

Why Hitler Might Have Thought Invading Russia Would Be Easy (Thanks to Finland)

by Michael Peck

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Befuddled Soviet riflemen floundering through deep snow and sub-zero temperatures while they froze to death. Russian tanks and their hapless crews set ablaze by Molotov cocktails. Soviet paratroopers jumping from airplanes without parachutes, hoping that a snowbank will cushion their fall.

(This first appeared several years ago.)

These are the enduring images of Russia and Finland at war. Though the story about Soviet paratroopers jumping without parachutes is apparently a myth, the popular story of the Russo-Finnish conflict of World War Two remains a David versus Goliath tale of outnumbered but nimble Finnish ski troops zipping around massive but clumsy Soviet divisions. It's a sort of Nordic version of the Confederate narrative of the Civil War, with Jeb Stuart's cavalry making fools of the inept Yankees.

There is much truth to this. The [Winter War](#) of 1939–40, in which Stalin invaded Finland to grab border territories and possibly to turn it into a Communist state, was a disaster for the Soviets. The Soviet Union, with a population of 200 million, should not overcome 3.7 million Finns without breaking a sweat. But the Soviet armies, crippled by Stalin's purges, performed so abysmally that Hitler—as well as America, Britain and France—were convinced that the Soviet Union would collapse like a house of cards after the German invasion of June 1941.

Do You Know What Happened On This Day?

Sep 21, 1792

French Revolution: the National Convention declares France a republic and abolishes the absolute monarchy.

The North American XB-70 Valkyrie, the world's first Mach 3 bomber, makes its maiden flight from Palmdale, California.

Though the Finns were eventually worn down so much that they ceded the border lands to Stalin, Finland maintained its independence, and also gained the admiration of a world that saw a small, democratic nation standing up to an aggressive bully.

But the Soviet debacle of the Winter War is not the end of the story. Less well known is how the Soviets took their revenge in 1944.

Though Finland had allied with Nazi Germany soon after Operation Barbarossa began, in what is called the [Continuation War](#), the Finns were not quite enthusiastic about participating in Hitler's crusade against Bolshevism. Desperate to maintain good relations with Britain (which halfheartedly declared war on Finland in December 1941) and a sympathetic America (which never did declare war), the Finns initially focused on regaining its territories lost in the Winter War. While Finland did tentatively advance beyond the 1939 border, including partnering with the Germans in an abortive [expedition](#) to capture the vital Lend-Lease port of Murmansk, the Russo-Finnish front was relatively quiet compared to the bloodbaths further south at Moscow and Stalingrad. Their hesitation was practical: the Finns quickly discovered that attempting to dislodge the Red Army from the forests and lakes of northern Russia was a much bloodier proposition than defending against the Red Army on Finnish territory. Losing seventy-five thousand casualties between June and December 1941 was a painful reminder that taking down the Russian bear was too expensive for the little Arctic fox.

Too expensive also was remaining Hitler's ally as the war turned against Germany. Soon after the Germans surrendered at Stalingrad, Finland secretly entered negotiations with Moscow to leave the war. However, by June 1944, the negotiations had gone nowhere, and neither had Finnish military capability. "During the war very little had changed regarding the organization, equipment or tactics of Finnish forces," according to the [book](#) *Finland at War: The Continuation and Lapland Wars 1941–45*. "Their weaponry had been slightly modernized by employing captured Soviet equipment or by refitting the mostly outdated items bought from the Germans."

The Finnish Army was stuck in 1939, but the Red Army most certainly was not. The Soviet troops that attacked on June 9, 1944 across the Karelian Isthmus and Lake Ladoga, near Leningrad, were a battle-hardened force well-equipped with modern tanks and artillery.

"This time, having learnt the bitter lessons from the Winter War, the Soviets took their attack preparations seriously," notes *Finland at War*. "The operations on the isthmus were preceded by a thorough phase of reconnaissance and planning. The defenses at the front line were well known to Stavka [the Soviet high command] while spies and extensive aerial photography provided information about positions deep behind the lines."

The Soviets used the same tactics that had decimated the Germans. On a narrow front, they massed two hundred and sixty thousand men, 630 tanks and 7,500 guns in twenty-four infantry divisions backed by numerous tank and artillery formations, as well as more than a thousand aircraft. The Finns had just forty-four thousand men on the front lines of the offensive and another thirty-two thousand in reserve, armed with just a few tanks and obsolete antitank weapons. Ever [since](#) the Battle of Kursk in July 1943, the German armies on the Eastern Front had been relentlessly driven

back by Soviet offensive after Soviet offensive. If Hitler's SS panzer divisions couldn't stop the Russian steamroller, neither could the Finns, who retreated back to their fortified lines. In 1940, the Mannerheim Line had stymied the Soviets. By 1944, cracking fortifications had become a routine procedure for the Red Army.

Yet just as in 1940, the plucky Finns could fight like tigers. By mid-July, the Soviet offensive had been halted. At the [Battle of Tali-Ihantala](#) from June 25 to July 9, 1944, fifty thousand Finns repelled one hundred and fifty thousand Soviets backed by 600 tanks, while inflicting three times as many casualties as they suffered. A less robust defense could have resulted in Finland becoming just another occupied Communist satellite like Poland or Romania, but Stalin decided that the price of conquering the Finns was just too high at a time when the Red Army needed all the troops it could get to drive on Berlin.

Nonetheless, the peace terms that Finland accepted in September 1944 were harsh. The territory the Soviets had captured in 1940 and then lost in 1941 would be restored, plus Finland would cede the Petsamo peninsula and pay \$300 million in reparations. Moscow also demanded that the two hundred and ten thousand German troops in Finland withdraw according to a tight deadline that was impossible to meet. The Soviets demanded that the Finns force the Germans out, which led to some sporadic fighting between Finnish forces and their former allies.

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However, Finland had again managed to maintain its independence and remain a democratic nation on the borders of the Soviet Union. "Finlandization" became the newest word in the postwar diplomatic lexicon, meaning a small state that carefully maintains its neutrality in order not to antagonize the superpower next door. Yet compared to Hungary or the Baltic States, neutrality was preferable to occupation by Red Army bayonets. Though Finland did ally with Hitler, it emerged from the war without the shame of collaboration, partly because it refused Nazi demands to turn over Finnish Jews.

Finland lost World War Two, yet by maintaining its independence and identity, it managed to win the peace.

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