

Outnumbered 3 to 1:

Tragedy and Triumph in the Winter War

Alicia Socia

Junior Division

Historical Paper

Paper Length: 2,447

"Since we cannot move Leningrad... then we must move the border."

-Robert Edwards, The Winter War: Russia's Invasion of Finland, 1939-1940

The Soviet Union's leader Joseph Stalin thought that very thing. Since Leningrad couldn't be moved then the border with Finland would have to be pushed back and that's how the Winter War began. The Winter War was one of the most brutal battles in history, but it only lasted for 105 days. Many people think the winter war had no real importance to World War II, but in fact it had a tremendous impact on both Russia, Finland and the rest of the world. The Soviet Union expected an easy victory but they, and the rest of the world, were surprised to see the Finns defend themselves using old guns, skis and their rugged terrain to their advantage. The Red Army went into Finland expecting a quick victory but little did they know that the next 105 days were going to be some of the worst days they had ever experienced.

The War begins (Tragedy)

In early modern history, Finland was a colony of Imperial Tsarist Russia. Finland and Russia shared a border for hundreds of years and interaction was relatively peaceful, until the year of 1939. Finns were allowed to serve in Russian military and were given full rights as Russian subjects. After the Russian royal family, the Romanovs, were overthrown by Bolshevik communists in 1917, the Finns declared Finland independent in 1918. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, and the Soviet

Union and Germany signed the non-aggression pact dividing Poland, World War II began.

After the non-aggression pact the Soviet Union coerced Finland to let Soviet garrisons on their territory. Joseph Stalin wanted to expand his territory. Finland feared Soviet expansion, and the Soviet Union feared Finland would let itself be used as a base where enemies such as Germany could attack Russia. Stalin demanded that Russians would be allowed to station troops in certain areas of Finland. Also, that the Russo-Finnish border on the Karelian Isthmus (entire territory of St. Petersburg) would be moved 20 miles northwest so St. Petersburg would have security against a German attack. In addition to expanding the border Stalin also wanted the Finns to give islands in the gulf of Finland, so the Russians could gain territory to build a naval base.

To get the territory Stalin wanted, the Soviets offered Finns Russian territory, but the Finns turned down the offer because they were suspicious of Soviet motives.

Finland refused and resisted negotiations from the Soviets because they wanted to keep their independence that they earned in 1918. The Soviet Union demanded concessions of Finland, but Finland delayed in order to use the time to build an army and petition Sweden and the Western allies for help. Finally after failed negotiations the Soviet Red Army invaded Finland with half a million troops. The Red Army crossed Finland's border on November 30, 1939 beginning the Winter War. Finland was completely outnumbered, and outgunned, which was a huge disadvantage for Finland. Many assumed that Russia would gain their precious land. Stalin expected his Red

Army to make a land barrier between St. Petersburg and Germany. Little did Stalin know this war would be a lot more difficult than he anticipated.

War in the Freezing Cold (Triumph)

Skiing was Finland's national pastime and they were used to their rugged and difficult terrain. Although the Soviet Union was a big army, they were not as skilled in the harsh weather. Soviets were taught to shoot their rifles while standing upright, while Finns were taught to fire rifles lying down, which proved to be more efficient because they could hide behind trenches while shooting. Finland's territory had lots of wilderness and very rugged terrain. They had dense forests, lakes, and swamps. Because the Finns were completely used to this kind of weather and rough land, they knew to dress properly with warm clothes. Many Finns wore long white coats and so many layers the only piece of skin that was showing was their eyes.

The Red Army on the other hand was not prepared for this harsh winter weather. The freezing winter affected their soldiers severely. They could not deal with Finland's terrain and climate. Many of them froze to death. Also, many Russian soldiers wore thin green and brown clothing so they were cold and easily spotted on snowy terrain, unlike the Finns in their heavy white gear who blended in with the snowy landscape. Neither could the USSR soldiers travel fast because they were slowed down by vehicles that didn't function in the snow. Moreover, Finnish skier troops used guerilla tactics on the Soviets and used landscapes to conduct hit and run attacks on the invaders.

The year of the Winter war was said to be an exceptionally cold winter. Many Soviets died from frostbite, some units losing ten percent of their soldiers. Finns excelled at using the climate and terrain to their advantage. The bitter winter and forests became allies to the Finns. They wore face masks that covered their entire face to protect them from the sub-zero arctic cold. In January temperatures were -40 degrees fahrenheit and soldiers killed in battle were frozen solid. Roads too were buried under ten feet of snow and it made it very hard for Soviets to advance. Vehicles and tanks could only advance after troops marched ahead of them stomping on the snow. Conversely, Finns used reindeer to haul their equipment.

