



## The Memoirs of Marshal Mannerheim (1882-1946)

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Histoire & stratégie

**The objective of this sheet is to understand how the use of a particular fighting technique such as "Motti" in a wooded, snowy and frozen environment, with its inherent advantages, can be used to improve the quality of the fight. The objective of this sheet is to understand how the use of a particular fighting technique such as "Motti" in a wooded, snowy and frozen environment, with its integration in a long-term battle strategy, makes it possible to compensate for numerical and operational inferiority, according to Marshal Mannerheim's personal observations.**

### - Presentation of the author:

**Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim was born on 4 June 1867 in Askainen in Southwest Finland. He is the third child of a Finnish-Swedish aristocratic family of Dutch descent, ennobled in 1768. He thus bears the title of Baron. He himself describes his dismissal from the Finnish Cadet Corps at the age of 16 as a "decisive" moment in his life. Wounded in his self-esteem, he took up the challenge of becoming an "officer of the knight-guards" (imperial guard) by joining the Cavalry School of Saint-Petersbourg.**

Admitted in 1889, at the age of 22, he started as a cornet in the 15th dragoon regiment of Empress Alexandra. After the coronation of Nicholas II, General von Grünwald, commander of the Knights Guards, was appointed Grand Squire of the Court and offered Mannerheim an important position in the administration of the imperial stables. In 1903, promoted to the rank of captain, he applied to become an instructor at the Cavalry Officers' School in St. Petersburg, where he took command of the "model squadron". The Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905), in which he served as a lieutenant-colonel, was the first of the five campaigns in which he took part. Regent of Finland between December 1918

and July 1919, he received the title of Marshal in 1933 and became head of the Finnish National Defence Council. He became Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish troops on the eve of the Second World War. In both the Winter War (1939-1940) and the Continuation War (1941-1944), Mannerheim was both a political and a military leader, and in 1942 he was granted the title of Marshal of Finland by the government. Elected President of the Republic by Parliament on 4 August 1944, he resigned in March 1946 for health reasons.

- **Date of publication:** 1952

- **Topic and issues of the book:** Beyond the political considerations concerning the role played by Marshal Mannerheim in the independence of Finland, this book is of interest because of the description he gives of the motti technique during the Winter War. In fact, Mannerheim, who details the different stages of the conflict between the USSR and Finland between 30 November 1939 and 13 March 1940, offers us his personal vision of the use of such a technique. As such, we have concentrated on chapters I (From the Cadet School to the rank of Colonel), III ("The War of Independence in Finland"), IX ("The Winter War") and finally XII ("The War Resumes") of his work. Motti" is the Finnish application of the technique of swarm fighting, which has been put into practice many times throughout history (the Turks against the Crusaders at the battle of Dorylaeum in 1097, or the Zulus against the British at the battle of Isandhlwana in 1879).

**In his Memoirs, Marshal Mannerheim accurately depicts the military operations he commanded and offers us a personal analysis of the successes and failures of the Finnish army against its Soviet enemy. The Army can learn tactical and technical lessons adaptable to modern warfare, especially when it comes to swarming. In addition, in his willingness to explain how the Finnish forces were able to stand up to an enemy that seemed to be able to win hands down (with a RAPFOR of 4 to 1), Emil Mannerheim sheds light on how an Army can take advantage of its environment, its weaknesses to remain agile and enduring. Finally, in the light of the Soviet failure against the Finns, this study shows that a thorough knowledge of one's enemy remains one of the keys to victory, and disregard for the enemy and the realities of the terrain a major cause of defeat.**

- Themes **addressed in the book :**

- Role of Marshal Mannerheim in the political construction of the Republic of Finland ;
- Marshal Mannerheim's role as military strategist and warlord;
- How to deal with an enemy army that is in a position of superiority, both numerically and operationally.

