

# RECOGNITION OF FINLAND'S INDEPENDENCE: A TIME OF CONTEMPLATION

*Adél Furu*

Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, E-mail: furuadel@yahoo.com

## **Acknowledgements**

This paper has been presented at the *Ninth Annual International Conference on Baltic and Nordic Studies in Romania: 100 Years since Modern Independence and Unification in Baltic Sea Region and East-Central Europe* held in Târgoviște, Romania, during November 15-16, 2018.

## **Abstract:**

*The article deals with the measures Finland has had to take in order to determine Russia and other states to recognize Finland as an independent republic. Independence Day in Finland is not a time of festivity but a time of contemplation. We analyze the attitude problems of other countries in recognition of Finland's independence: Nordic and Western countries but especially Russia. It is also important to investigate in what ways the Finnish government handled relations with Russia and the nature of their relation around 1917. This study also outlines how the Finnish government has acted to obtain the recognition of Finland's independence by other states.*

*History is explored – in addition to the great state and ideological events – also at the level of everyday life as well as the economic and living conditions. We look at the way people have experienced the period preceding the independence and the year of independence itself. The study presents how the traditions of Independence Day have already stabilized in the early years of independence and how they continued to be respected till nowadays; how the Finns have committed to the official symbols of the country and how these symbols have been rethought and changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

## **Rezumat:**

*Articolul investighează măsurile pe care Finlanda a trebuit să le ia pentru a determina Rusia și alte state să recunoască Finlanda ca o republică independentă. Ziua Independenței în Finlanda nu este un moment festiv, ci un timp de contemplație. Analizăm problemele de atitudine ale altor țări în recunoașterea independenței Finlandei: țările nordice și occidentale, dar mai ales Rusia. De asemenea, este important să investigăm în ce mod guvernul finlandez a gestionat*

*relațiile cu Rusia și natura relației lor în jurul anului 1917. Acest studiu evidențiază, de asemenea, modul în care guvernul finlandez a acționat pentru a obține recunoașterea independenței Finlandei de către alte state.*

*Istoria este explorată – pe lângă marile ideologii și practici politice - la nivelul vieții cotidiene, precum și la nivelul condițiilor economice și de viață. Analizăm modul în care oamenii au experimentat perioada care precede independența și anul independenței în sine. Studiul prezintă modul în care tradițiile Zilei Independenței s-au stabilizat deja în primii ani de independență și cum au continuat să fie respectate până în zilele noastre; modul în care finlandezii s-au angajat să onoreze simbolurile oficiale ale țării și modul în care aceste simboluri au fost regândite și schimbate începând cu secolul al XIX-lea.*

**Keywords:** independence; Finland; Russia; Sweden; Germany; memory; symbols

Although Finland nowadays has a stable border, it has not been like that a few decades ago. During its history not only the borders have been contested but also its own existence has been called in question. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a clear notion about Finland's borders was missing. Later, during the Cold War it became evident that the powerful and big nations decided where to draw the borders, not the small ones who had lost the war<sup>1</sup>. However, Finland's national plan envisioned the accordance of the national borders with the state borders.

## **The Russian bond, Germany's furtherance and Sweden joining the German side**

At the time of the Civil War and the declaration of independence Finland nurtured the idea that Russia represented the enemy. Browning (2014)<sup>2</sup> argues that the Finnish identity could only be understood by first considering the identity of the neighbor country in the East. Finland has been denied the national independence by the Soviets.

The Russian Empire refused to give liberty to the ethnic groups until its collapse although the Empire consisted of more than a dozen of nationalities and the Russians represented only a minority among the other

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Karelia as a Finnish-Russian issue: renegotiating the relationship between national identity, territory and sovereignty', *CEURUS EU-Russia Papers* 18 (2014): 1-31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

peoples (43% of the population)<sup>3</sup>. The whole year of 1917 until autumn has been characterized by insecurity and hostility among the Finns, Ukrainians and Russians. Despite the dangerous situation the Empire rejected the idea of losing much of the territory it held and carried on with its national policy.

As the Russification of Finland and the Baltic region has been followed unceasingly at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Könönen (2017)<sup>4</sup> asserts that the detachment from Russia could not be avoided anymore, but it was not only self-imposed but also directed by external political circumstances.

The Soviets intended to show opposition to Germany but the Germans had firm peace terms according to which Russia had to permit the separation of Finland and the dissolution of the whole Baltic area. The Soviet representatives instead were not open for debates declaring that "any discussion is useless and we refuse to have any"<sup>5</sup>. Germany supported Finland and requested that it escaped from the Russian bond, so the decision did not arise only from Finland's own will. The offer of German help also meant a lot of requirements intended to Finland's future administration.

In the years before the declaration of Finland's independence the domestic politics of Sweden has been a struggle, however, the foreign policy of the country has not been an idyll either. The activist movement emerging two years before the independence called for joining the German side and for the restoration of autonomy in Finland. However, in the foreign policy debate Finland has been a burden for the Allies of World War I. Though England and France have declared their struggle for the democracy and the rights of small peoples. The changing events in Finland 1917 have been eagerly followed by the Swedes<sup>6</sup>. After Finland had been declared independent, the Russian troops continued to dominate its territory. As the new Finnish state requested recognition, it demanded the statement of the Swedish government.

