

# Risks with a Public Perception of a Qualitative Edge

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## Resumé

Det finns en utbredd uppfattning om att de finska och svenska markstridskrafterna är av högre kvalitet än sina ryska motsvarigheter. Detta är i praktiken ett påtvingat faktum, då de ryska stridskrafterna har högre numerär. För att väpnat motstånd i en konflikt inte ska vara utsiktslöst krävs därför ett kvalitativt försprång. På så sätt är uppfattningen om ett kvalitativt försprång länkad till stridsmoralen bland befolkningen som helhet. Även om uppfattningen om ett kvalitativt försprång kan anses korrekt i flera fall, tar den inte hänsyn till att hemvärnet respektive landskapstrupperna löper en hög risk att möta kvalitativt överlägsna specialförband. Denna avvikelse mellan försvarsmakternas doktrin och befolkningens uppfattning om ett kvalitativt försprång skapar en grogrund för moraliska nederlag, som redan i fredstid bör förebyggas genom försvarsupplysning och en för allmänheten öppen informerad debatt.

AMONG THE GENERAL population in Finland and Sweden, there seems to be a perception that the troops of their own Defence Forces are of a higher quality than that of Russia, the main potential adversary. There is indeed a need for a qualitative edge, due to the fact that if one is outnumbered, one will need to make up for this deficit by having one's smaller forces be of higher quality. This article will discuss the nature of this qualitative edge for the ground forces of Finland and Sweden, whether it exists today, as well as what the consequences are if the public perception of a qualitative edge differs from the doctrines of the nations involved. In addition to the armies of the countries involved, the discussions and conclusions presented here are also relevant for troops from other service branches functioning as ground troops, such as marine infantry. Note that while similar questions are present in the air and naval domains, these are left outside the scope of this article.

## Defining the Qualitative Edge

For the purpose of this text, quality is taken as an overall measure of how good a unit is at performing its core mission. For the armed forces as a whole, this includes numerous different factors, such as training, equipment, and morale. Notably, quality can differ between different levels. In the extreme case, individual soldiers can be well-trained and -equipped, but lack of unit cohesion means that high quality at the individual level does not translate into high quality at the unit level. Similarly, combat units of high quality supported by inferior logistics means that quality at a tactical level does not necessarily translate into quality at the operational and strategic levels.

## The Need for a Qualitative Edge

Both Finland and Sweden have had to rely on quality as opposed to quantity when preparing their Defence Forces. In both countries,

the expectation has been that the enemy would be able to muster more troops, creating the need for their own troops to be better. The exact nature of this qualitative edge varies somewhat, with the Swedish Defence Forces readily mentioning the importance of research and development<sup>1</sup> as well as tactics.<sup>2</sup> The Finnish Defence Forces puts a greater emphasis on tactics alone, and attributes this to limited resources:

In terms of volume Finland is an underdog, which cannot afford to simply buy, let alone to create, the best weapons in order to succeed. We have harnessed a large manpower reserve through our use of compulsory conscription, but we are not able to maintain its military know-how on a professional level. This simple logic has led to the fact that the advantages needed to be victorious on the battlefield has already from afar back in history been sought above all in a method of operating that focuses on originality and on exploiting our circumstances to the fullest, i.e. upon tactics.<sup>3</sup>

### The Perceived Qualitative Edge

The Battle of Suomussalmi, around the end of 1939, is the quintessential example of how the Finnish qualitative edge is perceived by the general public. During the first weeks of the Winter War, the advancing Soviet forces pushed back the Finnish defenders from the border, until they eventually closed in on the village of Suomussalmi from two directions. This forced the Northern Finnish Group to abandon the village altogether in early December.<sup>4</sup> After having received reinforcements, the Finnish units in the area were reorganised as the 9. Division, led by colonel Hjalmar Siilasvuo (later lieutenant general). Despite the Soviets having more troops and a significant advantage in heavy equipment in the region, the division launched

a counterattack in the last days of the year, encircling the enemy and recapturing the village.

The battle, together with the follow-up battle for the Raate road just east of Suomussalmi, are among the few battles which are still household names among the Finnish population, and are literally textbook examples<sup>5</sup> of how a seemingly inferior force can be victorious.

