

SUOMUSSALMI

The greatest Finnish victory during the Winter War against the Soviet Union

December 7th, 1939 – January 8th, 1940



Before the war

The defeat of Poland in the war against both the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, and the partition of the Polish state by the aggressors (the September 28 pact, 1939) completely changed the situation in this part of Europe.

The Baltic Sea states – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – in accordance with the pact between Stalin and Hitler, found themselves in the Soviet sphere of influence and were quickly put under Moscow's political and military control. According to this pact, also belonging to the Soviet zone was Finland, against which Stalin planned war.

October and November 1939

Moscow deliberately worsened its relations with Finland, accusing it of armed provocations and of planning aggression against the Soviet Union.

November 30, 1939

Soviet troops cross the border with Finland.



In 1918-1945, the symbol of the Finnish military air force was the *hakaristi* – a blue swastika on a white background. It had nothing to do with the symbol of the National Socialists in Germany. In Finnish mythology, the swastika was a symbol of good luck, and amulets with this symbol were supposed to protect against evil. In 2017, the Finnish Air Force finally removed the swastika from other of its air force symbols (emblems, decorations).



Soviet invasion of Finland (November 30, 1939)

- Soviet Union
- Soviet sphere of influence
- Germany
- German sphere of influence
- Other countries and territories

← Soviet invasion of Finland

Before the Battle – Forces, Commanders and Weaponry

Outbreak of war

The area north of Lake Ladoga became one of the theaters of war.



Soviet light tank BT-5 in winter cammo. Soviet tanks found it difficult to cope with muddy terrain and snow drifts. They were easy target for mobile Finnish units.



Finnish Suomi M-31 submachine gun

Finland

Marshal Carl Gustaf Mannerheim Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish Army (1867-1951), former officer of the Russian Tsarist Army, who served, among other places in the Kingdom of Poland.

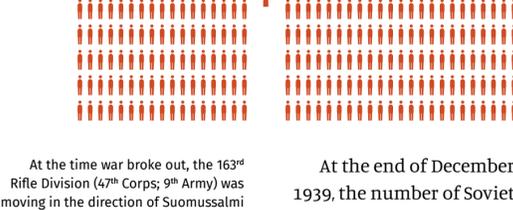


The Soviet 9th Army (commander W. Chuikov) was ordered to defeat the Finns in the central part of the country and reach Oulu, on the Gulf of Bothnia.

Tactical goal: to cut Finland into two and break its communication with Sweden.



At the time war broke out, the 163rd Rifle Division (47th Corps; 9th Army) was moving in the direction of Suomussalmi



Number: approx. 17.000 soldiers

Weapons: light armaments, 1 tank battalion, 2 artillery regiments, anti-aircraft and anti-tank artillery, support for fighter and bomber planes

At the end of December 1939, the number of Soviet troops taking part in the fighting entered the 44th Soviet Division (commander: Kombrig A.I. Winogradov) – numbered about 40.000–45.000 troops

At the time war broke out, in the Suomussalmi region, there was a small number of troops: the 15th Independent Infantry Battalion (part of the Northern Group of Finland).

Number: approx. 1.600 soldiers

Weapons: light weapons

December 7th, 1939 – reinforcement of the Finnish troops with the 27th Infantry Regiment (from 9th Infantry Division). Takeover of the command of the Finnish forces in the Suomussalmi section by col. H. Siilasvuo.

At the end of December 1939, the Finnish forces in this section of the front rose to approx. 11,000 troops.

REINDEER AND HORSES

The Finnish troops used horses and reindeer to move weapons and ammunition stocks as well as to deliver food. The reindeer were able to pull sleighs with 300 kg of supplies non-stop for 8 hours.



Battle – Course and Turning Points



December 7th, 1939 **Beginning of Soviet offensive**

The Soviet 163rd division attacked the Finnish forces from two sides. More to the north, near Juntusranta, two regiments attacked. In the south, one regiment attacked along the Raate-Suomussalmi railroad. On December 7th, 1939, the forces reached Suomussalmi, occupying the town.

December 11th-15th, 1939 **Finnish counterattack**

After the Soviet occupation of Suomussalmi by the 163rd Division, the attackers paused the offensive. It resumed on December 9th, but was repelled by the already reinforced Finnish troops. On December 11th, Finnish forces launched a counterattack on the flanks of the Soviet forces. As a result, after five days of fierce fighting, the Finns regained most of Suomussalmi and surrounded the 163rd Division units in the town and its vicinity (the Hulkkonniemi promontory). The Soviets were defeated despite their absolute superiority in tanks, artillery and air support.

December 15th-24th, 1939 **The Finnish offensive and Soviet defense**

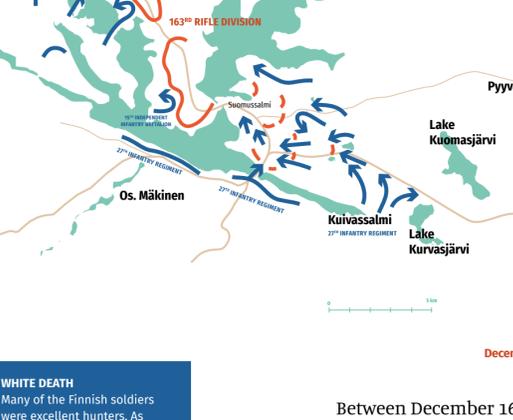
After encircling the 163rd Soviet Division, Finnish troops began operations to break the supply lines of the Soviet troops (the road to Juntusranta). In mid-December, the Soviet command decided to send the 44th Rifle Division to help the encircled division. The troops advanced along the Raate-Suomussalmi line.

