



The Winter and Continuation Wars: **PB Finlandia 1 & 2; PB Russian 8**

By Byron Henderson

The Finnish army of 1939–40 has achieved an almost mythical status among amateur historians. The Finns were undoubtedly well led, highly motivated, and one of the best trained infantry forces in the world at that time. In addition the Finns used the terrain of their native country to the maximum advantage in fighting a numerically superior and far better equipped adversary.

However, there were numerous disadvantages that Finnish soldiers labored under during the Winter War. Their primary shortcoming was a lack of armament and ammunition. In the spring of 1939, Finland did not possess a single antitank gun. The army was so low on ammunition that machine-gunners were restricted to a dozen rounds of ammo per training session. Guard and reserve units trained with wooden rifles. The Finnish army simply was not prepared for war.

In addition to this issue was the nature of the war that was coming. Of all the

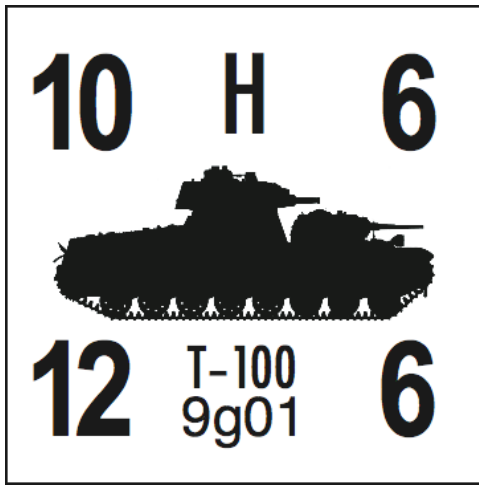


armies in Europe, the Finns were the least prepared for defense against armored assault. In 1935, the Finnish army had chosen the 37mm Swedish Bofors antitank gun as its main antitank weapon. But limited industrial capacity meant that only 50 guns had been produced by the

outbreak of the Winter War. Training in the use of antitank mines was likewise almost completely neglected. It was not until 1937 that antitank mines were tested during army maneuvers. A telling statistic: on the eve of the war the soldiers of the Finnish army had had nearly four times as much gas protection training as antitank training!

The result? The army's first encounters with Soviet armor were no less than traumatic. Men either panicked or died where they stood as they possessed no weapons with which to fight tanks. To the troops' credit, they recovered but cases of armor-induced panic were to plague the army throughout the war. In one case the cry of "tank" caused an entire company to abandon their

position. It was later found out that the supposed tank was in fact a single armored car – and a Finnish one at that! This type of reaction can, to a certain degree, be excused when we realize that initially the primary method of defense against enemy armor was to jam a wooden log or metal bar into the tracks to disable it.



In November, 1939 an antitank training school was established but shortages of antitank gun shells were so acute that rifles were attached directly to the gun barrels of the antitank guns to enhance the training. Only 4 to 7 shells per crew were allowed to be fired. After that, it was bullets and imaginary "booms"! Nevertheless, both motorized and horse-drawn antitank teams were formed. Each regiment received a single two gun platoon, usually made up of either 37mm or captured 47mm guns.

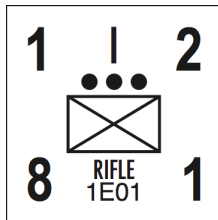
In spite of the best efforts of the antitank training school, the main line of defense against enemy armor was the ad hoc "bomber units" also called "Close Defense Units." These units

were formed (by necessity) at the front and operated along roads or at points suited for armor. Casualties among these units were often very high – up to 70 per cent in some cases. These units had no official organization or weapons establishment and operated in small groups which made them susceptible to quick destruction if the accompanying Russian infantry was not pinned by friendly fire.

It is important to note here that Marshal Mannerheim, based upon recommendations of his front line commanders, approved a general directive for the Finnish army concerning antitank tactics. The infantry was to allow Soviet tanks to penetrate through the first line of defense. Once the tanks were separated from their supporting infantry, they were to be attacked "relentlessly" by antitank teams and Close Defense Units. It is fair to say that the Finnish antitank defense during the Winter War was completely improvised. However, it was an effective improvisation: in 1990 a Russian study came out stating that total Russian tank losses during the Winter War numbered 3,543 armored vehicles!

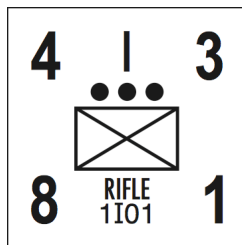
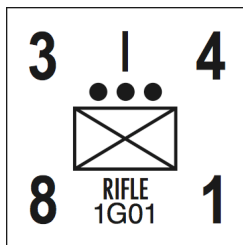
So why has the prowess of the Finnish army of this time been elevated to legendary status? Because they overcame all of these shortcomings to maul the Russian army that assaulted them. In spite of being heavily outnumbered, out-gunned, and assaulted by a form of warfare for which they were completely unprepared, the Finnish army stood firm and handed out truly historic abuse on the invading Russian army.

