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THE DRAMA OF VYBORG 1944

Lasse LAAKSONEN (Finland)

Abstract

In the military history of independent Finland, the city of Vyborg has played a particularly significant role as a theatre of urban combat. For the Finns, the significance of holding the city has been particularly great in spiritual terms.

When the Russians launched a major offensive on the Karelian Isthmus in June 1944, the front was quickly reduced to the vicinity of Vyborg. The Russians attacked Vyborg on 20 June. The Finnish defences soon crumbled as one battalion abandoned its position without justification. Other units quickly followed suit. The Russians reached the centre of the city by the afternoon.

Marshal Mannerheim considered the abandonment of Vyborg a 'scandal'. He demanded a thorough investigation and the punishment of those responsible. After the Interim Peace, the Vyborg 'scandal' was quickly buried in the twilight of history.

Key words: Second World War, Red Army, Strategic offensive, Karelian Isthmus, Vyborg

The Drama of Vyborg 1944

A well-known Finnish military historian, Lieutenant Colonel Wolf Halsti, described afterword the problems of defenders in Vyborg, on June 1944:

On paper and on the map, everything may look great – a new troop, a praised commander, positions drawn in red lines – although in the battle – it is the details that make the difference. You should see them with your own eyes.⁽¹⁾

Vyborg had a significant role in the Finnish history. For centuries it had been a strong hold against the East. Soon after Finland gained independence in 1917, Vyborg, the second largest city of Finland, played a particularly significant role in an urban warfare and in the military history of independent Finland. Its supremacy was fought first in the Civil War in spring 1918 and later in the Winter War 1939-1940 and the Continuation War 1941-1944.

The Finns lost the Karelian Isthmus in the Moscow Peace Treaty of 1940. The Treaty ended the Winter War and meant also losing of Vyborg. The city had to be surrendered, even though the Red Army had not been able to capture the city in battle.⁽²⁾ When the Continuation War began, the Finns quickly captured Vyborg and the Karelian Isthmus. However, the offensive was ceased near the old border. Mannerheim, Commander-in-Chief, no longer wanted to attack Leningrad.

The Karelian Isthmus has been described as the Gate of Finland. At front of that gate began the large-scale Soviet offensive on 9 June 1944. Massive artillery fire and aerial bombardment broke the first lines of the Finnish defense. The Russians also used their armored troops in their offensive. On the first day of the main offensive the Soviet troops were able to advance more than ten kilometers on their main attack direction. Russians had also planned the massive bombing of Vyborg. Luckily, at the last minute, for the Finns, the weather prevented the massive bombing of Vyborg on the first day of the offensive.⁽³⁾

The Russian offensive towards Vyborg was unexpectedly rapid. The Finns had not, at that point, time to strengthen the defense of the city. Although the arrangements had not been completed, the absolute order was to keep the city. The Finnish high command had to keep their appearance; they had not afforded to compromise its credibility. The psychological significance of Vyborg was unlimited for Finns. The loss had been a nationwide shock.

For Finns, the value of keeping the city in mind has been great, especially mentally. On the other hand, the military significance of Vyborg was fewer. The city was located in a planned defensive position, within the Vyborg–Kuparsaari–Taipale line. Keeping

1. W. H. Halsti, *Ratkaisu 1944, Suomen sota III*, Kenruu 1957, p. 313.

2. L. Laaksonen, *Todellisuus ja Harhat - Kannaksen taistelut ja suomalaisten joukkojen tila talvisodan lopussa 1940* (Reality and Illusions: The Battles in the Karelian Isthmus and the Condition of the Finnish Troops at the End of the Winter War in 1940, See also English summary, Helsinki 1999, passim; L. Laaksonen, *Karjalan kannaksen taistelut*, in *Talvisodan pikkujättiläinen*, Ed. Ed. J. Leskinen ja A. Juutilainen, Helsinki-Porvoo-Juva 1999, pp. 428-448, 453-468.

