

**ЮРИЙ МИХАЙЛОВИЧ КИЛИН**

доктор исторических наук, профессор, заведующий кафедрой всеобщей истории исторического факультета, Петрозаводский государственный университет (Петрозаводск, Российская Федерация)  
*yurikilin@yahoo.com*

### SOVIET-FINNISH WAR 1939–1940 AND RED ARMY'S LOSSES\*

The 105-day long Soviet-Finnish War (30 Nov. 1939–13 Mar. 1940) was one of the largest local wars waged in the XX century. Its frontline stretched from the Barents Sea to the Gulf of Finland, exceeding 1 400 kilometers, and approximately one fourth of the Red Army's whole battle strength was engaged in the war. By the end of the military conflict exactly 60 infantry and cavalry divisions of various types were massed on the front, providing the Red Army with an overwhelming numerical superiority over the Finnish Army, whose battle strength did not exceed 300 000 soldiers. Shortly before the outbreak of the fighting, the Red Army deployed assault troops of roughly 450 000 men on the border territories, all in all, 21 infantry divisions. These forces were massively strengthened in January – March, 1940 by 39 infantry and cavalry divisions speedily dispatched to the front, raising the battle strength of the Soviet troops to a so far (after the Russian Civil War) unprecedented one million man army, to say nothing about its technical superiority counted in tens (combat aircraft) and hundreds (armoured combat vehicles). The Red Army suffered exceptionally heavy losses in comparison to the seized territories during the Winter War whose principal battles had been fought in extremely severe long-lasting frosts, in many cases below minus forty degrees centigrade. The author of this article estimates that the total irretrievable losses of the Red Army during the Soviet-Finnish war amounted to 138 533 men.

Key words: Soviet-Finnish, Russo-Finnish, Winter War 1939–1940, Red Army's losses in the Winter War

#### THE MAIN OUTLINES OF THE WINTER WAR

The Winter War had a long and complicated pre-history that is mainly ignored or unknown by its researchers, who are inclined to see its origins in the early, mid- or even late 1930s with a narrow political approach. It must be stated that in analysing the genesis of the Winter War, solely political and even military approaches do not work. The war should be looked at as a part of the global planning of the Soviet leadership [7; 448–449], bearing in mind the ultimate goal of the Soviet state's foreign policy in 1920–1930s – restoring Tsarist Russia's borders of 1914 with some possible minor changes on the western border in favour of its most possible ally, Weimar Germany. In this sense, the "Finnish issue" was just a part of a larger problem on the USSR western border in 1920–1939.

Much was at stake for the USSR, which at the beginning of 1939 was industrially undeveloped and militarily unprepared for a large-scale war. The primary military goal of the Soviet state from the mid-1920s to 1939 had been to reinstate Tsarist Russia's western borders by eliminating newly independent buffer states and ensuring the so-called "natural", i. e. easily defendable borders. The USSR's 3 774 kilometers (from Barents Sea to Black Sea) long and almost non-fortified western border was seen as the principal weakness of the Soviet state fraught with possible military defeat. By annexing Baltic states, Finland and regaining territories that had been occupied by Poland and Romania in 1918–1920, the USSR would have shortened its western border to

the Baltic Sea – Black Sea isthmus, the main front of the future large war, to roughly 1 200 kilometers (as measured by a straight line from Lithuania's western border to the city of Odessa). This would have eliminated a flank threat posed by Finland and its possible allies, as it was then estimated. So, the war against Finland was a key action for a successful encounter with Germany, as the 1 554 kilometer long Soviet-Finnish border made up over 41 per cent of the whole USSR's western border [3; 140].

This plan could be realized only in cooperation with one of the influential European state: Great Britain, Germany or France. Soviet leaders had tried all three possible alliances in 1920–1930s, having signed the Molotov – Ribbentrop Pact with their "old ally" on August 23, 1939. Leningrad Military District, however, had begun its preparations for the war against Estonia, Latvia and Finland in December 1938, some months before secret Nazi-Soviet contacts started. Military preparations were compromised by the sabotage of the Soviet Peoples Commissariats (ministries), which failed to fulfill their tasks, leaving the Red Army totally unprepared theatre-of-war. Stalin used the talks with the Finns held in Moscow in October – November 1939 as a co-ver-up for military preparations [2; 357].

