

The Winter War: Preparation and Technology of War



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Abstract: *The theme of the World War II held in the period of 1941-1945 never loses its relevance because the threat of armed violence and military aggression in present days is too great. Therefore, the historical experience should become the property of the younger generation, so it does not repeat the mistakes of the past. Without speaking against the pluralism of scientific approaches and assessments in the study of the past in general, it is impossible to agree with the bias in the description of historical processes that take place today in Russian history. With the coming to power of the new political forces, many historical events concerning the past of the country are rethought, there is a rewriting of historical facts in favor of politicians, to justify their actions.*

Index Terms: *country's security, Karelian Isthmus, Mannerheim Line, Winter War.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Winter War (November 30, 1939 – March 12, 1940) was a severe trial that Russia had to go through on the eve of the World War II. Its military-strategic lessons had a significant impact on the course of reform and training of the Armed Forces of the USSR before the impending battle with Nazi Germany.

According to some experts [1]-[3], the outbreak of this war resulted in the desire of its participants to move to the solution of disputes by military means, without exhausting all the possibilities of their political settlement.

An important activity of the Soviet government was to strengthen the defense of the north-western borders of the USSR and, above all, the city of Leningrad [1].

The conclusion of the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, the transfer of the Soviet border to the west as a result of the accession of Western Ukraine, Western Belarus, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, the signing (in late September – early October 1939) of mutual aid pacts with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania improved the strategic position of the country. Moreover, it allowed the Soviet Union to avoid a war on two fronts (with Japan and Germany) [4]. However, the situation in the north-west continued to be alarming.

This was primarily because the government of Finland consistently and purposefully pursued a policy of rapprochement with Germany. The priorities of Finnish foreign policy in those days are well illustrated by the statement made by P. Svinhufvud [5] who was the President of Finland in the period of 1931 to 1937: "Any enemy of Russia should always be a friend of Finland" [6].

The airfields, naval bases, roads, fortifications had been intensively constructed on the Finnish territory, as well as a network of fortifications 32 km from Leningrad, called the Mannerheim Line. Here, in August 1939, the largest military maneuvers in the history of Finland were held [2].

In such conditions, as M. Moiseev, the First Deputy Minister of Defense of the USSR, Chief of the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces, the General of the Army, believed, the Soviet government "became increasingly aware, that under certain circumstances the territory of Finland and its armed forces can be used by large imperialist powers in aggressive anti-Soviet purposes" [1, p. 210].

Among other things, after the failure of the Soviet-Finnish negotiations in the spring of 1939, the Finnish command intensified direct contacts with the top military leaders of Germany, England, Sweden and other countries. At the same time, a call to the Finnish army of reservists of 20 ages was announced. At the same time, work was completed on a refined plan of defensive war against the USSR, which was based on counting for direct support of Western powers. Finally, Finnish troops began to deploy, and the civilians were evacuated from the border areas [1, p. 211]. These actions of the Finnish party, apparently, were caused both by the West-oriented, anti-Soviet policy of the government of Finland and by fears for the sovereignty of the country, which intensified after the entry of Soviet troops into Poland and the Baltic States [1, p. 211]. It was not surprising that the negotiations started in the mid-October in such an atmosphere on the conclusion of a Defensive Alliance between the USSR and Finland, which, included mutual territorial concessions, were disrupted due to the irreconcilable positions of the sides [1, p. 211]. Even though at the end of November Finland offered to continue negotiations, the military-political leadership of the USSR did not show interest in this proposal: at that moment, the nomination of the troops of both states to the border was coming to an end. The choice in favor of a military solution to the conflict was made by its participants.

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II. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

A. General description

According to some historians [2, pp. 29-30], [3, p. 32], the Soviet government was planning to wage a major war. It believed that the Western powers engaged in the war with Germany would not interfere in the Soviet-Finnish conflict and Finland itself (as not only Soviet but also some Western experts believed) [7] was not a serious military opponent for the Soviet Union.

Moreover, as in the Soviet-Polish war (1920), the Soviet leadership assumed that as soon as Soviet troops crossed the state border, the working class of Finland would oppose its bourgeois government. The above opinion of historians is based on several facts. We will refer to only two of them.

In the summer of 1939, the plan of military operations with Finland (based on a realistic assessment of the current situation) was submitted for consideration of the Main Military Council of the Red Army by the General Staff under the leadership of B.M. Shaposhnikov. It claimed that the implementation of military tasks is "far from easy, requiring several months of intense and difficult war". Therefore, for military operations with Finland, the plan was to use not only the troops of the Leningrad Military District but also additional forces, most of which were planned to be used to strike on the Karelian Isthmus. However, I.V. Stalin, believing that the developers of the plan overestimated the capabilities of the Finnish army, heavily criticized the plan and rejected it [1, p. 211].

In addition, on December 1, 1939, in the city of Terijoki (Zelenogorsk), the emigrated representatives of the Finnish left forces created the government of the Finnish Democratic Republic. Key positions, the Chairman of the People's Government and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, were taken by O.V. Kuusinen, a prominent figure of the Comintern and the Finnish Communist Party.

