

Finnish armour

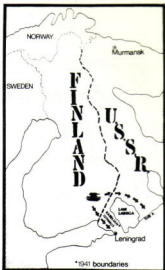
1939-1945 described by Steve Zaloga and Karl Rosenlof

THE FIRST Finnish experience with armour came in 1919 when small numbers of 'Russki-Fiat' armoured cars were captured from Russian Bolshevik Forces. Like most of the newly independent nations of eastern Europe, Finland soon became a military client of France and, in 1919, military advisers and credit were made available. The Finns wasted no time in setting up an armoured force, and in October of that year organised the *Hyökkäysvaunurykmentin* (HVR, or tank regiment) which was composed of 32 Renault FT-17/18s sent from France. Of these tanks, 14 were armed with the 37 mm Puteaux cannon and the remaining 18 with a Hotchkiss heavy machine-gun. By the time the HVR reached operational status, the anti-Bolshevik conflict was coming to a close, and the Renaults probably saw no action.

Finland's meagre military budget during

the inter-war years did not permit the modernisation of her small tank force and the HVR officers had to content themselves with purchasing single examples of foreign types for inspection and trials. In 1925, a St Chamond tankette was purchased and in 1933 a Vickers Armstrong Medium, a Carden Lloyd Mk VIB tankette, a Carden Lloyd 4-ton amphibian, a Carden Lloyd 4.5-ton 'Patrol' tank and a Vickers Armstrong 6-ton Type E export tank.

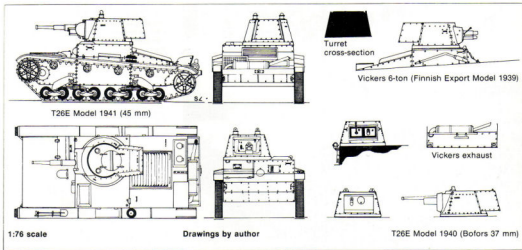
Trials were conducted with these vehicles but it was not until the tense days of 1938 that the military budget was expanded sufficiently to allow for the purchase of any significant number of tanks. With the threat of war becoming greater, Finland ordered 16 Vickers Type E (later increased to 32) for tank units, and a small number of Landsværk 181 armoured cars for the *Rat-suvakiprikaatin* (Cavalry Regiments).

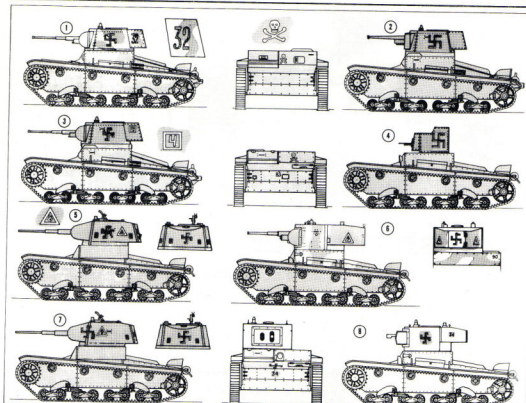


Above left T26E in wartime markings preserved at the Finnish tank museum, Parola (Karl Haugsted). Above Map showing Finnish advances in 1941.

The Vickers Type E 6-ton (Finnish export Model 1939) was built in England, but the armament was added in Finland, but the Finnish Model 1939 differed only in detail from other export models, such as in the types of viewing devices fitted in the mount for the Marconi SB-4a radio. In order to assure compatibility with the Renault FTs, the Vickers was equipped with the same Puteaux SA 17 37 mm gun, and a Hotchkiss MG.

In the autumn of 1939, the Soviet Union demanded that Finland cede large portions of the Karelian isthmus north of Leningrad in exchange for some worthless scraps of land in the Arctic Circle. The Finns refused and in November the Russians provoked

