



CIVIL WAR IN FINLAND

Posted on December 1, 2020 by Charles



You have likely never heard of the Finnish Civil War. A brief war, in some ways a simple war, it lasted only three months, from late January to late April, 1918, but killed around one percent of the population. It was started by the Left, the Reds, and ended by the rest of Finnish society, the Whites, who crushed the Reds, preserving Finland from the fate of Bolshevik Russia. This war is an object lesson in how even a homogenous, largely united country can quickly end up in civil war when part of the population becomes gripped with Left ideology, and it is also an object lesson in what to do in response.

There is more than one reason you have not heard of this war. Finland is obscure, as shown by that there is apparently an internet myth that Finland itself is a fiction cooked up by the Japanese and the Russians to preserve bountiful fishing grounds that exist where maps show Finland to be. More importantly, perhaps, other events in 1918 had much greater historical consequence—the Bolshevik Revolution and the height of World War I occurred at precisely the same time.

But just as relevant to this war being unknown is that the Left, who for over seventy years has written the histories taught to us, is embarrassed and afraid that they lost the war, a war of rebellion they chose to begin because Finnish society rejected their poison. They know that their loss disproves the idea that the arrow of history points left, just as does their loss of the Spanish Civil War. They can't ignore the [Spanish Civil War](#), so they simply lie about it (and lie more as time goes on and the truth slides further from view). If the Finnish Reds had won, you would know about their triumph, which would be sold as a righteous victory. I am here today to remedy this historical amnesia.

Of course, the war is well-remembered in Finland itself. English-language sources, however, are few and far between; I bought and read every one of consequence. I started with a basic overall history of Finland, David Kirby's [A Concise History of Finland](#), which I separately reviewed a few weeks ago.

I then read what seems to be generally acknowledged as by far the most important English-language history, the massive [The Finnish Revolution 1917–1918](#), by Anthony Upton. This book, a monograph in the old style of great detail and little editorial comment, was published in 1980 and was then translated into Finnish; apparently even in Finland (though I speak no Finnish at all) it is regarded as one of the, if not the, masterworks on the Civil War. Upton's book narrates the run-up to the war and the war itself in day-by-day, nearly hour-by-hour, detail.

I also read a recent academic anthology, translated from the Finnish, [The Finnish Civil War 1918](#), edited

by Tuomas Tepora; and the updated second edition of Risto Alapuro's [*State and Revolution in Finland*](#). These two latter are less substantive than Upton's work, but still thorough. And in this small selection, at least, the authors avoid propaganda masquerading as history, a real problem in books about the Spanish Civil War, although to be sure all three books lean toward the Reds.

Tepora's volume spends far too much time on worthless areas like "gender and psychohistory," but does contain some updated factual scholarship since Upton wrote. Alapuro's work seems like it should be propaganda—he's an avowed Marxist, and the book was published by an explicitly "radical left" press, Haymarket Books. Nonetheless, he strives to be neutral, and his biases tend to show up in his macro interpretations, not in distorting the actual history.

I also consulted some other books focused or bearing on the war, such as John H. Hodgson's 1967 [*Communism in Finland*](#); C. Jay Smith's 1958 [*Finland and the Russian Revolution 1917–1922*](#); Henning Söderhjelm's [*The Red Insurrection in Finland*](#), published in translation in London in 1919; [*The Memoirs of Marshal Mannerheim*](#), by the key figure in the entire war, the White commander, [*Baron Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim*](#); and German general Rüdiger von der Goltz's [*My Mission in Finland and the Baltic*](#).

Furthermore, brief discussions of the Civil War usually show up in detailed histories of the Bolshevik Revolution. Lenin and his compatriots took refuge in Finland after their failed coup of July 1917, and the Bolsheviks, as we will see, supported the Finnish Reds—though such support was ancillary to their own problems and focuses. Therefore, I studied some Bolshevik-oriented writings as well, even if none really added anything new.

From all these sources, it's possible to get a complete picture of the Civil War. Although I can't be certain, not having read the Finnish-language literature, it appears that the war is not subject to the kind of completely fabricated propaganda typically generated by the Left during its conflicts with the Right. Probably that is mostly because there were, and are, nearly no foreigners interested in the war who could be profitably targeted with such propaganda.

Moreover, in a small, homogeneous society and with the war being short and well-documented, it would be difficult to convincingly maintain manufactured falsehoods over the long term. Thus, propaganda about the war, during and after, was and is apparently confined to exaggeration, not fiction.

A note on terminology. I will here simply refer to the Finnish Civil War as the Civil War. For a long time it was referred to in Finland as the "War of Independence," tying it to successfully separating Finland from Russia, and at the same time tarring the Reds with the brush of attempting to prevent Finnish independence. Which is true, but not because they wanted to be subject to Russia, rather they believed that socialism would usher in the Brotherhood of Man, making independence irrelevant.

The Finnish Left has long called the Civil War the "Class War," and other names have been used as, since the 1960s, leftist influence has gained in Finnish historiography. The simplest name makes the most sense, and "Civil War" (or "Domestic War") is apparently mostly used today among the Finnish public.

As to the participants, traditionally "Whites" and "Reds" have been the primary terms used, and I will often use those as well. True, a more accurate characterization of the Whites would be the "Loyalists" or "Republicans," since they represented the legitimate democratic government (far more so than Spanish "Republicans"). That would be confusing, however. I will frequently use the catchall term "the revolutionary Left" for the Finnish Reds. As with any political movement, there were variations within their ranks, but in practice all acted under the umbrella of the Social Democratic Party, the SPD, which was a revolutionary Marxist party, and which, since there was no Finnish Communist party until well after the war, contained within itself all elements of far-left thought. One might make subtle distinctions, as in Russia among Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, but for our purposes, they were all the Left, committed to violent revolution.

Sometimes when reading about the Civil War, the reader is struck by the feeling that this was a stupid and wholly unnecessary war. The Left leadership contained no men of excellence or real drive; they were men of weak character who bounced from one crisis to another, often of their own incompetent manufacture, both before and during the war. They held the principles of Lenin, or close to them, in theory, and shrieked them loudly in the press, but shrank from their full application, which did nobody any favors. They were led to war, a war they, and they solely, chose to initiate, by the own iron logic of their ideology, unable to come up with creative approaches or to take the long view. And not having any line of demarcation to their left, they were inexorably drawn to ever more violence, in the usual dynamic of leftist movements.

