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A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War Of 1939-1940



Synopsis

In 1939, tiny Finland waged war-the kind of war that spawns legends-against the mighty Soviet Union, and yet their epic struggle has been largely ignored. Guerrillas on skis, heroic single-handed attacks on tanks, unfathomable endurance, and the charismatic leadership of one of this century's true military geniuses-these are the elements of both the Finnish victory and a gripping tale of war.

Book Information

File Size: 4841 KB

Print Length: 320 pages

Publisher: Algonquin Books (November 1, 2013)

Publication Date: November 1, 2013

Sold by: Â Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00DE0WMYA

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #55,278 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #11

in Â Â Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Europe > Scandinavia #20 in Â Â Books > History > Europe > Scandinavia #42 in Â Â Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Russia & Former Soviet Republics

Customer Reviews

Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 provided convenient cover for the Soviet Union to make two aggressive moves to bolster its own security interests. One move was the relatively quiet, but equally destructive consumption of Poland's eastern half. The other move was forcefully demanding Finland to cede territory near Leningrad. While Poland was quickly crushed between the might of a two-sided invasion, Finland used its terrain, climate and little more than a sense of purpose to shock the massive Red Army. With *A FROZEN HELL*, William Trotter details this vicious and miserable conflict in an entertaining manner that reads more like a dramatic novel than history. The significance of the war between Finland and the Soviet Union is naturally suppressed by the onset of World War II. While the documentation of

Germany's aggression is standard fare, similar conduct by the Soviet Union garners much less attention. When the Soviet Union forced its awkward Goliath-might on a quiet nation hidden in the nether regions of northern Europe, it found itself facing a resolute foe that was quite capable of bleeding the Red Army white. William Trotter brings the nastiness of the Winter War to life. Even though we know the historical outcome of the conflict, the book's lively take on historical events gives readers the impression the outcome might challenge reality.

Trotter's narrative is neutral, but it is hard not to root for the outnumbered and out-gunned Finns defending their nation from an armored Soviet onslaught. The historical outline of the conflict is thoroughly colored with interesting and insightful individual accounts that make it easy to envision the events being described. Readers are prepped with events and situations prefaced a conflict that by all sense and purposes, should have been a route in favor of the Red Army. The book illustrates a classic example of a superior foe completely underestimating the resolve and tactical capacity of its intended victim. While the Soviet Union could afford to throw an endless stream of men and machines at Finland, the Finns were savvy and tenacious enough to make inevitable outcome a pyrrhic victory for the Soviets. Trotter does an excellent job detailing every facet of the Winter War in a manner that keeps things interesting. We get a vivid image of the utter misery experienced fighting in Arctic weather and how costly it was for the unprepared Soviet Union. Soviet expectations of a quick and easy victory led to poor planning and decision-making that would prove disastrous. Simple things like neglecting to white-wash vehicles, issue camouflaged uniforms or effectively map terrain created a maelstrom of havoc on the invaders. Trotter shines in showing how the Finns used the frigid environment and rugged terrain as a weapon. How lumbering columns of Soviet tanks and soldiers, unfamiliar with the terrain and unprepared for the weather, are cut into isolated pockets by aggressive Finnish soldiers who then let the arctic weather take its toll on the pockets. I particularly enjoyed how Trotter points out the vast differences between Finland's Army and Red Army. The Finns were innovative and resourceful, while the Red Army was encumbered by rigid and archaic military doctrine. When the battered Soviet Union finally decides to stop "playing around" with Finland and commits to ending the conflict, we begin to see the names of Soviet generals who would eventually lead the Soviet Union to victory over Nazi Germany years later. Even the end of the Winter War is characterized as a last-minute diplomatic drama that saves Finland from Soviet rule. While my curiosity in understanding the Russo-Finnish War created my desire to read about it, I never thought I would become so engrossed in the conflict once I started reading *A FROZEN HELL*. The entertaining and colorful narrative made this book such an enjoyable and interesting read. If I were

to recommend any book on the subject matter, A FROZEN HELL would certainly be my choice.

