

DOI 10.18522/2500-3224-2021-3-58-74

УДК 94 (470)



# ФИНЛЯНДИЯ И ПАМЯТЬ О ВОЙНЕ

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**Аннотация.** XX век оказался турбулентным периодом в истории как России, так и Финляндии. В начале столетия Финляндия была Великим княжеством в составе Российской империи. К концу столетия, Финляндия обрела независимость, вела две полномасштабные войны против страны, частью которой она когда-то была, и стала свидетелем превращения России в Советский Союз и обратно. Восприятие этой общей истории все еще имеет тенденцию быть противоречивым среди современных финнов и россиян. Наследие преимущественно антагонистических исторических отношений двух стран является предметом ряда дискуссий и источником взаимных обид.

В этой статье предпринята попытка подытожить болезненные исторические проблемы недавнего финско-российского прошлого. Будучи профессиональным историком, автор постарался выразить точку зрения финнов на эту проблему. История и России, и Финляндии переплетены друг с другом, и единственный способ залечить раны, нанесенные прошлым, — это противостоять прошлому во всей его противоречивости и двусмысленности.

**Ключевые слова:** Вторая мировая война, Финляндия, Советский Союз, финско-советские войны, память.

Цитирование: Сильвеннойнен У. Финляндия и память о войне // Новое прошлое / The New Past. 2021. № 3. С. 58–74. DOI 10.18522/2500-3224-2021-3-58-74 / Silvennoinen O. Finland and the Memory of War, in *Novoe Proshloe / The New Past*. 2021. No 3. Pp. 58–74. DOI 10.18522/2500-3224-2021-3-58-74.

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# FINLAND AND THE MEMORY OF WAR

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**Abstract.** The 20<sup>th</sup> century proved to be a tumultuous period in the history of both Russia and Finland. Finland began the century as a grand duchy of the Russian empire, but by the time it was over Finland had gained its independence, fought two full-scale wars against its former mother country, and seen it revert from Russia into the Soviet Union and back again. Perceptions of this troubled, shared history still tend to be contradictory among modern Finns and Russians. The legacy of the mainly antagonistic historical relationship seems to be a number of open questions and sources of bitterness.

In this article I will summarize the sensitive historical issues in the Finnish-Russian recent past. As a professional historian I will sketch out the way things looked like in Finnish eyes. Histories of both Russia and Finland are entangled to each other, and the only way to heal the wounds dealt by the past is to confront the past – in all its contradiction and ambiguity.

**Keywords:** Second World War, Finland, Soviet Union, Finnish-Soviet wars, memory.

*Linguistical note: as a rule, place names are given in their Finnish form, if applicable. Exceptions to this are names of major geographical features which have become established in international usage: St. Petersburg (in Finnish: Pietari), Petrozavodsk (Petroskoi), Ladoga (Laatokka), Onega (Ääninen) and Svir (Syväri). Alternative Russian or Finnish forms for place-names are given in brackets.*

*Author refers to the Finnish-Soviet border between 1920–1940, as defined in the peace of Dorpat (Tartu) between Finland and Soviet Russia, as the 1920 border. 1940 border refers to the Finnish-Soviet border as defined in the peace of Moscow 1940, which concluded the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939–1940 (the Winter War).*

I remember my grandparents, my father's mother and father, as voices of the European 20<sup>th</sup> century – upheaval and war. Grandmother had lived her childhood and youth in a now-vanished world of the pre-revolution cultural sphere around the lake Ladoga. Born in 1903, she was raised as an adopted child by a childless Finnish couple in St. Petersburg. Like many of the city's sizable Finnish population, her adopted parents were railroad workers, and lived close to the Finland Station, in Tchugunnaya Street behind the Arsenal works. On weekdays, she would twice a day walk over the Liteinyi Bridge on her way to the Finnish School and back home. Her stories from that bustling city, usually involving other members of the Finnish community, were full of wonder, drama, humour and a sense of big-city worldliness.

The revolution changed all that. Grandmother's vivid reminiscences of street violence, Red Guards night-time house searches, and frightful memories of hunger and famine blended in my child's mind into a hotchpotch of incomprehensible horrors. I can still remember the tone of angry contempt in her voice when she spat out the word "Cheka", and told me how they ransacked train passengers returning to city from the countryside, to find and confiscate any black market foodstuffs. One always had to eat everything put on the plate. One could never be certain if there was to be any next meal.

## WAR AND REMEMBRANCE

And then there was the war, the Second World War. In my child's mind, the war was a towering experience eclipsing everything else in the grandparents' already tumultuous 20<sup>th</sup> century. For a child it was something impossible to fully grasp, something bad, which had resulted in the bombing of cities and the loss of homes and possessions. Grandfather and all his brothers had been in the war; supposedly shot at other people – Russians – perhaps killed someone. I would not know, grandfather never spoke to me of his experiences. One of the brothers had died there – grandmother would say he had fallen. I was puzzled by her choice of a verb.

