CHAPTER THREE
THE FINNISH ARMY AT WAR
OPERATIONS AND SOLDIERS, 1939–45

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In April 1948, Generalissimus Josef Stalin drank a toast to the Finnish Army. He is reported to have remarked: “A country that has a poor army, nobody respects, but a country with a good army, everybody salutes!”\(^1\) Stalin’s comment was not just a compliment. He knew what he was talking about, because he had been in charge of the Soviet Union’s war efforts in World War II. The Soviet Union, having overwhelming power and endless resources, could have occupied Finland had it wanted to do so. But, in the end, it did not employ the required amount of both its forces and time to fulfill this surprisingly troublesome military task. This had a lot to do with the will of Stalin and the remote geographical location and geopolitical position of Finland; this strategic direction was simply not a priority, but more like “a northern sideshow” for the Soviet Union. The Soviet decision to relinquish its plans to occupy Finland, however, was, to a major degree, influenced by the military performance of the Finnish Army. Despite the territorial losses and defeat in the Winter War and the Continuation War, the Finnish Army was not annihilated and it did not capitulate, neither in March 1940 nor in September 1944.

In the research concerning military effectiveness and innovativeness, victory is not the sole criterion for success. Effective militaries are those that are able to convert their resources into maximum fighting power. Combat effectiveness means the quality of performance in the battlefield. Other criteria are effective command, good initiative and logistics. These are linked with the level of democracy, as the best motivation comes from a soldier’s personal interests, which determine what kind of motivation and control is required to ensure combat effectiveness. In short, this effectiveness is determined by technical

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elements of the military system (military justice, tactics, administration, organization and command) combined with the psychological aspects of the motivational system (morale, primary group cohesion and motivation).

In this chapter the reader is first introduced to the complexities of events on the fronts of the Winter War, the Continuation War and the Lapland War. The two first sections of the chapter are dedicated to the chronology of main military events for Finland in 1939–45. The chapter seeks to discuss the Finnish military art with a clear focus on the operational level of land warfare. The conclusion that the Finnish Army performed reasonably well in World War II requires an explanation. In the third section of the chapter, combat effectiveness and motivation are, therefore, analyzed by utilizing military sociological and social psychology viewpoints.

I. The Winter War, 1939–40

Prewar Preparations and Resources

The Soviet Union had made operational plans related to Finland during the 1920s, and since 1930 its objective had been to take over the whole of Finland. The Leningrad Military District was strengthened in 1938, and soon the preparations for an invasion of Finland got under way. In June 1939, Stalin gave orders to check war plans for an offensive. He approved the plans before the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939. The Red Army concentrations of the attacking troops were initiated in September 1939, and the final attack order was issued on 15 November 1939. The objective was to annihilate the Finnish Army and swiftly occupy the country.