Soviet tents were also not helpful and couldn't keep out the bitter cold. Likewise, Russian weapons were not equipped for such cold weather and often they malfunctioned. Engines too would freeze and vehicles couldn't move thus delaying attacks. This freezing weather played a vital role for the Finns because without it the Soviet, may have easily won that war. While It was a tragedy that the Soviet Union invaded Finland and completely outnumbered the Finns, the Finns were able to use the weather and knowledge of the terrain to their advantage and avoided being overrun by Soviets which was a major triumph for the much smaller nation.

Finland's "puppet" Government during the war

The government in Finland was run by Finns who were on the side of Russia because Finns who had escaped to the Soviet Union in 1918 formed the people's

government of Finland. Many Finns called the government a “puppet government” because it was set up in Finland using Finns sympathetic to Soviet communism. This people’s government never came to power in Finland because the Soviets couldn’t defeat the Finnish army.

The Mannerheim Line is Breached

The Mannerheim line was Finland’s southern barrier across the Karelian Isthmus. It was created to protect the South-eastern border of Finland. It was named after Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim the commander of the Finnish army. It was created in the beginning of the Winter War. Two hundred guns and machine guns were stationed along the Mannerheim line, and the strongest fortification on the Mannerheim line was in the Summa area of Finland which was the most threatened point. Shelters for men stationed on the Mannerheim line were built out of concrete.

The Mannerheim line was vital for the Finns because it kept the Soviets at bay for 2 months. In February 1940, the Red Army had doubled its size and began an attack against the Mannerheim line. They used bombardments to weaken and break the Mannerheim line and they finally succeeded. After the Winter war the entire Mannerheim line stayed in the area that Finland ceded to the Soviet Union. Although the Mannerheim line was eventually breached, it held up long enough to keep the Russians from storming Finland's territory and for the Finns and the cold to do substantial damage to the Soviet army.

Soviet Union Completely Unprepared

Russia had a population of 170 million and Finland only had a population of 4 million. When the Red Army invaded, Finns were hugely outnumbered and outgunned 3 to 1. They were also outnumbered in tanks and planes, but the Finns had advantage of fighting on home turf. The Finnish army had less than 70 aircrafts, and had only 14,200 soldiers in their divisions while the Soviets had 17,000 men in their divisions. The Soviets suffered from Kremlin micromanagement and inexperienced officers because of purges made by Joseph Stalin. They also lacked good supplies and medical services to treat the soldiers quickly.

The Soviets went into the war looking for a quick and easy victory but went out of the war losing many lives and their reputation. The Soviets expected the war to last 12 days and instead it lasted 3 and a half months. The Soviet invasion on Finland was supposed to be the same format that Germany used on the invasion of Poland. This format was using many resources and technology to overcome resistance. For Germany the format was a success, but for the Soviets not so much. The format didn't work well because Poland had flat plains, while Finland had frozen forests and deep snow.

Outnumbered 3 to 1 (Tragedy)

During the Winter war Finland was the underdog and nobody thought they would stand a chance against Russia. They were outnumbered 3 to 1 and didn't have the new technology the Soviet Union had. The Soviet Union had better pistols than Finland because most of Finland's weapons came from World War I. Both armies used machine guns, field guns and tanks but the USSR's weapons were more modern. Luckily, Most of Finland's army were veterans from World War I who were also very anti-communist.

When the Soviets attacked the Finns, they had lots of backup and were clustered in groups while the Finns had no backup and were spread out since they didn't have enough soldiers. Soviets always had two tank backup groups while the Finns had none. After observing for many weeks the disorganization of the Red Army, Stalin sent reinforcements and better equipment for his army. This completely outnumbered Finland more than it already was, and since Finland had already been fighting for a while, they didn't have reinforcements so they began getting weaker.

Snipers on Skis (Triumph)

Most of Finland's army was made out of Snipers. A Sniper is a soldier who has good eyesight and can shoot from really far away. The main and most important sniper on Finland's side was Simo Hayha. The Soviets nicknamed him the white death, because he killed over 500 Soviets during the war. Hayha could shoot Soviet soldiers from 300 yards away and once had 25 kills in one day making him a prime target for the

Soviets. Hayha was called the white death because he wore white jackets, hats, and pants to camouflage with the snow.