It can be deduced that among the general population this perception of a qualitative edge is a core part of the will to defend the country. If its own Defence Forces were to be perceived as both numerically inferior and of a lower quality than the adversary's, there is a real risk that an attempted defence of the country against an armed aggression would be seen as a pointless waste of resources and cause unnecessary human suffering. Crucially, this would in turn lower the willingness among the population to participate in the defence of one's country, thereby lowering the deterrence value created by the Defence Forces. This train of thought is also evident in the Finnish Government Defence Report of 2017, which notes that "top-notch training" is one of the prerequisites for maintaining the will to defend the country.<sup>6</sup> As such, the qualitative edge is tied to the ability of the Finnish and Swedish Defence Forces' to execute their core missions, that of being able to lower the risk of war by deterring a potential attacker.<sup>7</sup>

However, by design this means that the perception of a qualitative edge is to some extent detached from the related question of whether it really exists. It is also dual-natured, as the qualitative edge perceived by a potential adversary (affecting deterrence) doesn't necessarily match the perception held by their own population (affecting morale and war exhaustion). It should be noted that it can be debated whether there is an

objective measure, or truth, for such a complex question as the qualitative state of the armed forces of a country, as the fighting value of any force is continuously changing and depends upon a vast number of factors.

If we turn our focus to the varied perceptions, the perception of deterrence is likely to be closer to the objective measure of fighting prowess, and the perception held by the general public further from it. This stems from the fact that the adversary is investing significant resources in military intelligence, trying to acquire the most accurate picture possible of their opponent's forces, their organisation, and abilities. For the general public, with the exception of a relatively small number of professionals and non-professional enthusiasts, the perception of a qualitative edge is rarely made up of any comparative studies of available open sources, but a combination of other information, such as non-specialised media and the swapping of 'war stories' about the Second World War and personal experience as a conscript around coffee tables. This kind of informal spreading of information, part of which is obsolete, means that the perceived state of the Defence Forces, especially in relation to other countries, runs a high risk of being inaccurate.

### The Nature of the Qualitative Edge

There is a case to be made based on the historical events of the Second World War that the Finnish Army at the individual as well as at unit level outperformed their Soviet counterparts during the 1940's. This can be seen as providing a baseline for a moment in time where there undisputedly did exist a qualitative edge. Among the factors behind the Finnish success at Suomussalmi, as well as in general throughout the war, were such core principles as concentrating

the forces available, knowledge of the terrain and environmental conditions, as well as the superior training of Finnish soldiers, non-commissioned officers, and officers. In short, the foundation for the victory was a simple yet well-executed plan which resulted in the destruction of two Soviet divisions.<sup>8</sup> While a similar direct conflict did not take place between Sweden and the Soviet Union, there are significant similarities between the Swedish and Finnish Defence Forces with regards to doctrines, training, and organisation.

Another key principle was that of mission command. Though the term itself is something of an anachronism in Finnish and Swedish doctrines of the time, the underlying mindset of both societies meant that both Armies were open to invest heavily in the idea of mission command.<sup>9</sup> The faster operational tempo made possible by low-level mission command compared to the more rigid command principles employed by the Soviet and later Russian Army is one of the key components of the qualitative edge. In the Swedish Defence Forces, the following definition is used:

Mission command is practiced through the superior stating the aim and reasoning behind it, setting tasks, providing rules of action, and allocating resources as well as to the highest extent possible giving subordinates the freedom of action to determine for themselves how the task should be solved. The role of the own unit in the bigger picture needs to be clear. The unit commander who receives the task decides how it will be resolved.<sup>10</sup>

The Finnish view is similar, emphasising that the commander in the field decides how a mission will be performed within the framework of the plans of higher command:

Under mission command the mission the unit commander gets may in its simplest

form include only the end goal, i.e. what the commander is to achieve with his or her unit. The unit commander will decide how he or she executes the task, while still making sure that his or her actions are in line with the battleplan and goals of the higher levels of the chain of command.<sup>11</sup>

The components of the qualitative edge could thus be summed up as consisting of some or all of the following:

- high morale,
- being familiar with the terrain and local conditions,
- skilled individuals at all levels of the organisation (soldiers, non-commissioned officers, officers),
- proper equipment, and
- the ability to maintain a high operational tempo through adaptability and mission command.

It should be emphasised that not all of these components need to exist for a qualitative edge to be present. At Suomussalmi, there were clear deficits in the equipment issued to the Finnish forces, but thanks to the other four components these deficits were overcome. Similarly, a force that is able to adapt to current circumstances could maintain a qualitative edge in unfamiliar territory, an ability which has become important with the growing number of complex international missions performed by both the Finnish and Swedish Defence Forces. It is however important to understand that the components also support each other. It is easier to maintain a high morale if you are in familiar terrain, well equipped, and confident in the training of yourself and your unit.

