

Ministry of National Defence
PORTUGUESE COMMISSION OF MILITARY HISTORY

ACTA 2024

*The role of the military in political transitions:
from the 18th century to the present day*

XLIX International Congress of Military History

1 - 6 September 2024, Lisbon

Volume I





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Published by:

Portuguese Commission of Military History

Av. Ilha da Madeira, n.º 1, Room 332

1400-204 Lisboa - Portugal

Coordinator and editor: Jorge Silva Rocha, PhD

Book Cover Design: Jorge Silva Rocha

Book cover images: Alfredo Cunha (*front*) and Eduardo Gageiro (*back*)

ISBN: 978-989-8593-31-3

DOI for this volume: <https://doi.org/10.56092/GDSK9438>

Printed in Portugal by Rainho & Neves - Artes Gráficas

“I SHALL CROWN YOU KING” THE MILITARY AND POLITICAL TRANSACTION IN FINLAND 1918 – 1919

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to observe the role of the military and political transaction in Finland 1918 and 1919. This period included different intrigues and turmoil of the newly independent country, where both inner and outer military factors were involved. It shows how different interests and military presence of Great Powers effected Finland, which had its own goals and intrigues during the early years which followed the independence of Finland.

Finland became independent in December 1917 and soon after the Finnish Civil War broke out. The Whites were supported by the Germans and the Reds by the Bolsheviks. The German military aid to Finnish was significant. They had given military training to Finnish men, so-called Jägers, with the aim to liberate Finland from Russia. The German Baltic Sea Division also arrived in Finland in April 1918. The Finnish Civil War was won by the government troops, the Whites. German troops stayed in Finland although the Finnish Civil War ended in May 1918. Military support against the Red menace was welcomed in Finland. The German influence in Finland grew stronger. A German was elected King of Finland. After the armistice of the First World War, the newly elected king renounced the throne and the German troops left Finland. After this Finland tried to find allies from the victorious Entente countries. The presence of

these countries grew. Lack of foreign military support and co-operation meant that Finland became a republic.

Keywords: Finland, Civil War, military, political transaction

Introduction

In Finland the years 1918 and 1919 were a time of intrigues and turmoil of the newly independent country, where both inner and outer military factors were involved. It shows how different interest and military presence of Great Powers effected Finland, which had its own goals and intrigues during the early years which followed the independence of Finland in December 1917.

By 1917, the social situation had escalated. The Russian Empire stumbled and fell because of the First World War. The February Revolution ended the reign of the Tsars. A power vacuum was created, followed by unrest, violence, and murder. The historic turmoil gave the Finns a more tangible opportunity to seek independence.⁽¹⁾

The idea of independence had been growing in Finland since the end of the 19th century, but the year 1917 was the year of collapse of the Russian Empire and the year of independence of Finland. But long all were uncertain. The question was whether the Finns should follow their dreams or their reason. The Finnish politician, later President of Finland, K. J. Ståhlberg said, in July 1917:

“In the quest for Finland's independence there are two choices: either to make use of the opportunities offered by the facts and to strive forward again from the position thus gained, or to throw oneself at the mercy of emotions and let oneself be led by them, regardless of the facts.”⁽²⁾

The end of year 1917

External and internal factors intensified social unrest throughout 1917. In November 1917 there were still 100,000 Russian soldiers in Finland. The October Revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power in Russia in November 1917. According to historian Timo Vihavainen, without the October Revolution there would have been no uprising

1. Risto Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

2. Eduskunta (The Finnish Diet), Minutes of the Finnish Diet, 17 July 1917.

in Finland.⁽³⁾ On the day of the Bolshevik coup, 7 November 1917, Russian sailors in Finland, led by a Red Finnish shoemaker, murdered one of the richest men in Finland. The White Guard took up arms against those Russian sailors.