Background

Finland did very well during the nineteenth century. For centuries it had been part of Sweden (and to this day Swedish is one of Finland's two official languages), until Russia defeated Sweden, and in 1809 Finland became part of the Russian Empire, as the Grand Duchy of Finland. In practice, Finland occupied an advantageous position within the Empire, viewed as loyal to the Tsar and largely left to govern itself internally. Finns did not even have to serve in the Tsar's armies, though many chose to make a career in the Russian military, and Finland was able to sell to Russian markets on advantageous terms (to the annoyance of many Russian nationalists).

Class divisions in Finland were not nearly as extreme as in some other European countries. Finland is sparsely populated and crop agriculture limited, so a good deal of Finland's agriculture was husbandry, including dairy products, and timber, both wood itself and derivatives such as pine tar. Demand for all these products both from Russia and from Europe increased sharply during the century, enriching all of Finnish society, and at the same time creating some fractures within what had been a stolid, patriarchal-type society with a high degree of social satisfaction.

The small Finnish upper class based its wealth partially on land holdings (although most timber was owned by peasants), and partially on their position in administration of the state.

A handful of rich industrialists also emerged toward the end of the century (steam-powered sawmills were introduced in the 1860s), owning manufacturing concentrated in a few areas in southern Finland, notably Tampere. Crucially for the course of the war, the railroad network had become quite extensive by 1918, bringing a land of frozen lakes and roads made impassable by mud together, and allowing more industrial activity, mostly in the south but also in a few more-northern regional centers. Still, by 1914, there were only around 200,000 industrial laborers.

A large middle class existed, including very many smaller farmers who owned enough land to live comfortably (and more, if they owned significant timber). At the other end of the rural scale were landless laborers, who in that harsh land typically spent the winters in the forests cutting wood to make ends meet. In-between was a large group of crofters, who held long-term leases on land, often paid largely or wholly in-kind. Conflict between landowners and crofters arose when landowners perceived they could get better returns by ending the leases and hiring laborers—a problem exacerbated by that many of the leases were oral.

Also in the middle class were clergy (Finland was uniformly Lutheran) and civil servants of one type or

another—as was common in many areas of Europe, government service was regarded as a prestigious employment.

What bound the Finns together, then and apparently now, was nationalism. Despite practical loyalty to the Tsar, Finns regarded the Russians as beneath them, and always had. All classes, top to bottom, idealized Finnish independence, in combination with a century-long national recapture of Finnish culture, such as the Finnish epic, the [*Kalevala*](#).

The Russians made little effort to tamp down Finnish thought and speech about independence, but refused to even confirm the specifics of what the Finns saw as a special constitutional status, much less grant formal independence. The Finns played the long game, strengthening their cultural institutions and evincing a great degree of unity around the matter, but keeping it as an aspiration, not a concrete political goal. But in 1901 the Tsar introduced conscription, and the response was the politicization of the independence movement.

This politicization occurred at the same time as other political matters were fermenting. One was the issue of crofters' holdings. Another was expanding the franchise, which for the most part was restricted to property holders. The [SDP](#) was formed in 1903, unopposed by the other classes, who (mostly incorrectly, as it turned out) thought that organized workers would be educated, and therefore responsible, workers. It was, as typical for such parties, a hard Marxist party, not what we think of as "social democracy" today.

The SDP was explicitly revolutionary from the start—but not with quite the same vigor as the Russian Marxists, rather similar to the German Marxists, whose program, as Upton says, they incorporated verbatim. They contemplated that the triumph of Communism was inevitable, and their job was to manage the inevitable. It is very important for us today to understand what seems to us a quirk in early Communists, but is an essential point. They believed that Communism was science, and its triumph was as certain as any other scientific law, or that two plus two equals four.

This encouraged an attitude of passivity, sometimes fatalism, among the Finnish Left, where violence was known to be inevitable, but something that could not be controlled, rather in effect being an independent actor.

Politically, naturally, the focus of the SDP was class struggle (the trade unions were somewhat separate, although ultimately also dominated by the revolutionary Left), and the majority view among the SPD until after the Civil War was that all class enemies, collectively referred to as "bourgeois,"

should not be fraternized with, whether socially or politically.

This meant that parliamentary democracy was largely a farce, since from the very beginning of strife, one side rejected compromise and normal parliamentary give-and-take. This character defect in the SDP was exacerbated by the single biggest factor in dividing Finnish society along class lines—the relentless mendacious propaganda peddled by the revolutionary Left press, especially the SDP's flagship newspaper, *Työmies* (The Worker). The education level in Finland was low, and as a direct result the working class believed the lies told to them, which revolved during the 1910s around the supposed hatred of the “bourgeoisie” for the working man and their desire to starve the working man into submission for their own enrichment.

In 1905, when the turmoil in Russia resulted in political change there, the SDP called a general strike, hoping to achieve similar dramatic results in Finland. The representative of Russian power, the Governor General, bolted, and the small Finnish police force largely disbanded (there was no Finnish army), leaving a power vacuum.

This led to the creation of Red Guards in urban centers for the first time by the SDP—not that this was an original idea, since orthodox twentieth-century Marxism always contemplated self-generated militias supposedly to “protect the workers,” in reality to impose revolutionary Left will. But mostly these forces were a ground-up creation, not one created or commanded by the Executive Committee of the SDP, and this set the pattern for much of the next fifteen years—a weak Left leadership swayed by those even further left. So while theoretically, the Red Guard reported to the SPD leadership, in practice, its leaders often dictated to the SPD.

In response, a “Home Guard” (sometimes referred to as the “Civil Guard”) was formed by the “bourgeoisie.” At this point in the reading of the various books on the Civil War, a crucial defect shows up in all of them, most evident in Upton. None of the authors, except Alapuro to a limited extent, give any depth to the loyal elements of Finnish society, those opposed to the Reds, the Whites. They all richly sketch the SDP and all Left entities. But everyone else is just the faceless “bourgeoisie,” the standard derogatory Left term (until they switched to “butchers,” of which more later). Thus, after detailing at length the creation of the Red Guards, Upton simply says “the bourgeoisie formed a separate Home Guard, consisting mainly of university students.” We are not told anything at all more (although if you examine the data closely, it is evident that in an inversion from many Left revolts, students supported the Whites—only two students died fighting for the Reds, and 251 died fighting for

the Whites).

