Part 7– Skis in the Winter War

Most Finns learned to ski as soon as they learned to walk. The Finnish ski troops demonstrated themselves to be far more mobile than the Soviets during the Winter War, although this advantage was most pronounced where the snow was deepest, such as further north at Suomussalmi. During the battle of Tolvajärvi the snow was about a foot deep.

Below: Old and young Finns on skis.
Red Winter Notes: In Red Winter, all Finnish infantry companies are ski-equipped. They have a movement allowance of 6, vs. 5 for the Soviets. Finns on skis pay only 1 movement point to cross frozen lake hexes, while the Soviets pay 1.5.

While this discrepancy might at first seem minor, it results in some rather profound differences in game play. For example, the Finns can cross 6 frozen lake hexes per turn, compared to only 3 for the Soviets.

Also, since both sides spend +2 movement points to conduct assaults (combats during movement), the Finns can usually move up to a Soviet unit and assault it during the same action phase, whereas the Soviets typically need to begin adjacent to their target to assault.

Although some Soviet units were equipped with skis, the Finns considered the Soviet skis to be of such inferior quality that they burned them as firewood when they captured them.

*Below: Captured Soviet skis.*

*Right: Finnish ski troop armed with submachine gun. Art by Rodger MacGowan.*
The Soviets were trained to remove their skis at the first sign of combat. The Finns, on the other hand, would ski into combat, often striking suddenly and with great speed, then disappear again into the snowy haze like white ghosts. The Soviets called this "belaya smert"- the white death.

Below: Soviet ski troops. Notice that despite their skis, they still wear brown uniforms.

Bottom: This photo from later in the war shows Soviet infantry, now equipped with skis and white clothing, removing their skis in a combat drill.
It's easy to see how tales of the "white death" might have started. Due to the sub-zero temperatures of the Winter War, soldiers would sometimes freeze in place (quite literally) like ghoulish mannequins when their metabolism suddenly dropped upon taking a bullet hit. This created some bizarre and ghastly scenes to discover the morning after the combat. Slain troops were sometimes still standing when found, their eyes and mouths open in a frozen scream.

While it is true that the Soviets were unprepared for the harsh winter condition in December of 1939, it is a bit of a misconception that the Soviet army was untrained in winter warfare. The Finns did not merely "ski circle around them" during the first weeks of the war, and indeed the Soviets of the 139th Rifle Division used their extensive training to outflank the Finnish strongpoints time and time again during their advance to Tolvajärvi.

Next time: Soviet tactics in the Winter War.

Above: Finnish ski troop in the Winter War.