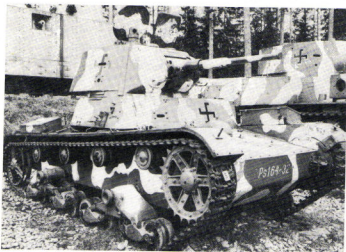


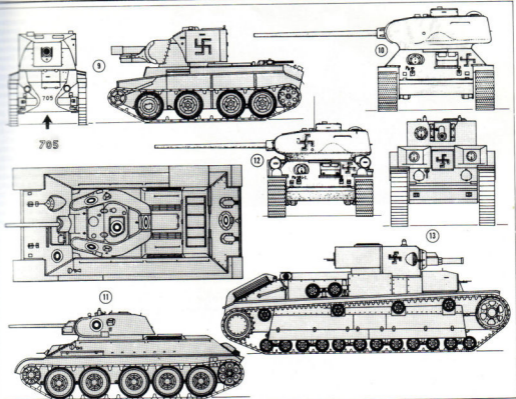


the first Russo-Finnish War. The confrontation pitted a tiny but spunky army of reservists against a large, well equipped but inept Soviet army. Finland's small armoured force of 59 tanks was faced by over 1,500 Russian AFVs. At the outbreak of the war the Finns had five *Eritiliseksi*

Hyökkäysvaunukomppaniaksi (ErHvK, independent tank companies). The 1 ErHvK and 2 ErHvK were both equipped with 14 Renault tanks, but the Finnish High Command was understandably reluctant to commit these old dinosaurs to action. The 3 ErHvK and 4 ErHvK were to be equipped

Key to drawings above. 1 T-26E in overall grey-green with sloppy white overpaint and a red turret rear number. This vehicle was photographed in Viipuri in 1944 and carried the standard hakaristi on the turret side and rear. 2 This T-26E belonged to the 3rd Tank Company, circa 1941, whose insignia was a white skull and crossbones. No other markings are evident apart from the early style hakaristi. 3 A T-26E in the standard markings of the 1941 campaign — overall dark grey-green with hakaristi and a white company insignia on the turret. 4 A T-26A, also of 3 PsP, with the early style insignia and company marking. Note the white 32 on the bow plate. 5 T-26S displaying a slightly different style of marking from the T-26E in (3). Compare also to (6) which shows another similar pattern. 6 A T-26E with similar markings, except that sloppy patches of winter whitewash have been added. 7 T-26 with the national insignia in a forward spot. 8 This T-26Lh (Finnish designation for OT-130s) is in overall whitewash with the base coat of green showing through in many locations. The standard early form of two digit serial can be seen on the bow plate and, interestingly enough, is repeated on the turret. (Drawings not to scale.) **Left** Preserved T-26S at Parola (Kari Haugsted). **Right** A BA-32 armoured car in overall dark grey-green with the early style hakaristi, belonging to the 7th Independent Armoured Car Company, 1941, and a second BA-32 in the same basic scheme but irregularly splattered with whitewash.





with the 32 Vickers that had been ordered, but there were serious delays in delivery and in arming them once they had arrived in Finland. Eventually 27 arrived, but only about half were armed as of February 1940. A handful went to 3 ErHvK, and 4 ErHvK received its full complement of 16 tanks. The remainder went to 5 ErHvK, a training unit, while awaiting their armament.

The 4 ErHvK was the only unit to see any significant amount of action during the Winter War. On February 25 1940, 13 Vickers were used in an attack from Honkaniemi towards Viipuri. The attack was not successful due to the poor perfor-

mance of the Vickers in snow, difficulties in co-ordinating the attack with the infantry, and inadequacies of the Puteaux gun against Russian tanks like the T-28 medium. The 4 ErHvK suffered serious losses, only about half its tanks surviving. The Finns took the appropriate lessons from the Honkaniemi attack and undertook steps to improve their tank operations. The problem of mobility in snow and co-ordination of tank-infantry attack was solvable through training, but the problem with the Puteaux armament was more difficult. The small Finnish arms factories could produce only a very limited number of shell types, but it was apparent that the Puteaux had to be abandoned as the standard tank weapon. Initially the Finns adopted the Bofors-Madsen Model 36 anti-tank gun which was also the standard gun of the Swedish and Polish armies. These were fitted in small numbers to the Vickers with a new mantlet very similar to that designed by Landsverk for the Polish 7TP tank. None of these were finished before the war came to a close, and after the war enough Soviet Model 36 45 mm AT guns were available to be adopted as the standard tank weapon. Mantlets were taken from burned out T-26s, and the modified Vickers were called T-26E (not as odd as it sounds, since the T-26 was derived from the basic Vickers design).