Finnish Units



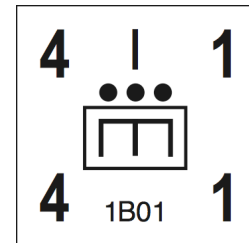
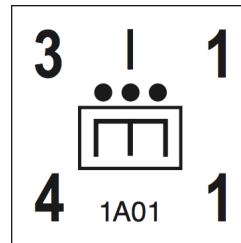
The infantry unit of the Winter War (1 I 2/8-1) reflects a highly trained and motivated group of men armed with rifles. (Only a few

hundred - 100 to 184 according to one source - of the famous *Suomi* SMG were issued to each Finnish Division during the Winter War. The *Suomi* would earn its reputation during the Continuation War when its numbers would rise from less than 200 per division to approximately 500 per regiment). The Finnish infantry had no actual antitank training and few heavy weapons. They suffered accordingly in the early part of the war against Russian armor - even given how poorly it was used. However, the Finns learned quickly and soon developed ways to deal with Soviet tanks.

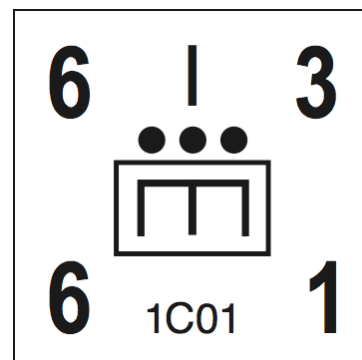


After the Winter War, Marshal Mannerheim reorganized the Finnish army. With the help of German supplies and equipment the infantry units were rebuilt and the lessons of the Winter War put to good use. The *Suomi* SMG was now far more prevalent (its numbers would increase as the war continued) and the infantry better organized and equipped for antitank combat. The 3 I 4/8-1

infantry unit is used for 1941-43 scenarios and the 4 I 3/8-1 infantry unit is used for 1944 scenarios.

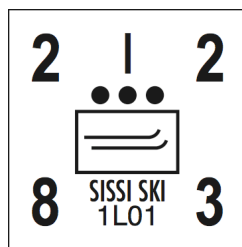
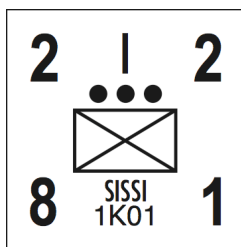


In the Finnish army, all engineers were simply referred to as *Pioneerit*. There was no distinction between combat or non-combat engineers. The engineering units (3 I 1/4-1, 4 I 1/4-1, and 6 I 3/6-1) have the same generic capabilities of all other engineer units in the game. They represent the standard engineer units who primarily set a variety of small traps (barbed wire in snow drifts seems to have been a favorite), laid mines, and built satchel charges and other close assault weapons used by the "bomber" units to destroy Russian tanks. In addition, they represent the "bomber" or "close support" units that were responsible for destroying enemy tanks after they had broken through the front lines. The 4 I 1/4-1 unit is for 1941-43 Continuation War scenarios. The 6 I 3/6-1 unit represents the Panzerfaust and/or Panzerschrek armed units for 1944 scenarios.



The standard Finnish machine gun platoon (2 I 4/4-1) soldiered throughout the war with little change. During the Winter War, the this platoon was often the main assault or defense unit. In 1942, an antitank platoon (close support or bomber unit) was added to the machine gun company establishment. In 1944, the antitank platoon was armed with Panzerfaust or Panzerschrek weapons. Machine gun units may not use close assault tactics unless stacked with infantry or engineers.

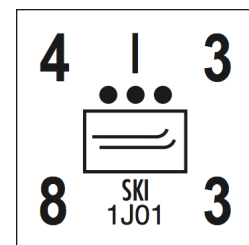
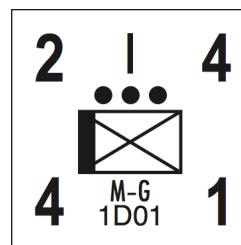
Sissi units were gorilla or assault formations that were self-sufficient and operated primarily behind enemy lines. Due to shortages of troops, the Finns were forced to use some *Sissi* units in regular front-line duty. They were armed with twice as many SMGs per platoon. In game terms, *Sissi* represent assault formations and have engineer capabilities.



Infantry notes:

PanzerBlitz players disappointed with the low attack factor of the Winter War Finnish infantry need to realize just how important combined arms will be in using the Finnish army. And by "combined arms" I'm referring to effectively using Finnish infantry, machineguns, and engineer units together. The Finns were an *infantry*

army and to be successful, players will need to use all parts of it effectively. It should help that you'll normally be fighting from behind blocks in forest terrain and defending bunkers and fortifications against poorly motivated Russian conscripts. The biggest problem the troops will face is surviving Russian artillery and tank attacks. On the offensive, effective use of your machinegun units and engineers will be extremely important.