## The Current Status of the Qualitative Edge

While the existence of a qualitative edge between the Finnish and Soviet armies on the battlefield 75 years ago helps with identifying the underlying factors of the edge, it does precious little in asserting whether or not the edge has been maintained. To do this, we need to look into the current state of the armed forces of the three nations involved.

### The Finnish Army

The Finnish Defence Forces has throughout its existence been based on the principle of general conscription providing a large reserve to be mobilised in wartime. The growing complexity and increased cost of modern weapon systems has however led to a clearer split between manoeuvre (operational), regional and local forces. The manoeuvre forces constitute the spearhead of the Army, being equipped and trained to fight the decisive battles. They will create the *Schwerpunkt* in the defence, i.e. the area where the main effort will take place.<sup>12</sup> To be able to do this, they have a higher strategic and operational mobility compared to the other units. The regional forces provide regional coverage and will support the manoeuvre forces by providing additional manpower and firepower. The local forces lack operational manoeuvrability, and instead focus on providing security, surveillance and support to manoeuvre and regional forces in their area of responsibility. They also join in battle alongside these and assist them in maintaining contact with other authorities if the battle takes place in their area.<sup>13</sup> The Government Defence Report of 2017 notes that “most troops can only be equipped and trained for their tasks to a satisfactory level.”<sup>14</sup>

A number of key developments are currently taking place with a particular focus on improving the materiel of the manoeuvre forces. This includes artillery, anti-air capability, as well as command, control, communications and intelligence systems. Still, due to budgetary pressures the Government Defence Report states that the “relative share of light troops will increase.”<sup>15</sup> As the total wartime strength is being increased as well, this means that the absolute number of light troops will also increase. When confronted with the issue of equipping these additional light forces, brigadier general (ret.) Heikki Välivehmas, then director of the Finnish Ministry of Defence’s Planning Unit, noted that “We have an absolutely senseless amount of small arms acquired back in the days.”<sup>16</sup>

However, as senior research fellow Charly Saloniuss-Pasternak of the Finnish Institute for International Affairs noted in a blog post aptly named “Train and Verify”, there are currently significant problems with the training level of the Defence Forces. These are further worsened by the fact that only since 2015 have conscripts been trained according to the new Army Doctrine 2015, which puts further emphasis on the active role of smaller units. This adds to the so-called “training deficit” caused by the slashed number of refresher exercises in the first half of the 2010’s,<sup>17</sup> and the bottom-line is that, in the words of Saloniuss-Pasternak, “Finland does not have properly equipped, trained or inspected wartime Defence Forces.”<sup>18</sup>

On the positive side, the local forces include the local Defence Forces Maakuntajoukot, MAAK, the voluntary nature of which means that the people involved in these are usually highly motivated<sup>19</sup> and keep their training fresh and relevant by taking part in voluntary courses arranged by the National Defence Training Association of Finland, MPK, and other local stakeholders. In 2016, MPK pro-

vided 1 386 courses for reservists, with over 33 000 reservists getting additional training this way.<sup>20</sup> This will help keep the training on a satisfactory level for units which otherwise would run the risk of being deprioritized when the Defence Forces face hard choices regarding which units will get called up for refresher exercises, and which will have to wait due to deficits in the training budget.

## The Swedish Army

After the Cold War, the Swedish Defence Forces gradually moved away from the conscription-based system and the mobilisation of a large force in wartime, and instead opted for a significantly smaller and leaner force largely staffed throughout the ranks by professionals. The decision to reactivate parts of the conscription system in 2017, mainly the muster and the refresher exercises, does not significantly change the prevailing trend.<sup>21</sup> The core of the wartime Swedish Army would be made up of two mechanised brigades,<sup>22</sup> in addition to which a number of units would operate as smaller detached assets for higher command. These include e.g. Arméns jägarbataljon, the ranger-style light infantry battalion of the Swedish Army.<sup>23</sup>