Similarly, we are told that at this time the SDP "recruited a group of largely bourgeois intellectuals," many of whom were very important in later years, notably Otto Kuusinen. What made them "bourgeois," we are not told. With the exception of Mannerheim and a few government ministers mentioned from time to time, all the authors treat the "bourgeoisie" as the Borg, a mass with no individuals. Its motives are opaque, and it acts as a monolith, though that can't actually have been true, and hints of broad diversity peek out. We get endless detail about the internal arguments and tensions of the SDP, but we get almost no understanding of the Whites except as it relates to military decisions. We learn all about the administrative structure of Red Finland, and almost nothing about White Finland's, other than in connection with Mannerheim. I don't know if this massive lacuna is present in Finnish-language literature, but it's jarring to the reader of any of the books I read, and makes the reader wonder what else is being left out of the story.

In any case, in 1905 in Finland, as in Russia, matters settled down, somewhat. The Tsar confirmed a radically new constitution put forth by the Finnish estates that included universal suffrage (thus showing pretty clearly the "bourgeois" weren't opposed to the working class at all—although unlike in other countries that suffered violent Left revolutions, it does not appear any of the rich funded the Left out of ideological sympathy or a desire to be eaten last). The SDP disbanded the Red Guards (and the miniscule nascent Home Guards were also disbanded) and instead focused on electoral politics, building an efficient machine.

Realizing that urban workers numbered too few for their purposes, they aggressively and successfully recruited throughout the countryside, as a result winning forty percent of the seats in the new Parliament. Mostly, they recruited crofters, not the landless laborers. Upton says the latter were "too sunk in ignorance and apathy, or too dependent on employers to be willing to engage in politics."

Probably that was true, but the urban working class was ignorant, too—more likely the issue was that exposing rural workers to a stream of propaganda was harder than doing the same for urban workers, and direct personal appeal to the interest of the more educated was a better strategy. Moreover, rural success was limited by the SDP's aggressive emphasis on atheism and free love, the usual Marxist bellwethers—Finnish rural society was strongly religious, having undergone a pietist revival during the nineteenth century, and contempt for Christianity was not a good selling point.

But the power of Parliament was, for the most part, an illusion, since the Tsar was now taking a far more active role in Finnish matters, and Parliament was not the sovereign—the Tsar was. In practice, what Parliament did was advisory, and the Tsar mostly rejected the advice, which meant he rejected most of what additional the SDP wanted. (He did bar the termination of crofter leases, however—but the SDP wanted the land given as freehold, without compensation to the owners, to the tenants, so even this was inadequate in their view). Rather than cooperating with the other elements of society to increase pressure on the Tsar, the SDP chose to view every non-Left group ideologically, and concluded they were the problem, not the solution. They fed this false view, for which Upton notes there is no evidence at all, to the workers.

Nonetheless, at the beginning of World War I, Finland was quite peaceful. Big talk did not mean big problems. Prosperity was widespread. The Finns did not fight, except as volunteers, in the World War, but the Russian presence increased greatly, since Finland occupied (and occupies) a strategic position for Russia. This led to yet more prosperity, as the Russians spent money in Finland on massive fortifications—but this was counterbalanced by the loss of Germany and Britain as export markets. Still, Finland did not suffer much in the war—the biggest problem was food insecurity, because Finland relied on grain imports from Russia, which became unreliable.

In 1916, the SDP won a slim absolute majority in Parliament—although the Tsar refused to allow Parliament to meet, given that it was prone, in his view, to agitation, which he could ill afford at that time. And he made clear that if Russia won the war, Finland would not gain more independence.

A group of Finns, in essence a clandestine single-issue political party, the “Activists,” whose main program was immediate total Finnish independence through violence against Russia if necessary, and who had some relationship with all the recognized Finnish political parties except the SPD, negotiated with the Germans (the logical patron to the Finns if the Russians refused independence) to achieve the opposite result. Among other actions they recruited somewhat more than a thousand Finns to travel to Germany, to fight under German command but with plans to later assist in seizing Finnish independence. This became the “[Jäger Battalion](#),” an important component of the later Civil War.

Unrest in Russia during February 1917 led to uncertainty in Finland. Russian soldiers stationed in Finland, mostly on the coasts and mostly sailors, mutinied and shot their officers. The soldiers set up Soviets and proceeded to stir up trouble in Finland, including encouraging allied revolutionary Left Finns to form new Red Guards, again to “maintain order.”

Order had to be maintained because a key demand of the Left was the disbanding of the police in all the cities and towns, such that the Left, through its militias, would be the only group able to exercise force. (It's strange to see this same demand appearing in 2020 in America, now in the mouths of the BLM terrorists, for the same reason as a hundred years ago. Although in Finland, the Left demanded the municipal governments pay the Red Guards, and today George Soros pays their modern equivalent, Antifa).

Kerensky's Provisional Government was sympathetic both to Finnish independence and to the Finnish Left, but most concerned with not giving the Germans an opening in the World War. The Russian change in government was, in some ways, the proximate cause of the Civil War, because the Tsar's abdication created an ambiguity as to who held the ultimate power in Finland. Did it revert to the Finns, under a creative interpretation of the events of 1809, making the Finns automatically and permanently formally independent? Or did it transfer to whomever held supreme power in Russia at any given time, from whom formal independence must be sought? This argument clouded all power relations in Finland until the end of the Civil War.

The Russian Provisional Government persuaded the Finns to form a government, complicated by that although the SPD held the most seats, on principle most of its members still refused to participate in any type of coalition government with "class enemies." After pressure, though, the SPD bent enough to form the socialist-majority "Tokoi government," named after its chief minister, and containing ministers from four other parties, the "bourgeois" parties. Those were the Old Finns, the Young Finns, the Swedish People's Party, and the Agrarian Party. (Again, we get almost no information, other than scattered hints, about what these parties believed, what they held in common, and what their position was on issues crucial to the SPD. They are merely "bourgeois," a contentless propaganda term).