Most of the antitank and artillery used by Finland has already been rated in Panzerblitz. However, a note concerning its scarcity is warranted. The Finnish army expected to go to war using the 20mm Lahti antitank rifle and 37mm Bofors gun as their main antitank weapons. Unfortunately the 20mm ATR was not available until after the Winter War (it was used in the Continuation War) and the 37mm ATG was in painfully short supply.

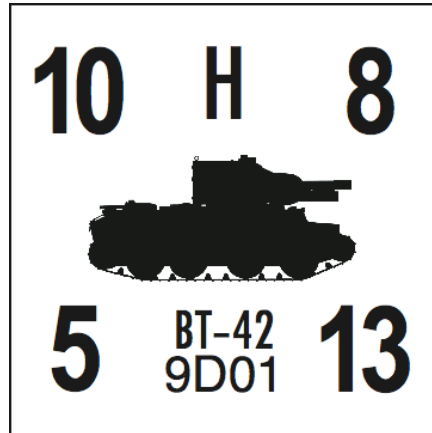
Mortars and Field Guns were in equally limited supply. During the battles for Taipale, Finnish reconnaissance planes reported Russian superiority in artillery to be 111 batteries to 9. When the Finns launched their "all out counterattack" at Suomussalmi only 8 artillery pieces were available to support it. The standard Winter War practice in light of this was to use the HMG companies

to provided direct fire support to the infantry to supplement the artillery.

During the "peace" of 1940, the Finns addressed these problems and, with German help, were able to support their troops during the Continuation War with limited antitank armament using delivered German 50mm and 75mm guns. In spite of this, the main antitank defense of the Finnish army remained the Close Support, or bomber, units.

Finnish Armor:

Finland put captured Soviet tanks to as good a use as possible during the Continuation War. They formed three battalions of armored forces (primarily using captured T-26 tanks) and, in 1943, reorganized them into an armored division with two tank brigades (T-26 tanks), and assault gun brigade (BT-42s and later, German supplied Stug III-75s), and an attached Jaeger Brigade (motorized, sometimes bicycle mounted, infantry). It also included six self-propelled Bofors AA guns. Its usefulness was limited in the face of the T 34/85 and JS II tanks employed by the Red Army in 1944.

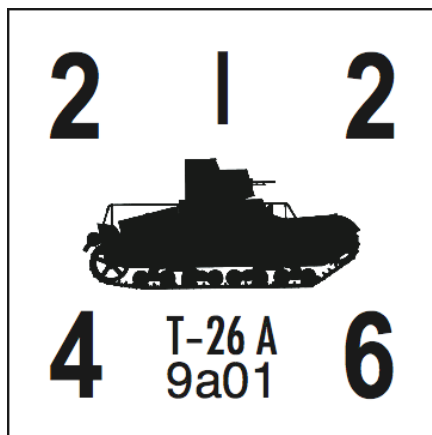


The Quality of the Opponent

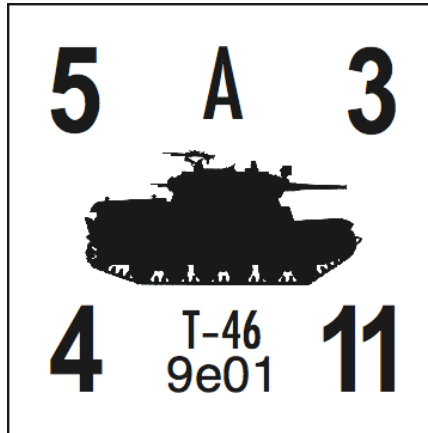
There is no doubt the Finns were very much helped along by the incompetence of their enemy. Had the Russians initially been led by Timoshenko, instead of the political crony Zhdanov, the Finnish army would have been overrun much quicker. The Russian army of 1939 was blind to its own limitations. Its strength was in numbers: manpower, weapons, and material seemed limitless. But that was all the army that invaded Finland had in its favor; everything else was a detriment to success.

Fully 30 per cent or more of the Russian soldiers that took part in the Winter War were conscripted off the street. From there, they were given a rifle and sent to die an ugly death trying to fulfill the unrealistic expectations of their superiors. (One Russian soldier, captured by the Finns, was found to have a pair of shoes he had bought for his wife in his backpack! He had been yanked off the street and immediately sent to the front.) Morale was low and was only made worse by leaders who insisted on

pressing and repeating attacks that had no hope of success. Russian troops were marched across clear terrain, arm in arm across minefields (apparently no sheep were available), into the teeth of the Finnish defenses. Dressed in khaki overcoats and silhouetted against the gray-white landscape, they made easy targets for Finnish machinegunners. Firing squads worked overtime dealing with men – officers and troops alike – who refused to take part in further suicidal attacks. In addition, coordinated tank and infantry tactics were non-existent. Russian armored tactics of the time were effectively straight-ahead cavalry charges. Their effect upon the Finnish soldier, who had often never seen even a single armored vehicle before, was initially shattering. But the Finns recovered and the Russians never got any better – until Timoshenko took command.