The war and its consequences were a constant presence in their conversation. Most importantly, my grandparents among hundreds of thousands of fellow Finns lost their homes because of war. That left in them an ever-present longing for a land that was rapidly

turning into a legend – Finnish Karelia. It was a land twice lost to the Soviet Union: first in the peace of Moscow in 1940 and again in the 1944 truce agreement and subsequent Paris peace treaty of 1947, and now hopelessly out of reach, behind the new Finnish-Soviet border. It was a land I had never visited, but which I sort of knew, as the grandparents wouldn't cease telling me about it.

The modern histories of Finland and Russia are hopelessly entangled to each other. This becomes immediately obvious when one looks at things from the Finnish side. The main theme of Finland's modern history, as written by the contemporaries, became the slow unravelling of Finland's relationship to Russia from 1809 to 1917. The result was a story of a peaceful, almost somnolent grand duchy ultimately aroused in rebellion against its Russian sovereigns, who had gradually turned from benevolent masters into tyrants.

The resulting struggle was depicted as a necessary, vital school of a nation on its way to freedom and independence, as well as a lesson to never again allow oneself to become a subject of any empire, be it Swedish or Russian. A Finnish national state was the only possible mode of existence for a dignified, self-conscious and self-aware nation. In this narrative framework, Russia was the vital antagonist without which the story would have been incomplete.

Then, the rise into power of Lenin's doctrinaire, intolerant and authoritarian regime served only to aggravate the already familiar resentments towards Russia and the Russians stemming from Finnish nationalist demagoguery. Ultimately, the ascent of Stalin's paranoidly suspicious, murderous autocracy seemed to confirm every one of these negative images. Then, the Finnish narrative of a national awakening was crowned by the experience in the Second World War, where Finland had fought, defended and reasserted its independence from ever-untrustworthy Russia, now turned the Soviet Union.

The Russo-Finnish historical entanglement may appear less obvious if one looks at things from the Russian side. After all, the Finns had been just one among many in the multitude of imperial subject peoples, and Finland a strategically less-relevant periphery on the north-western fringes of the pre-revolutionary Russian world. Yet, at least for the north-western parts of Russia, the proximity of Finnish territory to St. Petersburg gave it particular strategic urgency. North-western Russia, Russian Karelia and St. Petersburg/Leningrad were equally defined by proximity to Finland and the Finns as they were by Russianism.

Finland had been a temporary refuge for both Lenin and Stalin before the revolution, as well as a support area for British intervention forces and White generals like Nikolai Yudenich and his North-western Army in the Russian civil war. The Bolshevik government had in vain tried to intervene in the Finnish civil war of 1918, sending troops to aid the Finnish Red Guards in their futile struggle against the Finnish Whites. In 1919, a planned Finnish White intervention in the Russian civil war might well have led to the capture of St. Petersburg and the collapse of Lenin's government. In the interwar years, Finland, uncomfortably close to Leningrad, had been a haven for White Russian secret agents and

counterrevolutionary terrorists. Thus, throughout the interwar period, the Soviet leaders harboured doubts that Finnish territory in the future could be a staging ground for hostile designs against Leningrad and the Soviet Union. These concerns became acute in the final years preceding the outbreak of the Second World War [Тепора, 2015, p. 257–258; Mainio, 2015, *passim*.].

For grandmother and the remaining St. Petersburg Finns, the way for a return to Finland and away from the hardship and malnourishment finally opened after Finland and Soviet Russia signed the peace treaty of Dorpat (Tartu) in 1920. Grandmothers adopted family settled into Sortavala (Sordavala) on the western shore of Ladoga. Around that time she met grandfather, a native to Finnish Karelia. There they settled down, probably expecting a quiet, stable life. Like virtually everyone else of their generation, whether in Finland or in the Soviet Union, they were to be rudely awakened.

#### A SEPARATE WAR – FINLAND AND HITLER'S GERMANY

On March 1st, 1945, the prime minister of Finland and future president J. K. Paasikivi confided to his diary:

We Finns are record holders in inept foreign policy. We have manoeuvred our ship of state from the year 1939 (1938) from one catastrophe to another. We used to be 'plaintiffs' in the eyes of the whole world, and so should we still be, but instead we are 'defendants' in front of the whole world. [Blomstedt, Klinge, 1985, p. 113]

Paasikivi was referring to one thing only: the sequence of events that had turned Finland first from an admired and respected victim of unprovoked Soviet aggression to an ally of Nazi Germany. In that historical development, Finland came to fight three wars within the larger context of the Second World War in Europe, 1939–1940, 1941–1944 and 1944–1945. The result was that Finland was among the losers of the world war, and squarely under the influence of the Soviet Union. An Allied Control Commission, headed by Stalin's very heir apparent, Andrei Zhdanov, and residing in a hotel in central Helsinki, undercut at each turn its independence.