The SPD quickly lost control of the more radical revolutionary Left elements, which engaged in mass demonstrations in Helsinki and other towns. A key demand was to seize food from imaginary hidden stocks of the non-Left classes; fear of starvation was a major problem by this point, and a nonstop propaganda topic of the SPD was the supposed thievery and hoarding by the non-Left, endlessly repeated to whip up hatred and unify the Left, although without any evidence provided. (We have yet another analogue today, as the American Left shrieks "racism!" constantly, while never providing evidence of any actual racism at all.) Nonetheless, the SPD leadership maintained enough control to prevent open violence—for a little while.

Meanwhile, by the end of April 1917, with the police disbanded, the Red Guards began to engage in violence against the non-Left, both in cities and in the countryside, along with coercion of municipal authorities, making the Left militias in many instances, as was intended and planned, the ultimate authority. The non-Left parties therefore began, by June, to discuss setting up their own paramilitaries, but unwisely failed to do so; the SDP's organs used these discussions anyway to whip up more hatred and fear among the rank-and-file Left. As Upton says, "In short, the socialist press sought to persuade an unsophisticated and captive readership that the capitalist enemy was deliberately trying to starve the workers so as to weaken them and beat them into submission."

Violent propaganda was the stock-in-trade of the SPD; the standard term for any non-Left opponents, from long before and through the Civil War, used scores of times in quotes in all the books I read, was "butchers." Seeing the writing on the wall, in the countryside, the farmers began, without government help, to organize mostly unarmed "fire brigades," excluding socialists, something assisted by the great popularity among rural Finns of intermediary institutions, not just churches but also many other social-benefit groups, theater groups, and so forth.

Inevitably, as Upton says, by August 1917, everywhere in Finland there was an atmosphere of fear. The Tokoi government was incompetent, due to the contradictions it contained, and it could not work well with the Russians, since even the SPD was keenly interested in formal Finnish independence, the non-negotiable demand of all Finnish parties, and not in the least interested in getting involved in the World War, to Kerensky's annoyance, given he regarded the two as necessarily linked. Kerensky therefore stalled by claiming he could not authorize Finnish independence without the Russian Constituent Assembly, which had yet to meet, and in the meantime, he expected the Finns to fight.

The SPD therefore began to fall fully into the orbit of the Russians even further to the left than Kerensky, most of all the Bolsheviks, who were only too happy to promise immediate complete independence—even though the Bolsheviks had no power in Finland, except for tight personal ties to some in the SPD.

Endless talks with the Russian government produced no real movement toward a solution, so the SPD passed a bill claiming full Finnish independence, the *valtalaki*, annoying Kerensky, who rejected this action as ineffective, even more. And when Kerensky crushed the premature Bolshevik revolt in July, the Provisional Government, as sovereign, dissolved the Finnish Parliament and scheduled new elections for the beginning of October. The SPD was not happy, but assuming they would win the

election, grudgingly accepted this dissolution.

Violence by the Left increased rapidly, including riots in the major cities; in response, the non-Left elements of society finally started forming private security forces. These forces tended to fall within the Activist orbit, and have strong anti-Russian overtones, rather than being directed at the SPD, which should have reduced tension - but they could hardly announce that their purpose was getting rid of the Russians, and anyway since the SPD looked to the Bolsheviks more and more, and were friendly with local Russian Communist elements, these new loyalist forces ultimately were certain to conflict with the Red Guards. T

These security forces blended into the Home Guard forces that began to be raised in the countryside and started to assume a more formal structure. Both the Red Guards and the Home Guards made strenuous efforts to acquire weapons, which were rare and hard to get (something Americans of today find difficult to comprehend), and managed to accumulate a modest quantity and variety of light weapons, mostly bolt-action rifles and revolvers, with a very few machine guns, and little ammunition. Inevitably, the first political murder was on September 24, when SPD elements, in revenge for the arrest of some Red Guards, shot a random Home Guard member on the street in a Helsinki suburb.

But, shockingly to them, amidst large turnout, the SPD lost the election, although there was no clear mandate for any of the other parties, either, and no party had a majority. The surprised SPD immediately started threatening violent revolution, and calling for concrete action, issuing a long list of non-negotiable demands, including confiscation of any non-Left weapons and confiscation of all food stocks for distribution to SPD supporters.

Most of all, they denied the legitimacy of the election, demanding an immediate new election with a lowered voting age. They falsely claimed, with zero evidence, that the results of the election were fraudulent and "the product of conspiracy between the bourgeoisie and Russian reactionaries." Not only must the non-Left parties agree to a new election on their terms, they must also agree immediately to a new constitution and a purge of all non-Left judges and civil servants, and the formal disbanding of all Home Guards and similar groups. Or, don't you know, the SPD would not be responsible for the violent revolution sure to result over which they had no control, since it was a scientific inevitability.

This denial of legitimacy is the crux of the matter and was the immediate cause of the Civil War. Although the confused question of sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia clouded the matter, that's a

smokescreen. The reality is that, always and everywhere throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Left denies the legitimacy of any election it loses under conditions where it expects a revolution. Given what we've seen in America from 2016 through 2020, we shouldn't be surprised at this course of events at all.

At this point, in October, the Bolsheviks took power in Russia. Lenin, who had a close relationship with top members of the SPD, particularly those most far left, encouraged the SPD to "rise and take power" (although the flow of Russian weapons to the SPD temporarily slowed, as the Bolsheviks needed them to cement their own rule). The leaders of the SPD were not Lenin, though; they lacked his virtues, and were always prone to half-measures combined with threats they could not, or did not, follow through on, to Lenin's annoyance and disgust.

Still, on November 14 the SPD announced a general strike. In those days, a general strike was not what we see in France occasionally today, where the bus drivers stay home and museums close; it was an overt attempt to take power through extralegal means, short of full rebellion but with full intent to use violence, and under the guidance of a "Revolutionary Council." The Home Guard was still struggling to be born, and the non-Left parties were neither prepared to nor inclined to fight, yet, so in all the major cities, and many smaller ones, the Red Guard took control, invading homes of their opponents to search for guns and food (and liquor, to the chagrin of SPD leadership), and arresting and imprisoning hundreds of their opponents, murdering some people along the way.

