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# Forging the Will to Fight

## Lessons from the Winter War, 1939–1940

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**Abstract:** The Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union (1939–40) shows how small states can overcome major disadvantages by organizing society and institutions effectively. Despite facing far superior Soviet forces, Finland built strong resilience through focused military training, shared national narratives, and close coordination between civilians and the military. Civilians supported the war effort through fortification work, logistics, and cooperation with military goals, which strengthened national unity and boosted soldiers' morale and performance. Finnish forces used terrain, harsh weather, and decentralized leadership to turn this societal commitment into real tactical advantages. Modern Finnish defense practices—such as preparing for hybrid threats, conducting territorial exercises, and maintaining voluntary military service—reflect these lessons. Together, they demonstrate that readiness, cohesion, and resilience depend on deliberate planning and broad societal involvement. This article argues that the will to fight is not automatic but deliberately built, and that doing so improves both strategic independence and military effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Finland, military cohesion, resilience, Soviet invasion, survival motivation, Winter War, will to fight

### Introduction

The Winter War, fought between Finland and the Soviet Union from November

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1939 to March 1940, illustrates the decisive influence of both civilian mobilization and the army's fighting spirit on conflict outcomes. Facing an adversary with overwhelming manpower and material superiority, Finland prolongs its resistance, inflicts significant losses, and preserves political independence despite territorial concessions.<sup>1</sup> Finnish effectiveness relied not only on territorial defense but also on the ability to convert limited resources into maximal operational performance through exceptional collective motivation.<sup>2</sup> Leadership adapted to local conditions and deliberately fostered civic engagement, serving as a causal driver of collective motivation that enabled the country to mitigate initially unfavorable imbalances. The Finnish case therefore suggests that fighting spirit emerges from deliberate social cohesion, meticulous planning, and organizational adaptability, acting as generators of operational and strategic advantages rather than appearing spontaneously. Such advantages subsequently reinforce and sustain the collective will to fight, clearly marking operational effectiveness as an effect rather than a cause.<sup>3</sup> Each participant, military or civilian, assumes a clearly defined role within national strategy, with collective motivation anchored in shared narratives and rigorous anticipation of challenges, thereby maximizing performance despite tangible and intangible limitations.

Understanding how a state cultivates superior fighting spirit despite material and numerical deficits requires examining the interplay among societal, institutional, and individual factors. Rather than a static attribute, fighting spirit represents a process actively generated by psychological preparation, institutional structures, and sociopolitical cohesion, which produces resilience, operational effectiveness, and enduring morale.<sup>4</sup> Historical Finnish experience demonstrates that intensive military training, deep-rooted social cohesion, and adaptation to extreme environmental conditions directly generate the capacity to sustain operational effectiveness and collective will under severe constraints, offsetting conventional disadvantages. This enabled Finland's population to

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<sup>1</sup> Pasi Tuunainen, "New Approaches to the Study of Arctic Warfare," *Nordia Geographical Publications* 43, no. 1 (January 2014): 87–99.

<sup>2</sup> Pasi Tuunainen, *Finnish Military Effectiveness in the Winter War, 1939–1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-44606-0>. The originality of Pasi Tuunainen's work lies in its analytical reframing. Rather than attributing Finnish performance to abstract cultural factors or solely to force asymmetry, the author advances a systemic analysis integrating organizational structures, operational practices, and environmental constraints. He demonstrates that Finnish effectiveness emerged from a dynamic interaction among decentralized command, tactical adaptability, resilience, and the methodical exploitation of terrain and climate. The book represents a major contribution to the literature on small-state warfare by conceptualizing military effectiveness as a multidimensional phenomenon—one that is measurable and explicable beyond mythologized narratives.

<sup>3</sup> LtCol Juoni Keravuori, *The Russo-Finnish War, 1939–1940: A Study in Leadership, Training, and Esprit-de-Corps* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Eric Engle and Jukka Paananen, *Finland's Winter War: Strategy, Society, and Survival* (London: Routledge, 2019).

survive overwhelming odds and inflict disproportionate losses on a technologically superior adversary, as documented by Vesa Nenye and colleagues in their analysis of the Winter War.<sup>5</sup> Civic mobilization, national narratives, and culturally attuned leadership actively created fighting spirit (cause), allowing limited resources to generate strategic leverage and reinforce operational effectiveness (effect). Integrating terrain mastery, improvised tactics, and decentralized command, Finnish forces demonstrated that fighting spirit functions as both a psychological and force multiplier, transforming constraints into operational advantage.<sup>6</sup>

