



Finding Finland

Craig Moore discusses tanks, U-boats, howitzers, and reindeer meat as he explores Finland's military history following a visit to the country

Helsinki, the capital of Finland, can easily be reached from the UK on several budget airlines. It then only takes an hour to drive north on the E12 motorway to junction 27 where the turnoff to Parola is located. You know you are in the right place as there is a great big Leopard main battle tank perched

beside the flyover bridge.

I just had to stop and examine this monster, it was so unexpected. What's more, there is also a Sturmgeschütz III Ausf.G (StuG III) assault gun. I had not even reached the Parola Armour Museum (Panssarimuseo) but had already found two iconic German-built tanks that had both

seen service in the Finnish Army.

The tanks were placed at this location in recognition of the nearby Finnish Army training base. The Armour Brigade specialises in training soldiers in mechanised battle groups, ground-based air defence and electronic warfare. Tank crew training has also traditionally taken place at this location.

My visit took place early one May and it was still cold. Finland has long winters so the deciduous trees were still devoid of leaves and there were no flowers in the gardens. The fields were lightly covered with snow and everything seemed grey, even though the skies were clear and blue.

I received my second surprise of the morning while approaching the entrance to the museum. On top of the embankment on the right side of the road, was an armoured train. A large black TK3 steam train was coupled to four armour-plated camouflaged wagons. The twin-turreted armoured wagon once belonged to the Soviet Union's security service, NKVD, and was captured in Käppäselkä at Eastern-Karelia on October 28, 1941. It was armed with two 76.2mm canons and eight 7.62mm





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Captured Soviet T-26 light tank in winter whitewash camouflage in Finnish Army Service on display outside the Museo Militaria in Hämeenlinna; Captured Soviet T-26 tanks in Finnish Army Service; Captured Soviet T-50 tank in Finnish Army Service; The Finnish Navy Vetehinen-class 'Vesikko' small coastal U-boat submarine on the island of Soumenlinna

'There lies an impressive, beached German-designed U-boat that was built in 1933'

Maxim machine guns.

Two armoured wagons behind the train and the front gun wagon with curved armour were captured from the Red Guards during the Finnish Civil War in 1918, while the front gun wagon came from the Russian armoured train Partisan that was captured at Säiniö, south of Vyborg, on April 24, 1918.

The wagons displayed the short-armed, black with a white border, swastika. The Finnish Military began using the ancient, good luck hakaristi (swastika) symbol as an official national emblem in 1918. This was a few years before the German Nazi party formally adopted it in 1920.

As you drive through the museum gates, many of the tanks displayed in front of the buildings have Finnish military swastika emblems painted on their sides. What is striking is the number of Soviet-built tanks displaying the symbol. To understand this, we need to look at what happened in Finland during World War Two. The country was involved in three conflicts between November 1939 and April 1945. These were The Winter War of November 30, 1939, to March 13, 1940, The Continuation War of June 25, 1941, to September 19,

1944, and the Lapland War of September 15 to April 27, 1945.

During the Winter War, the Soviet Union invaded Finland to annex the country. The Finnish Army fought the Soviets to a standstill, but due to a fear of more Red Army resources being directed towards this battlefield in the early summer, a peace

treaty was signed that gave away parts of the country to the Soviets.

On June 22, 1941, Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, began. The Soviets bombed Finnish cities, an excuse the Finns needed to declare war on the Soviet Union, and they went on the offensive to try and reclaim the land lost





Captured Soviet T-28 tank in Finnish Army Service

in the Winter War.

Finland entered a co-belligerent pact with Germany and allowed German troops to be stationed in the country. They also received military aid including German-built tanks. The Continuation War peace treaty was eventually signed on September 19, 1944, but one of the conditions was that Finland must expel German troops from its territory. This resulted in the Lapland War as their previous allies resisted being forced into northern Norway.

There are so many interesting tanks to view and explore at the Parola Armour Museum. They are now undercover in newly built tank shelters, but there is not enough space in this article to cover them all. There were several highlights and the ability to examine a row of captured T-26 tanks was fascinating as they ranged from a Vickers built T-26 to the licensed Soviet-built T-26A to the T-26E.

It was noticeable that the British-built tank was constructed to a higher standard of workmanship. The build quality and simplifying of features to enable more tanks to be built quickly, and at a lower cost, was easy to spot and compare.

The museum is home to two captured Soviet KV-1 tanks parked side by side. One is a rare KV-1E with additional appliqué armour. Nearby is the huge Soviet T-28 multi-turreted medium tank armed with a 76mm KT-28 (L/16) gun in the main turret and 7.62mm DT machine guns in the hull deck turrets.

All three of these tanks saw service in the Finnish Army. One of my main reasons for going to the Parola Armour Museum was to see the only surviving example of the Finnish Army BT-42 assault gun, which was built on a captured Soviet BT-7 tank hull.

The BT-42 was powered by an M-17T 12-cylinder water-cooled petrol engine that produced 500hp. The BT-7 hull it was built on had a top road speed with tracks fitted of 52km/h (32mph). It could also just use its road wheels without tracks. That increased its top speed to 72km/h (45mph), but the extra weight of the larger turret and gun as fitted on the BT-42 version would have reduced these speeds.

