehrmacht.

In many aspects the Russo-Finnish conflict can be seen as part of the Eastern Front. Its challenges and resolutions paved the way for the technological, tactical and organizational improvements of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army. It also provided invaluable insights in terms of wargaming designing, especially for future projects that will cover more battles from the Eastern Front. We do hope fellow wargamers will enjoy the title as we did while creating it.

Regards
Ozgur Budak

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