3. *Jatkosodan historia 4, Vetäytyminen Karjalan kannakselta*. Sotatieteen Laitoksen Sotahistorian toimisto, Porvoo 1993, passim; A. Juutiainen, *Taistelujen torjuntavoittoon*, in *Jatkosodan pikkujättiläinen*, eds. J. Leskinen ja A. Juutilainen, Porvoo 2005, pp. 793-802; G. Mannerheim, *Muistelmat II osa* (Memories Part II), Helsinki 1952, pp. 446-447.

the line of defense would have required a strong military force.⁽⁴⁾ The operational advantage of Vyborg was not absolute. Strategic battles took place behind the city on the Tienhaara peninsula. If the Russians would reach from Tienhaara to the mainland, they, in the worst case, could turn their attack directly towards Helsinki via the main roads.

When the Russians launched their main offensive on the Karelian Isthmus in June 1944, the front retreated to near Vyborg in just ten days. The Finnish battle positions in front of the city were still underwork. There were no unified trenches dug and barbed wire barriers were missing. As the main line of defense ran in the suburbs, as previously in the Winter War. The defense line was stiff and it based on masses of soldiers. But there were no extra forces or reserves which could be used. Example the IV Corps under command of Lieutenant General Taavetti Laatikainen were tight to the fighting and did not have reserves for the defense of Vyborg.⁽⁵⁾

The biggest problems in the defense of Vyborg were caused by last-minute improvisations. The High Command finally ordered troops to defend the city, but transportation took time. The 20th Brigade, commanded by Colonel Armas Kemppe, was transferred from the East Karelia to the Karelian Isthmus. Heist and limited transport capacity meant that maintenance was left behind. Last but not least the destination was changed on the way. The troops under Kemppe were concentrated in a hurry directly in the city. It was believed that when he arrived, he would have time to prepare his troops for urban warfare by building stronger defense positions.

The troops concentrated in Vyborg had to go directly to combat and unfinished positions. The men were completely unaccustomed to defending the city – they had been on different terrain in the Eastern Karelia. Some of them had only been engaged in fortification work behind the frontline in forested terrain. Before the Soviet attack, men from other units still flowed into Vyborg. They were from broken units and they decrease morale by spreading fear with their stories to the fresh troops of the 20th Brigade. Disobedient soldiers plundered buildings which had been evacuated. Either were soldiers of Colonel Kemppe not immune for robbing.

From the beginning troops of Colonel Kemppe had suffered from shortage of ammunition. There were no relief for the shortage of ammunition. One reason for shortage was bureaucratic system. North of Vyborg was the Rautakorpi ammunition depot, but without a written order ammunition were not handed over from there. The brigade got their grenades only after the headquarters had intervened. There were short of time, when ammunition depot handed over grenades, it was far too late.⁽⁶⁾

4.L. Laaksonen Lasse, *Viina, hermot ja rangaistukset – sotilasylijohdon henkilökohtaiset ongelmat 1918–1945*. Bookwell Digital 2017, p. 503; W. E. Tuompo, *Päiväkirjani päämajasta 1941-1944*, Saarijärvi 2014, pp. 284-288.

5. *Jatkosodan historia 4, Vetäytyminen Karjalan kannakselta* Toim. Sotatieteen Laitoksen Sotahistorian toimisto, Porvoo 1993, passim.

6.For example, National Archives, IV AKE, Op.os. sotapäiväkirja 20.6.1944, Spk 4380; National Archives, 20.Pr:n

The Russians attack reached to Vyborg around noon on June 20, 1944. It is not known for certain what kind of the artillery preparations were, but the Soviet troops were apparently able to storm the city quit easily with support of tanks. When the Finnish assault guns in the Centre of the defenders were damaged and the close-range anti-tank weapons and heavy artillery could not be used properly, the morale of the troops was eroded. Troops unaccustomed to urban battles were nervous, even though there was still a long way to go before the house-to-house combat took place.

The incorrect situational awareness picture significantly hampered command. Colonel Kemppe had no telephone connection with the commander of the Army Corps, Lieutenant General Taavetti Laatikainen. Lieutenant General had only little knowledge of the events in Vyborg. The messages were delivered via couriers or even via Mikkeli, where the headquarters was located. Delay of messages was inevitable. Even the battalion commanders of the 20th Brigade did not have direct contacts with each other. When one company in the center of the defenders misinterpreted order and retreated, others followed.⁽⁷⁾

The troops of the scattered brigade quickly sought to leave Vyborg. First, the men packed into the bottleneck of the Linnansilta bridge, after which they retreated to the inland via bridges and straits. This happened although the Russians had not even had time to properly harass the fleeing troops. The Finnish officers no longer managed to organize the defense of the city. Already in the afternoon, only two or three hours after the beginning of the offensive, more than two thousand men left the city. Colonel Kemppe was so shocked by the collapse of his brigade that he first wanted to be left alone at his command post on the city.

