



Winter War 1939–40

# Finnish Soldier

VERSUS

# Soviet Soldier

David Campbell

**COMBAT**



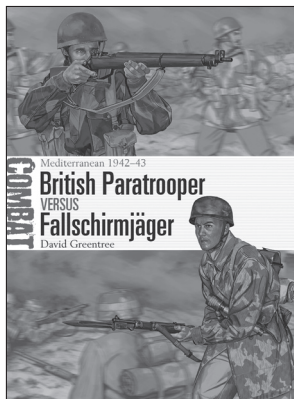
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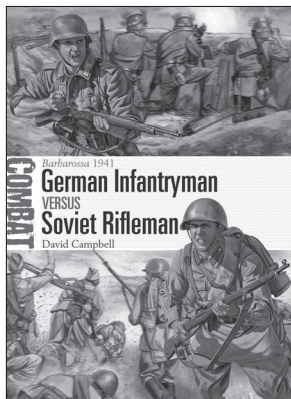
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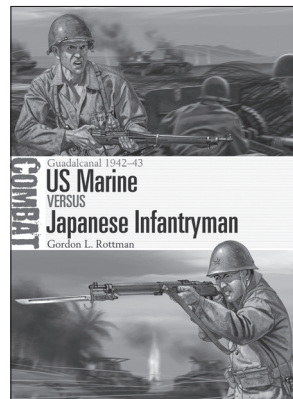
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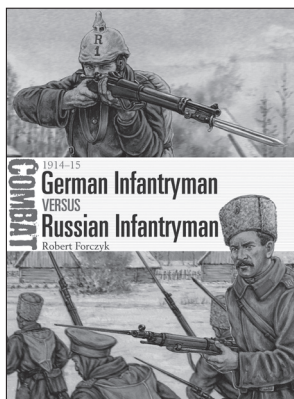
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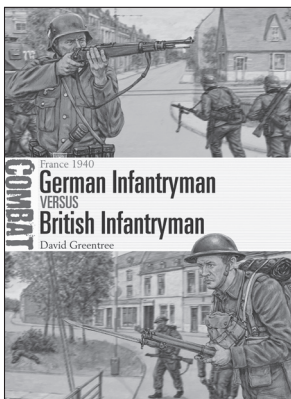
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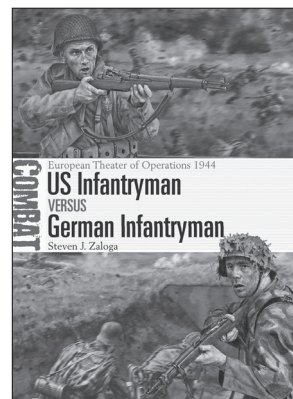
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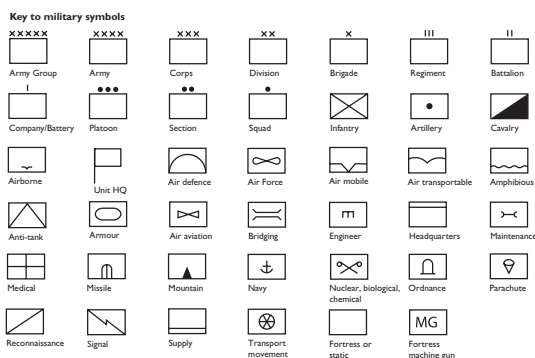
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## Dedication

To David Greentree, for helping to kick-start the whole thing.