The war plan drawn up by the headquarters of the Leningrad Military District was totally unrealistic. Its main idea of a "one-month war" originated in 1930, when a military game played in Leningrad ended in a month-long war and the takeover of Helsinki [4; 115]. The Red Army's grouping deployed

on the border from mid-September to November 30 had no ready reserves and the troops were incorrectly distributed between two theatres-of-war: west and north of Ladoga Lake. Reserve troops were badly, if ever, trained and motivated to fight effectively during the first phase of the war. All these factors predetermined heavy losses of the Red Army during the Winter War. Nevertheless, the USSR had a one million man army in high battle condition by March 13, 1940 when the Moscow treaty ended hostilities. The war ended because of the Soviet leaders' fear of allied intervention [2; 384].

#### **CLARIFICATION OF THE RED ARMY'S LOSSES IN THE WINTER WAR IN THE USSR – RUSSIA 1940–2009**

In the 50 years that followed the war estimations of the losses suffered by the Red Army in the 105 days of the war varied widely from mere 45 000, mentioned by the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov in spring of 1940, up to “over one million dead” Soviet soldiers. The figure was seen by the author of this article on tourist information boards in Ilomantsi area seven years ago. The truth lies as always somewhere between these numbers.

By the end of June 1940, when military units and a special commission had arranged the burial of 8 367 dead soldiers newly found on battlefields and buried in mass graves, as well as 2 853 dead reburied from single graves to mass graves, there were, all in all, 18 military cemeteries and 410 mass graves on the battlefields of the Winter War, that now are mainly the Russian Republic of Karelia and Leningrad region [7; 8].

In the course of the war, the Red Army's military units suffered extremely heavy losses, as stated above. The losses were first counted and made public by a research team headed by Lieutenant-general Grigori Krivosheev in 1993. The team used as a raw data the Red Army's so-called ‘irretrievable losses’ (all who lost their lives in the war) records that had been compiled by the personnel department of the Ministry of Defence of the USSR as early as in 1949–1951, when it was decided to keep the records secret. Publishing of the formerly secret materials was not permitted until the USSR had disintegrated [1; 103]. While compiling casualty records the personnel department used as raw data sources the Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), Central Archive of the Defence Ministry, Russian State Navy Archive (RGA VMF), Military Medical Academy's Archive and the archives of territorial military commissariats, that is, military registration and enlistment offices. From the very beginning, the records were known as “the General Staff's data file” among those who were aware about the situation.

In this publication the total irretrievable losses of the USSR's armed forces in the Winter War were reported to be 126 875 men, including those killed in action (KIA), personnel missing in action

(MIA), died during sanitary evacuation, fatalities due to accidents and disease, and soldiers sentenced to be shot by military tribunals [1; 125]. The Red Army's so-called sanitary losses, a category that includes the wounded, contused, burnt, frostbitten and diseased, were counted by the team and amounted to 264 908 men [1; 125]. Subtracting 58 370 diseased from 264 908 and adding 126 875 dead gives us the total figure of combat losses of the Red Army in the Winter War – 333 413 men (counted by the author, [1; 125]), according to Krivosheev's research team.

In accordance with the decrees issued by the government of the Russian Federation on December 22, 1992 г. № 1004 and on August 26, 1995 г. № 1177-р, a composite author team headed by Vladimir Zolotaryov compiled additional data from the principal archives of the Russian Federation. In 1999–2005, the team published a nine-volume Memory Book, dedicated to the Red Army soldiers who lost their lives in combat in 1929–1940. The Memory Book's second to ninth volumes contain specified nominal lists of the Red Army's irretrievable losses, that is, personal data on presumably all the Soviet soldiers who lost their lives during the Winter War [9], though in many cases this data is incomplete. A number of new entries were added to the Memory Books as compared to the figures published by Krivosheev's team after new data was found in Russian military and medical archives, raising the total loss number well over 130 000, though the exact figure had not been calculated.

For a variety of reasons, the Memory Book, although the best publication on the topic at the moment of publication, is not free from some substantial shortcomings, the most common of them being double and even triple entries for the same dead soldier due to raw data derived from different written sources with differing name spelling variants. Moreover, military clerks' insufficient language competence produced a great number of wrong name and surname spellings, making it difficult or even impossible to identify many of the dead soldiers. The theatre-of-war's extremely difficult mixed Finnish and Karelian toponymy, in many cases wrongly spelled by military clerks, has also caused confusion among relatives of the dead soldiers in the process of planning commemorative trips to the mass graves and military cemeteries of the Winter War. The renaming of the whole of the Karelian Isthmus's Finnish and Karelian toponymy into Russian in 1948–1949, when this territory was included into the Leningrad region, has greatly complicated the situation. The situation is further complicated by the incomplete information presented in a database compiled by the Russian State Military Archive by 1999 and presented in the Memory Books. In some cases, information on dead soldiers, even officers, is not presented in this database, as evidenced by letters from relatives of the dead soldiers.