December 24th-30th, 1939 **Destruction of the 163rd Rifle Division**

December 24th - As the Soviet auxiliary 44th Division advanced from the east, units of the 163rd Division began the attack. After 3 days, the fighting stopped. The reinforced Finnish troops went on the counterattack and after one day of fierce fighting they broke through the Soviet defenses. The Soviets retreated across a frozen lake - Lake Kiantajärvi - towards Juntusranta (in the north-east). Part of the Soviet troops defending themselves on the Hulkkonniemi Cape (west of Suomussalmi) were defeated. The defeat of the Soviet division was complete.

until January 8, 1940 **Obliteration of the 44th Rifle Division – the battle on the road to Raate**

The 44th Division, following the road from Raate to Suomussalmi, was to break the encirclement of the 163rd Division, but failed to connect with the encircled troops (although the two divisions were only 5 km apart). After defeating the 163rd Division, the Finnish troops turned to the 44th Division, cutting off its retreat to the east. The Soviet division was encircled along an 8 km stretch of road, and separated into several parts that were then systematically destroyed by the agile Finnish troops (the *motti* tactics). Only a small part of the Soviet troops managed to break out of the encirclement and evacuate back into the Soviet Union. The victory of the Finns was complete.



WHITE DEATH
Many of the Finnish soldiers were excellent hunters. As snipers, they wreaked havoc in the enemy ranks. The sniper - legend, Simo Häyhä - who was called "The White Death" - shot more than 500 Soviet soldiers. The Finns operated in small, agile units, using the principle of hit and disappear.

Between December 16th and 24th, the Finnish troops were reinforced: 2 artillery batteries, 2 anti-tank guns and five infantry battalions.

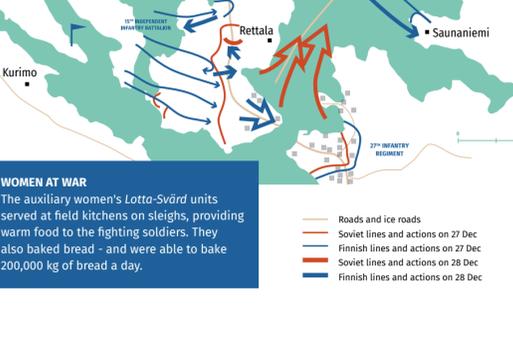


Soviet tank destroyed in motti



MOTTI – The name of the Finnish tactic, *motti*, comes from a word meaning a pile of wood that is made by Finnish lumberjacks during logging. The number of *mottis* was the basis for calculating any amount due. In Polish, the *motti* tactic can be compared to the term "cauldron".

ARMY ON SKIS
The Finns moved around quickly and quietly on sledges and skis. They considered the captured Soviet skis to be of inferior quality and used them to make bonfires.



WOMEN AT WAR
The auxiliary women's *Lotta-Svärd* units served at field kitchens on sledges, providing warm food to the fighting soldiers. They also baked bread - and were able to bake 200,000 kg of bread a day.

After the Battle – the Direct and Long-Term Consequences

Direct consequences

The elimination from the war of two major units of the Soviet Army, the 163rd Division and the 44th Division, which were defeated, with their survivors retreating across the border to the Soviet side.

The 9th Soviet Army switched to passive operations and did not resume its offensive on Finnish territory until the end of the war.

Long-term consequences

The Soviet plan to rapidly defeat the Finnish defenses around the Suomussalmi section and reach the Gulf of Bothnia was foiled.

The Finnish victory at Suomussalmi significantly increased the morale of the fighting Finnish troops, which had an influence on the outcome of the war.



Losses

Soviet Losses	Finnish Losses
Killed and missing – approx. 25.000 (combined losses of both divisions)	1.000 Finnish soldiers dead
Prisoners – approx. 2.000	1.000 Wounded

Finnish war gains
• approx. 1.5000 horses
• more than 40 tanks
• approx. 100 guns
• 11 combat vehicles
• approx. 450 trucks and tractors
• approx. 300 machine guns
• over 6.000 rifles
• over 30 field kitchens
• ammunition



PUNISHMENT FOR DEFEAT
The commander of the 44th Soviet Division Alexei Ivanovich Vinogradov, chief of staff O.I. Volkov and the head of the political section I.T. Pachomenko, after their defeat in the battle on the road to Raate, were placed under arrest by the Soviet authorities and were shot (January 11th, 1940).

Commemoration

Finland

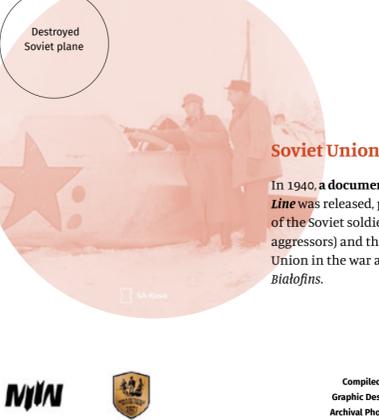
The Raateen Portti Winter War Museum in Suomussalmi



The Winter War Monument
in Suomussalmi. The Winter War Monument is a field with thousands of natural stones erected in memory of Finnish and Red Army soldiers who fell in the Battle of Suomussalmi.

Vaikka Ihminen Kuolee – Nin Muisto Elaa.
(People may die, their memory still remains.)

A bronze equestrian statue of Marshal of Finland Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, by Aimo Tukiainen, stands in centre of Helsinki. It was erected in 1960.



Destroyed Soviet plane

Soviet Union
In 1940, a documentary *The Mannerheim Line* was released, praising the heroism of the Soviet soldiers (in fact, brutal aggressors) and the victory of the Soviet Union in the war against the so-called *Bialofins*.