In truth, the Left had taken over much of the country without much violence. But the government, in the form of civil servants, shut down, and the SPD leadership lost its nerve, calling off the general strike on November 16, over the objections of the Red Guard leadership—although in much of the country the strike, and violence, continued for another week. As always, the SPD leadership were men who talked big but could not follow through.

And to cover their incompetence, they ramped up talk of violence, blaming their opponents for murders by Reds (twenty-seven by November 26) and generally endorsing violence, a move not calculated to calm the situation, and alienating those non-Left politicians who still had any interest in cooperating with the SPD. When Parliament convened, a non-Socialist government was formed, on November 26. The SPD had gotten the opposite of what they wanted, and the opposite of what they had promised their constituents.

In a sense, the general strike lost the Civil War for the Reds, since it forewarned their opponents. The

non-Left elements were not going to be caught flat-footed by the Red Guards again. All Finnish society still wanted formal independence, and now the new Parliament treated with the Bolsheviks. In theory, of course, the Russian Communists were only too happy to have the Finns be independent, if they only asked, since socialism had no borders.

So, Parliament, after wrangling about form, declared independence in early December (today December 6 is Finnish Independence Day), formally notifying the Bolsheviks as requested, though they found it degrading to do so. The mechanics of independence were not nearly as simple, though—there was the matter of the extensive Russian military presence, both troops and equipment, much of it immovable. Nonetheless, independence was, over a few weeks, internationally recognized, creating a brief wave of good feeling in Finland.

It did not last. The SPD had never abandoned their list of non-negotiable demands, and continued to press them. But the non-Left parties refused, of course, and they could, because they held parliamentary power. The Red Guards, still only tenuously under control of the SPD leadership, continued to expand and engage in freelance raids for food and arms, extortion, and other forms of politically-oriented criminality, openly and, as Upton says, "all with complete immunity from legal sanctions." (It appears this was because they could not be arrested without violence, not because the judicial system had been taken over by the Reds, as ours has today in many American urban areas).

Among other things, in Turku (the second city of Finland), the Red Guard led three days of riots on December 15, looting shops and burning buildings, and setting the entire country on edge. The SPD leadership publicly frowned on the violence—and blamed their enemies for it, claiming the Turku riots were organized as a provocation, not conducted by the Red Guards (again we see a reflection of this in 2020, with the gaslighting total lies we are told that right-wing "white supremacists" were in some way involved in the massive exclusively Left violence in American cities this summer).

The government was unable to openly rebuild defense forces against this insurrectionary activity, except in secret, because of threats from the Red Guards, who controlled crucial chokepoints on the rail network, preventing the assembly of anti-Left forces except by drips and drabs. Whatever the government's inability to raise forces, no surprise, the Home Guard, privately funded and organized, grew rapidly, although with little central direction, rather on a local level. (The SPD, of course, lied that the Red Guards had only come into existence to counter the previously non-existent Home Guard).

Unlike the Red Guards, though, the Home Guard focused not on looting, but on training, either under Finnish officers with some military experience or under small contingents of Jägers sent home by Germany (who were coming home in small groups, rather than in one large group, because the Germans were making nice with the Bolsheviks at the time). They still lacked weapons, however - the Germans sent some, but were unsuccessful in sending more. The Finnish government, after some dithering, did proceed to establish a military command, recruiting (as their second choice) a Finnish aristocrat who had fought for the Russians - Mannerheim. He was a man of overwhelming self-confidence and competence.

On January 9, Parliament authorized the creation of a large army, directed at the Russians if they would not leave, and an internal security force, clearly directed at countering the Red Guards. Mannerheim immediately began to implement these directives, while the SPD shrieked hysterically in Parliament that the "butchers" were starting a war, waving on the floor of Parliament poisoned dum-dum bullets that the government was supposedly issuing to the Home Guard to use on the workers. Meanwhile, the SPD asked for, and got, more large shipments of weapons from the Bolsheviks (even if, again, by modern American standards, these were trivial amounts of weapons).

Although only a minority of the SPD leadership actually wanted war, they all believed fervently that the "triumph of the workers" was inevitable, and a hard core of militants was able to dictate SPD policy - as had been seen in the general strike, consistency was not a hallmark of the SPD leaders. Naturally, they continued to claim that any violence was due to their opponents. As Upton paraphrases the official SPD position, published in Työmies, "Their [opponents'] sole responsibility for any violence that ensued was further asserted by the doctrine of historical necessity; those who oppose the forces of history are guilty of the violence this causes." Thus, after some waffling, on January 27th, the SPD's Executive Council declared that "It has been decided to take all state power into the trustworthy hands of the nation's workers. . . ." The Civil War was on.

The Civil War

As seems to be the case with most modern civil wars, everyone was expecting this to happen, and was just waiting for the show to begin. Intellectually, the Whites viewed this as a war of independence, against Russia, not a war against the Reds, whom they chose to view as a proxy for the Russians. For the most part, this was not true; the violence was just another in a long line of wars begun by the Left when they could not achieve their goals within an existing system.

Sometimes they manage a veneer of legality for grabbing power that they never intend to risk giving up again, as in 1936 Spain or 1970 Chile; when that fails, as it did in Finland, they turn to direct action. It's not really their fault; it is baked into the way they view the world. Anyone with sense can see the signs long before the fighting actually begins. You might want to take a look around America today.

The government immediately handed over supreme White military power to Mannerheim, who in his high-handed aristocratic way interpreted this as all power, causing tension with the civilian government, which would ultimately, had the war lasted longer, had to have been resolved. As it turned out, though, the government's ministers fled southern Finland, stronghold of the Reds, barely escaping, and were initially dispersed in northern Finland, so Mannerheim was able to do as he pleased with little trouble, in practice largely functioning as the ruler of White Finland during the Civil War.

The pressing problem Mannerheim faced was that he directed no real military power; the government was far behind the Reds in organizing for war. Even with his minimal forces, Mannerheim immediately responded to the SPD's declaration of war with bold assaults on Russian garrisons in White Finland, successfully disarming several with minimal bloodshed, and managing to capture significant stocks of desperately-needed weapons.