In Paasikivi's eyes, the first fateful turn of events had happened already in 1938, when Stalin had opened an underhand, unofficial negotiating channel to the Finnish government to talk very serious business. His apparent aim was to make the Finns concede a number of territorial adjustments designed to pre-empt a military strike towards Leningrad utilizing Finnish territory. That, at least, was the pretext.

The negotiations went nowhere, as the Finnish side was not willing to compromise Finland's security by giving up the defence system built on the Karelian Isthmus. In late August 1939, Stalin finally secured his freedom of action by concluding an agreement with Hitler. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact divided Eastern Europe between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union into respective spheres of influence.

After that, no concessions by the Finnish government probably could have averted war. On the early hours of November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1939, the Red Army poured over the Finnish border. As if to confirm the Finnish suspicions towards Stalin's ultimate motives, a pro-Soviet puppet government of Finland, headed by the Finnish communist-in-exile O. W. Kuusinen, was immediately set up. The Finns knew now they were fighting for their very independence, perhaps their very existence as a people.

This was the beginning to a period of different conflicts, which in everyday Finnish parlance are often referred to as just "the wars", in plural. The first of them was the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939–1940, usually in Finland called the Winter War. The Finns fought the Red Army to a standstill, but in the growing military pressure had to sue for peace in March 1940.

The most important thing, Finland's independence, was secured, as the Soviets quietly abandoned Kuusinen's government. But according to the peace terms Finland had to cede most of Finnish Karelia – the Karelian Isthmus between the Gulf of Finland and the lake Ladoga, and the area north of the lake to the Soviet Union. The ceded territory included the second-largest city of Finland, Viipuri (Vyborg), as well as towns like Sortavala and Käkisalmi (Kexholm). Some 400 000 refugees flowed into the part of Finland and had to be hastily resettled. Most of them lost almost all of their possessions, as they had to leave in all haste and transports for movable property were not available. Also Sortavala had been bombed and devastated. Upon the conclusion of hostilities, the town was hastily evacuated. Grandmother and grandfather lost their home and most of their furniture [Hämynen, 2020, p. 260–261].

What smarted most was that the Soviet attack was seen to have been utterly unjustified, a ferocious assault upon a peaceful and much smaller neighbour. The grievous injustice could not even buy peace, as Finland now seemed only more vulnerable to further Soviet aggression. It was well known in Helsinki that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact still consigned Finland to the Soviet sphere of influence. Unbeknownst to the Finns at that time, upon his visit to Berlin in November 1940, Molotov demanded from Hitler an assurance that the Soviet Union would be free to proceed with Finland as it saw fit. Therefore, as Germany from spring 1940 onwards started to put forth feelers to the Finns, indicating that its stance towards the Soviet Union might soon change, the Finnish leadership was willing to listen. Gradually, the Barbarossa-plan was revealed to the Finns. A real chance to end the Soviet threat, reclaim Finnish Karelia – and who knows what more – beckoned [Musial, 2008, p. 434].

The second conflict Finland was to fight was the Finnish-Soviet War of 1941–1944. The conflict is in Finland usually called the Continuation War, implying that the new war was nothing more than a continuation to the war of 1939–1940 – a renewed struggle for Finland's territorial integrity and liberty. Continuation War nevertheless was a contemporary term. The Finnish government had, since late 1941, explained to anyone who might care to listen that Finland was fighting its own war – alongside Germany perhaps, but independent of German war aims and methods. As the war progressed and the prospect

of a German victory receded, it became more and more politically expedient to insist that Finland was fighting a separate war. The implication was that in the eventual peace talks Finland should not be treated as a German ally, even less a German satellite [Vilkuna, 1962, p. 75, 79].

The third and final conflict was to be the Finnish-German War of 1944–1945, usually in Finland called the Lapland War. It was fought in northern Finland against the German troops slowly retreating towards their bases in still-occupied Norway. Begun to answer Soviet post-armistice demands for more vigorous measures against German troops still on Finnish territory, the war soon turned real enough, with the German Army devastating Finnish Lapland as it went.

By late April 1945, the last German soldiers left Finnish soil, and the post-war era could begin. With it came an absolute necessity to create a manageable narrative of the experience the nation had just seen through. In both domestic and foreign political terms, it was imperative to underscore even more forcefully the supposedly independent nature of Finland's war. The Finnish communists returned from the underground to daily politics and were eager to discredit the wartime decision-makers with claims of their close contacts to Hitler and his regime.