It would be easy to conclude that the Swedish Army has taken the qualitative edge to extremes, having reduced the force by an order of a magnitude in order to be able to afford a standing force of well-trained professionals ready for action without the need for a prior mobilisation. This is however only partially correct, as it overlooks the fact that well over a third of all soldiers, non-commissioned officers, and officers serve part-time, and as such require mobilisation.<sup>24</sup> The importance of these is also higher in the Army compared to other services.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, while the two brigades are generally well-equipped with modern weapon

systems, vehicles, and other materiel, there are also a number of significant shortfalls. The most obvious example of this is the Army's RBS 97 main surface-to-air missile system<sup>26</sup> which is outdated. The limited amount of indirect fire support available to the brigades is also a pressing issue.<sup>27</sup>

However, the most important oversight when describing the Swedish Army as a slim and professional organisation is that the Swedish home guard *hemvärnet*, HV, is completely overlooked. The role of HV largely corresponds to that of the Finnish MAAK, in that it can perform the following missions:<sup>28</sup>

- guard an area or an object,
- protect an area or an object,
- protect a transportation,
- surveillance,
- disturb (auxiliary mission, which can be solved after the unit has received additional resources and complementary training), and
- delay (auxiliary mission, which can be solved after the unit has received additional resources and complementary training).

HV units “are to be able to operate in all types of terrain [found in their home region], including urban environments, and to be able to do so under all visibility and weather conditions. The unit should be able to perform its missions regardless of the time of the day.”<sup>29</sup> Notable here is the difference between the task of guarding and the task of protecting something. To protect is defined in Swedish doctrine as “Prevent your opponent from taking action against a certain area, activity or facility, so that the purpose of the battle or operation that is to be protected isn't compromised.”<sup>30</sup> This task is mainly solved through defensive actions.<sup>31</sup> In other

words, protecting may include skirmishes against regular enemy forces.

The 40 HV battalions<sup>32</sup> of the Swedish Defence Forces are a sizeable force of volunteers, far outnumbering the two brigades of the regular Army. As such, “its high availability, [...] numerical strength and [...] geographical distribution is central to the defence of Swedish territory, including the protection of air force and naval bases as well as critical infrastructure.”<sup>33</sup>

## The Russian Army and Associated Ground Forces

The Russian Army vastly outnumbers both the Finnish and the Swedish ones, as can be expected considering the vastly greater size of the country itself. Traditionally the Russian Army, as well as the Soviet Army before it, has been seen as relying on numbers. However, in the last decade an ambitious modernisation program has been undertaken, with the stated goal of creating a smaller but more modern force, with a special focus on higher readiness.<sup>34</sup>

One of the most visible effects of this change has been the switch from a division-based force to brigades becoming the core manoeuvring element of the Army, with only a single division having been left in the force by 2013.<sup>35</sup> That year two brigades were again raised to division standard, though it seems that these have a lighter force structure compared to the pre-2008 divisions of the Russian Army, and might more properly be designated as reinforced brigades.<sup>36</sup> The creation of additional divisions in place of the brigades has since been reported, with a special focus on the Western Military District.<sup>37</sup> While it is unclear if this constitutes a real reversal of the earlier decision, or if it is mainly a way to bring back traditional unit names accompanied by a slight increase in



unit strength, it is clear that the military reform has made the Russian Army reach a level of proficiency where it can be successfully used abroad as a tool for Kremlin's ambitious foreign policy.<sup>38</sup>

Russia has shown that the Army is taking its modernisation efforts seriously, with e.g. the war in Ukraine demonstrating the first large scale instance of tactical unmanned aerial systems, or drones, being used to direct artillery barrages in real-time.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, several new or modernised weapons, vehicles, and other systems have been demonstrated, and are in various stages of entering service. This is badly needed, as only an estimated 20 percent of the equipment in general use by the ground forces is ranked as "modern".<sup>40</sup> However, it is highly questionable whether Russia will be able to introduce new equipment according to the ambitious schedule they have set, with the new vehicles destined for the mechanised and motorised infantry units being a particular issue in this regard.<sup>41</sup> It should also be noted that despite the somewhat successful efforts to increase the number of professional soldiers, the bulk of the Russian Army is likely to be made up of reserves and conscripts for the foreseeable future.<sup>42</sup>

The change in tactical doctrine is harder to evaluate. It seems rather clear that the Russian Army tries to move away from the traditional linear and centralised principle of command it has employed. A high tempo in operations and generally staying active on the battlefield are seen as important traits. According to recent Russian writings, these work as force multipliers, i.e. giving the fighting force a qualitative edge by taking and keeping the initiative.<sup>43</sup> However, it is unclear to what extent these principles have been implemented, both due to the ability of organisations to resist change ("inertia"), but also as a higher tempo will require dele-

gating command authority downwards into the organisation, putting higher demands on the level of personal skills exhibited throughout the chain of command. The latter is likely an issue due to the large number of conscripts and reserves that are used to fill the ranks. Observers have also noted only minor changes between written guidelines in tactics between late-Soviet times and recent years, indicating that the changes would yet have to filter through from academic research down to the field manuals.<sup>44</sup>