A great telling of the Winter War with plenty of details and anecdotes from individual soldiers but not too much where it becomes muddled by details. It was pretty tough trying to pronounce all of the Finnish names (I gave up, lol) and keep them straight but it's kind of expected, I suppose, for a native English speaker who is unfamiliar with Finland. I have the Kindle version of this book and in my opinion, get the paperback or hardcover version unless you really want the Kindle version. You cannot zoom in on any of the maps in the book, which I found f'ing ridiculous and disappointing, so you cannot use them to follow along where units were placed or moved to/from.

Good English language account of the Russo-Finnish winter war. Trotter does a nice job of explaining both the military and diplomatic action. I came away with a better understanding of Mannerheim and the dynamics that shaped him. One challenge of this topic is that the Finns holding off the Soviets is one of the great underdog stories of the 20th century, but the author's continued praise of all things Finnish does have you wonder in the back of your head - is this a straightforward analysis of the war, or does it have a tilt.

The Winter War was a legend from a time when the world needed legends. Finland's sturdy yeomen standing in defense of their homeland against immeasurable numbers and performing the unique achievement of killing enough invaders to give even Stalin a feeling of indigestion. In our iconoclastic age it comes as a bit of a surprise that much of the legend is in fact true. There is another side, as there always is. War is always nasty, brutish and uncomfortable and our age is not unreasonably suspicious of all that seems to obscure that. Arguably Finland's later renewal of the war was an unnecessary aggression, though equally arguably it was provoked because the arrogance, ambition, and ruthlessness of Russia's leaders made it extremely plausible that Russia still intended to swallow Finland. Even Finland's defection gives a very slight hint of dishonor for those with an odd sense of quixotism. Though given their "allies" nature, not more than a whiff. In any case no nation can be expected to commit suicide for the sake of an ally of convenience. And the thought of the politically inexperienced Finnish "rustics" shrewdly outdeviling the devil brings a touch of amusement. The Finns managed to outfight and outwit both Russia and Germany and were the only country in Europe to do that successfully. Some have even said that Stalin only wanted enough territory to protect Russia, territory which Finland could live without. I find that hard to believe. Stalin's record shows that he kept pushing as far as he could get away with and stopped

when he could no longer. Or to put it another way Finland was a bush that could spare a few flowers but unless it proved it could stick Stalins hand full of thorns it would lose all it's flowers. All that is of course the concern of the high and mighty. As far as ordinary Finns were concerned their own leaderships possible failings were beside the point. They had built an admirable society under very harsh circumstances and it was worth fighting to protect. And fight they did. In doing so they not only protected their own country but proved that the people of democratic countries are not thereby effete and that tyranny could indeed be resisted. They gave hope when hope was needed and for that alone we should thank them. Someone said that they found Mannerheim a dull character. Personally I found him fascinating. He reminded me a lot of Captain von Trapp as played by Christopher Plummer and had similarities to both the movie one and the real one (especially the movie one). He had the curious attraction of several of the aristocrats of the time that comes from a mixture of nostalgia, fairy tale romance, and "lost causedness". He served Finland rather than Democracy. And the things he stood for had their flaws. However his ideas were far superior to the prevailing ideas of political idolatry that threatend both his way and Finland's way. He was intensely masculine just as the Finnish people were, but in a patrician rather than a plebian way. The Finns were men and he was a man to lead men. Or as the writter said he was a nobleman who was also a noble man. And if the Ancient Regime had had more like him, it would not have been what it was and there might have been no need to overthrow it. Despite what has been said, Mannerheim would make a great movie hero. He had a fascinating life, from his Indiana Jones like spy mission to Central Asia, to his service in previous wars, to his present service. He new everyone that was "worth knowing." His hauteur might be hard to work with but could be done if acted well and it would be lovely watching him turn it on some arrogant SS Staffie as indeed he did on one or two occasions. All that aside, Frozen Hell was a fascinating book about a fascinating campaign. I am glad to own it.

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