The news of the loss of Vyborg was transmitted via complicated communication lines to the upper military command. After five o'clock Kemppe was in a car heading to the headquarters of the IV Army Corps. Kemppe had to explain the situation to Lieutenant General Laatikainen personally. Bad news and Kemppe arrived about same time to the knowledge of Laatikainen. When the news of the catastrophe reached headquarters in Mikkeli, a short time later, Commander-in-Chief Marshal Mannerheim did not even believe it to be true!

Only a couple of minutes later, Commander of the Army Corps Laatikainen gave Kemppe an order on behalf of the commander-in-chief not to give up the main line of defense, even though the troops were in fact already on the mainland. The remaining

sotapäiväkirja 20.6.1944, Spk 20668; U. Tarkki, *Taistelu Viipurista 20.6.1944 – Viipurin menetys ja oikeudenkäynti!* Jyväskylä 1996, passim.

7. For example, National Archives, II/20. prikaatin sotapäiväkirja 1.1-22.8.1944, Spk 20703; National Archives, 20.Pr:n sotapäiväkirja 20.6.1944, Spk 20668; National Archives, 20. prikaatin sotapäiväkirjan liitteet 31.12.1943-24.10.1944, Spk 20670; National Archives, Päämajan sotapäiväkirja 1.1.44-28.4.45, Spk 20812; U. Tarkki, 1996, passim.

bridges in the city had been blown up. When the headquarters tried to contact the brigade, it was reported that lines of connection had been cut off. There were many different rumors about the fate of the city. One rumor was that the Russians had gained control of Vyborg.

The commander-in-chief of the Finnish army, Marshal Mannerheim, considered the leaving of Vyborg a “scandal”. He had given an absolute order to hold the city. The credibility of the military high command suffered a blow and was strongly reflected in the mood on the home front. The commander-in-chief demanded a thorough investigation and punishment of the guilty.⁽⁸⁾ Mannerheim directed the initial pace of the process himself and appointed his own general, Major General Väinö Palojärvi, from headquarters to find the felons for the collapse of the defense and the shameful flight from the city. In order to preserve the credibility of the military command, it was necessary, if nothing else, to appoint scapegoats for the rapid loss of Vyborg.

As usual, Marshal Mannerheim was extremely impatient. He saw any reason not to charge. At the same time Mannerheim completely forgot to investigate the leadership activities of the IV Army Corps. Lieutenant General Laatikainen was his personal favorite. From a legal point of view, Mannerheim’s dogmatic view was inverted. Undoubtedly, the investigation team had a strong tendency to quickly find the culprits. The most favorable target and scapegoat was undoubtedly, the leadership of the 20th Brigade and its commander Kemppe. Its responsibility had been the defense of Vyborg.⁽⁹⁾

Later, only Brigade Commander Colonel Armas Kemppe and Lieutenant Colonel Kurt Bäckman, commander of the first battalion to leave his position, were brought to court. The former eventually received a mild sentence, the latter committed suicide in the middle of the legal process. Although more detailed information about the battles in Vyborg and the command of the army corps was later obtained, the case was not reopened.⁽¹⁰⁾ From the point of view of the military high command, the matter was embarrassing. It was easier that the scandal of Vyborg was quickly buried in the twilight of history.

8.L. Laaksonen 2017, pp. 508-517.

9.L. Laaksonen 2017, pp. 518-532; L. Laaksonen, *Eripuraa ja arvovaltaa – Mannerheimin ja kenraalien henkilösuhteet ja johtaminen* (Discord and Authority – The Personal Relationships of Mannerheim and his Generals and their Effect on Leadership), Jyväskylä 2004, passim.

10.National Archives, ”Korkeimmalle Oikeudelle”, N:o 143/78 V.D. 1944, KKO VD143/78 1944 Eb178; National Archives, ”Valtioneuvoston oikeuskanslerille”, Sotatieteiden v.t. sotaviskaali N:o 337. V. 15.11.1944, KKO VD143/78 1944 Eb178; L. Laaksonen 2017, pp. 532-535, 607-610.

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