Contrary to what is the case in most Western nations, the airborne troops do not sort under the Army, but constitute their own service branch, *Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska*, VDV. The airborne forces include both paratroopers and helicopter borne forces, and have maintained a number of divisions in its organisation despite the introduction of the brigade-based Army. This is expected to continue,<sup>45</sup> though it should also be noted that the airborne divisions are in fact closer in size to reinforced brigades than they are to the pre-2008 divisions of the Army.<sup>46</sup> As the VDV occupies an important role in most Soviet and Russian wars in recent history, these deserve a closer inspection.

The role of the airborne forces seems set to increase, as they in many ways already exhibit the traits that the Army tries to achieve. These include a markedly larger portion of professional soldiers, higher readiness, and a level of training allowing for a higher operational tempo and more refined small unit tactics.<sup>47</sup> This has led to an increasingly important role for the airborne forces as the spearhead of the Russian ground forces,<sup>48</sup> with the VDV being employed as elite light infantry alongside Army units.<sup>49</sup> To further highlight this dual nature of the VDV, in addition to their current air-portable armoured vehicles, there are also unconfirmed reports that the service will be equipped with the T-72B3

main battle tank in tank companies.<sup>50</sup> The T-72B3 represents one of the most advanced versions of the T-72 currently in service with the Russian Armed Forces, featuring many of the sensors and systems, though not quite the same level of protection, as Russia's most modern tank currently fielded, the T-90.<sup>51</sup>

As the tanks are not to be easily transported by air, the inclusion in the organisation of modern main battle tanks would constitute further proof that the employment of VDV as high-quality ground troops is not only born out of immediate necessity, but envisioned as a core part of their mission. These integrated tank units would offer a significant increase in both protection levels and firepower, and dramatically increase VDV's ability to conduct offensive operations when the element of strategic or operational surprise isn't available.

The growth of the importance of VDV in the Russian Armed Forces is a result of both historical<sup>52</sup> as well as recent experiences from using it as an elite complement to the regular ground forces.<sup>53</sup> These include both overt operations such as the war in Georgia and covert ones such as the ongoing war in the Donbass region.<sup>54</sup> The war in Georgia did bring to light certain issues for the VDV, mainly related to communications network, directing indirect fire support, and intelligence gathering.<sup>55</sup> However, it should be noted that the VDV had started to reform already in 2006,<sup>56</sup> and that during the war VDV did not operate as division- and brigade-level units, but as smaller battalion-sized battle-groups.<sup>57</sup> It is probable that the large-scale reform of the armed forces after the war is in part modelled after the performance of VDV in Georgia. As noted, it is unclear whether the Russian Army will be able to achieve this on a broader scale, or whether e.g. the transfer of main battle tanks to the VDV is an indication of the Russian leader-

ship recognising that VDV will have unique qualities in comparison to the regular ground forces for the foreseeable future.

## Conclusions on the Current Status

For the larger part, it seems likely that the two Swedish brigades and the Finnish manoeuvre units maintain a qualitative edge against Russian motorised and mechanised units. This stems from the fact that the neither side has been able to create a significant technological gap relative to the other, and that the problems with implementing parts of the Russian Army reform, i.e. a professional force and modernised small-unit tactics, means that the Finnish and Swedish forces still maintain the edge when it comes to their traditional strengths discussed above.

When it comes to VDV, and to some extent the naval infantry, the difference would not be as marked, but even with their tank units the VDV is still made up of comparatively light units. Here, the existence of a qualitative edge is more in doubt, but the generally heavier equipment of Finnish and Swedish mechanised units would be an important factor.

In these scenarios, the qualitative edge likely exists. This does not necessarily translate into victorious battles, but it does give a chance for a Swedish or Finnish force against a numerically superior aggressor, provided that the mobilisation and concentration of forces have taken place according to plans and that the enemy isn't able to create such a significant advantage in a particular field, e.g. air superiority, massed armor, or indirect fire, that this advantage in and by itself would give them a decisive edge.