Another unknowable was the Soviet Union. It might back the communists in their efforts to use accusations of Nazi sympathies as a tool to effect far-reaching purges within the administrative corps and traditional elites, perhaps even try to turn Finland into a people's democracy. It was wiser to adopt a narrowly national viewpoint on the recent past, vigorously deny any implications of active participation in the Nazi project, and settle down, as best one could, to an uneasy post-war era where the Soviet Union would be a factor in every political calculation [Meinander, 2009, p. 9–10].

Personal memories and historical interpretations often had to be fitted into the official policy line: that Finland pursued a relationship based on friendship and mutual trust towards the Soviet Union. That Finland had no claims to territories outside its borders. That Finland would participate in no military alliance directed against the Soviet Union, its interests and allies. The awkward truth was that all this represented a full about-face to the years 1939–1944, when Finland had first defended itself from Soviet aggression, and then allied itself with Germany to seek the return of at least the territories lost, perhaps even the dismemberment of the Soviet Union.

Thus Paasikivi would lament Finland's lost moral ascendancy, hard-won in the Winter War, then frivolously wasted through an ill-judged association with Hitler's Germany. However justified Finnish decisions might have appeared to contemporary eyes, all the legitimacy seemed to have been lost by the fateful alliance with Hitler. All of these conflicts, and the conflicting memories resulting from them would leave palpable traces in the modern Finnish consciousness and none so much as the deeply contradictory experience on 1941–1944.

## AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER – WAR AND POPULAR IMAGINATION

The personal experiences and memories of those who lived through the war years are one thing. For the formation of a history culture incorporating also those without direct connection to the events, popular culture forms an important arena of remembrance. Popular culture can serve as a forum through which also the most difficult aspects of the war can be dealt with, just as it can serve as a platform to the creation and distribution of false memories and distorting or misleading narratives. In Finland, all these strands came together in one work of literature, which stands above others in respect to the popular imagination of Finland's war. The work is Väinö Linna's novel *Tuntematon sotilas* (The Unknown Soldier).

First published in 1954, the book almost immediately became the definitive Finnish novel about the war, written from the viewpoint of ordinary infantry soldiers on the front. It sold in the tens of thousands, a lot for a nation of some 3,5 million souls at the time. The novelist Linna was himself a war veteran, and had liberally exploited his own and his comrades' experiences to bring his characters into life and give his story a particularly effective sense of realism.

While among the war generation there were also those who complained that Linna gave a too base and unidealistic description of the war and the Finnish soldiers, among the later generations of readers the novel has become something of a definitive document of what war was like. Quickly, in 1955, Edvin Laine, one of the foremost Finnish post-war directors, turned the novel into a full-length film. Ever since the year 2000, Finnish television has broadcasted the film on Independence Day – December 6<sup>th</sup>, the day in 1917 when the Finnish senate declared Finland's independence from Russia.

In its down-to-earth, everyman's account of the war the novel draws a distinct picture of what the war was about, and what it wasn't – the regular guys at the front don't speak much of politics, and when they do, it is in an ironical tone. The central theme of the novel is the loss of illusions. This is not just literary embellishment, as irony also elsewhere rose to a prominent choice of style when front soldiers described their experience in the great wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [Fussell, 1975, p. 7–8].

Reflecting reality, it is the experience of the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939–1940, the Winter War, which also in the novel serves as the great justifying cause for the next war. The vast majority of Finns saw the assault into the Soviet Union as justified. Opinions only started to differ after the Finnish Army in the fall of 1941 had reached the 1920 borders. Some soldiers flatly refused to cross the old border – they saw a war to retake what was theirs as fully justified, but refused to become conquerors of foreign land. The High Command had to publicly justify further advances into Soviet Karelia with appeals to reaching strategically advantageous front lines, from which it would be easy to keep the Red Army from threatening the Finnish homeland again. In Linna's novel the character Lahtinen, personifying the political left, says it upon crossing the 1920 border line: "And here ends our justice. I mean from here on we're on a robber's trail. So that you know" [Linna, 1954].



The popularity of the novel – and the film – has ensured its place as a shaping force for the historical consciousness regarding the war among modern Finns. For many, it could be the only source they would ever consult on the history of the wars. Thus, what the story does not say is equally important to the formation and content of popular images of the war as what it does say. Preposterously, the later preeminent status of Linna's novel as a travel guide on the recent past has obscured some features of wartime Finland from the popular awareness. Linna harboured a distinct antipathy towards propagandistic language, high-blown displays of patriotism, and grandiose dreams of conquest. All these he repeatedly makes his characters take down and ridicule. This approach tends to hide from the view of a modern reader that such attitudes certainly were present in contemporary thought.

One of the themes that did enjoy genuine popularity among the most nationalist-oriented Finnish audience was the idea that the war was an opportunity to realize even the most daring nationalist ideas. Salient among them was the idea of a Greater Finland, which had come into being with the emergence of Finnish nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its underlying logic was common with other nationalisms: that national identity was primarily tied to language, and speakers of a language formed a natural national entity. On top of that, linguistic and ethnological research made great strides during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It ultimately discarded the Altaic and Turanian theories linking the Finnish language with Turkic languages, and accurately assessed the position of Finnish as part of a larger Finno-Ugric language group [Manninen, 1980, p. 47–48].

