

Death

AT THE GATES OF FINLAND



BY EDWARD DOHERTY

Liberty's war-zone reporter

ONE of the most exciting war stories of the day, and perhaps one of the most important, is the story of the fighting in northern Finland—a story Liberty is privileged to publish here exclusively in all its wealth of detail.

It began late in the afternoon of Thursday, November 30, when Russia began its invasion. It is being written in the deep snows of Petsamo, on the ice-covered lakes and streams, in the black arctic night, in the dancing lights of the aurora borealis. How it will end no one can say; but if it ends as it began, the Russian bear will cease to be a menace to the peoples of the Baltic—and of the Balkans.

At present Finland's sister states in Scandinavia are excited and alarmed. Italy is frantic with suspense. Rumania and other Balkan states toward which the fetid Russian breath is blowing are in fear of swift invasion and overthrow. But if the Finns hold out . . .

On that last Thursday in November Helsinki had twice been bombed. Men, women, and children had been crushed and buried by tons of falling masonry. Humble little people lay mangled and dead in the streets. Thousands were fleeing to the woods or were hurrying over the roads to refuge in Norway or Sweden.

In the far north the Russians came by land and sea, marching from the neighborhood of Alexandrovsk, marching and sailing from the Russian section of Fisherman's Peninsula. They occupied the Finnish part of the peninsula with no trouble, then started south to attack and seize the port of Liinahamari and the nickel mines near Salmijarvi.

The frontier guards, the only force Finland had in this region, retired, sending word to Helsinki. From a distance they watched the invading troops enter Liinahamari.

The night was dark and there were few stars, but they could see clearly all that happened, for the northern lights were blazing and the docks and the houses and churches and stores in the village were afire.

Several boatloads of troops landed near a flaming pier. One of the boats suddenly turned into a burst of fire and smoke; was blown to pieces, boat and men and equipment. Scarce had the sound of the explosion ceased reverberating in the frozen hills when there was another detonation, and another and another. The seacoast had been mined. The village had been mined. Even the snow was mined.

The guards sped south on their skis, pausing now and then to place new mines or to set small villages afire. They began to encounter dozens and scores and hundreds of men, women, and children fleeing toward the Norwegian border—Englishmen and Canadians and Americans from the nickel mines near Salmijarvi; peasants from near-by villages, who carried their household goods on their backs; Lapps driving herds of reindeer before them and carrying their houses — houses made of poles and reindeer hide. There were also families who had fled from Helsinki in their motorcars. There were wagons and trucks laden with food and with furniture and clothes.

Some of these people were well-to-do. Others were wretched, ill clad, hungry, frightened and bewildered. There were hundreds of crying babies,

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scores of men and women with bleeding and frost-bitten feet, many old people who had walked until they could walk no more.

"Did you set your house afire before you left?" the guards would ask.

"Of course we did," was the usual answer. "Do you think we'd leave it for the Russians?"

The guards halted at the village of Salmijarvi, close to the western border, to wait for reinforcements. Several hundred seal hunters, great shaggy men armed with knives and spears and excellent modern rifles, came hurrying up from the Gulf of Bothnia to join them.

THEY were itching for immediate battle, these sealers; but the guards counseled them to wait for the troops speeding up from the south in buses. The hunters were reluctant, impatient. "Our great hero Juho Vesanen," one of them cried out, "would not have delayed!"

"Nor would he have attacked," replied the leader of the guards, "until the right time. Take notice, brother. The Russians are many and we are few, even with the troops now on the way. But let a little time pass and what will happen?"

"The Russians are tired now. They have marched far, and they have

war-zone

found nothing there but fire and snow. They are warming themselves now in the heat of our burning homes. But how long will those embers retain heat? Let us wait until the fire dies out, until the bitter wind numbs the Russians. Then let us strike.”

The sealers grinned, opened their packs, and began to brew tea. They sang songs of the legendary hero, the peasant Vesanen who first claimed Petsamo for the Finns.

The Finnish hunters and sealers, from the earliest days, had considered this region their own. It was a deserted region but it abounded in game and fish. To the south there were great forests, a hunters' paradise. In the north there were only great rolling hills covered with scrub birch and creeping juniper, and the tundra. But there was a harbor which, even in the coldest winter, was ever free of ice. An arm of the Gulf Stream kept its waters warm.