Returning to the question of the public perception of the qualitative edge, it does seem like that at the centre of gravity where



the best equipped own forces would meet enemy mechanised units, it would indeed come down to trying to stop a numerically superior enemy through superior training and a higher operational tempo. When confronted with VDV, the battle would somewhat diverge from the popular view of the “Suomussalmi”-style qualitative edge, as the main qualitative edge of the Finnish or Swedish units would likely be due to heavier equipment and better local knowledge rather than individual prowess. Still, there is a qualitative edge in place, and this in turn creates valuable deterrence.

### The Lack of a Qualitative Edge in the Rear Areas

Again, returning to the battle of Suomussalmi in the last weeks of 1939, today’s local troops of HV and MAAK display many similarities to Er. P 15, the battalion that bore the brunt of the first rounds of fighting east of Suomussalmi in 1939. The battalion was created by reservists from Suomussalmi and the neighbouring area, each company being created by the men of a single community. The third (Suomussalmi) and machine-gun (Hyrnsalmi) companies were both led by their respective Civil Guard district commanders, with the local Border Guard district providing most of the other officers and non-commissioned officers. This strong local connection and the bond between the men in the unit, stemming from serving together with soldiers from their own community and from the months of practice at the Suomussalmi training camp in the months leading up to the war, formed a key part of the qualitative edge that proved crucial for the developments of the Kainuu front during the Winter War.<sup>58</sup> In the case of HV, the local connection has been highlighted as creating

a connection between the general population and the Defence Forces as a whole.<sup>59</sup>

For both MAAK and HV, there are two different scenarios which would see them taking up battle with enemy forces. Additionally, there is the possibility of MAAK or HV suffering losses due to air strikes or other long-range weapons system. MAAK and HV rely on other branches of the Defence Forces for protection from such strikes, i.e. the combined air defence systems of fighters as well as ground and ship-based air defence systems.

We will now take a closer look at both of the battle scenarios, one at a time.

### MAAK and HV at the Frontline

The first scenario is that the main frontline would have moved to their area of operations. This is closest to the Suomussalmi-scenario, where the local forces were reinforced by a number of other units, and together they managed to stop and destroy the Soviet 163. Division. Then as well as now, when the gravity of the situation became clear and additional forces were dispatched to the area, the value of having a local battalion staff which had experience from operating in the area proved invaluable. When colonel Siilasvuo got the mission of recapturing Suomussalmi and defeating the enemy, one of his first actions was to phone the local Civil Guard commander and the head of the local police to get a better picture of the local conditions, which Siilasvuo described as “completely unknown” to his staff. Arriving at Er. P 15’s command centre, he received further briefings from major Kaarle Kari (later colonel), who had taken over command of the battalion a few days earlier. Only after this did Siilasvuo officially take command of all units in the area.<sup>60</sup>

When the enemy offensive finally stalled, the reinforced Finnish troops counterattacked during the days after Christmas. The Finnish forces taking part in the main thrust consisted of Battlegroup Kari, made up of the major's earlier command Er. P 15 and a second infantry battalion in the form of IV/KT-Pr. These had, as colonel Siilasvuo put it, "already several times been deployed in the area, and knew the terrain well".<sup>61</sup> To back up these and provide additional manpower, two additional battalions from the 64. Infantry Regiment, I/JR 64 and II JR/64, were added to their strength. Major Kari, who had received command of a single battalion just three weeks earlier, got to lead a combined force of four battalions in the largest Finnish operation on the Kainuu front up to that point of the war. The reasoning behind colonel Siilasvuos decision was simple: "[Major Kari] was on location and was the one who best knew the terrain and the enemy positions".<sup>62</sup> This operation was a major success, and broke through the main enemy positions, while other units cut off the roads north and east of the village, leaving the Soviet division with no way out.<sup>63</sup>

It is easy to imagine a similar scenario in the current day. An enemy spearhead is met by the local forces, which perform a fighting withdrawal while awaiting reinforcements. When reinforcements arrive, the commander in charge of the greater tactical or operational picture is able to tap into the local knowledge provided by the MAAK or HV forces in the area, as well as counting on these to function as liaisons between the Defence Forces and other local authorities.