When one glanced at a map, one could see that the Finno-Ugrians were a mighty tribe indeed. The linguistical relatives of modern Finns included such illustrious nations as the Hungarians, and closer to home it was easy to see the whole north-eastern Europe as a patchwork of Finno-Ugric settlement. What one casually thought of as Russia was actually the homeland of many nationalities. Close linguistic relatives to the Finns could be found from the Estonians, Karelians, Vepsians, Ingrians and Ingrian Finns – descendants of 17<sup>th</sup> century Finnish-speaking settlers in the area where St. Petersburg was later founded – and so on to the Urals and beyond.

Nationalisms everywhere tended to confuse linguistic relationships to genetic relationships, and to construct grandiose ideas of national homelands with borders set by nature itself. Thus, Finnish nationalism already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed an idea of a future Greater Finland to embrace all the major Finnic ethnicities. The key territory would be Karelia, both Finnish and Russian Karelia. It was there where the epic poems of the national epic Kalevala had been collected in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the region had thereafter assumed the role of a mythical, spiritual cradle of the Finnish language and nation. The creation of Greater Finland was the central myth and the central goal for Finnish inter-war nationalism. Never had its creation seemed more imminent than in 1941, when the German and Finnish advance into the Soviet Union appeared unstoppable [Tepora, 2015, p. 257–258].

## BELATED RECKONINGS – PRISONERS OF WAR, CONCENTRATION CAMPS AND THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD

Almost every aspect of Finland's war of which ordinary modern Finns are not well aware, or are poorly informed, is connected to the Finnish-Soviet war of 1941–1944. The main source for these eclipses of memory is the period of 1941–1942, when German victory over the Soviet Union appeared likely. The main mechanism, which later ensured that certain aspects of the war never made it into parts of mainstream narratives about the war, was Finland's post-war vulnerability to Soviet influence and pressure.

As the Finnish army in July 1941 began its attack over the 1940 Finnish-Soviet border, enormous vistas seemed to open before the advancing troops. The end of the Soviet Union was suddenly a realistic proposition, the realization of a Greater Finland just around the corner. One could – and indeed should – begin to plan the future: where would Finland's borders be drawn, who would have the right to inhabit the new homeland? The enemy already appeared defeated. The Red Army soldiers were surrendering in droves.

Throughout the Finnish-Soviet war of 1941–1944, the Finnish forces took some 65 000 Soviet soldiers as prisoners-of-war, the vast majority of them in 1941. As pre-war planning had anticipated around 24 000 prisoners, the existing Finnish facilities proved rapidly inadequate. Problems in housing, clothing and feeding the mass of prisoners soon manifested themselves. By late 1941 Finnish prisoner-of-war camps were already in the grip of a full-blown famine. The net result was a catastrophic mortality among the prisoners, particularly during the spring of 1942: diseases like typhus and dysentery ran rampant among the prisoners, who were already weakened by months of malnutrition or dire hunger, ill clad to resist the weather and the harsh conditions of forced labour [Silvennoinen, 2012, p. 367]<sup>1</sup>.

Overall, the mortality rate for Soviet prisoners-of-war in Finnish custody topped 30 percent. This is a very high figure even in the generally savage conditions of the Second World War. For comparison, Western Allied prisoners in Japanese camps – famous for their brutality – suffered a 27 percent mortality rate. The Finnish camps were almost as murderous to Soviet prisoners-of-war as the camps faced by Finnish prisoners-of-war in Soviet custody: estimates of the mortality among Finnish prisoners-of-war there range from 32 percent to 40 percent. These figures all pale in comparison with the mortality rate of German prisoners in Soviet hands or Soviet prisoners in German hands, a staggering 57 percent, already a result of a wilful policy to murder the prisoners through hunger and exposure. But overall, they are among the highest in the whole war [Silvennoinen, 2012, p. 393].

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<sup>1</sup> The Finnish authorities registered a total of 65 000 prisoners, but as registration only took place once a prisoner had been conveyed to the relative safety of the rear area, away from the combat zone, an estimation of the grand total has to include also prisoners who were killed when trying to surrender or before they reached registration points. Thus, the overall total of prisoners taken is probably closer to 70 000.

As the Finnish army crossed also the 1920 border in the summer 1941, it also found itself in the role of an occupying power in Soviet Karelia. By the end of 1941, the Finns had taken Petrozavodsk (Petroskoi) by the Onega, cut the White Sea canal in Povenets (Povenets), and reached the line of Svir, where the Finnish army was supposed to junction with the Germans advancing from the south. The Finnish occupation authority was early on confronted with a problem of what to do with the residual civilian population left by the Soviet authorities to the area. The solution was to sort them by nationality and by an assessed security risk: those of Finnic nationalities were generally left at large. Those of “unreliable” nationalities, meaning Russians and other non-Finnic Soviet nationalities, as well as those of politically suspect backgrounds, were confined to civilian internment camps to await further measures.