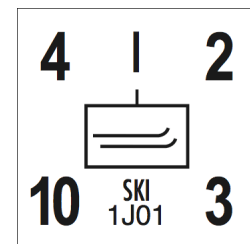
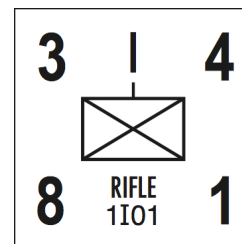
Russian tanks inevitably out-ran their infantry support and, once this was realized, would stop to allow them to



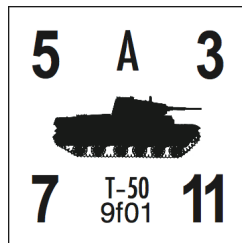
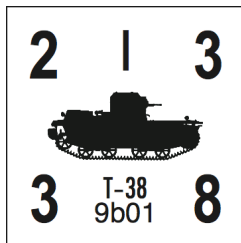
catch up. All too often the Finnish infantry and machineguns had cut down the supporting infantry and the tanks were left alone to fend for themselves against Finnish “bomber” units. The results were predictable. It was only after Zhdanov was relieved of military

command and Timoshenko took over that the Russian army was reorganized and retrained into a force capable of overwhelming the Finns.

The 3 | 4/8–1 unit represents Russian infantry before Timoshenko’s reorganization. Rifle armed, advancing together in tight groups, and poorly motivated this is as bad as it will get for the Russian infantry. The 3 | 4/10–1 unit represents the standard Russian infantry unit during the early years of the war (1940–42). Although still primarily armed with rifles – early war Russian doctrine emphasized massed rifle fire, not submachineguns – and fighting using the tactics of the First World War, they can nevertheless be an effective force if properly used and effectively supported. Early war Russian infantry may be transported by tanks but may not use PanzerBlitz assault tactics.



Impressed with the Finnish Ski troops, the Russians raised their own in 1942. Each company included two Rifle platoons and a SMG platoon armed with PPsh41 SMGs. They carried no antitank guns and relied solely upon ATRs for defense against armor – not that the Finns had any of which to speak. They were lightly equipped and were broken up during the summer months into front line infantry. Approximately 50 brigades were formed in 1942 but only 4 were left in 1944 and all were disbanded by 1945.



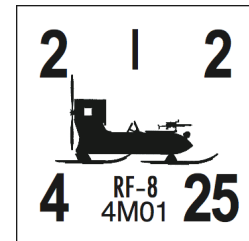
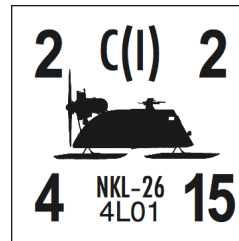
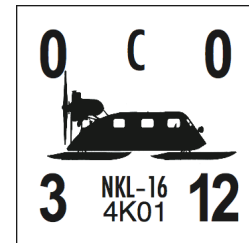
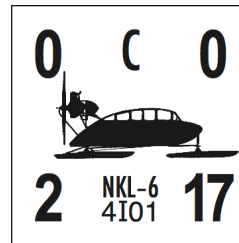
Russian Armor:

The Russians used the Winter War as a testing ground for numerous tanks. While the main tank available was the T-26, Russian tank formations included a variety of armored types from the amphibious T-38 to the heavy T-35 and T-100 tanks. A few, such as the T-46 and T-50, saw their only action of World War II in Finland.

Aerosans:

Michael Bennighoff includes quite a few Aerosan counters in his article and, although I could find no reference to their use in combat, he does mention that several were used in a scouting capacity. They are included (directly from his article) for their novelty and the variety they provide in the

countermix. They may carry infantry, CP, 81 and 82mm mortars, and light AT and AA guns (of 50mm or less).



Movement Notes:

As many of the scenarios for the Winter and Continuation Wars will take place during snow months, the following movement rules are recommended.

1. It costs aerosans two movement factors to enter a woods hex and five movement factors to enter a slope from a non-hilltop hex. They may not cross green hexsides and are not considered armored targets.
2. It costs wagons and all armored vehicles two movement factors per hex to move in snow.
3. It costs ski troops one movement factor to move through a hex. They may move through green hexsides. It costs them 3 movement factors to move into a slope hex unless they are entering it from a hilltop (higher elevation) hex.
4. Trucks may only move on roads.