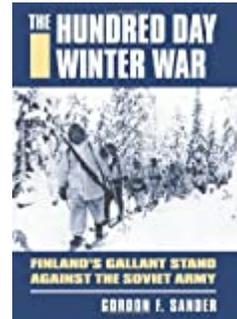


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Gordon F. Sander.** *The Hundred Day Winter War: Finland's Gallant Stand against the Soviet Army.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. 400 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1910-8.



**Reviewed by** Christopher Rein

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Journalist Gordon F. Sander's *The Hundred Day Winter War* offers a detailed look at the brief but influential conflict between Finland and the Soviet Union during the depths of the winter of 1939-40. While the episode is often overshadowed by the Second World War, which opened just three months before the Winter War and also featured a second war between Finland and the Soviet Union, albeit with Finland acting as a German proxy the second time around, Sander manages to capture both the daily feel and broader international significance of this relatively brief episode. His main argument, that Finland made a gallant stand before being overwhelmed by both the sheer numbers and increased effectiveness of the Soviet forces, is well supported by stories from both the frozen front lines where soldiers of both nations decided the issue and the backroom parlors where diplomats negotiated the consequences. Betraying his interests as both a journalist and a Finnophile, Sander focuses generally on the Finnish side of the story and, in particular, on the international media's coverage of the war from the cold and crowded halls of the Hotel Kamp in Helsinki. The editorial staff at the University Press of Kansas has done their usual fine job in the production, although the placement of all of the maps at the end of the introduction rather than in the chapters where the

action is discussed is a bit curious. The final result is a broad, compelling, and significant study of the war that lacks only more detail on the Soviet side to make it the authoritative work on the conflict.

Sander organizes the work chronologically, tracing generally the initial Soviet assault which floundered in the deep snows and dark nights of the Finnish winter, the interregnum when Finland was unable to marshal significant external support, either militarily from the Allies or diplomatically from its neighbor Sweden while the Soviets implemented the necessary reforms, and finally the decisive Soviet spring offensive that finally broke the vaunted Mannerheim Line and led to the permanent (after 1945) loss of both Finnish Karelia and Finland's second-largest city, Viipuri (now Russian Vyborg) as well as the arctic port of Petsamo. Sander jumps with ease from the exhausted Finnish ski troopers manning the inadequately supplied pillboxes, to the halls of government in Helsinki and Moscow, the feckless League of Nations, and the numerous fundraisers in the United States in which the nation, paralyzed by isolationism and unpreparedness, salved its conscience with generous funds for nonmilitary relief. The result is a comprehensive coverage of the war which includes a deft blend of diplomatic, military, social, and cultural aspects, all of which make

the work a very enjoyable read.

The work highlights the global community's inability to come to the aid of brave little Finland and respond to naked aggression under the derelict League of Nations. Unable to deter the Soviets, France and Britain finally raised a military relief force, too small and too late to impact the outcome, but sufficient to arouse German suspicions, especially for the security of the high-grade iron ore it received from ever-neutral Sweden. The western Allies would eventually use the forces destined for Finland in an ill-fated intervention in the German invasion of Norway, itself arguably an immediate byproduct of the Winter War. In the longer run, Soviet ineptness resulting from Stalin's debilitating purges, already under repair by the end of the Winter War, convinced Hitler that the Soviet colossus was a decrepit façade, requiring only one swift blow to topple, especially at the hands of Aryan supermen like the outnumbered Finns. But, just as the Germans were busy that winter incorporating lessons learned from Polish campaign into plans for the conquest of Norway, the Low Countries, and France, so too were the Soviets beginning their long climb back from the depths of the purges. Under the leadership of Winter War veterans, such as the Ukrainian Semyon Timoshenko, Stalin's forces would eventually survive a German invasion, not in time to stop Operation Barbarossa in the summer of 1941, but certainly by December at the gates of Moscow when conditions resembled those of the Winter War two years earlier. Diplomatically, Sander's biggest lesson seems to be the necessity of quick and de-

cisive foreign intervention, the lack of which surely sentenced Finland to her fate.

Militarily, Sander contrasts the incredible destructiveness of the Soviet air force's indiscriminate raids on Finnish cities with the heightened will to resist among the Finnish civilian population, for whom the end of hostilities and subsequent territorial concessions came as a shock. For military practitioners of the day, the ineffective air campaign should have served as further confirmation of the inadequacy of air theorists, such as Giulio Douhet's ideas about the fragility of civilian morale, which would be later confirmed on the streets of London and Berlin alike. Despite complete command of the air, the Soviets were unable to shake Finnish resolve with terror bombing and required a decisive land campaign to finally force the Finns to concede the territory they desired.

In the end, Sander's work is a deeply satisfying and enriching account of one of the lesser-known episodes of the Second World War. He explains his scant coverage of Finland's later alliance with Nazi Germany in an attempt to regain the territory lost in 1940, which perhaps tainted Finland's standing in the world community, with the explanation that it lies not within the province of this book (p. 341). That, and the relative paucity of sources from the Soviet side only slightly diminish what is otherwise an excellent treatment of the war and a model of how to integrate the numerous strands of inquiry within the field of military history into an illuminating and enjoyable work of scholarship.

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