The occupation authority spoke of concentration camps for non-national population. To avoid domestic and international opprobrium, the camps were in 1943 renamed “transit camps” in order to avoid unwelcome associations with German concentration camps. However, it was understood from the beginning that the inmates would, after the successful conclusion of the war, be deported from the area. The Finnic population would remain and be incorporated into the new, expanded Finnish nation. It was therefore important to begin the process to turn the Karelians and Vepsians into proper Finns by educating and gradually converting them from the Russian Orthodox religion into Lutheran Christianity [Silvennoinen, 2012, p. 387–388].

At the peak of the camp system there were some 24 000 inmates, with a mortality rate of roughly 17 percent. While a similarly catastrophic situation as that among the prisoners-of-war did not develop, this is still a very high figure. It is similar to the estimated mortality among the civilians evacuated from Soviet Karelia by the Soviet authorities – however, these figures chiefly underscore the brutality faced by ordinary civilians in both Soviet and Finnish hands<sup>1</sup>.

These issues tend to be ones well known to professional historians, but not part of the popular understanding of Finland’s position in the war. Sources for the distortions of popular memory can be many. Such is the case particularly with the popular conceptions regarding Soviet prisoners-of-war in Finland. The catastrophic conditions in the closed prisoner-of-war camps were not generally known to the contemporary public. Instead, many Finns had contacts to Soviet prisoners through the prisoner-of-war administration’s practice of placing select prisoners into Finnish farms for much-needed labour. This would produce genuine memories that were easy to take as the full story of the prisoner-of-war’s lot in wartime Finland [Danielsbacka, 2013, p. 141–142].

This practice, while against the Geneva Convention, usually meant for the prisoners an improvement in the living conditions, as food supply and general treatment were normally much better on the farms. Human contact between the prisoners and their host families

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<sup>1</sup> “Suomalaisten keskitysleirit Itä-Karjalassa otettiin esiin Venäjällä – ‘Suomessa tämä ei ole ollut vaiettu asia’”, *Iltä-Sanomat*, 29.10.2019 (<https://www.is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000006289698.html>, accessed 26 April 2021).

sometimes led to genuine friendships, as well as to a number of pregnancies where the father was a Soviet prisoner-of-war. The ultimate tragedy of these human relationships came with the ending of the war, as the former prisoners were rounded up and repatriated to the Soviet Union without explanations, or time for goodbyes [Danielsbacka, 2013, p. 143–150].

The modern popular memory also seems to have trouble handling Finland's participation in the siege of Leningrad. Finland's role has largely been a non-issue, as if the Finnish army would not have been there. Despite the fact that the northern half of the encirclement of the city was throughout the war maintained by the Finnish Army, the onus for the siege and consequent sufferings of the civilian population of the city has been entirely on the Germans.

In the summer of 1941, Finnish troops advanced on the 1920 Finnish-Soviet border on the Karelian Isthmus. They ended their advance without attempting to attack the actual city of Leningrad: the front line solidified to a distance of some 20 kilometres from the city at its closest. After that, the Finnish Army would maintain the northern part of the encirclement until the summer of 1944 – a passive, but essential part of the investment of the city<sup>1</sup>.

There were sound military reasons why the Finnish Army remained passive. Any attempt to storm the city would have had to be conducted in concert with the Germans. They alone possessed the necessary heavy weaponry and equipment, demanded by combat in a built-up environment. Despite occasional German planning impulses to such an operation, no real attempt was ever made.

A further complication arose from the side of the Western Allies. The United States warned Finland already in 1941 not to undertake or participate in military operations which could decisively jeopardize Soviet Union's capability to survive. To add to the reality of this threat, Great Britain declared war on Finland in December 1941. While this was merely a symbolic gesture, it underscored a very real threat of completely alienating the Western powers of the Finnish cause. Such an outcome few were willing to realize, at least not before the war had decidedly turned in favour of Germany [Manninen, 1980, p. 277–278].

The Finns knew well, that no Finnish contribution could decide the issue, and were content to let Germany do the heavy lifting. Thus, no attempts to attack Leningrad directly or at cutting the Murmansk railroad in an effective spot were ever made. This was the basic rationale also for Finnish coldness toward German proposals for a renewed offensive against Sorokka (Belomorsk), Operation *Lachsfang*, in 1942. The Finnish commander-in-chief, Marshal Gustaf Mannerheim stated the capture of St. Petersburg – something the Finnish HQ by now was sure would not be forthcoming – as a necessary precondition before he would commit several Finnish divisions to the operation. It was a polite way

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<sup>1</sup> "Johtavat sotahistorian tuntijat: Suomen joukot olivat olennainen osa Leningradin saartorengasta", Yle.fi 9.8.2016 (<https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-9083286>, accessed 26 April 2021).

to decline a request from a mighty ally, a tactic the Finns learned to master in their later relations to the Soviets [Visuri, 2018, p. 219–222].