Another reason why Hayha got many kills and survived was because he could shoot really quickly then leave swiftly on his skis. Most of the Finnish army fought on skis because it allowed them a quick escape from the Soviets after their hit and run tactics. Finns were great skiers and knew their terrain well so they had no trouble attacking on skis. Because the snipers used what they knew best (skiing) they fought off 26 Russian divisions and lasted longer than the soviet Union expected which was a triumph for Finland. Finland resisted the Red Army for 3 months with little help from other countries.

Treaty of Moscow

Even though the Finns held up and showed more resistance than the Soviet Union expected, they were still no match for the Red Army, especially after the Red Army got reorganized, more backup, and better equipment. The Finns were low on ammunition and exhausted and they had little help from other countries. Finland could get no help from Britain and France and no new reinforcements so they agreed to peace terms the following month. Finland agreed to sign the peace treaty of Moscow which ended the Winter War on March 13, 1940.

In the treaty of Moscow it forced Finland to cede 11 percent of their territory to the Soviet Union. The 11 percent of land was Western Karelia and part of Finland's Hanko peninsula. Finland also had to cede 13 percent of its economy to the Soviet Union. Although Finland had to cede 11 percent of land, the Soviet Union expected to capture all of Finland so they wouldn't have any independence.

Aftermath of the War

Though Finland didn't technically win the war, the Finnish resistance during the Winter War kept Finland independent. Without Finland's resistance during the war Russia would have captured Finland completely. Many soldiers were wounded and died during the war but the Soviets suffered 300,000 casualties while the Finns only had 65,000 casualties. Moreover, the League of Nations expelled the Soviet Union because of its aggression against Finland.

The Winter War also displayed the poor performance of the Red army and was said to be one of the reasons why Hitler was persuaded to invade the Soviet Union a year after the Winter War. After the Winter War the Soviet Union's reputation lowered while Finland's rose.

Tragedy and Triumph

When the USSR invaded Finland most everyone assumed Finland wouldn't stand a chance against the Red army. Finland was completely outnumbered. It was a huge tragedy for Finland because they knew they would have to either fight against the large Red army, or give up their land. Even though Finland was extremely outnumbered, they managed to resist the USSR for 3 months when the Soviets expected less than 2 weeks. Finland used their land to help them fight and didn't technically win the war, but their resistance helped keep their independence that they earned in 1918. The Triumph for Finland was using the land to their advantage and doing what they knew how to do best skiing, they didn't get overrun by the Red Army and astonishingly managed to keep their independence.

Conclusion

When Germany invaded Poland world War II began. After Poland, Germany went for Norway and France while the Soviet Union went for Finland. The USSR wanted to make naval bases on Finland, but after Finland refused Russia's demands for 18 months the Soviet Union invaded Finland on November 30 1939. The Russians were completely unprepared and even though they outnumbered Finland 3 to 1 Finland was doing much better than them. They worked with their land and lasted way longer than

the Soviets expected. In the end the Finns didn't exactly win, but they avoided being overrun by the Soviets and kept their independence. After the Winter War Finland's reputation was boosted and they had a legacy of excellent resistance like never before.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

[file:///C:/Users/rossi/AppData/Local/Packages/Microsoft.MicrosoftEdge_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/1123224%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/rossi/AppData/Local/Packages/Microsoft.MicrosoftEdge_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/1123224%20(1).pdf)

This was one of the most helpful sources because it was Russia's record of the Winter war. It was a very detailed paper written by a Russian during the time period of the Winter War it gave many details of the whole war.

http://heninen.net/sopimus/1940p_e.htm

This source had the "protocol appended for the treaty of Moscow between Finland and Soviet Union on March 12, 1940." It had a list of what both sides were agreeing on after the war ended. It also had the names of the people who signed the treaty.

<https://histdoc.net/history/NKID1939-12-07.htm>

This source was a letter written about the naval blockade in Finland. It had the temperature and direction of the blockade in details. It was written on December 7, 1939.

<https://histdoc.net/history/nonagen1.html>

This site had articles from the treaty of "non-aggression and pacific settlement of disputes between the Soviet Union and Finland finished on January 21, 1932." This website gave me information on how Finland and the USSR fought over land before the Winter war began.