On December 2, the Soviet Union and the Finnish Democratic Republic signed an agreement on mutual assistance and friendship, according to which the border was to be transferred on the Karelian Isthmus in the direction from Leningrad, with the transfer to the Soviet Union of the territory in the amount of 3,970 square km [2, pp. 30-31].

However, the people of Finland did not recognize the government of O.V. Kuusinen and, after a short period of time, it left the political arena [2, p. 33].

After rejecting the plan of military operations with Finland developed by the General Staff, the Command of the Leningrad military district (K.A. Meretskov) was instructed to develop a new plan, considering the point of view of I.V. Stalin. The plan was soon drawn up and approved.

B. Algorithm

Its main emphasis was on the powerful initial impact of large forces able (according to the developers) within two to three weeks to defeat the enemy. Active military actions were simultaneously deployed not only on the Karelian Isthmus but also on the Murmansk, Kandalaksha, Kem, Ryabolsk Isthmus and other areas. This was supposed to "stretch the grouping of enemy forces and inflict a decisive defeat on her" [1, p. 211].

However, in practice, this led only to the unjustified dispersion of units and formations of the Red Army in many directions, which did not lead to the achievement of goals and was not adapted for the actions of large masses of troops with heavy weapons.

At the same time, according to M. Moiseev, the General of the Army, an irrational grouping of troops was conducted: on the Karelian Isthmus, the 7th army transferred to the Leningrad Military District was deployed, the 8th and 9th armies regrouped from the Baltic were deployed in Eastern Karelia, the 14th army – in the Arctic [1, pp. 211-212].

The Soviet troops were tasked with the following: by performing active actions in Northern and Central Finland to hold down the enemy and prevent the landing of troops of the Western powers. In this case, the main blow was to be dealt by the forces of the 8th army north-east of the Ladoga Lake, bypassing the Mannerheim Line in the Serdobol direction. The auxiliary blow was supposed to be performed by the 7th army on the Karelian Isthmus.

The operation was supposed to last for 12-15 days [2, p. 31]. The operation was divided into three stages: the first – the defeat of the enemy in the prestrip (operational zone of obstacles) and access of the main defensive strip; the second – preparation for the breakthrough of the main strip and the third – the final defeat of the Finnish army on the Karelian Isthmus and the mastery of Kexholm (Priozersk), Viipuri (Vyborg). The rate of attack envisaged in the first and second stages – 2-3 km per day, in the third – 8-10 km per day. However, these plans were destined to remain on paper.

III. RESULT ANALYSIS

The calculations that with the overwhelming superiority of the Soviet troops, the Finnish army will not be able to provide serious resistance were not justified. The situation was complicated by the fact that intelligence data on the state of powerful border fortifications created by the Finns, in particular, the Mannerheim Line, were incomplete and largely unreliable [1, p. 212].

As a result of poor command and control of the troops, the 18th, 163d, 54th, 168th, 44th rifle divisions were trapped in the entourage. Their personnel, attacked by well-prepared and trained Finnish units operating in a familiar theater, were forced, having left the equipment and heavy weapons, to make their way in small groups to the connection with their troops. On December 6, in 1939, P.E. Veshchev, the Commander of the 24th Rifle Division Brigade, died, after a failed attempt to exit the encirclement, S.I. Kondratyev, the Commander of the 34th Tank Brigade, killed himself, A.I. Vinogradov, the Commander of the 44th Division Brigade, was shot [1, p. 213].

The command's counting on high morale of soldiers was not justified [1, p. 213]. Moreover, after the first major military failures, the level of political and moral condition of the personnel had sharply decreased, the military discipline had fallen.

Only for various statements against the Soviet government, the Winter War, the leadership of the Red Army, the court of the Military Tribunal convicted 843 soldiers [8]. From the first days of fighting, the rear seriously failed. The supply of parts was disrupted. Troops experienced an acute shortage of not only in ammunition and fuel but also in food. This was largely because transport and communications of north-west direction did not cope with the task of the transportation support of the Red Army combat activities [9].

The main reason for this situation was the mistakes made in peacetime in the calculation of the capacity of transport communications. From these calculations, it followed that the available capacity not only exceeded the volumes of military transportation planned for military operations but also had significant reserves. As a result, from the very beginning of the Winter War, the transport communications of the north-western direction were overloaded with traffic, the volume of work in 1940 doubled compared to 1939 [10]. The speed of movement of train flows decreased sharply. Diversion of about 4 thousand passenger cars for military-sanitary trains led to difficulties in passenger transportation [11]. Due to the insufficient capacity of several railway sections and junctions, only 36 trains a day could be sent from Leningrad to the Karelian Isthmus, while 160 trains arrived from various directions to the city itself. From Leningrad, Vologda and Chudov to the Kirov Railway to Volkhovstroy Station 67 trains approached every day, and then, to the front, it was possible to pass only 19 trains. Moreover, sending troops and supplies was performed without considering the capacity of the unloading areas, so the Oktyabrskaya and Kirov Railways were quickly overflowed with cars. Thus, in November 1939, 50 thousand cars were idle waiting for unloading. In February 1940, their number exceeded 100 thousand [12, p. 314]. The situation threatened to end up with a complete shutdown of the railways and disruption of military transportation. In these conditions, only the troops of the 14th army managed to complete the set task by occupying the Rybachy and Sredny peninsulas in 8-10 days. Finland was thus cut off from the Barents Sea. Acting in the Rembol, Ukhta and Kandalaksha directions the troops of the 9th army in the first week advanced by 30-45 km, and the 8th army by mid-December advanced by 75-80 km [2, p. 32]. However, the growing resistance of the enemy and the features of the theater of operations, which significantly hampered the use of large forces of troops and military equipment, forced the 14th, 9th and 8th armies to move to defense. Having suffered significant losses and not breaking through the main strip of the Mannerheim Line, the 7th army, which operated on the Karelian Isthmus, moved to defense.