Physical environment plays a critical role in operational behavior and the maintenance of Finnish determination. Dense forests, frozen lakes, and harsh winter conditions severely restrict Soviet mobility while enabling the application of terrain-adapted asymmetric tactics.<sup>7</sup> Training from youth to exploit environmental constraints actively generated preparedness and initiative, which then enhanced motivation, cohesion, and combat effectiveness. Furthermore, the intimate understanding of local geography allowed Finnish forces to anticipate enemy movements, optimize small-unit maneuvers, and integrate natural obstacles into broader operational planning, amplifying both strategic impact and collective resolve. Mastery of the environment alone does not constitute fighting spirit; it merges with cohesion and leadership to enhance operational outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Terrain familiarity and anticipatory logistical planning act as causal instruments, producing operational leverage that reinforces the population's will to fight. By combining anticipation, cultural preparedness, and collective discipline, Finland demonstrates that fighting spirit is generated through an integrated system in which tactical actions, individual commitment, and logistical effort collectively produce resilience and operational effectiveness, consolidating institutional trust and military confidence.

## **From Strategic Preparation to Societal Mobilization**

By the late 1930s, Finland faced a precarious geopolitical position in Europe,

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<sup>5</sup> Vesa Nenye et al., *Finland at War: The Winter War 1939–40* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2015). This work represents one of the most comprehensive syntheses of the conflict, combining operational analysis, archival sources, and detailed battle narratives. It is distinguished by its ability to interweave the strategic, tactical, and human dimensions of the war, offering a precise reconstruction of engagements while situating Finnish performance within a broader geopolitical context. Through the integration of visual documents and firsthand accounts, the book provides an exceptionally nuanced, multidimensional understanding of Finnish military effectiveness.

<sup>6</sup> William R. Trotter, *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War of 1939–40* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, a division of Workman Publishing, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Carl Van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland, 1939–1940* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Maj Gregory J. Bozek, *The Soviet-Finnish War, 1939–1940: Getting the Doctrine Right* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1993).

confronting an adversary with overwhelming material and numerical superiority. With a population of approximately 3.7 million and an army undergoing modernization, the country remained highly vulnerable to Soviet demands, which included ceding strategic territories on the Karelian Isthmus, permitting military bases along key points in the Baltic, and demilitarizing critical defensive sectors.<sup>9</sup> Finnish leaders perceived these requirements as existential threats, recognizing that any concession would undermine national sovereignty, weaken social cohesion, and erode institutional trust. Such circumstances necessitated careful strategic preparation, combining intelligence gathering, early mobilization, and comprehensive operational planning to ready the nation for a conflict that was both conventionally and psychologically demanding.<sup>10</sup> Here, early mobilization and societal coordination function as deliberate instruments to generate fighting spirit, establishing the population's readiness as a causal factor in resilience rather than as a by-product of preexisting morale. National strategy integrated military readiness, civil coordination, and moral formation to convert structural vulnerability into enduring resilience.

### **Mobilizing Society and Shaping Strategy**

Perception of threat extends beyond immediate military considerations, framing the conflict as a moral and historical test of national continuity. As Juoni Keravuori emphasizes, state beliefs, biases, and strategic culture shape threat perception, filtering rational assessments through historical memory, national identity, and institutional frameworks.<sup>11</sup> This understanding allows Finnish authorities to implement an integrated mobilization approach, combining social cohesion, civic discipline, and anticipatory logistical preparation. Interaction between regular forces, local militias, and coordinated civilian participation deliberately generates resilience, with operational effectiveness emerging as a reinforcing consequence. The causal chain runs from structured engagement to the cultivation of fighting spirit, ensuring that the population's willingness to fight is actively constructed rather than passively reinforced. Strategic anticipation also functions as a psychological lever, enhancing public confidence and collective determination against a technologically superior adversary. Every decision, from supply line planning to unit organization, is designed to maximize responsiveness, coordination, and the ability to maintain pressure on the enemy while preserving national cohesion.

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<sup>9</sup> Bozek, *The Soviet-Finnish War, 1939–1940: Getting the Doctrine Right*.

<sup>10</sup> Tuunainen, "New Approaches to the Study of Arctic Warfare."

<sup>11</sup> Keravuori, *The Russo-Finnish War, 1939–1940: A Study in Leadership, Training, and Esprit-de-Corps*.