It had an operational range of around 250km (155 miles) and had a crew of three. The hull armour ranged from 6mm to 20mm in thickness. The new turret had

16mm thick armour on the front and sides. Only 18 vehicles were produced between 1942 and 1943. They were issued to the 3 Panssaritykkipataljoona (3rd Tank Battalion) which comprised of three companies each equipped with six BT-42 assault guns.

They first saw action on June 17 and 18, 1944, and later June 20, 1944, at the battle of Viipuri. The museum also has several Stug III assault guns on display. In 1943 Germany supplied the Finnish Defence Force with 30 Sturmgeschütz III Ausführung G with a long barrel, high velocity 75mm Stu.K. 40 L/48 main gun. A further 29 were sent in 1944. After the war, the StuG IIIs were the main combat vehicles of the Finnish Army until the early 1960s. These StuG IIIs were given the nickname 'Sturmi'. Finland rearmed in the 1960s by purchasing British Comet tanks armed with the high velocity 77mm gun and Charioteer tanks armed with a QF 20-pdr (84mm) gun. The Comet tanks were used to train new tank crews while the Charioteer



The armoured train near the entrance to the Parola Armour Museum

tanks were deployed near the Soviet border in defensive positions. The army is now equipped with 200 Leopard 2 tanks.

On the drive back to Helsinki, it is worth making another stop at the impressive Museo Militaria (Military Museum) – the Artillery, Engineer and Signals Museum of Finland. It is located only two junctions south of Parola on the E12 motorway and sits next to the imposing 13th Century Häme Castle (Hämeen Linna) on the banks of the Vanajavesi river.

The castle museum is also worth a visit, especially if you are travelling with family members or friends who are not as interested in World War Two military history. It has many exhibits from the days of knights in armour. The Museo Militaria is housed in the military barracks and parade ground to the north of the castle. I was expecting just to see a collection of artillery and anti-tank guns but had another pleasant surprise to find a T-26 light tank and a T-20 artillery tractor on display. The museum's parade ground has row upon row of towed field howitzers and fortification guns ranging from 1870 to the 1980s cold



British-built Comet tank in Finnish Army Service

war rocket battlefield weapon systems.

The more 'delicate' and rare guns are on display inside the Artillery Hall. The large selection of German and Soviet World War Two guns enables you to study the weapons that were later converted for armoured fighting vehicle use, mounted in a tank turret or self-propelled gun superstructure. Inside the main building, spread over three floors is a comprehensive exhibition that explores the military history of Finland from the Middle Ages, when the country was part of Sweden, to modern times. Of particular interest are the sections that cover the Winter War, the Continuation War, and the Lapland War.

There are still more interesting military exhibits in Helsinki at the military museum (Sotamuseon) on the Suomenlinna island fortress in the harbour. It is the biggest sea fortress in the world, founded in 1748 and built on five islands. You can board a water bus or ferry from the market square dockside to the island. On the journey,



visitors are treated to spectacular views of Helsinki from the sea.

The exhibits are split into three locations. Two are inside buildings: the Sotamuseon Maneesi building houses the army display, including more tanks while the Tykistömaneesi building contains the



Captured Soviet T-60 tank

artillery collection. The third location is outside near the entrance to the island's inland dock. There lies an impressive, beached German designed U-boat that was built in 1933.

It is one of the few surviving submarines that fought in World War Two. The Finnish Navy called this Vetehinen-class submarine 'Vesikko'. It is considered a prototype for the German Navy IIA class U-boat. After World War One, under the conditions of the Versailles Peace Treaty, Germany was not allowed to rearm. Authorities ignored this and through various means continued to develop new weapons. In 1922, to evade the peace treaty conditions, the German firm Ingenieurskantoor voor Scheepsbouw den Haag set up business in Holland. Here German engineers designed U-boats and supervised their construction.

The Vetehinen-class was a 250-ton small coastal submarine launched on May 10, 1933, with Germany ordering six to be built for the navy, but this time at the shipyard in Kiel. As a trading partner with

Germany, Finland built three Vetehinen-class submarines for its own navy and the U-boat 'Vesikko', now on display at the museum, was one of five submarines to eventually serve in the Finnish Navy. The word 'Vesikko' is the Finnish name for the European mink, a small predator now near extinction and already extinct in Finland.

The submarine saw action in World War Two, but according to the armistice of September 19, 1944, with the Soviet Union, Finnish Navy submarines were ordered back to their bases. Finland declared war on Germany, but none of the submarines was used against their old ally. In December 1944, Vesikko made its last voyage as a warship, and in January 1945 the Allied supervisory commission ordered Finnish submarines to be disarmed. Vesikko was beached in 1959 as part of the museum exhibit.

Once travel is allowed again, I would recommend visiting Finland and doing this trip. And while in the country, stop at a restaurant where you can order reindeer. Just do not tell your kids you ate Rudolph! ◀

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The only surviving example of the Finnish Army BT-42 tank built on captured Soviet BT-7 tank hulls