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Maksym Kurochkin

Translated from the Russian by John Freedman

Veteran No. 1

I wanted to learn more about the Soviet-Finnish war. So I took a recorder and went to a retirement home for veterans.

“Ivan Savelyevich. Tell me about your heroic acts. Was it hard?”

“Well, yeah... hard.”

“Cold?”

“And cold. There were three hundred of us, twenty sheepskin coats issued among us. The superiors took them all for themselves. We wouldn't see hot food for weeks. We made slow progress. There was abandoned, smashed-up equipment all along the roads. I had to push it to the side of the road with a tractor. People were unprepared, and angry. Naturally, frostbite set in, leading to gangrenous processes. A week later I saw my first corpse. Later there were so many I couldn't count them anymore. I remember finding three guys on the road. They had frozen into a single ball. We had to cut them apart with a saw in order to load them onto our vehicle. I can't tell you how many like that were left until spring. It was hard, yeah. Many died during the explosions. But there was no other way to get through. You just had to blow things up! The brass were drinking moonshine in a warm shed, and we were pushing on in summer clothes: Forward! Onward! Blow it up! How many friends I lost...”

“You keep saying 'the brass.' Who was that? Who was pushing you? Political operatives? Commanders?”

“Well... the foremen. We mostly spoke the language of construction, we weren't military men.

“Wait! Not military? But you were at war!”

“I'd never fought a day in my life. I had a deferment for flat feet.”

“But you were just telling me about the war.”

“What war?”

“The Finnish War. The Soviet-Finnish War.”

“No, you've made some mistake. The Veterans of the Soviet-Finnish War are in the next wing. I'm a veteran of construction. We built kindergartens for shock construction projects up north. That was my specialization.”

“Sorry, my mistake.”

“No problem. Veterans of the Finnish War are in wing No 3.”

“Thank you.”

Veteran No. 2

I was very ashamed of my mistake. So, in advance, I talked to the administrator of the retirement home and verified that Ivan Ignatyevich was truly a veteran of the Finnish War.

“Ivan Ignatyevich. I am working on a project with my Finnish friends. Tell me. What was it like at war?”

“I fought good in Spain. Then over at Lake Khasan, at Khalkhin-Gol... We liberated the Baltic States, Poland, lots of places. Then there were the Germans, the Japanese again, the Koreans...”

“All I'm interested in right now are your memories of Finland. You did fight in Finland, didn't you?”

“Yes, I'm sure I did. If it says so in my military record, then I did.”

“Tell me about it.”

“What's there to tell? I fought.”

“How? I'm interested in knowing how you fought?”

“Oh, I don't remember anymore. It was this little war... not very memorable. Now, take Angola... Our company was quartered in the...”

“Thank you. We'll talk about Angola another time. Do you remember nothing at all about Finland?”

“What's to remember?”

“Thank you.”

Veteran No. 3

But I did get lucky. I found a veteran in the same wing who remembered the Finnish War. Like me, Ivan Akimovich turned out to be from Poltava. In 1939 he served in the finest Ukrainian division of the time – the Frunze division.

“Ivan Akimovich. Do you remember the Finnish War?”

“Of course. It was the best of times.”

“Why?”

“It was good. We weren't hungry.”

“They fed you well?”

“Very well. Almost every day. There was lots of other food too. There was horse meat lying all over the road. I was able to give up eating human flesh.”

“You ate people?”

“Are you listening to what I said? Why eat people if you've got horse meat?”

“But you said it as if, basically, you had eaten people.”

“What else do you expect? If you ate in the village of Rakity, you survived. If you didn't – you died.”

“Was this 1933?”

“'32, '33, after that it got worse. Before the war began I was constantly hungry.

“About the war... do you remember anything else?”

“Well, let' see... they fed us often.”

“So you liked it in Finland?”

“Yeah, it was good. I ate my fill.”

“Thank you.”

Veteran No. 4

There were no other veterans of the Finnish campaign at the retirement home. But I did score an interview with General Gostyushin.

“Ivan Osipovich. How would you assess that war now?”

“The Soviet-Finnish War was the best of wars.”

“What do you mean by 'best'?”

“Nobody was hanging over your shoulder. You ask them to send you a regiment, they send you a regiment. You ask for two, they send you two. You felt like a real human being: if you're running out of people, you just make a call to Moscow, and they send you new ones. No paperwork, no red tape. Now, you can fight like that! There was a lot less discipline during the war with the Germans.

“So there was discipline during the Finnish War?”

“Of course there was. We had two firing squads per day for the uncommitted.”

“How were the Finns as an opponent?”

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