## Training Minds and Shaping Battlefield Performance

A critical component of this preparation lies in the cognitive and cultural training of soldiers through national narratives. Ville Kivimäki and Matti Hyvärinen highlight coordinated efforts among military authorities, historians, and educators to frame the 1939–40 conflict as part of a centuries-long struggle against external domination.<sup>12</sup> By presenting contemporary soldiers as heirs to a tradition of resistance, these narratives instill a profound sense of duty and urgency, reinforcing unit cohesion and resilience. Narratives extend beyond propaganda, translating historical continuity into concrete operational principles and internalization of mission command. Such an approach ensures that every tactical decision and battlefield engagement directly aligns with national strategic objectives, transforming individual and collective morale into a force and discipline multiplier. The integration of these elements guarantees optimal coordination between individual initiative, tactical autonomy, and strategic purpose, thereby consolidating the nation's capacity to endure in hostile environments.<sup>13</sup>

## Preparing Bodies and Reinforcing Resilience

Concurrently, the General Staff of the Finnish Defence Forces (*Pääesikunta*) implements proactive operational measures to offset structural weaknesses. Ammunition and fuel depots are dispersed to reduce vulnerability to artillery and air raids, while unit organization promotes decentralized command and flexibility for small detachments operating in forested, snow-covered terrain.<sup>14</sup> Soldiers receive intensive winter mobility training, including skiing and frozen-lake navigation, ensuring operational effectiveness even under extreme temperatures. Civilian participation further strengthens resilience, contributing to fortification construction and maintaining logistical networks.<sup>15</sup> Anticipation of foreign support, albeit uncertain, reinforces national determination and discourages premature surrender. Collectively, these efforts generate continuous adaptive capacity, wherein material preparation, societal preparedness, and effective leadership interact to produce resilience, ensuring the army can sustain prolonged operations despite significant initial disadvantages.

Finally, integrating social, institutional, and military mechanisms establishes a holistic system in which existential threats become drivers of collective discipline and operational effectiveness. Combining strategic foresight, cultural

<sup>12</sup> Ville Kivimäki and Matti Hyvärinen, "Forging a Master Narrative for a Nation: Finnish History as a Script during the Second World War," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 47, no. 1 (2022): 83–105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2021.2015430>.

<sup>13</sup> Tuunainen, *Finnish Military Effectiveness in the Winter War, 1939–1940*.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Jowett and Brent Snodgrass, *Finland at War, 1939–45* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Engle and Paananen, *Finland's Winter War: Strategy, Society, and Survival*.

preparation, and civic engagement ensures that logistics, training, and moral cohesion reinforce each other.<sup>16</sup> Soldiers' confidence in reliable supply lines and alignment of civilian support with military objectives guarantees operational continuity and optimizes battlefield performance. Thus, fighting spirit emerges from a national system capable of converting vulnerability into resilience, using historical memory, social cohesion, and institutional legitimacy as strategic multipliers.<sup>17</sup> This approach highlights that every aspect, from logistical support to cultural adherence, contributes to sustainable combat capacity, enabling a materially limited state to mount effective resistance while maintaining intact sovereignty.

## **Finnish Tenacity and the Dynamics of Combat**

On 30 November 1939, Finland entered in open hostilities against the Red Army, which deployed approximately 400,000 soldiers, thousands of armored vehicles, and massive air support, intending to rapidly overwhelm resistance. Soviet doctrine at the time favors mechanized breakthroughs and concentrated offensives, largely disregarding constraints imposed by extreme winter, frozen lakes, and dense forests.<sup>18</sup> Finnish effectiveness relied on the integration of three key factors: pragmatic leadership, rigorous tactical training, and a national culture of tenacity (or *sisu*).<sup>19</sup> Internal cohesion, or *henki*, transformed every engagement into an existential affirmation of sovereignty, while the combination of discipline, individual initiative, and mutual support converted initial inferiority into a lasting moral and strategic advantage.<sup>20</sup> This synergy reveals that fighting spirit functions as an “intangible asset,” enhancing both troop resilience and overall operational effectiveness in hostile environments, with

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<sup>16</sup> Keravuori, *The Russo-Finnish War, 1939–1940: A Study in Leadership, Training, and Esprit-de-Corps*.

<sup>17</sup> Engle and Paananen, *Finland's Winter War: Strategy, Society, and Survival*.

<sup>18</sup> Van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland, 1939–1940*.