However, it is important to understand the limitations of the local volunteer units as well. Notably, major Kari was a professional officer, who transferred to the Border Guards in the early 1920's, and whose local knowledge in part was acquired during his tenure

as the second in command of the Kainuu Border Guards during 1938 to 1939, and in part during the fighting of the early part of December.<sup>64</sup> The limitations in artillery, anti-aircraft and anti-tank weaponry meant that the enemy armour was only stopped by the ice of the local lakes and river systems not being thick enough to allow them to cross.<sup>65</sup> The often-quoted perception that the Soviet forces weren't able to conduct imaginative operations or operate away from the roads<sup>66</sup> are also partly incorrect.

One of the biggest problems for the early Finnish defences was that they were set up with the main focus on the Raate road, which proved to be a secondary direction of operation from the Soviet point of view. The main thrust came further north, where the main operation was launched in the direction of Juntusranta. After the Soviet forces turned south, Er. P 15 had to retreat to avoid being trapped in a pincer move between the two advancing units. In many of the early skirmishes the Soviets also forced the Finnish units to retreat by launching flanking manoeuvres which otherwise would have led to the encirclement of the defenders. While logistic considerations dictated that the main thrust of the 163. Division would take place along roads, and while the motorised and armoured units couldn't venture off into the snow, the Soviet off-road operations which the infantry did execute where effective, especially considering their lack of skis.<sup>67</sup>

When it comes to the limitations as well, similarities to modern day operations are obvious. Local knowledge and high morale will only get you so far, especially if low manpower means that the enemy is able to circumvent prepared positions or if every single enemy tank and aircraft constitute a serious threat against which suitable weaponry is scarce.

## MAAK and HV in the Rear Areas

The second scenario where MAAK or HV would see combat would be them encountering enemy forces while protecting bases or critical infrastructure. The exact nature of these engagements could vary greatly, stretching from small squads of special forces gathering intelligence or performing commando raid-style direct action by seeking to damage or destroy specific targets, to airborne or amphibious troops performing a surprise assault to open up a bridgehead for a new front.

In case of a bridgehead, this would likely be one of the main areas of operations, and as soon as this would become evident to the higher parts of the chain of command, parts of the main striking force of the Army, either the manoeuvre units or mechanised brigades, would be directed to the area to take charge of the situation. In other words, this scenario would rapidly develop into the Suomussalmi-style battle described earlier. However, it should be noted that before the reinforcements would arrive, the qualitative edge would be uncertain. This as a result from the fact that any air or amphibious assault would likely be executed by a highly trained enemy force, and in both cases even the lightly armoured vehicles integral to Russian naval infantry and airborne troops would provide a higher level of protection than MAAK and HV normally has, meaning that successfully countering these would require an adequate supply of light anti-tank weaponry.

In the case of enemy special forces, the battle would be unlike any other scenario discussed here. In the most widely skewed alternative, potentially a whole battalion could be operating against a four-man squad of highly trained special forces, trying to capture or kill them before they can complete their mission and be extracted. It is clear

that there would be no qualitative edge in a scenario like this, but MAAK or HV would instead rely on vastly outnumbering the enemy, being able to field superior firepower, and to a certain extent superior local knowledge.

Russia has a considerable number of different special forces which could come into question for raids deep behind enemy lines. The most prolific of these are the Navy's combat divers of Otdel'nyy Morskoy Razvedyvatel'nyy Punkt, OMRP, as well as the Otdel'naya Brigada Spetsial'nogo Naznacheniya, oBrSpN, of the Army. The oBrSpN are brigades associated with<sup>68</sup> the military intelligence agency, GRU, which perform reconnaissance, direct action, and intelligence gathering behind enemy lines. A key mission during the Cold War was the destruction of nuclear weapons in Europe, especially mobile ground-based launchers.<sup>69</sup> The OMRP are highly qualified special forces units, which are able to perform intelligence gathering and direct action, both underwater and on land.<sup>70</sup> In addition, Russia has a number of other units which can also be used for missions behind enemy lines. These include VDV's own special forces brigade, the 45. oBrSpN, which is closely related to the Army's oBrSpN.<sup>71</sup>

Outside of the Armed Forces, additional special forces are found in the National Guard, which was created by transferring the paramilitary forces of the Ministry of Interior to the newly created National Guard in 2016.<sup>72</sup> The main special force unit of the National Guard is the Otryad Spetsial'nogo Naznacheniya, OSN, which in spite of its main focus being operations inside Russia, has also been used abroad, most notably in Afghanistan.<sup>73</sup>

Any combat that would develop between MAAK or HV and Russian special forces would likely appear suddenly, be extremely violent, and pass quickly. It should also be

noted that the Russian as well as the earlier Soviet doctrine emphasise using the special forces in the early stages of a conflict, including under peacetime conditions.<sup>74</sup> This has been demonstrated in recent times in Crimea 2014,<sup>75</sup> but also in the invasions of Afghanistan 1979<sup>76</sup> and Czechoslovakia 1968.<sup>77</sup> The level of surprise would likely be further heightened if an armed skirmish were to take place before the onset of open hostilities, even if it was at a time of heightened alert of the kind which would have led to MAAK or HV being deployed in the field.