<https://spartacus-educational.com/RUSfinland.htm>

This Primary source consisted of short articles saying that the Red Army launched its attack on Finland, and details about the first day of the invasion then the

next. The article was extremely helpful and helped me get a grasp of how outnumbered Finland was.

<https://www.defmin.fi/winterwar/>

This Website had a piece that was the first information letter of the information office of the ministry of defense written in 1939. The letter had information about how the Russians bombed cities and how the Finnish troops were excited and brave.

<https://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1939/391214a.html>

This source was a short article of the USSR being officially expelled from the league of nations. It had the official document of the expellment.

http://www.ibiblio.org/pub/academic/history/marshall/military/wwii/treaties/sov-ger_non-aggression.txt

This site was the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany at the beginning of World war II. It helped me get background information.

<http://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/589224>

This source had newspaper articles where the headline said the treaty of Moscow was signed and that the war had ended. Underneath the headline it said "Finland pays high for Peace."

<https://www.talvisota.fi/en/aftermath/moscow-peace-treaty/>

This source had a picture of the signatures of the important people who signed the treaty of Moscow. It also had the last page of the treaty.

http://www.winterwar.com/War%27sEnd/moscow_peace_treaty.htm

This website had articles of the treaty of Moscow and what Finland was agreeing to. This article had details on the treaty and the exact land Finland was ceding.

Secondary Sources:

<https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/daily/military-history/winter-war-russia-invades-finland/>

This website has details on how the red army was unprepared for the war against Finland. It gave many details on battles and equipment both sides had.

<https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/lessons-from-the-winter-war-frozen-grit-and-finlands-fabian-defense>

This site had information on how Finland managed to keep its independence by using a fabian defense. This source also gave me helpful information on how much the weather affected the Russian's and how it affected weapons. This source also gave me information on the geography of the land and how the Finns used their terrain to their advantage.

https://ww2db.com/battle_spec.php?battle_id=30

This website gave a long and detailed explanation of the Winter War that gave many areas in Finland where the war was fought. It also had some quotes that were said during the war.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Russo-Finnish-War>

This website gave an overview of the whole war. It didn't give details but it gave important things that happened like the Mannerheim line and the treaty of Moscow.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Treaty-of-Moscow-Russo-Finnish-history-1940>

This source gave information on the treaty of Moscow the treaty that ended the war. It explained how Finland kept its independence but had to cede some of their land. It also gave information of important things after the treaty of Moscow that the Winter war affected.

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.businessinsider.com/ussr-russia-finald-wwii-winter-war-photos-2017-3>

This site had pictures during the war. The pictures showed different actions during the war like a picture with the Finns on skis with guns, or in trenches holding guns. The pictures also showed how many soldiers died of the cold. The source also gave lots of information under the pictures.

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/ussr-expelled-from-the-league-of-nations>

This secondary source gave details on the expellment of the USSR out of the league of nations after the Winter War.

<https://www.history.com/news/what-was-the-winter-war>

This website had an overview of the War with a few details about the Mannerheim line and how much the Finns were outnumbered by the Red army. It also gave examples of results of the Winter War.

<https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world-war-two/world-war-two-and-eastern-europe/the-winter-war-1939/>

This source had extremely helpful information, it gave examples of causes of the war, and information about the war with many details. It also gave a timeline of what happened from when the winter war started and when it ended, and it gave information on two Finland leaders who helped Finland against the Red Army.

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-short-history-of-the-winter-war>

This site gave an overview of the war and a few details about both armies and how they were equipped. It also had a picture of Finns with skis and guns hiding in trenches with a detailed caption.

<https://www.prlib.ru/en/history/619090>

This website gave a detailed explanation about the Moscow treaty and people who were associated with it. It gave information on where it was signed and what Finland would have to give up.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269670259_Bad_blood_and_humiliation_Finn_s'_experiences_of_the_Moscow_peace_negotiations_in_1940

The information I got from this source was details about after the war when Finns were traveling to Moscow to sign the treaty. It gave information about the journey to Moscow because it was dangerous since the war hadn't officially ended.

<https://www.winterwar.com>

This source had information on many things including the different battle setups between Russia and Finland. It showed either side's formation of battle and a list of difference between their weapons.

<https://www.zachorfoundation.org/timeline/soviet-union-expelled-from-league-of-nations/>

This website had a short but easy to understand paragraph about why the USSR was expelled. It gave me background information on the consequence of the Winter war.