At the end of December, fruitless attempts to break through the enemy's defense were stopped and based on the Directive of the Main Command of December 28, 1939, the troops moved to the systematic preparation of further actions.

At the same time, measures on the elimination of the revealed shortcomings, improvement of management of troops, improvement of work of the rear were taken. The North-Western front led by S.K. Timoshenko was formed, and based on the 7th Army the two Armies, the 7th and 13th, were developed, as well as some other organizational arrangements were made. Additional forces aircraft, artillery,

tanks were sent to strengthen the front. Intensive preparations for the upcoming actions of the troops and staffs were conducted. On February 11, 1940, the troops of the North-Western front went on the offensive. By this time, the front had more than double superiority over the enemy in infantry, triple in artillery and absolute in tanks and planes [2, p. 33]. The failures of the initial period of the war demanded from the command urgent and strong measures to fully improve the transportation support of combat operations of the Soviet troops [9]. In this regard, an unprecedented decision was made in the practice of railway construction in the USSR: to improve the provision of troops operating north of the Ladoga Lake in winter, in the shortest possible time, in extremely difficult climatic conditions to carry out forced construction of the Petrozavodsk – Suoyarvi Railway [13], [14]. The Colonel Z.I. Kondratyev was appointed as a chief of construction. Under his leadership in 1939 during the military conflict on the river Khalkhin-Gol in Mongolia, the high-speed construction of the Borzya-Bain – Tumen Railway carried out. At the height of winter, when the air temperature drops to 45-48° degrees below zero and the depth of snow cover exceeds 1.5 m, the builders had to lay 132 km railway, 90 km of which ran through the dense forests, teeming with granite rocks and large boulders, and 36 km – in the swamps, the depth of which reached 13 m [14, p. 4]. The Finnish saying gives an expressive visual image of these places: "Enough water to drown, enough rocks to get killed, enough forest to get lost". However, neither the harsh nature nor the hardest conditions of construction could prevent the military railway men from performing the task set by the command. The work began on January 1, 1940. The participants of the construction had to lay 160 km of the upper structure of the road and build more than 2,000 running m of artificial structures in a very short time. This required to perform 1,655 thousand cubic m of earthworks, of which 805 thousand cubic m accounted for the filling of embankments (including over 15 miles through swamps) and 850 thousand cubic m – the development of seizures (including the volume of the recesses in the rocky soil (50 thousand cubic m) and boulders (40 thousand cubic m) [14, p. 4]. The main works on the construction of the Petrozavodsk – Suoyarvi Railway were completed in 70 calendar or 47 working days. The first train started movement on the new line on March 15, 1940. Even though the railway was opened to traffic with some delay from the deadline, its construction was a serious achievement. It proved the opportunity for accelerated rail construction in the theater under extremely difficult climatic conditions [14, p. 6]. Parts of the Red Army, advancing through the complex system of obstacles, minefields and powerful enemy fire by February 17, 1940, broke through the main strip of the Mannerheim Line. On February 28, they began storming the second line of defense. Its breakthrough, as well as a sudden, for the Finns, bypass of Vyborg fortifications on the ice of the Gulf of Vyborg by the 70th rifle division led by M.P. Kriponos, the Brigade Commander, and the subsequent capture of Vyborg put the Finnish army in a critical position.

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On March 12, 1940, the USSR and Finland signed a Peace Treaty, under which military actions were to cease on the entire front starting from 12 hours on March 13 [3, p. 34]. The 105-day Winter War was over.

Participation in the Winter War was a tough and uncompromising trial of the combat readiness of the Soviet Armed Forces, their ability to solve combat tasks in extreme conditions.

Speaking about the results of the Winter War, it should be noted that the personnel of the troops operating in the theater of military operations demonstrated a high level of combat skill, the ability to solve the tasks set by the command in any situation.

At the same time, the war revealed serious deficiencies in the training of the armed forces in terms of conducting large-scale military actions, low level of readiness of the command and headquarters, lack of maneuverability of associations, connections and parts, need to improve their organizational structure and management system, lack of infrastructure in the rear [9].

IV. CONCLUSION

The process of preparation for the Winter War, its course and results were the objects of close study by the military and political leadership of the USSR. However, even though it made mostly correct military-strategic conclusions and adopted several radical measures aimed at improving the combat readiness of the armed forces, a number of mistakes made in 1930-1940 years were repeated in the initial period of World War II [15].

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