<sup>19</sup> *Sisu* is a concept deeply rooted in Finnish culture, denoting a particular form of courage, determination, and perseverance in the face of adversity. It is not merely a momentary act of bravery, but a lasting inner strength that compels an individual to persist despite obstacles, fatigue, or discouragement. It can be described as the capacity to endure and strive even when circumstances seem insurmountable—a blend of stoic courage, tenacity, and steadfastness of mind and body. For more on the concept, see Pentti Henttonen, “A Measure for Assessment of Beneficial and Harmful Fortitude: Development and Initial Validation of the Sisu Scale,” *Helion* 8, no. 11 (2022): e11483, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e11483>.

<sup>20</sup> *Henki* is a Finnish term that literally translates as “spirit,” “soul,” or “breath,” but it carries a more nuanced cultural significance. It denotes the vital energy or inner force that animates a person—their life force and spirit of being. Unlike *sisu*, which is associated with perseverance in the face of adversity, *henki* refers more broadly to the very essence of life and presence, encompassing a person's inner dynamism and capacity to be fully alive. For more on the concept, see Ville Kivimäki and Tuomas Tepora, “War of Hearts: Love and Collective Attachment as Integrating Factors in Finland during World War II,” *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 2 (2009): 285–305, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.0.0273>.

combat preparation extending far beyond mere accumulation of material resources.

Adaptation to terrain and climate constitutes a decisive factor in sustaining resilience. Frozen marshes, narrow transport corridors, and dense forests restricted Soviet mobility, exposed armored columns to ambush, and disrupted supply chains, while extreme cold exacerbated fatigue and triggered mechanical failures.<sup>21</sup> Finnish units employed skis, sleds, and light vehicles to achieve tactical surprise and maintain sustained operational tempo, fully exploiting environmental constraints as a strategic lever. Patriotism, belief in just cause, and unit cohesion strengthened individual and collective endurance. Every ambush, raid, or defensive action enhanced confidence in the group's ability to strike effectively and impose disproportionate costs on the adversary. Finnish leadership and national narratives intertwined with these tactics, linking morale, operational execution, and strategic outcomes, thereby transforming terrain mastery into a fundamental performance cornerstone.

Logistics assumed here a decisive role, acting as both operational and psychological multiplier. Decentralized depots, field maintenance, and adaptive transport methods—skis, sleds, horses, and light vehicles—ensured continuous supply of ammunition, food, and fuel even under extreme conditions.<sup>22</sup> Each successful delivery reinforced soldier confidence, sustained combat endurance, and enabled coordinated action across dispersed units. The Battle of Suomussalmi, fought from 30 November 1939 to 8 January 1940, exemplified this integration: a smaller Finnish force, leveraging intimate knowledge of terrain, unit autonomy, and innovative tactics, destroyed two Soviet divisions despite numerical inferiority. Skis and sleds enabled rapid redeployment and surprise attacks, while decentralized supply chains ensured continuous support. Coordination between leadership, logistics, and tactical initiative amplified morale and operational effectiveness, allowing Finnish units to strike, withdraw, and exploit enemy mistakes repeatedly.<sup>23</sup>

The Battle of Suomussalmi illustrates that a small state, leveraging environmental knowledge, cohesive leadership, and adaptive tactics, can impose disproportionate costs on a superior adversary. Careful coordination of reconnaissance, flexible command, and continuous situational assessment further enabled Finnish forces to anticipate enemy movements, exploit vulnerabilities, and maintain operational tempo. Finnish experience offers enduring insights for contemporary operations, showing that fighting spirit, cohesion, and terrain exploitation remain central to operational effectiveness and resilience, whether

<sup>21</sup> Jowett and Snodgrass, *Finland at War, 1939–45*.

<sup>22</sup> Bozek, *The Soviet-Finnish War, 1939–1940: Getting the Doctrine Right*.

<sup>23</sup> Trotter, *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War of 1939–40*.

in conventional or asymmetric conflicts. Psychological preparation, discipline, and national culture substantially offset material and numerical disadvantages, transforming initial vulnerabilities into sustainable operational and strategic advantages, consolidating Finland's reputation as a model of resilience. This combination of human, social, and environmental factors underscores how an integrated system maximizes a small state's capacity to resist and inflict significant losses even against a technologically superior adversary.