### **Solemnity neither for the crowds, nor for the intellectuals**

In this section we expose some of the dramatic events of the period preceding and following the year of independence, the atmosphere and the inner thoughts and feelings of ordinary people in Finland and at the same

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Serge, *Year one of the Russian revolution* (Chicago, IL.: Haymarket Books, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Janne Könönen, *Punaisen leijonan maa: Suomen hullu joulukuu 1917* (Otava, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Victor Serge, *Year one of the Russian revolution* (Chicago, IL.: Haymarket Books, 2015, 182).

<sup>6</sup> Seikko Eskola, 'Suomi 1917 Ruotsin silmin', *Tieteessä tapahtuu* 29 (4-5) (2011): 12-18.

time we show how they could reach calmness in the swirl of history. We approach the topic also from the cultural and economic point of view. Before the year of independence nobody in Finland would have thought that by 1917 a new state would emerge. Although in 1917 the war already seemed endless and peace never coming, as if it was the normal state of the world, Keskiarja (2017)<sup>7</sup> claims that many did not foresee or wish for the collapse of Russia.

Finland has been through a period of oppression but the Russian repression was temperate, so that Finland did not want to escape from it as soon as possible. Finnish people have been accustomed with the constant rule of the crown. The revolution of the motherland Russia in March 1917 has been the first happening in a long time that brought joy to the Finns.

Although the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 1917 is considered a turning point in the Finnish history, the Finnish population of that time did not consider the event as a decisive or festive one. This attitude was rooted in the fact that World War I was going on while ordinary people were suffering from food shortages, strikes and crimes. It became obvious that the declaration of independence could not solve all the emerging problems in Finland<sup>8</sup>.

In the years preceding the declaration of independence labor has been stopped and the working class has been struck by famine. Serge (2015)<sup>9</sup> notes that it seemed that the proclamation of independence would not shape the situation in Finland since the bourgeoisie intended to extend the food shortage among the peasants.

While the period leading to the independence is examined by the public from the point of view of the 1918 war and its aftermath, the magazines of that time reflected how the world was seen by common people who did not suspect anything of the approaching disturbances: the March Revolution in Russia which returned the old autonomy to Finland, the elections in October followed by the government crisis, the great strike in November which brought a lot of turbulence and after all these Finland receiving a bourgeois senate.

The achievement of the Finnish independence was considered by the Finns an unexpected surprise which a few years before seemed impossible.

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<sup>7</sup> Teemu Keskiarja, "Vapauden ja vihan vuosi", in *1917*, ed. K. Häggman, T. Keskiarja, M. Kuisma (Helsinki: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 2017), 13-73.

<sup>8</sup> Henrik Meinander, 'Itsenäisyys ja demokratia: parlamentaarikkojen rooli Suomen historiassa 1917-1920', *Eduskunta* 12 (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Victor Serge, *Year one of the Russian revolution* (Chicago, IL.: Haymarket Books, 2015).

In order to understand the change it is not enough to refer to the collapse of the Russian Empire but we have to interpret things from the point of view of the social order which is unprecedented in the Finnish history research. The news about the restoration of autonomy in Finland has been received with great joy by the western neighbor, and although Finland could have strengthened its position, the unfolding events proved that they could still not speak about a country of real progress. The Swedes have considered that "the Finns played a brave game"<sup>10</sup> if they thought that Russia would not adopt a nationalist discourse once more<sup>11</sup>.

The independence day would have been considered by the crowds of those times a meaningful and solemn moment only after experiencing the consequences of it. Moreover, none of the parliamentarians "have raised their bowls or sung songs for the free Finland"<sup>12</sup>.

In the Swedish- and Finnish-speaking Grand Duchy of Finland (1809-1917) belonging to the Tsardom of Russia the Finnish intellectuals lived in a Swedish style and acquired their education mainly in Swedish though they were emotionally attached to the Finns. With the growing Russian pressure these intellectuals were the ones who awakened that "'here is the time': we have to become Finnish - now or never!"<sup>13</sup>. They invisioned that the people who spoke two languages should be unified by one language and patriotism which constituted the principles of the Finnish national movement. The Finnish intellectuals' main objective became the creation of their own Finnish literature, the creation of the Finnish literary language and the introduction of a uniform spelling. As the Finnish politician, linguist and professor of Finnish language and literature, Eemil Nestor Setälä pointed out, culture does not provide superiority but provides protection for the little peoples among the great cultural nations<sup>14</sup>. After the Finnish state had become independent in 1917 and consolidated following the bloody Civil War of spring 1918, the politicians' goal was to create the image of an independent state and its international acceptance.