The Winter War left the tiny tank force bloodied but experienced, and on the verge of a major expansion. During the

Key to drawings above. 9 A BT-42 in overall green serving with the Independent Heavy Tank Company during the opening phases of the Continuation War in 1941. Note the early style serial on the bow, '705' in white. A colour photograph of the BT-42 preserved at Parola was featured on the front cover of our June 1975 issue. 10 A T-34/85 in overall dark green with whitewash sloppily smeared on the turret. The later style Ps serials were carried under the bow machine-guns on T-34s, but the number wasn't clear in the photo on which this scheme is based. This vehicle did not undergo the factory modifications described in (12) below. 11 A T-34 Model 1941 in the standard post-war markings. Again, this vehicle had few modifications, but was in mint condition even into the 1950s. 12 A T-34/85 with a badly weathered overall dark grey-green finish. This vehicle had Finnish-style fittings added, consisting of a storage box on the hull rear, reinforced fenders and early style Russian-type retractable lights added to the fenders. 13 This T-26M Model 1940 is in the standard markings and served with the Heavy Tank Regiment in the opening phases of the 1941 war.

war, over 1,600 Russian tanks had been captured or knocked out, and the best examples of these were sent to factories in Finland for rebuilding. They consisted of 42





A T-28M which was captured early during the Continuation War and used by the Finns. The extra turret and sub-turret armour which distinguished this version from earlier T-28 variants is also evident on this photo (J. Cochran). Plans and modelling details for this vehicle appeared in *Airfix Magazine Annual 5*.

T-26s (both B and S models), 5 T-26As, 5 OT-130s (T-26 flamethrowers), 30 T-37s and T-38s, and two T-28 mediums. With these, the Finns began reforming their armoured units. Four major formations were organised, these being:

1 *Pansaripataljoona* (1 PansP or 1st Tank Battalion) which was formerly the 5 ErHvK training unit, consisting of eight T-26Es, five T-26s and three T-26As, to which was added a *Raskas Pansarijoukkue* (RaskPsJ or Heavy Tank Platoon) with two T-28s and a T-26.

2 PansP, formerly the 4 ErHvK which had seen action in February, consisting of eight T-26Es, five T-26s, three T-26As and a Ba-32.

3 PansP, a new unit, consisting of 15 T-26Es and T-26s, and a Ba-32 or Ba-30, to which was also attached the 2 ErPansJ with five T-37s and T-38s.

1 *ErPansJ* with five T-37s and T-38s. The remaining tanks were placed in

reserve or sent to training units. In order to provide fire support for these new units, the Finns began rebuilding between 15 and 20 BT-7s with a new turret and gun. This new vehicle, called the BT-42 or BT-42/114, mounted a 4.5-inch gun in a new, rather high turret which gave it the look of a mini-KV-2.

We now come to the Continuation War. Despite its successful territorial aggrandisement during the Winter War, the Soviet Union continued to interfere in Finnish domestic affairs, and many Finnish officials feared that the Russians had plans to eventually annex Finland as they had recently done to the three Baltic republics and eastern Poland. As the German military was impressed with the performance of the Finnish army in 1940 (as they were unimpressed and overconfident because of the poor Soviet showing) they began to make overtures to the Finnish government in the hopes that it would join in the coming inva-

sion of the Soviet Union.

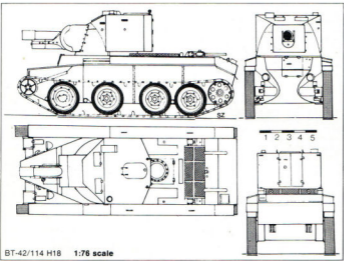
Finland had traditionally been reluctant to join in any alliance with a major foreign power, but in return for German promises of the return of stolen territories as well as military and economic aid, the Finns agreed to allow the Wehrmacht certain transit rights over Finnish soil, and strongly hinted that Finland would become involved in the war if the Soviets took any provocative steps.

With the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22 1941, troops of the Army of Norway under General Deitl began attacking Soviet bases in the north of Finland in order to cut off the port of Murmansk and to secure the vital Petsamo nickel mines from Russian attack. Finland boisterously declared its neutrality but the Russians viewed Finnish-German relations as being so fishy that several Finnish cities were bombed by the VVS. The Finns managed to overcome their reluctance and, since the army was fortuitously already mobilised, began offensive operations immediately.