### **Pillars of Fighting Spirit**

Finnish fighting spirit rests on four foundational pillars, closely integrating social, institutional, military, and international factors to generate durable resilience. The unique combination of societal preparedness, military discipline, logistical planning, and perception of shared legitimacy enables a small state to convert material and numerical constraints into operational and psychological advantages. The Finnish case provides evidence that fighting spirit does not arise spontaneously but emerges from a holistic system in which social cohesion, leadership, historical memory, and anticipation of alliances interact to produce resilience capable of sustaining prolonged campaigns against a technologically superior adversary. Each pillar reinforces and amplifies the others, transforming objective limitations into durable strategic levers.

### **Sociopolitical Cohesion and Legitimacy**

The first pillar relies on an integrated sociopolitical system, where national mobilization, social cohesion, and perceived legitimacy interact to generate resilience.<sup>24</sup> Civilians actively contribute to defense, building fortifications, maintaining infrastructure, and supporting frontline troops, forging an inseparable bond between society and the military.<sup>25</sup> This multidimensional cohesion produces collective effectiveness exceeding the sum of individual contributions, reinforcing soldier morale and operational confidence. National narratives emphasize duty to society and continuity of historical identity, converting cultural

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<sup>24</sup> Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199658848.001.0001>. Anthony King analyzes how unit cohesion and combat effectiveness do not arise merely from soldiers' voluntarism, but from a systemic combination of organizational and sociopolitical factors. He notes that clear hierarchical structures and a shared culture within platoons enable forces to maintain high levels of confidence under intense pressure. His analysis demonstrates how resilience depends on the integration of collective norms rather than on isolated individual qualities, reinforcing the notion that national mobilization, social cohesion, and perceived legitimacy constitute essential pillars for sustaining a durable fighting spirit.

<sup>25</sup> Ben Connable, "Structuring Cultural Analyses: Applying the Holistic Will to Fight Models," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 13, SI (2022): 153–67, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.2022SIstratcul009>.

adherence into concrete operational motivation.<sup>26</sup> A politically unified society, convinced of the legitimacy of its struggle, sustains prolonged military effort despite the adversary's material superiority. Integrating such human and social factors into national strategy enhances the durability of fighting spirit and establishes a framework of collective discipline that is difficult to undermine.

### **Logistics and Environmental Adaptation**

The second pillar relies on logistical planning and terrain adaptation, essential for resilience. Decentralized depots, autonomous units, and expert exploitation of forests, snow-covered terrain, and variable weather conditions transform structural constraints into significant tactical advantages.<sup>27</sup> Mobility on skis, mastery of frozen lakes, and deep terrain familiarity enable precise strikes, effective defense, and rapid maneuvers, reinforcing soldier confidence and fostering civilian intrinsic motivation. Logistics extend beyond technical supply: they act as a “catalyst,” ensuring operational continuity, sustaining morale, and facilitating adaptive decision-making under stress. The capacity to convert physical, environmental, and climatic constraints into operational advantages suggests how a state prepares its forces to sustain prolonged combat and maintain a stable, resilient fighting spirit even against a superior adversary.

### **Civic Engagement and Perceived Legitimacy**

The third pillar emphasizes civic engagement and perception of a just cause, enhancing fighting spirit beyond material limitations. Finnish society, fully informed and mobilized, accepted severe sacrifices to defend its ideals, including roughly 25,000 casualties, mainly young adults, in key battles such as Suomussalmi and Tolvajärvi.<sup>28</sup> Moral strength, grounded in shared societal values or what might be termed *spiritual formidability*, shapes endurance and unit cohesion independently of physical constraints, as exemplified during the Greek Civil War (1946–49).<sup>29</sup> Active civilian participation amplifies military effective-

<sup>26</sup> Tuunainen, “New Approaches to the Study of Arctic Warfare.”

<sup>27</sup> Jowett and Snodgrass, *Finland at War, 1939–45*.

<sup>28</sup> The Battle of Tolvajärvi took place during 12–24 December 1939 in the Ladoga Karelia region, north of Lake Ladoga. Following the Soviet invasion, Finnish forces organized Group Talvela, including the 16th Infantry Regiment and several detachments, to confront the 139th Soviet Rifle Division, which was considerably larger and better equipped. Through a meticulously coordinated assault, featuring a “pincer movement” and the strategic exploitation of cold, snow, and frozen lakes, the Finns inflicted a severe defeat on the Red Army, with approximately 4,000–5,000 killed, numerous wounded, and substantial material losses. The battle is particularly significant as it represents the first major Finnish offensive victory of the Winter War, restoring morale to the Finnish Army and the civilian population and countering the perception of an unstoppable Soviet advance.

