



The Hundred Day Winter War: Finland's Gallant Stand Against the Soviet Army

By Gordon F. Sander

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Reviewed by Maj Timothy Heck, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

The Finnish-Soviet Winter War of 1939-40 holds a special place in modern military history. The war, lasting a little more than three months, has been the subject of a disproportionate number of books given its length. Furthermore, an aura of myth surrounds it. The war has the drama of David versus Goliath, complete with diplomatic machinations, foreign volunteers, and an adoring press corps looking for excitement as combat between Germany and the Allies was at a standstill. Finland, it seemed to contemporary journalists and commentators, was not just another Poland which would be quickly swallowed by its larger neighbor. Finland's defensive war against the Soviet invaders thus took on a significant role in popular memory and in the following months as both Axis and Allies reacted to the conflict. Gordon Sander's comprehensive history of the war expands beyond traditional narratives of hopeless and inept Russians being cut to ribbons by a handful of Finnish troops in arctic forests. Against this mythical backdrop, Sander weaves social, military, diplomatic, and cultural history into *The Hundred Day Winter War*, giving life to the complex interplay of national and international politics that drove the war.

For the military reader, Sander's analysis of Finnish defensive operational maneuver against a numerically superior foe is insightful. The treatments of the battles around Suomussalmi are Sander's best combat writing. These battles, which saw an undermanned and underequipped Finnish force trap and nearly annihilate two Soviet divisions, are presented as "a classic military double victory with few if any precedents in the history of modern warfare." While the sections on Finnish attacks against Russian troops do read like the traditional narrative of "ghosts on skis," Sander does cover small unit tactics, logistics, and the impact of combat on the Finnish soldiers in the protracted battles. Sander's inclusion of the human element strengthens the narrative and helps demystify both the Finns and the Soviets. Readers looking for a more analytical approach to the battle should see Allen F. Chew's *Fighting the Russians in Winter: Three Case Studies*, issued by the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College's Combat Studies Institute in 1981.

Sander briefly covers the Red Army's evolution during the course of the war. Initial Soviet failures were rectified and incompetent commanders, mostly junior officers before the purges of the late 1930s who suddenly found themselves regimental and division commanders, were relieved and some executed. The battles around Suomussalmi led Stalin to continue the war "after the requisite period of retraining and reorganization," including the appointment of Semyon Timoshenko as the commander. Under Timoshenko's command, the Red Army adapted and changed its tactics to become an army that was indeed capable of learning from past mistakes. As a result, the Soviets were able to break the Finnish defensive positions and destroyed the nation's ability to fight.

Sander is unabashedly pro-Finnish in his writing and use of sources. This said, he does attempt to explain Soviet intentions and political vision for the conflict in balanced terms. He was able to locate several Soviet veterans

whose stories are included. Overall, the lack of Soviet equivalence or parity in writing does detract from the balance of the book though, as the subtitle implies, Finland is the hero of Sander's narrative.

Overall, Sander presents a history of the war using a plethora of primary and secondary sources in a clear manner. The book is largely a social history of the war heavily influenced by his journalist sources, but military readers will benefit from its expansive scope and well-written sections on military operations.