The Reds did not engage in immediate military action; there were no White garrisons to attack in Red Finland, and they contented themselves with arresting specific people, when they could find them, which they mostly could not—it appears Finland is, or was, an easy place to hide.

For ten days, both sides made ready. Control of the rail network was crucial; the roads were hard to use and could, at this season, only be travelled by sledge, though frozen lakes could also be crossed by men on foot, but movement at speed of large forces required rail. Mannerheim focused on cementing control in northern Finland, and by mid-February, controlled all north Finland (which was most of Finland, but only half its population). In retrospect, the only chance the Reds had was a massive initial push, since when the war began, only they had organized fighters and weapons.

But they lacked the training and the will, and their decision structure was not nimble. The White and Red armies coalesced during the month of February, while each tried to figure out the best way to defeat the other. As with all things in this somewhat cut-rate war, most of the Red leaders could not put their whole heart into it. This is perhaps the strangest thing about the Civil War—the lack of competence of the Reds. In the usual course of left-wing violence, hard men of power come to the

fore, shoving aside those with less will. That did not happen here.

Soon enough, both sides turned their focus to the rail network, which had main east-west and north-south trunks. For both sides, preventing the other side from attacking along the three north-south trunks became critical. The fighting during the war did not, with a few exceptions, involve large masses of men fighting in positional warfare.

The front lines were, except in a few places located on critical rail junctions, usually many miles apart, miles that were in practice impassable except by small groups of scouts or skirmishers. Conflict, outside the taking of towns and cities using men brought up by rail, mostly involved men shooting at each other from a distance, with few casualties and, if an advance was attempted, victory almost always going to the defenders. Artillery was minimal.

The Bolsheviks promised troops but failed to deliver; the Russian garrisons mostly wanted to go home to Russia, not fight in another foreign war (even if a considerable number did volunteer to fight for the Reds). And although the Bolsheviks sent a lot of weapons, the supply was unreliable, and Lenin's personal intervention was repeatedly necessary to get weapons released. Mannerheim spent the initial days of the war, when not strategizing, aggressively training his men and expanding his army, including through conscription. He also negotiated with the Germans for support, for weapons, for the full return of the Jägers, and for troop support, although the latter was the least important to him, since he wanted to show a Finnish, not a German, victory. His goal was independence, along with destroying Bolshevism.

It is important to remember that at this point the Germans were, in a way, patrons of the Bolsheviks—the German aim was to win the World War, still ongoing, and keeping the Bolsheviks out of the way, avoiding restarting fighting in the East, was their goal. Thus, Mannerheim realized, the Germans were not as anti-Bolshevik as the Finns, and if Germany was needed to win the war, Finland would likely become a German satrapy, defeating the overriding goal of full Finnish independence. As always under Communism, the Reds immediately unleashed a Red Terror in the areas they controlled.

But, by comparative historical standards, it was a fairly restrained Red Terror. The usual Left mechanism of "Revolutionary Courts" was used, combined with opportunistic murders by Red Guards, and the target was any members of the Home Guard, or those politically opposed to the revolutionary Left. However, as with so much about the Finnish Reds, this was terror-lite, or in the eyes of the Bolsheviks,

an incompetent Terror.

The Revolutionary Courts mostly handed out fines and imprisonment, not executions, and in a rare departure from revolutionary Left orthodoxy, focused not on class membership, but specific proven actions deemed to be harmful to the working class. The Red Guards were annoyed at this, wanting just to kill class enemies, and engaged in parallel organized murders. But these were relatively few in number, except in Helsinki, where the Red Guard in practice ran the city and the initial Red Terror was more significant - but still modest by usual revolutionary Left standards.

Perhaps this was some quirk of the Finns themselves, slow to rage, or maybe the short duration of the war and the need to focus on immediate concerns meant less immediate killing, and the Reds would have unleashed a greater terror over time. Later events suggest the latter.

Many more Reds than Whites died in the Civil War. In 1998 the Finnish government commissioned a study to determine, so far as possible, the names and details about every person killed during the war and its immediate aftermath. (I assume this was non-political and accurate, but have no way to determine if that's true).

The total was about 37,000, in a nation of 3.2 million people. Of those, about 9,000 were killed in battle; 9,000 were murdered or executed; and 13,000 died in prison camps. But 27,000 were Reds and 5,000 were Whites (with 5,000 "other," presumably Russians or those impossible to determine). 7,500 Reds were executed or murdered; only 1,500 Whites.

The disparity wasn't because of the more merciful character of the Reds, but because the Reds captured few prisoners in battle and captured no towns or cities they did not initially hold. The Whites weren't merciful either, though. Often the Whites killed prisoners out of hand on the grounds they were not legitimate wartime opponents, but traitors and murderers. (Captured Russians fighting for the Reds were almost invariably shot).

Mannerheim waffled on what treatment should be meted out to captured Reds, sometimes calling for courts martial after the war, sometimes implying they should be shot immediately, so in effect he was responsible for much of the killing of prisoners. This was probably a mistake, since most of these men were probably simply misguided, and the actual architects of the Civil War mostly escaped punishment

after the war, hiding abroad.

The role of the civil service deserves its own attention. Most of the bureaucracy was trapped in Red Finland, so Mannerheim did not benefit from their service, which they would mostly no doubt have given, since most of the civil service was "bourgeois" by Left definition. The Reds dismissed the bureaucrats from their posts for refusing to work, and tried to administer the existing machinery of government themselves. This was largely a failure. However, the crucial postal and rail services kept working, more or less, thanks to the efforts of the lower-level workers who may not have been Reds but were willing to keep working, in part simply to feed their families.

The banks mostly refused to open, but the Reds controlled the Central Bank, and simply blew open the vaults and helped themselves to all the cash on hand to pay their bills, then printed more. (C. Jay Smith notes that this "operation [was] facilitated by the fact that the [Red] Minister of Finance, Edward Gylling, was an ex-burglar").

Printing money would have ultimately crashed the Red economy, but did not within the three-month period of the war. Telegraph workers stuck around—and, since they were, according to Upton, "notoriously White sympathizers," proceeded to pass secrets to Mannerheim. (Of course, the usual term for refusing to work is "strike." Upton adopts the Red characterization of any refusal to work for the Reds instead as "sabotage," aligning himself with the Reds—similarly, no person is ever described by Upton as "notoriously a Red sympathizer"; negative emotionally-laden terms are reserved for Whites).