<sup>29</sup> Spyros Tsoutsoumpis, “The Will to Fight: Combat, Morale, and the Experience of National Army Soldiers during the Greek Civil War, 1946–1949,” *International Journal of Military History & Historiography* 44, no. 1 (2022): 103–27.

ness, demonstrating that resilience is a sociocultural construct. Soldiers perceive that their commitment directly contributes to collective survival, reinforcing the link between morale, discipline, and strategic outcomes, and transforming cohesion and national legitimacy into “tangible assets” for operationalizing fighting spirit.

### **Alliances and Anticipated International Support**

The fourth pillar relies on anticipation of alliances and international support, influencing strategic calculations and consolidating national resolve. In 1939, Finland anticipated potential support from Sweden and Western powers, which, even if uncertain, significantly strengthened civilian and military confidence, reinforcing a shared sense of purpose and collective determination. Public communication, morale management, and strategic transparency further reinforced collective trust and resilience. Integrating social cohesion, shared responsibility, and perception of external support allowed limited material resources to be converted into symbolic and operational power, amplifying both psychological and tactical effects. This experience reveals that fighting spirit depends as much on legitimacy and civic solidarity as on logistics and material means, highlighting the importance of a holistic vision combining internal preparation, societal cohesion, and strategic anticipation.<sup>30</sup>

### **From History to Modern Military Resolve**

The Winter War profoundly shaped Finnish strategic memory, demonstrating that fighting spirit is not spontaneous but institutionally cultivated through societal preparedness and shared national culture. Lessons from 1939–40 reinforced mandatory conscription for men, voluntary service for women, and a large network of trained reservists capable of rapid mobilization.<sup>31</sup> This framework ensures societal role awareness, strengthening adherence to defense ob-

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<sup>30</sup> Alexandru Mihai Serban, “The Role of Military Morale as an Essential Dimension of Combat Power,” *Security & Defence Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2024): 174832, <https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/174832>.

<sup>31</sup> Jarkko Kosonen and Juha Mälkki, “The Finnish Model of Conscription: A Successful Policy to Organize National Defence,” in *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries: Cases, Lessons, Challenges*, ed. Caroline de la Porte et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), 456–72, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192856296.003.0022>. This chapter examines the enduring success of Finland’s conscription program as a central foundation of national defense. The authors emphasize that conscription ensures the resilience and adaptability of the military system, enabling Finland to sustain a credible force despite limited resources and a precarious geopolitical environment. Since attaining independence in 1917, conscription has been shaped by political and social debates, incorporating civic responsibility, social cohesion, and adherence to national values. The legislative framework has evolved to include women on a voluntary basis and to provide nonmilitary alternatives for conscientious objectors, while ensuring that most of the population contributes to national defense.

jectives, consolidating perceived legitimacy, and embedding strategic culture within education, public communication, and military training. Nicholas H. Vidal emphasizes that strategic behavior is shaped not solely by material capabilities but by collective cognitive frameworks and culturally embedded narratives.<sup>32</sup> Decision-making, resilience, and crisis responses are structured by shared interpretive models defining threats, legitimacy, and appropriate action. Within such perspective, anticipation, social cohesion, and perceived legitimacy operate as stabilizing mechanisms guiding collective behavior under pressure. The historical foundation sets the stage for understanding how these outcomes continue to shape military practices.

### National Defense Practices

Contemporary Finnish defense doctrine directly reflects insights from the Winter War, transforming historical experience into strategic practice. Units exploit environmental familiarity, decentralized coordination, and cutting-edge technologies to compensate for numerical and material limitations, applying rigorous training to forests, dispersed terrain, and harsh climatic conditions. For instance, during the Winter War, small Finnish detachments repeatedly used “motti” tactics—encircling and isolating superior Soviet units in forested terrain—to convert limited forces into decisive local advantage. These experiences continue to inform modern maneuver strategies and emphasize the value of initiative at lower command levels. Programs integrate territorial defense, cybersecurity, information security, and coordinated civil-military activities to confront complex threats. Opponents are recognized as multidimensional actors employing military, cyber, informational, economic, and psychological instruments to destabilize society and undermine institutional trust, rather than achieve immediate battlefield gains. Operational effectiveness emerges from collective experience, confidence in leadership, and disciplined cohesion under prolonged and multifaceted pressures, converting limited means into both tactical leverage and cognitive advantage.<sup>33</sup> By fusing institutional design, societal preparedness, and adaptive training, Finland ensures readiness and coordination, demonstrating how strategic culture translates historical insight into enduring resilience.

