

# THE WINTER WAR

Between Finland and Russia, at 1939-1940.

3½ million against 140 million, 105 glorious days of fighting in minus 40 temperatures and nearly one meter of snow.

I was nine years old when it started, at 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1939. We were living in Helsinki, the capital, at its quiet suburb, and on the way to school I saw at that morning several airplanes emerge from clouds and soon bombs were falling and explosions were heard and first fires broke out sending billowing clouds of smoke up in the air. I was standing in awe looking up but my father run after me telling to come back home, there's no school today, he said, and they were closed for the entire winter, which annoyed me because I had just learned what the idea was in grammar, and I never found it anymore. Everybody was haggard and pale, some were crying and all adults spoke whispering, we were scared to death as it happened without any warning and we all knew how big country Russia is with its population of 140 million people and there seemed not to be any chance of survival, we were doomed, we thought.

The ground along Finland's and Russia's 1300 kilometers long border was mostly thickly forested with only few narrow dirt roads here and there to cross it, and as the troops need plenty of ammunition, fuel and food to go on, and with those narrow roads with forests close at each side and nearly one meter of snow everywhere together with minus 40 degrees temperatures most of the time, Russians had difficulties to supply their forces but Finnish forces were waiting in their

trenches with a supply depots closer by so they were able to hold on. Only if our forces had had proper clothing and arms to go, but the state was poor so that many men were fighting with their civilian clothes on, and with only the blue and white cockade on their fur hats, and with simple rifles, but of course, as most soldiers were workers or small farmers from the countryside, they were used to the cold weather and working outside, but still it was almost inhuman. They invented the so called "Molotov's cocktail" to fight the tanks, a bottle filled with benzine which was ignited and hurled on the tank to break and set it in fire.

The idea they took was to cut the long Russian convoys into parts, then rounding them, as all Finns were able to ski to move in the forests, and then start shooting at them from behind trees, and having a white cloth on, they were difficult to be seen, and as Russian troops had no white clothing to cover them, and because they were staying on the road they were easy to be found and shot at, and soon their fuel supplies were used stopping them and they had to capitulate, if they were still alive, but many were killed by fire or frozen to death.

We were quite safe at Helsinki suburb, although we were evacuated once but soon we came back home, when we saw that there were not too much damaged done so far.

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**But as we knew that we are only 3,5 millions against 140 million, we were sure that we cannot stand it very long, we were afraid that the Russians were going to run us over sooner or later, and that could have been worse than death, then, as we had been afraid of them, for hundreds of years.**

When the war started, we had to go and buy strong paper to cover our windows, no light was allowed to be seen outside, so the world seemed to be totally dark, when at the wintertime there is daylight only few hours, but we were able to see all the stars and Milky way, very clearly, if only one could stand outside in that cold to admire them. Also we learned to go to bed partly clothed to be ready to go for a bomb shelter as soon as air raid sirens began to howl. In the radio they demonstrated the sound of falling bomb, whether it is going further or if it is coming very close, that we had to learn too.

All foods were rationed at that time, and remained to be so to the end of the world war, and still after that for many years to come. As we lived outside the proper town, our underground water pipes froze and that forced us to build an outhouse, but it was freezing cold, so I tried as long as possible to wait, to get everything done as soon as possible. Also we got no water except by melting the snow in a kettle for food making, but to wash ourselves we had to go to a public sauna once a week, fortunately we had many public saunas here in Helsinki then, so it was no problem. To our own astonishment the war just continued and fighting was only close to the borders, the enemy was not able to get any further.

The war ended at 13<sup>th</sup> of March, after 105 heroic fighting and hard days, we were forced to give in for the harsh peace treaty because the ammunition was just ending and our troops were getting tired as we had not enough reserves, we had got no help from any other country during the war, just that sympathy, from American press especially, we were absolutely alone.

I remember that day when the peace came on, we took the papers off from windows, all of a sudden there were lights again to be seen from the houses, we wanted to go out to look at it, and we were able to go to bed with pajamas on, but we were not joyful, just relieved, that now it's over, and we were still alive, and independent, it was a wonder. Finland was not occupied but we lost Carelia, about 10 % of our territory, and we had to relocate 350.000 of its people anew. We had lost 27.000 soldiers as dead, and 40.000 as wounded, Russians three or four times more. I remember reading later from a book that on one specific, about 200 meters long stretch of front line, the Taipale river, where there had been fierce fighting all those 105 days and sometimes nights too, that when the peace came into effect, at 11 am on that day, *there were only eight (8) dirty and tired Finnish soldiers to come up from the trench, against about 200 Russians, and they were wondering, is this all, where are the rest of men, they were asking?* Lines had been only about twenty meters apart, so they came over to see it themselves, shaking their heads in wonderment, but everybody was happy just to be alive.

Why that war? Stalin took the power in Russia 1924, Hitler in Germany 1933, we had many people which thought that we have to rely to the Germans, and Stalin said to our negotiators in Moscow at -39 fall that they don't have to be afraid of our small nation, but they are afraid that we let German troops to invade Finland, and as the border was only 25 kilometers from St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) it could have been possible to fire cannons directly there, and they wanted to move the border some 20 kilometers further off, but Finnish negotiators refused, and so Stalin began the war. After the Winter war we had peace only till the next year, then the German troops really came here, 200.000 strong, and with their help we were able to take back the areas we had lost earlier, but only for three years, then the Russians took it back again,

and that is the situation still today, but since then we have learned to live in peace with that situation, permanently.

Now when I write this, March 2010, I am 79, and as we had just remembered that armistice day, exactly 70 years ago, the Winter war has become almost like an Ikon to be remembered and framed and hanged on a wall, together with those veterans which are still live, now 90 or 95 years of age, it was such a wonder to be alive and independent after it. I just heard from a radio a *Requiem* that

has been composed to honor this day. It was played in a church with a small jazz band with a choir of 60 singers, but it was good, very good indeed, it lasted 70 minutes. They sang part of it in Finnish, part in Latin, and part in Russian, as it was a pacifistic remembrance for all those soldiers from both sides that had fallen during that war! Let peace prevail.

*Leo Nygren*  
*Helsinki Finland*