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## Comparative army ranks

### US (1941)

General of the Army

General

Lieutenant-General

Major-General

Brigadier-General

Colonel

Lieutenant-Colonel

Major

Captain

1st Lieutenant

n/a

2nd Lieutenant

Sergeant-Major

Staff Sergeant

Sergeant

n/a

Corporal

Lance-corporal

Private

### Finnish

*Generalfeldmarschall*

*Sotomarsalkka*

*Kenraali*

*Kenraaliluutnantti*

*Kenraalimajuri*

*Eversti*

*Everstiluutnantti*

*Majuri*

*Kapteeni*

*Yliluutnantti*

n/a

*Vänrikki*

*Vääpeli, Sotilasmestari*

*Ylikersantti*

*Kersantti*

n/a

*Alikersantti*

*Korpraali*

*Sotamies<sup>1</sup>*

### Soviet

*Komandarm* or *komanduyushchiy armii* (Army Commander)

*Komandarm* or *komandarm vtorogo ranga* (Army Commander of the second rank)

*Komkor* or *komandir kórpusa* (Corps Commander)

*Komdiv* or *komandir divízií* (Division Commander)

*Kombrig* or *komandir brigady* (Brigade Commander)

n/a

*Polkóvnik*

*Podpolkóvnik* (Sub-Colonel)

*Mayór*

*Kapítán*

*Stárshiy Leytenánt* (Senior Lieutenant)

*Leytenánt* (Lieutenant)

*Mládshiy Leytenánt* (Junior Lieutenant)

*Starshiná*

*Stárshiy Serzhánt* (Senior Sergeant)

*Serzhánt*

*Mládshiy Serzhánt* (Junior Sergeant)

n/a

*Yefréytor*

*Ryadovóy, Krasnoarmeyets* (Private, Red Army Man)

1. *Sotamies* (soldier); *Kiväärimies* (Rifleman); *Tykkimies* (Gunner); *Pioneeri* (Pioneer, Engineer)

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# Introduction

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The Russo-Finnish Winter War, which lasted for 105 days in the early months of World War II, would bring the Finns lasting international fame, while their Soviet foes would be marked with ignominy and opprobrium in equal measure. Almost from the first shots on 30 November 1939 until the Peace of Moscow treaty was signed on 12 March 1940 and implemented the following day, the conflict was cast as one of a plucky Nordic David against a belligerent Soviet Goliath, though one in which it was Goliath, bloodied and embarrassed, who would emerge the victor.

Finland was a part of the Russian Empire until 1917, when the Finns took their independence from the failing Tsarist regime. After a short civil war Finland emerged as an independent democratic republic, but it could not ignore the very obvious fact that its nearest neighbour to the east had an

A Finnish ski patrol returning across the border on 1 January 1940. Patrols such as these, which could spend days operating many kilometres behind Soviet lines in conditions that would be unsupportable for Soviet troops, were a constant worry for the Red Army and did much to secure the Finnish reputation for being able to hit anywhere at any time. The effects of such raids, coupled with the quick discovery that trees, villages, haystacks and even rivers and lakes had been booby-trapped, made the advancing Red Army units fearful and cautious, and encouraged them to stick closely to the existing road network – exactly where the Finns wanted them. (SA-kuva)





ideological and strategic disposition that was to pose a constant threat to the new nation's existence. Finland's system of defence, developed during the 1920s and 1930s, was built on the premise of the Soviet Union as the aggressor. Strategy and tactics were adapted to this unpleasant reality, despite the overwhelming disparity in size and military strength that existed between the two nations: Finland's population was around 3 million, that of the Soviet Union was 183 million; Finland's mobilized army (mostly made up of reservists of one stripe or another) numbered 337,000 men in total – nine divisions, three brigades and a number of independent battalions and units – while the standing Red Army numbered 1,600,000 men in no fewer than 98 divisions (though the initial Soviet assault would comprise only four armies). Surely the Finns, vulnerable and alone, would do anything to avoid the crushing reality of a war they realistically could not hope to win? For the Soviets, secure in their overwhelming power of arms, the idea that Finland would pursue any other option but acquiescence seemed wilfully absurd. Yet the Finns refused to bend: 'Finland preferred, if the choice had to be made, to die fighting rather than to accept the consequences of aggression, and she instructed her military technicians to prepare, within the limits of her natural resources, to sell the country as dearly as possible' (Langdon-Davies 1941: 6).