Juho Vesanen, according to the legends, was a giant of a man, the leader of the Finnish peasants in the early part of the fifteenth century. Word came to him that the Russians had invaded the hunting and fishing preserve. Orthodox Greek Catholic monks had built a monastery in Petsamo, and a Russian colony had grown up about the monastery.

Vesanen gathered several hundred peasants about him and told them what had happened.

“We must not suffer this injury,” he said. “Put on your skis, my children. We travel north.”

They trekked a thousand miles or so, with their food strapped on their backs, carrying spears and knives and axes. They camped in the wastelands at times, chopped holes in the ice of lakes and caught fish to eat, slept under blankets of reindeer hides, and pushed on.

They went as silently as the stars above them. When at last they came in sight of their objective, they rested an hour or so, then reconnoitered and attacked. There was a furious battle with the Russian horsemen quartered near the monastery, but it ended in complete victory for the Finns. The monastery and every other building in the vicinity were burned to the ground, and Vesanen claimed the territory and its mysterious ice-free waters for Finland.

For five hundred years the Petsamo province has been disputed ground. It has been Russian more often than it has been Finnish. The monastery was rebuilt. It became, in late years, a show place for tourists. Only a few monks dwell there now—or dwelt there—old men who knew their end was near and hoped it would be peaceful, old men embittered by the fact that they could obtain no novices. The Finns are Lutherans and offered no young men to the church. And the Russians hated all religions.

There have been no dispatches to say whether or not the monastery still stands. The Finns may have burned it in their retreat—or mined it. The Russians may have destroyed it or may be occupying it.

war-zone

FINLAND became a duchy under the Russian czars many years ago. Petsamo and its ice-free harbor became Russian, remained Russian even after Finland had won its independence. By the treaty of Tartu, signed in 1920, it was returned to Finland in exchange for certain regions in the south.

In the last twenty years it became one of the tourist spots of the world. Good hotels were built. Hundreds of miles of fine motor roads were constructed. Millions and millions of dollars were expended in developing the harbor. Then the nickel mines were discovered and all Finland began to taste prosperity.

Russia felt she had been cheated by the treaty, and as the day neared when she must prepare for a great war of aggression, she determined to regain, by force of arms if necessary, what she had lost through diplomatic bargaining. In Petsamo there were millions of tons of nickel, a metal essential for war purposes. And there was a harbor in the arctic that never was closed by ice—a harbor she must have if she would dominate the north.

Negotiations were begun, but the Finns were stubborn. They would not give up Petsamo. So Russia launched her attack by land and sea and air.

While they waited at Salmijarvi the frontier guards and the seal hunters whetted their long knives and the points of their bayonets. They set fire to the buildings of the nickel mines, and by their light directed the horde of refugees across the border.

An airplane equipped with skis landed on the glistening snow near the flaming town, and the pilot came wading through the drifts.

“Be patient,” he said. “Help is on the way. They’re coming in buses. They should be here before midnight.”

It had begun to snow before the airplane landed; and the men were not reassured. “Buses will never get through the snowdrifts,” they said.

“They have a snowplow on each bus,” he told them.

The road was clogged with fugitives. Here and there it was blocked with stalled automobiles, with wagons that had been overturned, with herds of cattle and reindeer. At other places it was closed to traffic by piles of snow. But in spite of all obstacles the buses made good time. They arrived in Salmijarvi before midnight. The troops alighted, donned their skis, and started to the north. They were armed with automatic rifles and sub-machine guns.

Out of burning Salmijarvi they sped toward the dancing lights in the sky. The pilot remained in the town for a while. He was expecting company.

EIGHT hundred men went silently over the hills and down into the valleys. The only sounds to be heard were the crackling of the northern lights and now and then the howl of a wolf.

Liinahamari was a mass of glowing embers when the Finns halted.

war-zone

A little smoke went up from it, smoke as thin as the frosty breath of the soldiers. The Russians were there, walking about drowsily, slapping themselves with their mittened hands. They had not dared go to sleep. There was no place to sleep except in the snow, and to sleep there was to die.

