

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE FINNISH CIVIL WAR IN FINLAND'S TRANSITION FROM GRAND DUCHY TO INDEPENDENT STATE

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Abstract: The Finnish Civil War took place from January 27th to May 15th, 1918. While the war only lasted less than four months, it left Finland and its people deeply divided. This paper explores the lasting effects of the Finnish Civil War and examines how the conflict affected Finland during its transition from Grand Duchy to an independent state.

By the early twentieth century, politics in Finland had become bitterly violent between socialists and the conservative bourgeoisie. The ever widening gap between conservative Whites and socialist Reds came to a head in January of 1918 (Klinge, 1991, pp. 96-8). This paper will explore the lasting effects of the Finnish Civil War and will examine how the conflict affected Finland during its transition from Grand Duchy to an independent state. More specifically, I will discuss German influence brought on by the Finnish Jäger Battalion and the German Baltic Sea Division, Finland's domestic political situation following the war, and both the emergence of "White" Finland and the persecution of "Red" Finns.

Matti Klinge suggests "the Russian Revolution of March 1917 restored Finland to a position of autonomy", but the country was still not completely independent from the Russian state (Klinge, 1992, p. 97). Those in favour of separating from Russia were most often socialist or leftist and supported the Social Democratic Party of Finland – who aimed to create a more fair and progressive society (Klinge, 1992, pp. 96-8). However, the events of the October Revolution and the collapse of the Russian Empire encouraged the two camps to rethink their views on Finland's

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autonomy. The socialists soon became supporters of Finland, remaining linked with the new Soviet Russia once the old Russian Empire had failed against communist forces. At the same time, the conservative bourgeoisie saw themselves as defenders of Finnish independence against communism (Klinge, 1992, pp. 96-8). In January of 1918, Red socialist and White conservative militias were fully formed and by the end of the month war had broken out in three separate parts of the country (Jussila, Hentilä & Nevakivi, 1999, pp. 107-8). In May of the same year, the period of civil war was over in Finland with the Whites claiming a decisive win against the Reds. While the war may have ended, the country still had to deal with the aftermath of a civil war and the consequences of a deeply divided and newly independent nation-state (Jussila et al., 1999, pp. 119-20).

The Finnish Civil War was not only a domestic conflict. It drew the interest of some of Europe's great powers including Germany, who hoped to influence the newly independent but deeply divided Finland (Jussila et al., 1999). At the outbreak of the First World War, the Germans had already begun training a group of approximately two thousand Finnish volunteers who would come to be known as the Jääkärit in Finland or the Finnish Jäger Battalion in Germany (Lavery, 2006, pp. 86-7). Each of these men received over a year of professional military training in Germany and then front-line experience fighting Russian forces during the First World War (Jussila et al., 1999, p. 110). This Jäger Battalion was used as a ploy by the Germans to encourage Finnish rebellion against the Russians and draw Finland closer to Germany (Klinge, 1992, p. 100). When civil war broke out in Finland, many of these Jägers returned to serve as lieutenants and instructors in the White Army. However, many Jägers decided to remain in Germany – they were themselves working class or had ties to the Red movement and did not want to fight against their own people (Klinge, 1992, p. 100).

Finland's ties to Germany were strengthened thanks to Pehr Evind Svinhufvud af Qvalstad, the Head of State of 1917-1918's independent Finland. Svinhufvud believed that strong German military intervention would be the best way to expel remaining Russian forces leftover from previous Russian rule and ensure that Finland would

remain protected and independent from Soviet Russia. The Svinhufvud Government's negotiations with Germany were especially controversial as these negotiations brought the newly independent Finland into the German sphere at the end of the First World War; this, in turn, allowed German troops to slaughter Finnish Reds in their own country (Kirby, 2011, p. 161). Following Svinhufvud's negotiations with Germany, eleven thousand German troops including the German Baltic Sea Division (under General Rüdiger von der Goltz) arrived in Finland (Jussila et al., 1999, p. 119). These German troops landed on Finnish soil in the cities of Hanko and Loviisa in April of 1918 and advanced towards Helsinki. There they met up with Finland's White Army, who fought under General Carl Gustav Emil Mannerheim (Lavery, 2006, pp. 86-7). With the commencement of the war in May of 1918, German leaders were more hopeful than ever that Finland would firmly tie itself to Germany in order to remain independent and protect itself against Soviet Russia (Klinge, 1992, p. 100). This effort to bring Finland and Germany closer together could be seen in the election of Friedrich Karl of Hessen (the German Prince) as King of Finland. While Prince Friedrich would never actually sit on the Finnish throne as a result of Germany's loss of the Great War in November of 1918, this decision demonstrated the influence that Germany had on Finland – which continued into the Second World War (Klinge, 1992). Involvement with Germany hindered Finland's struggle for both independence and neutrality in international affairs as it allied the country with yet another European great power (Lavery, 2006, p. 87). In many ways, as a small nation, Finland was forced to choose between an alliance with either Germany or Russia in an attempt to remain an independent nation (Kirby, 2011, p. 117-8).

With the end of the civil war came significant changes in Finland's domestic policies and politics. While Svinhufvud had a decidedly German-oriented view of an independent Finland, General Mannerheim believed that Finland should look farther West to rebuild their state and disapproved of any further involvement of Germany in Finnish political or international affairs. In December of 1918, Mannerheim succeeded Svinhufvud as independent Finland's Head of State and created a government that was less pro-German than its predecessor (Kirby, 2011,

p. 163). A Finnish Constitution was created in July of 1919 which gave the President a majority of the power, previously held by the Head of State. Also, a multi-party system was put in place which unfortunately led to short-lived and unstable governments, especially during the 1920s (Klinge, 1992, pp. 100-1).