## I- Motti's tactics

### a) Definitions

"The motti consists, in extreme climatic conditions and on a particularly hostile topology of the place, of harassing Russian columns and convoys to isolate them in small battle groups that find themselves surrounded by light and mobile units of ski scouts, who come out of the forest. Disoriented, cut off from the rest of the column, the Russian soldiers try to escape in small units through the bogs and frozen lakes." <sup>1</sup> This definition of Sergei Lion allows us to visualize the precise course of motti tactics. The latter refers both to a tangible reality, i.e. an encircled enemy unit - in this case, a Russian unit - but also to military tactics. The term motti (borrowed from the Swedish mått, "measure") means "stere", essarts. When the firewood was collected, the logs were cut into lengths and stored in cubic piles of one cubic metre, which were left in the forest to be retrieved later. According to Marshal Mannerheim, this was above all a technique of "active defence",

based on "intelligent use of the terrain and natural conditions". In his Memoirs, he gives a personal definition of it when he evokes the Soviet enemy: it is a question of "attacking the columns, one at a time" and of "making decisive blows on their flanks and on their backs, without compromising our links".

## **(b) Success depends on a combination of different factors**

The motti, which can be defined as harassment combat, which is similar to guerrilla combat. Its effectiveness is conditioned by the combination of different factors:

- a privileged application environment: wooded and snowy regions, forests with few trees;
- the mobility of the soldiers: in the case of the Finnish soldiers, this great capacity of movement was allowed to them by the use of skis;
- preparation for natural conditions upstream / excellent knowledge of the application environment; - wearing white camouflaged clothing (unlike the Soviets, who were highly visible).

It is the combination of these different factors that allows the implementation of motti, whose main stages can be summarized as follows:

- 1- Disarticulate the enemy: fight the war against the enemy's communication and supply lines. This makes it possible in particular to prevent the enemy units from giving each other mutual assistance afterwards.
- 2 - Divide to isolate the enemy: this is the natural consequence of the previous step. Armoured columns or enemy battle groups are thus divided, partitioned into smaller moles (mottis).
- 3 - Surround these small groups with mobile forces in order to fight them separately and give the illusion of mass.
- 4 - If a pocket is too strong, harass it to exhaust it until, running out of food and ammunition, it surrenders.

## **II- The motti in the Winter War**

The motti was used several times during the Winter War. The latter began on November 30, 1939, when the USSR attacked Finland. The main casus belli was Finland's refusal to give Stalin a portion of the Karelian Isthmus and to lease the Hanko peninsula to him to establish a military base. The Winter War lasted three and a half months and resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Moscow (1940). If the Soviets succeed in seizing the Karelian Isthmus, the Winter War will deeply damage the image of the Red Army's fighting qualities. The Red Army, which was a winner on paper, will face a Finnish enemy much more tenacious than expected.

### **a) Undeniable Soviet superiority**

The use of the motti is the result of a clear observation: at the beginning of the conflict, the Russian army, which had far more troops than the Finnish army, also had unparalleled

firepower. On the first day of the conflict, Mannerheim explains this with foresight: "On the morning of November 30, the Russians began regular operations with forces considerably larger than ours on land, sea and in the air. Now everyone understood that this was, for the Finnish people, a fight to the death."

## Diagram 1 - Comparison of the forces involved

### Table 1- Firepower

#### (b) Case study :

The Battle of Suomussalmi Two battles of the Winter War are particularly symptomatic of the use of motti: Tolvajärvi and Suomussalmi. A tactical analysis of the Battle of Suomussalmi, based on the personal observations of Marshal Mannerheim, may enable us to understand how this tactical method makes it possible to compensate for numerical and operational inferiority. The battle, which took place between 7 December 1939 and 8 January 1940, illustrates the concrete application of the motti tactics through the Finnish victory.

- Forces involved

- USSR: 2 infantry divisions and an armoured division, about 45,000 men ;

- Finland: 3 regiments and a few isolated battalions, about 11,000 men. Thus, the Red Army, four times more numerous than the Finnish army at the beginning of the confrontation, had absolute superiority.

### Map 1 - Course of the battle

Edward J. Krasnobowski, Frank Martini, Map of the Battle of Suomussalmi

1 - Soviet offensive: the 163rd division of the Red Army crosses the border between the USSR and Finland and moves towards the village of Suomussalmi in order to cut Finland in two. To achieve this, they take the region of Oulu, mostly forested and very marshy.