Mannerheim, seems to have come to doubt Germany's chances of success already by late 1941, when he could see that the Barbarossa-plan had essentially failed. In February 1942, Mannerheim told the Germans that Finland would not undertake any major offensives against the Soviet Union. In essence, it was up to the Germans to decide the war. Finland would husband its resources and avoid antagonizing the Western Allies further [Visuri, 2018, p. 26–27].

## EPILOGUE – CONFLICTING MEMORIES

Grandfather only once spoke to me of the war. I can still remember how he said to me on the fly: "You know, Oula, sometimes there was quite a smell under the canvas", referring to the tents the soldiers had been living in. That was all. I grew up wondering what it was that made the war – something to which my grandparents otherwise alluded to every time they spoke of the past – such a prominent but touchy issue.

The war, and the lost home in Finnish Karelia, both. A literature genre of books describing with words and reprinted photographs the different regions and places in Karelia grew up in post-war Finland. I can remember those books in grandparents' bookshelf – "Beautiful Karelia", "Sortavala of the Memories". Popular music echoed the nostalgia of generations of war refugees. "Do you Remember Monrepos?" asked a popular song, referring to a public park in Viipuri. "The Trees Are on Leaf Again on the Knolls of Karelia" reminded another, and made many an eye well with tears.

Yet there was an invisible but insurmountable threshold between private and public memories. If Karelia was something that privately was fervently, incessantly, achingly remembered, it could not be discussed in those terms publicly. The reason was, as so often in post-war Finland, the Soviet Union. Public expressions of homesickness and longing for a return would have been easily interpreted into unwillingness to accept the verdict of the last war, and the fact that Karelia was now irreversibly a part of the Soviet Union. There continued to be a large bloc of Finnish voters, most of them with roots in Karelia, who for decades hoped for a political settlement that would result in Soviet Union returning Finnish Karelia to Finland. For a politician to raise the issue publicly, however, would have constituted a political suicide, as such attempts would have been easy to brand anti-Soviet and revanchist sentiments.

A similar, publicly unutterable thing was the memory of Soviet partisan strikes into Finnish villages. The nature of partisan warfare on the Finnish-Soviet front was different than elsewhere: on the northern front, the partisan detachments would seek mostly unguarded, unarmed targets deep in Finland, such as civilian villages, attack and kill the inhabitants – the elderly, women and children alike. It had little to do with fighting the enemy, and everything to do with terrorizing the civilian population. The issue of the known 45 such

strikes and their 181 victims could not be publicly raised as long as the Soviet Union was in existence. The partisans were officially considered heroes in the Soviet Union, and to challenge that position would have been another hostile and anti-Soviet gesture [Erkkilä, 1999, p. 230–233; Martikainen, 2002].

Thus, the wars and all their accompanying contradictions left a long-lasting stamp on the Finnish collective consciousness. How one perceived the experience, how one came to remember it afterwards, and how one transmitted the memories on to the next generation were all different matters. Ultimately, there were as many experiences and memories of the wars as there had been individuals participating in them.

Everyone saw the experience through different eyes, everyone told a different tale afterwards; some remained mute of what they had seen, some could not help not to speak of it over and over again. Some came back profoundly shocked by the experience, bodily mutilated and psychologically scarred; some did not come back at all, leaving yawning holes the size of a man, a father or brother into their families. This, at least, was the one common truth, the shared experience understandable by all, irrespective on which side one had fought.

Post-war Finland has on the other hand been obsessed with the experience. Books about the war, fiction and non-fiction alike, continue to be among the most read year after year. Many topics that earlier had been difficult or impossible to touch particularly in academic research have risen to general awareness after the 1990's and the collapse of the Soviet Union. They include Finland's relationship to the Holocaust and Nazi policies of forced resettlement in the East, the image of the Finnish volunteers in the Waffen-SS, as well as the participation of Finland's national minorities – the Finnish Tatars, Jews and Roma – in the wars [Silvennoinen, 2010; Swanström, 2018].

The immediate post-war image of Finland as a helpless small state, which, like a log in a rapid, tossed by a powerful current, was just forced to fight all the wars came under increasingly weighty criticism during the post-war decades. It was the job of the historian Mauno Jokipii to finally put it to rest in the 1980's. In Jokipii's treatment, instead of having been a helpless victim of renewed Soviet aggression, Finland had in 1941 played its hand as best it could, and gone to war again to reclaim Karelia, possibly with interest. That argument, even if it has been much elaborated, still stands [Jokipii, 1987, p. 639–644].