Food was also a problem for the Reds; they quickly discovered all their wild claims of food hoarding were false, and so had to rely on Russian imports, which were sketchy at best, along with seizing any food they could find. But they managed to avoid starvation.

The Reds were also disappointed in the workers who were supposedly the core of their support. After years of relentless propaganda, most did support the Reds. However, Upton makes clear that generally the workers offered "low productivity and rising expectations"—in other words, they wanted more pay for less work, and, no surprise, "pious exhortations" had little effect. Again, in three months this did not cause real problems, and many of the workers were happy to join the Red Guard, simply to get pay and food, and opportunity for loot, so adequate troops were not really a problem for the Reds.

Demonstrating their usual tendency to lack of focus, the SPD leadership spent quite a bit of time during the war planning for a postwar socialist society, which would have democracy again, since everyone knew democracy inevitably led to socialism. And having no dynamic and charismatic leaders, they strangled themselves on committees and "democracy" within their structures, compared to the Whites, who operated much more efficiently, even though they had only a skeleton government.

An interesting aspect of the Finnish political division is that before and during the war, Finnish artists all supported the Whites. We associate artists with the Left, but that is largely historical happenstance. For a century, Finnish culture had been organized around a vision of Finland as an independent nation with its own deep culture. Thus, it is no surprise that artists, and all the cultural elite, had no sympathy for the Left, with its perceived desire to subjugate Finland to Russia and rejection of Finnish culture in favor of an alien ideology.

This demonstrates it is a mistake, and historically false as I have discussed elsewhere, to believe that artists necessarily lean left—and, in fact, the Right today desperately needs outstanding artists. Doubtless this rejection by the cultural elite frustrated the Reds, a feeling exacerbated by no public demonstrations of popular support, in part because Finland is cold and the culture not prone to overt emotion, but mostly because those not on the Left stuck in Red Finland saw "the Reds as betraying the national cause," in Upton's words, and simply stayed out of the way.

The Red Guards were used as the formal military of the rebels, though not all were sent to the front. Training was nominal at best—the Reds had the loyalty of few men with experience of military command, almost zero NCOs or professional officers.

The negative impact of poor training was exacerbated because pseudo-democracy was the order of the day, thus taking orders wasn't the forte of the Red Guards, who, no surprise, often preferred simply to loot and pillage, rather than frontally assault enemy positions.

When orders were received, often units chose whether or not to obey, and in any case the Red leadership often had little knowledge of where units were. Panic among the Red Guards after any battlefield reverse was very common, and discipline for such failures, and worse ones, such as outright cowardice or looting, was none.

While the Bolsheviks supplied a great deal to the Reds, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed on March 3, required the Russians to leave Finland immediately, and to cease supporting the Reds. The Bolsheviks had no choice but to sign, and anyway Finland was the least of their concerns. Lenin told the other Bolsheviks that after a "breathing space," world revolution would solve the problem in the Red Finns' favor.

When other Bolsheviks demanded they nonetheless keep materially supporting the Red Finns, Lenin said "Wars are not won by enthusiasm but by technical superiority. Have you got an army? Can you give me anything but blather and slogans?" Nonetheless, he agreed to keep supplies flowing to the Reds *sub rosa*, but at a lesser level than before, and as the Russians left Finland to return home, they mostly gave their weapons to the Red Finns. Bolshevik volunteers in modest quantities (Upton estimates up to 4,000, or about ten percent of Red front-line total troops) also remained to fight with the Finnish Reds. Of course, this gave force to the Whites' claim that the Reds, by allying with Russians, were fighting against Finnish independence, so it was a double-edged sword for the Reds, costing them propaganda points.

When battle was fully joined in various locations, at the end of February, it centered around thrusts along the rail lines, aiming to take control of crucial chokepoints. The Reds were helped by that they initially held most of these points and they also had several armored trains supplied by the Russians. The Whites were helped by their superior organization and training.

Fighting was concentrated in three areas along the three main north-south lines—the Häme region in the west, which included the city of Tampere, site of the largest battle in the war; Savo in the central section of the country; and Karelia in the east, toward Lake Ladoga and what was now Petrograd. The Reds, knowing they were under time pressure (and fearful, in addition, of German aid to the Whites), and holding the crucial city of Tampere already, attacked north in Häme on March 9. If they had been successful, they could have severed Mannerheim's hold on the northern east-west rail line, splitting his forces in two and likely defeating the Whites. But they failed.

On March 15, with inferior numbers, Mannerheim then attacked south, using frontal assaults for the most part, simply because those were dictated by terrain and weather. He isolated Tampere, but was unable to quickly capture the city, which had around 4,000 Red fighters. Mannerheim retrenched, among other moves bringing the Jäger regiment, regarded as the most competent force he had, to Tampere.

By April 4, using artillery and street-by-street fighting, Mannerheim had ground down the Red defenses, and captured Tampere on April 5. This probably decided the Civil War; by this point Mannerheim had destroyed one of the two Red major armies, killed 2,000 Reds (as against 600 White dead), and captured 11,000. Moreover, Mannerheim's troops had made significant inroads in Karelia. In other areas the Reds tried to push forward, and failed, although in several areas the fighting was bitter and resulted in hundreds dead.

Red morale collapsed. As always, the Red leaders did not shine; they peddled delusional lies to their followers while making plans to escape themselves. They could have fought on; they still had 30,000 men on the front lines, and at least another 30,000 Red Guards in rear areas. Moreover, they still had geographic links to Russia; they had not been split, merely lost their western forces. They still held the capital, Helsinki.

However, their cause took another hit when on April 3 the Germans landed 10,000 troops in extreme southern Finland, on the Hanko Peninsula. These took Turku, and the Red civilian leadership promptly fled Helsinki, the obvious next target for the Germans, while lying they had not, leaving their leaderless troops behind to defend the city. Those troops lost quickly to the Germans, so the capital fell to the Whites.

