

The Russo-Finnish War

by

Maj. Gen. STEPHEN O. FUQUA, U. S. A. Retired



Again the Great God Mars stalks along European frontiers, dragging little Finland into the combat arena for arbitration by the sword. The Goliath of Moscow engages the David of Suomi. In such combat, there can be but one class of tactics for each—offensive for the giant and defensive for the dwarf—which this department purposes presenting in outlining the Russian general plan and its execution as seen at the beginning of this week.

The Russian Plan

LAND: To carry the war at once beyond the frontier into enemy territory controlling no man's land, advancing under the principle of limited objectives up to the enemy's main defense line—an offensive similar to that carried out by the French at the beginning of the war in driving across the German frontier. This dash into Finnish territory, if successfully opposed, could then await the result of the sea and air offensives and the effect attained in the political field.

SEA: To take over the bases announced as required for control of the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland and especially those claimed essential for the protection of Leningrad and the naval base at Kronstadt, pushing later on successful stepping-stones to the Aland Islands and control of the Gulf of Bothnia.

AIR: To strike at once the key points on the Gulf of Finland coast and in the industrial areas and through the factors of surprise and air combat superiority demoralize and overwhelm the people. This demonstration of might and fear, produced among the masses, may well have been calculated as sufficient, together with the successful land invasion and sea operations, to force the desired end.

The Execution

LAND: The Russo-Finnish eastern frontier was crossed at several points. The penetration on the Arctic front in the Petsamo region was designed to establish a beach head on this coast and to dominate the northern end of the Arctic-Baltic highway. The port of Liinahamari was taken in the initial drive and later was recaptured by the Finns. The advance in this region was reported, though Finnish sources denied it, to have been aided by a parachute invasion. In any event, this sector with its ground barriers presented an ideal opportunity for the Russians to stage a parachute invasion—a mode of

The Russo-Finnish War

warfare in which they were especially trained (War Week, Dec. 4).

The frontier crossing to the east of Suojärvi was definitely aimed at the eastern end of the border railroad, the domination of which would not only be a threat against the left flank of the Finnish defense line, but a menace to the important region lying immediately north of Lake Ladoga. The border crossing west of Repola (Russia) was directed at the main railway line, with the spearhead of the attack pointed on Nurmes. Success in this area would make the ultimate objective the important Bothnian port of Oulu. Completion of this campaign would separate North and South Finland, give the Russians control of the north end of the Gulf of Bothnia, and carry the Russian boundary to the Swedish and Norwegian frontiers.

The drive across the frontier through the Karelian Isthmus would be a definite threat against Southeastern Finland and if successful would seal the fate of the nation. However, athwart this line of advance lies Finland's Mannerheim defense system, which crosses the isthmus and swings around the west and north shore lines of Lake Ladoga. This sector is the best organized of Finland's defense projects. Here the line is a broad belt organized in depth with strong points, blockhouses, and pillboxes interspersed in the "defiles"—the narrow land necks lying between the innumerable lakes. This position is topographically well adapted for defense and particularly well suited for the employment of small forces, thus equalizing in great measure the numerical advantage of the Russian attacker. The Finnish Army is reported to be trained along modern lines well equipped and particularly well adapted and practiced in the type of warfare for which it would be employed.

Although the lakes in the open season are water barriers, when frozen and covered with snow they still remain formidable obstacles. In addition to the natural forest obstacle in the defended sectors, it may be noted here that felled trees with branches sharpened (known as abatis) are used generously throughout the defense system.

This region seems wholly unsuited for the employment of mechanized forces, so the report of Russian tank disasters in this sector is not surprising. It will be noted that in the isthmus campaign the Russians are reported to have attempted a parachute invasion in the vicinity of Viborg, which the Finns claim to have stopped, killing all invaders.

SEA: The sea operations were simultaneous with those on land. The fleet first gained the island of Seiskari, 50 miles west of Kronstadt, which dominates the entrance to the eastern arm of the Gulf of Finland on whose shores is situated Len-

The Russo-Finnish War

ingrad. Farther west in the gulf lie the islands of Lavansaari, Tytärsaari, and Hogland, which were next taken, thus giving the Russian fleet domination of the gulf waters. At the mouth of the gulf on the Finnish mainland is a land's end jutting out well into the stream on the point of which is Hangö, a strongly fortified point.

The taking of this peninsula, with the islands noted above, would give the Russians complete sea control of these waters. However, in the attacks on Hangö, the Russian Fleet was reported in its first attempt to have failed in gaining a foothold with a landing party, and a modern cruiser was damaged from the shore batteries.

The fleet activities also included the shelling of some of the south coastal Finnish towns and to have aided with gunfire the land attack and capture of Terijoki—the present headquarters of the recently established Soviet-Finnish Government.

AIR: The attack from the air was timed with the land and sea operations. The bombing of Helsingfors, the capital, judging from the character of buildings destroyed and extent of ground covered, would seem to have been directed against area targets (War Week, Nov. 27). Owing to the anti-aircraft defenses of these cities, which accounted for several planes, the bombing of specific military targets would have been prohibitive, even if such a plan of attack had been preferred to the bombing of the cities for the effect on morale. Bombing attacks were also registered on the south coast cities of Kotka and Viborg (railroad and highway centers), in the area around Imatra and Enso (water-power and industrial plants), Hangö (fortified shore), Abo (naval base), and the towns in the Petsamo Arctic region. No reports have been noted of airplane attacks in support of ground troops nor against Finnish ground defenses.

Should the Finnish forces continue their successful defense on the isthmus, Russian intensified aerial attacks and increased naval operations against the coastal towns may be expected.

Newsweek

December 11, 1939: p. 26