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<sup>10</sup> "Todettiin suomalaisten pelaavan rohkeaa peliä [...]". Seikko Eskola, 'Suomi 1917 Ruotsin silmin', *Tieteessä tapahtuu* 29 (4-5) (2011): 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> "[...] kukaan ei nostanut maljoja tai laulanut lauluja vapaalle Suomelle." Henrik Meinander, 'Itsenäisyys ja demokratia: parlamentaarikkojen rooli Suomen historiassa 1917-1920', *Eduskunta* 12 (2016), 17.

<sup>13</sup> "„itt az idő”: finné kell valóni – most vagy soha!". Enikő Szűj, 'Arany János ismertsége a finnek körében', *Magyar Nyelv* 113 (2017): 434.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

In November 1917 the Finnish parliament felt ready to overtake the power, thus a month later Finland was declared a sovereign, independent state. Although the socialist left of the country supported the independence, they did not agree with this decision because they were waiting for the approval of the Bolshevik administration in Russia.

In fact Fingerroos (2008)<sup>15</sup> states that Finland's position between Eastern and Western Europe has been unstable even in the next few decades after the independence when a number of other modest countries have been deprived of their independence. During the Winter War sizable provinces next to the frontier have been taken over by the Soviet Union.

### **Memorization of the Civil War**

For the people in the lost territories the past and present are interwoven, they preserve their heritage and they have nationalistic manifestations. Many things have been forbidden to talk about for several decades or during the period of self-government. People in Finland have carried their memories about their struggle to gain independence. The Finns have chosen to forget the disruptive episode of their history. The memorization of the Finnish Civil War (from January 1918) has shaped the personal and family histories. The conflict emerging between the working class and the landowners has not been remembered in the same way and therefore it has been emphasized that the war should be collectively dismissed from mind<sup>16</sup>. Even the authorities' formal approach had strengthened collective forgetting until addressing the war became a censored topic. Various generations in different areas have though divergent forgetting and remembering traditions about the war in 1918. Puuronen (2014)<sup>17</sup> focuses on the individual depictions and historical narratives of the most disquieting historical events and family experiences. According to his study Finnish people are interested in both authorized historical narratives and private group narratives concerning the Civil War.

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<sup>15</sup> Outi Fingerroos, 'Karelia: a place of memories and utopias', *Oral Tradition* 23/2 (2008): 235-254.

<sup>16</sup> Piotr M. Szipunar, 'Collective memory and the stranger: remembering and forgetting the 1918 Finnish Civil War', *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 1200-1221.

<sup>17</sup> Vesa Puuronen, 'Intergenerational transmission of political heritage and historical memory (Finland)', *European Commission* (2014).

## Giving way to Finnish national symbols

National symbols can represent historical events, places of memory and can also bear the historical memory. As Fingerroos (2006)<sup>18</sup> has pointed out, origin, past experiences and remembrance are associated concepts.

After gaining independence the Russian national symbols had to be removed from the territory of Finland. The “symbolic contest between the Finns and Russians over the past” manifested itself in planned and undisguised eradication of the Finnish past, symbols and notions of history<sup>19</sup>.

The national symbols of Finland have undergone certain changes during the last decades. After the state flag had been approved, the crown from the coat of arms was removed in 1920. This crown coincided with the one used in the coat of arms existing in Finland as a Grand Duchy of Russia. The blue cross flag came into use after the red and yellow temporary state flag was removed in May 1918. The cross flag not only put Finland in a row with the Nordic countries but also symbolized a new beginning for the nation living in the new state.

## Conclusions

When looking at the years before and after the declaration of independence, they have been not only burdensome but also the most outstanding steps in the Finnish history. After the nation being part of the neighboring countries for several centuries, the time was ripe for taking a step towards the national sovereignty. Moreover, as Meinander (2016)<sup>20</sup> observes, Finland's independence, parliamentary democracy and its political stability proved to be constructive also for the surrounding countries.

While the Soviet government has consistently erased the Finnish cultural history and created a foretime of their own, the Finnish authorities and families have struggled to reconstruct and memorialize the past of their

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<sup>18</sup> Outi Fingerroos, 'The Karelia of memories: utopias of a place', *Electronic Journal of Folklore* 33 (2006): 95-108.

<sup>19</sup> Petri J. Raivo, 'Karelia lost or won - materialization of a landscape of contested and commemorated memory', *Fennia* 182: 1 (2004): 62.

<sup>20</sup> Henrik Meinander, 'Itsenäisyys ja demokratia: parlamentaarikkojen rooli Suomen historiassa 1917-1920', *Eduskunta* 12 (2016).

country<sup>21</sup>. Rantala (2011)<sup>22</sup> believes that Independence Day's anniversaries are appropriate occasions to address war narratives and include the Civil War among the key notions of the Finnish national history. Practices related to the reconstruction of the past are not declining, moreover, parents and grandparents are willing to share memories with their offspring. Younger generations of Finns are familiar with the wars with the eastern neighbor, yet Russia is not considered nowadays an invader of their own country.

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<sup>21</sup> Petri J. Raivo, 'Karelia lost or won - materialization of a landscape of contested and commemorated memory', *Fennia* 182: 1 (2004): 61-72.

<sup>22</sup> Jukka Rantala, 'Children as consumers of historical culture in Finland', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 43:4 (2011): 493-506.

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