A number of newly developed political parties were created following the civil war including The National Coalition Party which was conservative in nature. In contrast, The Progress Party was more liberal and worked to bring both Whites and Reds together following the Civil War. The Finnish Civil War had split the labour movement into two separate parties with their own hopes and plans for independent Finland. One of these parties was The Finnish Communist Party which was outlawed in Finland following the war, and was run out of Moscow by exiled Finnish Reds who hoped to spark a second revolution in Finland. The second was The Finnish Social Democrats, a moderate labour party under Väinö Tanner, who were not allowed to publish papers in post-war Finland and were only permitted to run in local elections starting in 1918-1919. The Social Democrats won over a third of the vote in their first local elections and became the leading political party following the civil war and Finland's first federal election. This impressive win by the Social Democrats went to show that even though the White conservatives had won the civil war, the people of Finland did not see themselves as solely conservative. The results of Finland's first federal election proved that Finland was a country with a strong socialist background, even after a bloody civil war (Jussila et al., 1999, pp. 126-8).

While politics and policies were changing as Finland evolved as an independent state, the Red-White divide was ever present and still very real within the country. Though the Whites had emerged as the victors and the 'saviors' of independent Finland, the Whites themselves were soon divided over the direction that Finnish independence should take. Some White Finns favoured a German-oriented Finland with Jäger officers holding high positions of authority within the country while others saw Finland's future under Mannerheim's direction with his imperial Russian military background and Swedish origins. These divisions amongst the victorious

Whites were made worse by the continuing divide between Reds and Whites which continued for decades after the civil war (Kirby, 2011, pp. 162-3). With the Whites' win over the Red Guard in the spring of 1918, Red leaders fled to their exile in Soviet Russia along with about five thousand Finnish Reds. On May 16th of the same year, General Mannerheim and the Whites staged their victory parade in the streets of Helsinki, claiming the day as a memorial of Finland's liberation and independence (Jussila et al., 1999, p. 119-20). Historians Jussila, Hentilä and Nevakivi suggest that the end of the civil war created two contradicting views of history within the minds of the Finnish people: where the Whites saw the war as a form of independence, the Reds saw the war as a revolution. Jussila et al. further suggest, "from here it was an easy step for the victors to maintain that, right from the onset, the values of the labour movement had been criminal and even treasonable" (Jussila et al., 1999, p. 119-20).

At the war's end, almost seven thousand people had been killed in the fighting, with one thousand civilians having died and about two thousand men declared missing in action. Jussila et al. (1999) suggest that the exact number of casualties of the Finnish Civil War is uncertain, as many people were captured and shot with little record of the events. As the war progressed, methods on both sides of the conflict became more brutal. This brutality was directed both at troops and civilians (1999, pp. 111-2). At the end of April, after the final battle of Tampere, twenty-eight thousand Reds who had fled to the city of Lahti were gathered up by White forces. All were sent to prisoner camps outside the city, where over five hundred Red prisoners were shot. By the end of the war, over eighty thousand Reds were interned in prison camps across Finland with approximately twelve thousand prisoners dying from poor living conditions, malnutrition and disease within the camps. By the time White leadership began to deal with the Red prisoners, 67, 788 prisoners had been sentenced. At the close of 1918, over six thousand Reds still remained interned in Finnish prison camps. The creation of prisoner camps and the internment of Reds at the end of the Finnish War of 1918 may have created feelings that were more bitter than the war itself for the people of Finland. Many people felt that their loved ones suffered for long periods of time in these camps and there was

very little anyone could do to help those imprisoned, especially since the prisoners were not usually permitted packages from their families. While the war had ended, memories of the conflict and the national divide were kept fresh in the people's minds with the internment of men, women, and children belonging to or associated with the Red Guard (Jussila et al., 1999, pp. 111-2).

While all civil wars are violent and destructive, the Finnish Civil War was a particularly bloody conflict. The civil war in Finland lasted a short period of time but thousands of people were killed over the course of a few months, including those civilians murdered in both the Red and White terror campaigns. Over thirteen thousand Red prisoners died in prison camps, most often from disease and hunger. Some suffered miserably in these camps for years after the civil war had ended (Lavery, 2006, p. 87). In this way, it was inevitable that the civil war would affect Finland during its time of transition from Grand Duchy to independent state. The Red-White conflict in Finland also garnered attention from other European powers including Germany, who hoped to tie itself to Finland while the country was in a vulnerable position. While certain Finnish political leaders hoped to make alliances farther west, Finland would come close to involving itself in the Great War as a result of the Svinhufvud Government's negotiation with Germany as well as German military intervention at the end of Finland's Red-White conflict (Nevakivi, 1989, pp. 130-1). The years following the civil war also brought political change and reconstruction to Finland with the creation of the Finnish Constitution, a multi-party system and a President's position that was given more power than ever before (Klinge, 1992, pp. 102-3). While the war ended in May of 1918, the conflict left Finland deeply divided with many Red supporters or socialists suffering persecution, exile, restrictions and internment in prisoner of war camps for years after the White victory (Jussila et al., 1999, pp. 111-2).

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