

ERIC
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Tough Finns

Think of Finland and two words come to mind: Saunas and "Finlandization." This derisive term implies that little Finland, with only 4.7 million inhabitants, lives under the shadow and at the whim of its mighty neighbor, the Soviet Union. But Finns and Russians recall a third image: The tiny village of Suomussalmi.

December, 1939: Finland refuses Soviet demands to cede its border province of Karelia. Stalin sends 1.5 million troops with thousands of tanks and aircraft to invade Finland. The Finns, outnumbered four to one, have almost no tanks, planes or artillery.

Two Russian divisions, 48,000 men, 100 tanks and 300 guns, converge on Suomussalmi which is defended by 17,000 Finns. Ambushes halt the vanguards of the roadbound Soviet mechanized columns. Finnish ski troops, appearing like white ghosts out of the snowy forests, attack the Russian flanks.

Armed only with submachine guns, grenades and Molotov cocktails, the Finns splinter the strung-out Russian columns; tanks are set ablaze with gasoline or immobilized by logs in their treads. In 17 days of hand-to-hand fighting, often at -40F, the outnumbered Finns, without any heavy weapons, utterly destroy two of Stalin's finest divisions.

Heroism alone does not save Finland. Abandoned by Churchill and Roosevelt, overwhelmed by Soviet numbers and artillery, Finland is forced to sue for peace and cede Karelia. But, in three bloody months, the Finns inflict one million casualties on the Soviets, destroying 1,000 enemy aircraft and 2,300 tanks. Finland counts 70,000 casualties — the equivalent to Canada losing 350,000 men in 100 days.

War again erupted in 1944. The Soviet attempt to seize the Viborg isthmus was stopped in some of the most intensive fighting in military history. In 10 days, the Finns downed 300 Russian aircraft. By comparison, during the 12 days of the legendary Battle of Britain, the RAF shot down 378 German planes.

Resistance to aggression

Much of the world has forgotten Finland's heroic resistance to Soviet aggression. But the Finns have not and neither have the Russians. This is why Finland is today a free nation.

Confronted by the immensity of Russian power, Finland signed a strategic agreement with Moscow in 1948 that is the cornerstone of its national policy. Finland would remain neutral and prevent its territory being used by any other power to invade Russia. The Soviets obtained the right to defend Finland against such an attack — provided the Finns requested help. Russia then agreed to keep its hands off Finland.

The Russians thus won more security for their Baltic and Arctic military/industrial zones; Finland lost Karelia but kept its freedom. Few of Russia's neighbors could make this claim.

Finland had maintained its freedom from Russia by careful diplomacy and tact. Nothing is done that will anger or threaten Moscow. This is the unattractive half of "Finlandization" that we see; the other half remains discreetly out of view, yet it is of far greater importance.

In spite of making apparent meekness something of a national attribute, little Finland retains awesome military capability. In two days, Finland can mobilize 250,000 soldiers; in two more days another 500,000 troops can be at arms. This incredible figure of 750,000 troops in a nation of 4.7 million gives Finland enormous defensive power.

Small defence budgets and the need to avoid alarming Moscow have prevented Finland from acquiring much heavy weaponry. Even so, 750,000 of the world's toughest and most skilful soldiers operating in an ideal guerrilla environment makes any invasion extremely unattractive.

Snowbound, frozen hell

Few Finns doubt that their latent military power is the real reason why Russia did not invade their nation after World War II, and why Moscow is content to allow Finland its freedom today. In 1939-1940, Russia seized 26,000 square miles of Finnish territory — at a cost of one million men. Taking all of Finland might well cost the Soviets up to three million casualties.

Southern Finland is on the same latitude as Whitehorse in the Yukon; one third of Finland lies within the Arctic Circle. In winter, Finland turns into a snowbound, frozen hell where temperatures drop to -50F. During the short summer, much of Finland, which is covered with lakes and rivulets, becomes a swampy morass. The forests of Finland are every bit as ideal for guerrilla warfare as the jungles of Vietnam.

This difficult terrain would have little defensive value were the Finns not so resolutely determined to defend their nation. Recent polls have shown that the doughty Finns are among the world's leaders in willingness to resist aggression. Contrast this attitude, and the freedom which it has brought, to the whining, cowardly Czechs who have twice allowed themselves to be invaded in the past 50 years without firing a shot.

Or, compare Finland to Canada, another neighbor of Russia and a nation almost five times more populous. In spite of spending almost twice as much per capita on defence as Finland, Canada can field only 1/20th the numbers of soldiers as Finland. To the Finns, defence means national survival; to Canadians it is merely an irksome afterthought.

The tough, dour Finns are clearly ready to fight to the last man to defend their country. The Russians, with long memories, know this and are content to leave the Finns alone. The West may have forgotten the village of Suomussalmi, but the veterans of the Red Army still recall with fear the white ghosts of the Finnish forests.

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