The initial cause of the conflict was the Soviet demand for a number of territorial and military concessions from the Finns; concessions that, despite their relatively small size, would effectively denude Finland of her main defensive capabilities in the Karelian Isthmus. To give what was asked for would have left Finland's future security dependent on the goodwill and honourable behaviour of her Soviet neighbour – characteristics that were demonstrably lacking after the violent partition of Poland only a few weeks

A rather ungainly Soviet patrol from January or February 1940. The Red Army's lack of preparation for war extended to the use of skis and camouflage, in which they were hopelessly outclassed by the Finns. Soviet scouts were sometimes issued with an 'amoeba'-pattern camouflage smock, but in the snow such items were not much more use than a greatcoat. By the beginning of 1940, Soviet forces were receiving warmer clothing as well as winter-camouflage outfits; the latter seemed to be either a one-piece 'boiler-suit' style that was awkward to wear and unpopular with the troops, or a voluminous white shroud of the type shown here that also left much to be desired. (Photo by ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

### MAP KEY

The British journalist and war correspondent John Langdon-Davies travelled to Finland in January 1940 to see the developing conflict for himself, and was struck by the nature of the landscape: 'I have travelled for miles through the type of country which the Russians found awaiting them. The roads are many miles apart. On both sides one is hemmed in by forest. The clearings for agricultural purposes are few and small. Every now and then a white, amorphous open space appears; finger-shaped and strangled in a noose of forest, it is one of Finland's 60,000 lakes. The country is not flat, neither is it hilly – a succession of confusing ups and downs, few of them possessing enough individuality to distinguish them from the rest. The roads themselves are beaten snow and solid ice ... on either side of the road, marked very often by small uprooted saplings, begins a soft impassable waste which can only be negotiated on skis' (Langdon-Davies 1941: 10). By December, daylight only lasted for around five hours – and then only if the weather was clear – with snow lying 30cm or more deep on the iron-hard ground, and the temperature averaging  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  and on occasion plummeting as low as  $-70^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

Into this forbidding country four Soviet armies would make the attack: the 7th Army would strike into the Karelian Isthmus, aiming for Viipuri and after that Helsinki; the 8th Army would move through Ladoga–Karelia to turn the flank of the Finnish forces in the Isthmus; the 9th Army would cut the

country in two by seizing Oulu on the Bothnian Gulf; and the 14th Army would take Petsamo in the far north. The Karelian Isthmus was the main point of attack. Army Commander (2nd rank) Vsevolod Fedorovich Yakovlev's 7th Army, tasked with breaking through the Finns' Karelian defences, consisted of two rifle and one tank corps – the 19th Rifle Corps was commanded by Division Commander Filipp N. Starikov, and the 50th Rifle Corps was commanded by Division Commander Filipp Danilovich Gorolenko, with the 10th Tank Corps in support: a total of 169,000 men, 1,490 tanks and 1,286 artillery pieces. Facing them were two Finnish corps – II Corps defending the right flank of the Isthmus including the route to Viipuri, and III Corps holding the left flank of the Isthmus along the Vuoksi River line. The two corps had six divisions and numerous smaller units between them, numbering around 133,000 men in all, though artillery was relatively scarce, and armour was to all intents and purposes non-existent. Ahead of this defensive line – soon to be christened the 'Mannerheim Line' – four delaying groups were positioned, comprised of 14 battalions and nine independent companies, from the south-west to the north-east: the Uusikirkko (U) Group, the Muolaa (M) Group, the Lipola (L) Group, and the Rautu (R) Group. Finnish defences in the rest of the country were sparse, and quite unprepared for the scale of the Soviet attack.

A Finnish machine-gun nest to the north of Lemetti, 21 February 1940 – note the large cap on the weapon's cooling jacket, a feature designed to allow snow to be used in lieu of water. In general the Winter War saw little of the atrocious brutality that would characterize the war with Germany, with Finns and Soviets retaining a sense of respect for each other, as well as an appreciation of each other's tactical capabilities. (SA-kuva)