Academic research has continued to add new knowledge, and dismiss the myths around the war-experience. As another sign of willingness to cast a critical eye on oneself, in 2004–2008 the Finnish National Archives in a systematic, government-funded research project compiled an online database recording some 19 000 Soviet prisoners-of-war and civilian internees who died in Finnish captivity. It provides a thoroughgoing dataset with which to assess any questions still arising from this part of the entangled Finnish-Russian history [Kujala, 2019]<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The database is freely accessible with a Russian interface in: [http://kronos.narc.fi/index\\_rus.html](http://kronos.narc.fi/index_rus.html).

The answers to these questions can still appear starkly contradictory, depending on whose historical narrative one follows. Further muddying the water is the fact that modern Russia has chosen to take some of these issues as political tools, distorting the real history to pursue current political aims. The clearest examples are the fabricated controversies around the mass graves in Sandarmokh and Krasnyi Bor in Karelia. The graves contain the remains of victims of Stalin's terror, but nowadays some have started to ascribe them to the Finnish occupying forces. History can be distorted in many ways, and the most effective method usually is to mix real facts with invented falsehoods [Kujala, 2019].

Both the Russian and Finnish public memories have tended to hide, downplay and obfuscate certain facets of the war-experience. In the post-war reality, where Finland was suddenly forced into an uncomfortably close good neighbourhood with the former enemy, the Soviet Union, it was clear that some features of the war-experience were better left to private gatherings, not to public examination. Most important of them was the fact that in 1941–1944, Finland had been a *de facto* German ally, and fought in support of the overall German war aim: the destruction and dismantling of the Soviet Union, once and for all.

Such high political embarrassments overshadowed a host of other, smaller causes for discomfort which disappeared from sight in post-war history culture. One of them was the fact that many in Finland had anticipated a German victory and the destruction of Leningrad, and would have happily annexed considerable chunks of Soviet territory – at the very least Soviet Karelia up to the White Sea, the lake Onega (Ääninen) and the river Svir (Sylväri). Perhaps also the Kola (Kuola) Peninsula, the part of Karelia beyond Onega.

A comparable distortion is the official memory culture of the Great Patriotic War, still nurtured in Russia. The very concept of the Great Patriotic War is of course wartime propaganda, designed to hide from view the prehistory of the war, and to recast the narrative stub in heroic, self-explanatory terms without the presence of nasty contradictions and questions of justification. In this narrative strand the Second World War for Russia begins suddenly in the morning of June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1941, as if the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact never happened, and the Red Army never invaded Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania.

One thing is certain, however: the perception of the Soviet-Finnish wars tended to be very different depending on what angle the one doing the remembering look at issues. Wars are complex affairs. While they often are considered to be ideal stages for self-sacrificing heroism, most, if not all heroes in the end do not withstand critical scrutiny. No war is a clean-cut affair, no cause entirely pure and noble, no arms blessed by whatever deities those wielding them may invoke. So it was with the Soviet-Finnish wars as well.

Most ordinary Finns went to war in 1941 motivated by the sense of rank injustice of the Soviet-Finnish war of 1939–1940 and with a revision of the verdict of that conflict as their war aim. Most would never question that basic motivation. But history would again prove indifferent to moral considerations. Finland had tried to overturn the unjust verdict of the

Soviet-Finnish war, only to fumble itself into an alliance with Nazi Germany and to stand, in the spring of 1945, in the same dock in the court of the world as its erstwhile ally. This, in J. K. Paasikivi's eyes, was the fundamental failure that ultimately confirmed the August 1939 agreement between Hitler and Stalin as a standing verdict. Whether Finland now wanted or not, after 1945 it was an Eastern European country too close to the Soviet Union and too far from the West.

In late 1980's, some years before her death, grandmother returned to Russia and St. Petersburg – to Leningrad. For the first and only time after the revolution, after the wars. Of the little traveling party, consisting of herself, her younger sister and my father, she was the only member fluent in Russian. And she had forgotten nothing, despite having been locked in a time-capsule ever since the revolution.

Time, however, had mercilessly progressed and could not be rewound. Much of the city was still recognizable, yes, if under a different name; Tchugunnaya Street was still there. But her childhood home she could no longer locate. Some of her interlocutors marvelled at the frail old lady who spoke perfectly understandable Russian, but in a quaint, pre-revolutionary fashion. Decades of painful history stretched between that moment and her childhood days in the big city, not just between herself and her memories, but between both of her homelands, Finland and Russia. Soon she would be gone, and so would the Soviet Union. Finland and Russia, with their entangled history, full of white spots, silences, intentional omissions and wilful misunderstandings, would remain.

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Статья принята к публикации 28.07.2021