Recent exercises, including Kajo 2022 and Arrow 2024, operationalize such principles by engaging both professional forces and civilians in territorial

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholas H. Vidal, “Enemy at the Gates: A Strategic Cultural Analysis of Russian Approaches to Conflict in the Information Domain,” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (2023): 49–76, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.20231402003>.

<sup>33</sup> King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*.

defense, cyber operations, and interinstitutional coordination.<sup>34</sup> The Finnish experience provides a model for small and medium states facing hybrid threats, showing that structured civic participation, disciplined training, and confidence in command cultivate the will to fight. Comparable initiatives are visible in Sweden's total defense program and Norway's civil-military resilience exercises, highlighting the transferability of societal and institutional integration in preserving sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> Legal and procedural measures, including the adaptation of the Emergency Powers Act (1991) to hybrid threats, reinforce cohesion and enable competent authorities to maintain operational continuity under extreme pressure.<sup>36</sup> By embedding historical lessons, multisector coordination, and civic engagement into daily practice, states achieve multidimensional resilience that sustains morale, operational adaptability, and strategic autonomy in the face of contemporary security challenges.<sup>37</sup>

### Society and Culture Integration

Civil society remains a central pillar in operationalizing Finland's collective resolve, as reflected in voluntary training programs, territorial exercises, and participation in hybrid-threat resilience initiatives that collectively sustain a structured approach to national defense. The reintroduction of voluntary military service in France, targeting 50,000 participants by 2035 alongside 200,000 professional soldiers, illustrates how societal preparedness can effectively complement professional military capacity.<sup>38</sup> The Winter War further suggests that perceived legitimacy, awareness of existential threats, and adherence to national narratives reinforce resilience—an observation notably examined by Jared Di-

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<sup>34</sup> The Kajo 2022 exercise, conducted from 15 to 28 March 2022, involved approximately 10,000 participants, including nearly 3,500 Finnish professional military personnel, cyber defense units, and critical civilian staff, alongside territorial units and reservists, to test civil-military coordination, the protection of critical infrastructure, and resilience against hybrid threats. The Arrow 2024 exercise, conducted by the Finnish Armored Brigade from 26 April to 14 May 2024 at the Pohjankangas training area (Niinisalo), mobilized 1,850 Finnish conscripts and approximately 300 allied professional soldiers from the United Kingdom, Latvia, and Estonia, supported by nearly 500 vehicles, including 150 armored vehicles, to train combined-arms cooperation and allied interoperability.

<sup>35</sup> Kristin Ljungkvist, "The Military-Strategic Rationality of Hybrid Warfare: Everyday Total Defence under Strategic Non-Peace in the Case of Sweden," *European Journal of International Security* 9, no. 4 (2024): 533–52, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.18>.

<sup>36</sup> Tiina Ferm, "Legal Resilience from a Finnish Perspective," in *Hybrid Threats and Grey Zone Conflict: The Challenge to Liberal Democracies, Ethics, National Security, and the Rule of Law*, ed. Mitt Regan and Aurel Sari (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 631–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197744772.003.0028>.

<sup>37</sup> Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen and Tapio Juntunen, "From 'Spiritual Defence' to Robust Resilience in the Finnish Comprehensive Security Model," in *Nordic Societal Security: Convergence and Divergence*, ed. Sebastian Larsson and Mark Rhinard (London: Routledge, 2020), 154–78.

<sup>38</sup> Laurent Vilaine, "Le Service Militaire Volontaire, un Projet Utile?," *Conversation*, 1 December 2025.

amond, who devoted a chapter to Finland in his analysis of how nations confront and manage crises.<sup>39</sup> Importantly, Finland's success must be understood primarily in terms of *survival* rather than *decisive victory*; despite fierce resistance that prevented full Soviet occupation, the Moscow Peace Treaty ceded significant territory to the Soviet Union while Finland retained its independence and institutions, a dynamic elaborated in Kimmo Rentola's study of Finnish–Soviet relations, which emphasizes Finland's preservation of sovereignty under extreme external pressure.<sup>40</sup>

Finland's defense doctrine demonstrates that resilience relies as much on coordinated civic responsibility and institutional reliability as on conventional military capability. Citizens actively participate in hybrid-threat preparedness, territorial defense drills, and multiagency exercises, deliberately generating fighting spirit while enhancing situational awareness, operational coordination, and collective accountability across civil and military domains. These proactive engagements form the causal foundation for strengthened will to fight, embedding lessons from past conflicts into routine practice and aligning decision-making at all levels with overarching strategic imperatives. Voluntary participation reinforces internalization of defense obligations, complements professional forces, and provides flexibility for rapid and coordinated responses to complex scenarios. Operational effectiveness and enduring fighting spirit thus emerge from the interplay of institutional legitimacy, societal commitment, and disciplined execution, rather than from numerical strength or individual heroism alone. Finland exemplifies a model in which civic engagement and interinstitutional cohesion produce sustainable strategic autonomy, enabling a small state to maintain resilience and operational readiness under existential pressures.