Finnish forces in the Karelian isthmus outnumbered Soviet troops in the area by two to one, and in late July two major offensives were begun: an attack down the isthmus, and an attack to the east along Lake Ladoga towards the Svir River. Within three weeks the assaults were brought to a successful conclusion and Finnish war aims, the retrieval of stolen lands and the crippling of Soviet bases in the area, were completely accomplished. Finnish armoured forces played an important role in the rapid victory, and gave the army firepower and mobility which it hadn't possessed in 1940. There was a fair amount of tank versus tank fighting and the new BT-42 platoon was one of the first units to run into the new T-34 tanks.

By the end of August, Finnish forces in the south halted offensive operations, though several Finnish infantry units continued to assist the German mountain troops concentrated in the north. In November, the Finnish army was actually reduced in size. Nearly one seventh of the whole Finnish population served in the armed forces and this caused severe economic dislocation. Continued offensive operations would have strained Finland's limited resources and, as the war aims had already been satisfied, the Finns decided to sit back and wait for the Soviet Union to collapse. Hostilities continued all along the front during this period with no small amount of casualties on both sides, but the level of activity was nowhere near that of the summer of 1941.

General Deitl, the German commander in Finland, was exasperated by this decision. The Finnish army was only 30 miles from Leningrad, but refused to advance on the city or cut Soviet supply lines to the east of the city. While Germany was always able to bully its other allies like Italy, Rumania and Hungary, this was never possible with the Finns. The Finns had a rather contemptuous view of the German soldiers, feeling that they had forsaken their individual fitness and personal courage for a reliance on machines. The German mountain units serving in northern Finland performed barely adequately and the SS Brigade Nord was so poor that it was withdrawn from service there. Due to Finland's rough terrain, the German units were forced to



BT-42/114 H18 1:76 scale

operate without the usual logistical support, and many soldiers could not take the gloomy and despondent atmosphere of Finland's sub-Arctic marshes and forests. The German units in Finland were always forced to rely on the Finns for aid in carrying out any major operation, and the Finns agreed only when it suited their own purposes. For instance, the German attacks towards Murmansk never succeeded because of American success in convincing the Finns not to assist an attack on this port, one of the principal entry points for US Lend-Lease shipments to the USSR.

The Finnish armoured forces saw only limited action during the years of positional warfare from November 1941 to June 1944, though they were used in a number of forays into Soviet territory. As the war dragged on, the Soviet tank units became technologically more advanced and the small T-26s had more and more encounters with T-34s and KVs. As few Finnish tanks could hope to match these new machines, efforts were made to obtain more modern equipment. The Germans were so annoyed at the Finns that they initially rebuffed the requests, but eventually sold Finland 30 StuG IIIs (known to the Finns as Sturmis). The Finns also managed to obtain about ten ITPSV 40 Landsverk anti-aircraft tanks from Sweden.

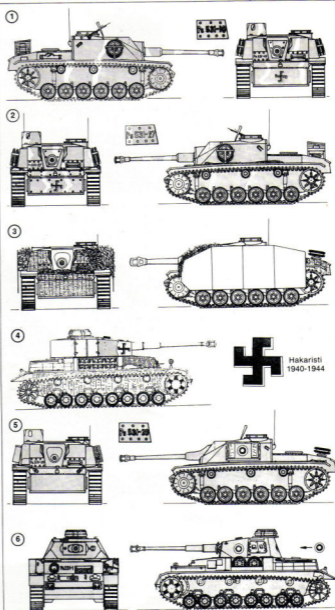
The new equipment arrived in the summer of 1943, just as the armoured forces were undergoing reorganisation. In 1941, the tank battalions had operated independently of one another but by 1943 military officials began to see the advantages offered by unified command and concerted operation of these units. This led to the formation of the Finnish Armoured Division in August of 1943. The new division consisted of three brigades, each with three tank companies for a total of about 190 tanks. The third brigade, known as the E/Rynn Tyk P (Independent Assault Gun Brigade) was formed with the new StuG IIIs and the older BT-42s. The divisional strength in March of 1944 is shown in the table here:

BA-20: 18	T-34: 2
BA-32: 2	T-38: 4
T-28: 6	BT-42: 14
T-26B: 53	Stu 40: 29
T-26S: 24	KV-1: 1
T-26E: 21	ITPSV: 6
T-50: 1	

In addition there were a number of small independent tank units attached to various army groups as conditions demanded.