The Red military leadership then ordered all remaining troops and the non-front line Red Guards to fall back eastwards, toward Russia, abandoning even positions that were not under immediate threat. The Reds fled east on foot from their various positions, large and small, discipline falling apart, killing and looting along the way, making this the month with the highest body count for the Red Terror. (This suggests that the extreme Red Terror common to all revolutionary Left regimes was mostly just partially delayed by circumstance, and that had the Reds won they would have killed much larger numbers of people).

The SPD leadership, on April 14, simply abandoned the fight, fleeing to Russia (from whence those who survived the purges would return, in 1939, to again attempt to subjugate the Finns to Communism) while exhorting their followers to keep fighting, to cover their escape—an orthodox Marxist option, but not one that earned them any honor among their followers, or Finns generally.

The Red rank-and-file didn't get far, being encircled near Lahti, and 20,000 of them surrendered by May 2. Those whose original station had been farther east, in Karelia, another 18,000 men, centered

around Viipuri (now Vyborg, in Russia), had been defeated by April 29 (after engaging in mass executions of White prisoners).

This marked the end of large-scale fighting.

So, by May, the Whites had won, saving the nation and ensuring its independence, and they had 80,000 prisoners whose crimes had to be dealt with. All the authors maunder on about the supposed postwar "White Terror." To call right-wing restoration of the rule of law "terror" at all is mostly a misnomer—a very deliberate one, designed to conceal the essential fact that terror is a standard tool of the Left, but rarely used by the Right.

Terror as used by the Left is violence outside the rule of law directed at enemies to break their will; guilt or innocence of action is irrelevant, the point is to keep the populace as a whole terrified and therefore compliant. But it is a historical fact that the Right rarely, if ever, relies on such methods. Instead, the Right views punitive repression of specific guilty individuals who are proven to be, or are known to be, guilty, as a tool of restoring and maintaining power. This deliberate confusion of the word "terror" to cover two distinct tendencies is not accidental; it is designed to protect the Left from the opprobrium of their actions.

True, one might argue that killings of prisoners by the Finnish Whites were "terror." No doubt those shot were in fear. But those surrendering risk being killed in any war due to the height of emotions and the charge of adrenaline, and the goal of their killing was simply not the same as Left terror directed at civilians. No argument can be made that post-war trials by the Whites were "terror."

They followed the entire structure of the rule of law, including appeals, but it is that period to which the mendacious term "White Terror" is usually applied by Left propagandists, both of Finland and in other places where the Right has beaten down Left savagery, such as Hungary in 1919 or Spain in 1939 (though, from recent events in Spain, it appears that beating it down again there will be necessary).

It is also true, more generally, that formal right-wing political repression reactive to preceding left-wing terror is difficult to analyze, because unlike left-wing political terror, a global phenomenon that has killed well more than a hundred million people, right-wing political killings are something that have never occurred on a wide scale, always only briefly, during and after wars, though often without the punctilious application of the rule of law the White Finns insisted on. (I leave aside here, for later further treatment and distinction, the brief mid-century period of twentieth-century "right-wing" ideological

murders based in race and religion).

Did Pinochet's extrajudicial killings of a few thousand known Communists, whose rule would have meant the deaths of hundreds of thousands or millions, constitute "terror"? Not in the same sense as the countless global Red Terrors. Pinochet's targets were few in number, and they were guilty, of specific crimes, not being "class enemies." Pinochet's real crime was beating the Left, and he has never been forgiven, nor will he be, until the global Left is utterly and permanently broken and destroyed.

The reality in Finland was that even though many trials were held, very few people were executed after the war—thirty, to be precise, after 265 death sentences were confirmed by the Supreme Court, which rejected some of the 403 original death sentences on appeal (although several thousand captives had already been summarily killed during the war, to be sure).

In the usual right-wing way, quite a few prison sentences of short duration were handed out, which were quickly commuted or amnestied in almost all instances—by the end of 1918, in fact, with every single prisoner being released by 1927. The biggest failure that can be laid at the feet of the Whites is the death of 13,000 prisoners between May and August in prison camps, of malnutrition-exacerbated disease.

Of course, this was the height of the Spanish flu, and food was short in the camps because food was short everywhere, not due to deliberate starvation. So perhaps there was little way to avoid these deaths, but it still is a strike against the Whites. Naturally, though, the mythology of the prison camps has been used ever since by the Left to further whip up class hatred.

So ended the Civil War. Mannerheim, hero of the hour, was soon enough sidelined by the White civilian leadership, tired of his high-handed ways. Twenty years later, in the Winter War, Mannerheim helped to save his country again. But that is another story, as also is how immediately the Finnish peasants were rewarded for their loyalty to the Whites with extensive land reform, and how within a very few years, the Finnish Left were fully readmitted to politics, though they failed to achieve working-class political unity, and they suffered social debilities for another twenty years.

Still, Finnish society knitted itself together, no doubt because the winning side did not have an ideology, and was happy to simply return to the days of parliamentary rule, and very happy that Finland had, at

last, achieved independence.

And what does all this tell an American of today? Quite a bit. First, that the revolutionary Left will never stop voluntarily. They cannot; to do so contradicts the basic premises of their world view, today as in 1789, and all the years in between, most of all that human perfectibility is achievable and that any price, especially a price paid by those who would deny others heaven on earth, is worth paying.

Second, for the Left, whenever power is not handed to them, those who do hold power are held to be necessarily illegitimate, and any action to strip them of power justified.

Third, they can be stopped, because in their nature their reach exceeds their grasp, but stopping them cannot be done with words, since to the Left, words are meaningless. It will always and ever, until their hold on the human imagination is broken forever, be only possible to stop them by force. This is our future, whether we like it or not.

We can hope it will be through the current institutions of order, if those are not yet wholly subverted by the Left. If not, it will be by some other mechanism, as the Finns found to their sorrow. The time is not yet - it probably would have been, had Donald Trump beaten the margin of fraud, since our Left would have been certain to, and was preparing to, react in the same way as their ideological predecessors and comrades, the Finnish Left, did in 1918. Maybe we get a break for a while. Or maybe not.

Charles is a business owner and operator, in manufacturing, and a recovering big firm M&A lawyer. He runs the blog, [The Worthy House](#).

The [image](#) shows "The Attack," by Edvard Isto, painted in 1899. [The Russian doubleheaded eagle is attacking the maiden Finland].