## Conclusion

The Winter War reveals that the will to fight arises from the deliberate integration of societal, institutional, and military elements, extending beyond individual psychological traits. Finland's endurance depended on meticulous logistical preparation, disciplined leadership, and broad civic engagement. Civilians actively supported the war effort through fortification construction, infrastructure maintenance, and provision for combat forces, reinforcing cohesion and national resolve. Soldiers internalized narratives emphasizing duty, historical continuity, and collective resilience, which served as a *causal driver of operational motivation*. Decentralized command, flexible units, and adaptation to harsh environmental conditions magnified the impact of this preparation, enabling a

<sup>39</sup> Jared Diamond, *Upheaval: Turning Points for Nations in Crisis* (New York: Little, Brown, 2019).

<sup>40</sup> Kimmo Rentola, *How Finland Survived Stalin: From Winter War to Cold War, 1939–1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

numerically and materially inferior force to impose disproportionate costs on the adversary. Resilience thus functions both as a source of fighting spirit and as an outcome that strengthens operational performance. The dynamic interplay among leadership, societal cohesion, and military organization illustrates how the will to fight acts as a force multiplier, sustaining operations under stress, preserving discipline, and enhancing both strategic and tactical effectiveness.

Traditional approaches to evaluating military power often focus on personnel numbers, equipment, and technological superiority, which neglect the central role of collective determination in operational results. The Finnish case underscores that will to fight constitutes a strategic variable that can be deliberately cultivated and institutionalized through training, civic engagement, and organizational design. Rigorous preparation, including environmental adaptation, decentralized logistics, and rehearsed operational plans, enhances psychological resilience and unit effectiveness. Soldiers develop confidence in leadership and supply continuity, enabling rapid, coordinated responses to enemy action despite material inferiority. This systematic integration of human, organizational, and environmental factors produces a multiplier effect, amplifying tactical success and operational endurance. For contemporary military doctrines, this emphasizes the importance of combining traditional combat effectiveness with leadership development, cohesion maintenance, and the human dimension, ensuring that forces remain resilient in prolonged or asymmetric operations.

Despite the clear insights, caution is required when applying the Winter War experience to contemporary contexts. Extreme environmental conditions, deep cultural cohesion, and a specific geopolitical setting shaped Finland's outcomes in ways that cannot be directly replicated. Contemporary societies face altered social dynamics, risk perceptions, and political structures that may limit rapid mobilization or the integration of civilians into defense efforts. Overreliance on historical narratives risks idealization, and planning must be based on evidence, not mythologized heroism. Assessing individual and collective will to fight in modern European societies requires attention to cultural, social, and political variables, as well as realistic analyses of potential threats. A nuanced understanding allows military planners to integrate insights from historical examples while adapting them to current conditions, reinforcing resilience and the capacity to sustain national defense efforts over extended periods without overestimating the ease of social mobilization.

Future research and defense policy should examine how psychological, civic, and cultural factors interact to sustain collective resilience under threat. Comparative studies of conflicts in which smaller or materially inferior forces resisted stronger adversaries can reveal lessons relevant to contemporary force planning. European societies, characterized by prolonged peace, econom-

ic interdependence, and technological reliance, require careful assessment of mobilization potential, civic engagement, and societal cohesion when facing hybrid, conventional, or multidimensional threats. Integrating will-to-fight considerations into doctrine, training, logistics, and joint exercises can strengthen operational and strategic endurance. Scenario-based experimentation and simulations translate historical lessons into practical tools, fostering a culture in which national defense is regarded as a shared responsibility. By aligning historical memory, institutional preparation, and societal commitment, states can cultivate a sustainable will to fight, enhancing sovereignty, resilience, and the capacity to resist coercion by superior adversaries. The Finnish experience should therefore be understood not as a prescriptive model, but as an analytically valuable case illustrating how institutional, societal, and cognitive factors interact to sustain fighting capacity under extreme asymmetry.