The Finns crept to the outskirts of the town and waited for the signal to open fire. The Russians outnumbered them by at least five to one; but that didn't matter. The invaders might have been so many seals. The more a man killed, the better for him.

This enemy, each Finn realized, must be annihilated. If Petsamo were taken, the rest of Finland would be taken. The country would be Bolshevized. There would be no Finnish language, no Christian religion, no native culture, no way to earn a decent living. The men would be killed or driven into Siberia to work under the knout. The women and children—

Some of the Russians, the Finns saw, had stacked their arms and were trying to thaw out their hands over the glowing embers. Others had built bonfires of blazing debris snaked from the ruins of a church, had taken off their boots, and were sitting with their feet near the flames. Sentries were pacing up and down slowly. Their uniforms were slick with ice, their hats and shoulders white with snow.

The leader of the little Finnish army waited only until he heard, far behind him and high above, the drone of the planes coming from the direction of Salmijarvi. Then he gave the order to fire.

Submachine guns, automatic rifles, and the guns of the seal hunters blazed from three sides of the village.

The Reds, who had no idea that Finnish soldiers were anywhere within miles of them, bolted in panic—except, of course, those who fell at the first volley. They ran as fast as their numbed and wearied legs could carry them. After them went the swift Finns.

It was bloody work, as bloody as the slaughtering of a herd of seals—and as easily accomplished.

The Russians gathered speed, but they could not escape. Mines exploded in the white depths beneath their feet and blew whole platoons of them to pieces. Fresh volleys flamed out of the blackness behind them and felled scores.

The men broke ranks, despite all their officers could do, and fled, each man in his own direction. The seal hunters dropped to their knees and popped them off one by one, or struck with sealing knife or bayonet.

And the Finnish planes shot down out of the sky, flew low, and added to the toll with their machine guns.

How many of the invaders were killed is unknown. Hundreds of them fell in the village. Hundreds were dropped in the flight back toward Fisherman's Peninsula. Hundreds crept away and died in the deep snows. Eight hundred were taken prisoner.

war-zone

Russian reinforcements came up in the early morning. The Finns put on their skis, took up their packs, and retired. Friday, after the few hours of daylight, they returned to the battle. All that night they fought, and all the next day.

News came from the south every little while to cheer them, to give them new zest in their tremendous effort to beat back the might of Russia:

“The Finnish government says, ‘No surrender!’

“We’ve sunk several Russian ships. We’ve shot down many planes.

“Russian planes tried to land large bodies of troops behind our lines. We caught them in mid-air as they dangled on their parachutes. Few of them landed alive. They forgot that we are the champion clay-pigeon shots of the world.

“We have captured scores of Russian tanks.

“There were several companies of Russians moving toward the border across a frozen lake. Our artillery broke the ice behind them, putting black water between them and their retreat. Then the guns tore holes in the ice in front of them and on their flanks. After that those who didn’t die by cannon fire drowned.

“Everywhere we have encountered the enemy, we have beaten him back. Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?”

And the news of the victories in the north heartened all the rest of the little nation. “Supposing we are outnumbered sixty to one,” every Finn began to say, “what of it? One Finn is worth a hundred Russians.”

Petsamo was taken and retaken several times in the first week of the fighting. Russia, at this writing, still pours troops into that region—thousands and thousands of men who find no food nor shelter there, only snow and ashes and hidden mines that explode with terrible consequences, and a foe who strikes when they are almost dead of fatigue and the arctic cold.

The fighting continues, to the wonder of every chancellery in the world. Petsamo has become a proving ground, it seems, for the army of Soviet Russia. A proving ground, and perhaps a burial ground as well. The Russian army is the biggest in the world. It has approximately 15,000,000 men. It is so big that it has frightened more than half the world. But if it cannot whip the little army that still keeps Petsamo for the Finns, if it cannot even dent the spirit of little Finland, then why should other nations fear its wrath?

The story being written today in the snow of Petsamo, therefore, may be one of the most important stories to be written in the history of the world. It may be the story of the beginning of the end of all that is Soviet Russia.

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