From this starting position an Internet project entitled “Russo-Finnish War 1939–1940” was initiated and completed by the author of this article and Veronika Kilina in 2006–2009 aiming to use the Internet for furthering fuller understanding of one of the bloodiest local wars waged in the 20th century [10]. The clarification of the true losses suffered by the Red Army has been the prime concern of this humane project. The main purpose of this project is to provide an opportunity for the relatives of the dead soldiers to find out the exact places where the soldiers were buried or went missing during the fighting. For this purpose the database, which consists of 168 024 personal entries, was corrected by eliminating multiple entries for the same dead soldiers. Thus, the database was cut down to 138 533 entries, counted by the author of the article on the basis of the corrected database from May 5, 2012 [10], which is at the moment the most correct figure of the Red Army's irretrievable losses during the Russo-Finnish war. For the first time, information on over 100 prisoners of war who died in Finnish custody was included into the database thanks to the former Finnish Military Archive, now a part of the National Archive of Finland. This information was not presented in the Memory Books.

The total number of the losses, 138 533, in no sense should be seen as “the very precise” figure. Interaction through the Internet site with relatives of the dead soldiers makes it possible to adjust the data already presented on the site, as well as to include data about those who are not even mentioned due to a complete lack of information, and to exclude more multiple entries. Therefore, the total number will inevitably be changing, though, I believe, by hundreds at the most, not by thousands. Adding the 206 538 men included to the so-called sanitary losses – mainly the wounded, with the exception of the diseased – to the 138 533 dead gives us the total number of the Soviet armed forces' combat losses – 345 071 men, counted by the author of the article on the basis of the corrected database [10] and Grif sekretnosti snyat [1; 125] which is almost 76.7 % of the initial Red Army's grouping. Thus, the Red Army's average daily irretrievable losses during the Winter War amounted to 1 320 men, and overall daily casualties, with the exception of the diseased, to 3 287 men.

The clarification of the real irretrievable losses of infantry divisions, which took part in the fighting and accounted for the lion's share of the Red Army's fatalities, was a much more challenging undertaking than counting total losses, because almost five per cent of the individual records in the database have no information on the military unit in which the dead soldiers had served. Taking this into consideration, the author of the article counts below the irretrievable losses of some infantry divisions, adding five per cent to the figures counted in the database.

Out of 60 divisions engaged in the war, the heaviest losses were suffered by the 56th Corps's 18th Infantry Division, which was encircled by the Finns in the Lemetti area north-east of Ladoga lake – 6 524 killed, died to wounds and missing in action, from the initial 15 000 man battle strength of the division. This is a more accurate figure than mentioned in the article published in 2010 [6; 77]. Fatalities of the 34th Light Armoured Brigade encircled in the same area amounted to 1 075 men resulting in a total loss of the fighting capability of the brigade. Contrary to this, under the solid command of Colonel Andrey Bondarev the 56th Corps's 168th Infantry Division encircled west of the 18th Infantry Division's battlefields in Kitilä – Haukkaselkä – Koirinoja area on a relatively large and compact territory, was able to avoid the loss of combat effectiveness and complete destruction until the end of the war, with the loss of 1 682 men.

The losses of the two divisions operating in the extreme north in Petsamo area, far away from the main theatres-of-war on the Karelian Isthmus and North-East of Ladoga lake, were relatively small, 52nd Infantry Division lost 322 and 104th Mountain Infantry Division – 149 men. At the other extreme, two infantry divisions, encircled in Suomussalmi area in northern Finland, suffered heavy losses as a result of one of the shortest and bloodiest battles of the Winter War. Encircled by the Finns in Suomussalmi by mid-December 1939 the 163rd Infantry Division had retreated to the Soviet-Finnish border just at the moment when the 44th Infantry Division was being speedily marched to the front to break through the encirclement, suffering 4 386 men losses by the end of the war. Subsequently, 44th Infantry Division, encircled in the Raate area, lost 4 494 men in the Battle of Suomussalmi (December 1939 – January 1940), the heaviest daily losses ever suffered by the Soviets during the Winter War, because the battle lasted in effect just a week. Exceptionally heavy losses of these two divisions can be explained by the steadfast desire of the military commanders to decide the outcome of the operation by capturing Oulu and cutting Finland in two parts in the shortest possible term.