In 1943, however, Finland found itself in a rather peculiar position. The war had been very costly to the Finns, and the government seriously desired to pull out. Yet to do so would invite retaliation from the 200,000 German troops on Finnish soil and the likely intervention of Soviet forces to 'protect' the Finns. In return for peace, the Russians demanded the contested territories as well as further land acquisitions or reparation payments. Under these circumstances, Finland reluctantly remained in the war.

In the spring of 1944, Russian forces around Leningrad prepared to go over to the offensive and shatter the tattered remnants of the German troops who had besieged the city for three years. It was becoming more and more apparent to the



1 A StuG III of the Ryn Tyk P during 1944 in standard dark grey-green with buff stripes. The serial was carried on the hull front in white. 2 Another StuG III similar to (1). Note that Finnish StuG's carried Degtyarev MGs in the AA position instead of MG34s. 3 This StuG 42 with Saukopf mantlet was one of a small number of vehicles transferred to the Finns by the Wehrmacht in the summer of 1944 in a forlorn attempt to bolster the Northern Front. 4 This PzKpW IVH 'Nelonen' was another one of the vehicles transferred in June 1944. The zimmerit was carried on the hull front as well, and the vehicle is in overall sand like (3) except for a repainted patch on the turret which may be green. 5 This StuG III survived the war and served with the Finnish army well into the 1960s. Many small fittings were added such as the stowage boxes on the superstructure. 6 This PzKpW IV also served with the post-war Finnish army and some small fitting alterations are evident.

Finns that the new offensive would include a major Russian attack to knock their army out of the war once and for all. Finland requested additional troops be sent by the Germans to the Karelian isthmus, and also asked for more tanks and arms, but the Germans were aware of the tentative peace negotiations going on between Finland and the USSR and refused to send any aid. When the Russians attacked in June 1944, the Finnish forces were steadily pushed back with severe losses. Fearing that this would threaten other German troops in Scandinavia, Berlin sent an infantry division, 30 StuG IIIs of 303 Assault Gun Brigade, and transferred to the Finnish army ten PzKpfw IV tanks, some StuG IIIs, 9,000 Panzerfausts and 5,000 Panzerschrecks.

The fighting in June-July 1944 was the most violent of the whole Russo-Finnish War. The Soviet army in 1944 was markedly superior to that of 1940 and its tanks were a generation ahead of Finnish vehicles. Finnish T-26s faced T-34s and StuG IIIs faced JS-2s. The Finnish Armoured Division stubbornly fought back and made the Russians pay for their advances. The Ryn Tyk P was equipped with StuG 40s and BT-42s, and they accounted for over 80 T-34s and KV's; the StuG of Corporal O. Soimaili alone knocked out ten T-34s and a JSU-152. Despite this valiant resistance, the Soviets in two months were able to push ahead to the 1940 boundaries and effectively cripple the Finnish army. Finland sued for peace and an armistice was signed in September 1944. The small number of tanks left from the June offensive went on to form the tiny armoured force Finland maintained after the war.

Finnish AFV markings

The Vickers 6-ton tanks used in action around Honkaniemi in 1940 were painted in overall dark green and carried no national insignia. The only markings carried were small licence plates with a three digit number carried on the left rear fender. With the capture of so much Russian equipment during the Winter War, the need for national markings was all too evident. Initially the T-37s and

T-38s of 10th Light Tank platoon were painted with white/light blue/white bands around the turret, but this was hardly ideal camouflage and the band insignia was dropped prior to the outbreak of the Continuation War in favour of the traditional *hakaristi*. The *hakaristi* as first applied resembled the Nazi swastika, but this eventually was modified to a version with shorter, stubbier arms. The main colour was a dark blue or black (unlike that of Finnish aircraft, which was a lighter blue) and the *hakaristi* was shadowed with white. It was carried on the turret side and rear, the glacis plate and occasionally on the hull rear of certain types. It was not carried on the hull sides, even on types like the StuG III. Another frequent location for the *hakaristi* was on one of the turret top hatches.

Besides the national insignia, white serial numbers were normally carried on the hull front and rear of the glacis plate. Beginning in 1941, this took the form of a two or occasionally three digit number. In



Hello

This article is brought to you by Sammy at Oink's pink palace <http://oink.me.uk/>

I would like to give big gratitude to Aliens who provide this fine article to scene.

Want to Exchange military Books mail me at **militarybooks@gmail.com**