2 - Suomussalmi, defended by a single battalion, falls into Soviet hands, but the Finnish troops manage to destroy the village before the enemy division can find refuge there (the weather conditions are very constraining).

3 - The Finns retreat to the opposite shores of lakes Nislanselkä and Haukiperä.

4 - Soviet counter-offensive: implementation of the motti under the command of Colonel Siilasvuo who orders his troops to harass the flanks of the Soviet columns.

5 - The motti is completed by the use of incendiary bombs which will take the name of "Molotov cocktail".

6- While the combination of the motti and the Molotov cocktails allowed the destruction of many groups of isolated Soviet soldiers, the latter, strengthened by their numerical superiority, continued to advance but more slowly.

7 - One month after the battle began, the 163rd Soviet division broke out and its survivors fled, while the 44th Russian division (essentially composed of Ukrainians) preferred to consolidate its positions rather than to rescue the other division.

8 - "Raattentie" incident, during which a unit of 300 Finns surprises in an ambush the 44th Soviet division (about 25,000 men) on a forest road, and causes it to suffer very significant losses.

9 - At the same time, at the head of the 6,000 men of the 9th Finnish Division, Colonel Siilasvuo once again applied the motti tactic to cut off the retreat of the Soviets. This last blow to the enemy offers victory to the Finnish troops: in only four days, the entire Soviet division is annihilated.

- Losses The comparison of the losses suffered by the two belligerents shows us how much the motti combined with the Russian defeats proved to be destructive for the USSR (Soviet losses are 28 times greater than the Finnish losses): - USSR: 23,000 men - Finland: 800 men

### **c) Assessment: lessons and limits of the motti**

In the light of Marshal Mannerheim's comments, we can point out several conditions whose respect determines the success of the motti:- opponents advancing in separate columns in a deserted forest environment - an impossibility of communication and cooperation between the different columns; - adversaries who do not know the environment and have not been able to train there beforehand; - adversaries whose doctrine of use is not compatible with the space of application, nor adaptable to it.

#### **According to Mannerheim, several factors explain the Soviet defeat:**

- **The underestimation of the value of the Finnish divisions in view of their material weakness;**

- **A Soviet tactical command not adapted to the weather and geographical environment. Soviet troops were used to fighting in the open steppes and not on wooded terrain, which explains their poor tactical competence ;**

- **A lack of knowledge of skiing and its use for military-strategic purposes (according to Mannerheim, this was the greatest shortcoming of the Russian soldier).**

**The marshal also evokes the limits of the motti. Isolated Soviet groups thus managed to regain the advantage by retreating, then creating solid points of support where the tanks formed the belt and the artillery, the heart of the device.**

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<sup>1</sup> LION Serge, *The Great Battles of World War II*, Ixelles Editions, Paris, 2012

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Schéma 1-

**Division soviétique**  
- 17 500 soldats  
- 2 régiments d'artillerie

Comparaison des forces en présence:

**Division finlandaise**  
- 14 200 soldats  
- 1 régiment d'artillerie

Tableau 1- Puissance de feu

Armes	Division finlandaise	Division soviétique
Fusils	11 000	14 000
Pistolets automatiques	250	-
Fusils mitrailleurs	250	419
Mitrailleuses 7,62mm	116	200
Mitrailleuses 12,7mm	-	6
Mitrailleuses contre-avions	-	32
Fusils lance-grenades	-	261
Lance-grenades 81-82mm	18	19
Lance-grenades 120mm	-	12
Pièces d'artillerie 37-45mm	181	48
Pièces d'artillerie 75-90mm	24	38
Pièces d'artillerie 105-152mm	12	40
Chars de combat	-	40/50

Diagram 1- Comparison of the forces involved:

Table 1- Firepower

Tableau 2- synthèse

	Terre	Air	Total soldats engagés
Finlande	- 17 divisions d'infanterie - 26 chars - environ 1000 pièces d'artillerie lourde	- moins de 150 avions	265 000
URSS	- 39 divisions d'infanterie - 3000 chars - 3000 pièces d'artillerie lourde	- environ 3600 avions	800 000