By the end of the 1990s, the Finns established their own database, clarifying the irretrievable losses of the Finnish army in the Winter War on the basis of the information given by parishes – 26 662 men [9; 825]. Overall casualties of the Finns, including those killed in action, missing in action and wounded are estimated by researchers to be 68 000–70 000 men [9; 828]. Thus, the Finnish army's daily irretrievable losses amounted to 254 men, corresponding 19.2 % of the Red Army's losses. Wartime daily losses of the Finns amounted to 648–667 men (19.7–20.3 %). Overall, Finnish and Soviet irretrievable losses were in the ratio 1:5.2. This great disparity is a convincing evidence of the Soviet leaders' hard political will to achieve the prime goal of the war, the annexation of Finland, at any price. The disparity makes it

also clear that the Finnish army was relatively more effective and the Finns were better ready for war, though not materially.

### AN OUTCOME OF THE WINTER WAR

Though the war's original goals, occupation and annexation of Finland, had not been achieved, the Soviet leadership ensured, as it then seemed to the Kremlin, better security for the state's biggest war-industrial centre, Leningrad, for the strategic railway connecting Leningrad to the unfrozen port of Murmansk and for the strategic Baltic Sea – White Sea canal. According to the Moscow treaty's provisions Finland ceded to the Soviet Union the whole Karelian Isthmus with the country's second-biggest city of Vyborg, the so-called Ladogan Karelia along with the town of Sortavala, the Suojärvi region north-east of Ladoga Lake – a total area of

34 800 square kilometres (except Ladoga Lake) – and the Kuolajärvi region of northern Finland, the so-called “Finnish waist” (9 000 square kilometres) in the Salla region, ensuring the shortest route to the Swedish border. The USSR leased Hanko peninsula west of Helsinki and ensured the supply of badly needed cellulose [4; 219], a principal component in the production of gunpowder and explosives. Still, the main military goal of the war, the shortening of the USSR's western border by annexing Finland for the inevitable war against Nazi Germany, had not been achieved. The outcome of the Winter War determined Finland's decision to ally with Germany and reanimated dreams of a Greater Finland, which had been fading away since the mid-1920s. As a result of the war, Finland, in effect, turned from her doubtful (for Soviet leaders) neutral state status into a certain enemy of the Soviet state.

\* Работа выполняется при финансовой поддержке Программы стратегического развития (ПСР) ПетрГУ в рамках реализации комплекса мероприятий по развитию научно-исследовательской деятельности.

### REFERENCES

1. Grif sekretnosti snyat. Poteri vooruzhennykh sil SSSR v voynakh, boevykh deistviyakh i voennykh konfliktakh: Statisticheskoye issledovanie / Ed. G. F. Krivosheev. Moscow, 1993. 416 p.
2. K i l i n J. Puna-armeija Stalinin tahdon toteuttajana talvisodassa // Talvisodan pikkujättiläinen. Porvoo, 1999. S. 356–384.
3. K i l i n J. Suurvallan rajamaa: Neuvosto-Karjala neuvostovaltion politiikassa 1920–1941. Jyväskylä, 2002. 291 s.
4. K i l i n Y. Karelia v politike sovetского gosudarstva. Petrozavodsk, 1999. 275 p.
5. K i l i n Y. The Birth of Soviet Globalism: The USSR's Military Activity in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic in 1920–1941. Proceedings of the International Congress on the History of the Arctic and Sub-Arctic Region (18–21 June, 1998. Reykjavik). P. 448–449.
6. K i l i n Y., K i l i n a V. The Red Army's losses during the Winter War // Perspectives on the Finnish Winter War. Winter War-seminar in Helsinki, 11 March 2010. P. 73–78.
7. Kniga pamyati. Moscow, 1999. Vol. 2. 549 p.
8. Kniga pamyati. Vol. 2–9. Moscow, 1999–2005.
9. L e n t i l ä R., J u u t i l a i n e n A. Talvisodan uhrin // Talvisodan pikkujättiläinen. Porvoo, 1999. S. 816–828.
10. Zimnyaya voyna. Bezvozvratnye poteri Krasnoy Armii v period sovetsko-finlyandskoy voyny (1939–1940) [Electronic resource]. Access mode: <http://winterwar.karelia.ru/site/about>