The outcome of any battle between MAAK or HV and a Russian special forces unit would almost certainly end with the former having suffered more losses than the later, and indeed any form of tactical victory would be unlikely. During the last half century, the number of times special forces have been defeated on the battlefield is surprisingly small considering how dangerous their missions are. This holds true regardless of their affiliation, and even in the cases where the special forces have been defeated they have usually been able to inflict considerably higher losses to the enemy than they have suffered themselves. The most well-known example is probably the so called “Black Hawk Down”-incident in Somalia in October 1993, where a US force got bogged down during an incursion into Mogadishu. This resulted in the loss of two helicopters and the lives 18 US servicemen. Still, it is difficult to argue a battle where low estimates place Somali losses in the hundreds<sup>78</sup> and high estimates in the thousands<sup>79</sup> as forming the basis for how Finnish and Swedish units should operate against enemy special forces.

The scenario of MAAK or HV facing a Russian special forces raid poses a problem that is rarely recognised, as it is far removed from the general perception of how a potential conflict would play out. In the same

way as the perceived qualitative superiority would increase the morale of the troops and civilian population, the sudden revelation following a successful special force raid that their own forces are at a distinct disadvantage in certain scenarios would potentially cause a significant loss of morale. This loss of morale would be made all the larger by the fact that the dead and wounded would have been operating close to home. As such, the local connection which is seen as a positive factor in peacetime and in many instances also in wartime, would be turned to a negative in the aftermath of a successful raid.

## Conclusions and the Way Forward

It can be argued that the qualitative gap as perceived by the general population does exist, and in a form not completely unlike that manifested at e.g. Suomussalmi (though it should be noted that there are parts of the battle that fit poorly with the public perception of it, such as the Soviet opening moves). This is of great significance, as there is a connection between the public perception of the qualitative edge and the will to defend one’s country. Thus, an informed public discussion on questions of national security and defence is important, as only by understanding how and why the Defence Forces are organised and operate the way they are can a correct picture of the qualitative edge continue to exist in a rapidly changing security environment.

However, there remains the largely unaddressed issue of significant parts of the ground forces having missions which will see them fight with a significant qualitative gap vis-a-vis their enemies. There exists a real risk that any battle involving MAAK or HV and enemy special forces will be viewed as a failure and have a negative impact on

public morale, made worse by the fact that the losses will take place at or very close to the home communities of the casualties. This is an area that needs to be addressed clearer than it is today by the relevant authorities.

The first response usually given when confronted with the potential qualitative gap of MAAK or HV is to suggest heavier armament and equipment, to raise their lethality. It is my opinion it indeed is the duty of the state when giving soldiers a mission to make sure that they are adequately equipped to avoid unnecessary casualties. Here, the earlier quoted example which seemingly portrays the equipping of light troops as a simple question of supplying them with “senseless amounts of small arms” is a gross oversimplification. It should instead be noted that there are certain key areas where relatively small investments would have a large impact on the quality of the units. These include e.g. equipment related to personal protection, surveillance, and night-time operations. However, on the whole the missions envisioned for MAAK and HV are far less complex than those handled by manoeuvre units and mechanised brigades, and as such

the same equipment level is neither economically feasible nor called for by military considerations.

The most important work would instead be to clearly and honestly communicate the role of MAAK and HV to the general public, as well as the general operational picture envisioned for them. Indeed, the quality of MAAK and HV against enemy special forces is not measured on a soldier-for-soldier basis but for the force as a whole. If a highly-trained and motivated volunteer force acts as a deterrent, and thereby forces the enemy to minimise the number of raids their special forces conduct, that is the edge sought. As such, it is a very different battleplan from the one of Suomussalmi. This needs to be explained to the general public. Otherwise, if the above envisioned battle between MAAK or HV and enemy special forces were ever to take place, the potential effects on public morale are likely to be adverse.

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## Noter

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