The Russian Bolshevik revolution had an impact on Finland and was an inspiration to the Red Finns. The Bolsheviks also gave weapons to the Finnish Reds. In the middle of the November, during the General Strike, the revolution in Finland was about to start, but the Reds' intention failed. Foreign influence on the tense situation was noticed. A newspaper wrote: "The earth is filled with a feeling of shame and anguish when one brother wipes the blood of another brother from a foreigner's weapon".⁽⁴⁾

At the same time as the newspapers were reporting the tyranny of the hooligans, the outrageous violence and looting of the Red Guards, Bolshevik Joseph Stalin appeared at the Helsinki Workers' House to stir up the Finnish Social Democrats. In a speech on 27 November 1917, Stalin agitate the Red Finns to revolution. Two months later the Finnish Reds began their revolution.⁽⁵⁾

Before and after the breakout of Civil War the bourgeoisie and the workers armed themselves. The weapons ranged from shotguns to smuggled rifles. At the end of October 1917, the s/s Equity, which had left Danzig, arrived in Ostrobothnia with a cargo of 6,500 Russian 3-line rifles, 30 Maxim machine guns and cartridges to the White Finns. At the beginning of December 1917, s/s Equity brought more weapons to Finland.⁽⁶⁾ This was not the first time that weapons had been smuggled into Finland. In 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, activists had persuaded the Japanese to send weapons to Finland on board the s/s John Grafton.

In addition to the weapons on s/s Equity, there were also a handful of Finns on board. They had gained military training in Germany since 1915 and gained war experience on the German Eastern Front. In total, Germany trained about 2,000 Finnish men, known as Jägers, between 1915 and 1918. The Finnish activist's unofficial and secret Jäger diplomacy paid off. The vanguard of Jägers, which arrived at the end of 1917, were to train the white Finns and organise the distribution of weapons.⁽⁷⁾

The year 1918

The White Guard was announced as an official troop by the Finnish Senate. At the same time the Reds were preparing for revolution. At the end of January 1918, the Finnish Reds started a revolution against the legal government in Helsinki. At the same time,

3. Timo Vihavainen, *Stalin ja suomalaiset*, (Helsinki: Otava, 2012).

4. Helsingin Sanomat, 25 November 1917.

5. Vihavainen, *Stalin ja suomalaiset*.

6. J. O. Hannula, *Suomen vapaussodan historia*, (Porvoo: WSOY, 1934), 40.

7. Hannula, *Suomen vapaussodan historia*, 40–41.

Mannerheim began to disarm the Russian troops in Ostrobothnia, in Western Finland. The Civil War, which had begun, did not remain an internal one.

As was often the case in other civil wars, foreign powers intervened. Finland's neighbours had an interest in getting involved in the war. Historian Jussi T. Lappalainen interprets that "the incipient war deeply affected the other Baltic Sea powers, Soviet Russia, Germany and Sweden."⁽⁸⁾ And these three countries were not the only ones, who intervened. It would be simplified to say that the Whites were supported by the Germans and the Reds by the Bolsheviks, when there were also other parties involved. Swedish volunteers participated in the War alongside the Whites, the Russians were seen on both sides and the Western Entente countries had their own goals. A civil war can therefore be more complex than wars between countries.

The Finnish Civil War was also influenced by the ideas of Russian Bolshevism and by nationalism, perhaps the most central idea of the 19th century. Lenin's Bolshevik Russia urged the Finnish Reds to revolt. The White Jäger movement was driven by nationalism. The international situation and shift of power had its own significant effect. The Finnish Civil War did not take place in a vacuum. It was influenced by the events of the First World War. Historian Ohto Manninen argues that

"Finland's War of Independence was not an isolated event but was fought in the middle of the First World War. Thus, like the whole process of Finland's independence, it was part of the struggle between the great powers and part of the attempted world revolution that had begun on the ruins of the Russian Empire".⁽⁹⁾

The Finnish Civil War was more or less amateurish. In Finland, according to historian Vesa Vares, there were "amateurish Whites, even more amateurish Reds, poorly motivated Russians and, as the only professional fighting force, an efficient German division".⁽¹⁰⁾ The Finnish Reds had less military training than the Finnish Whites. The reason was the Jägers. One of the Jägers wrote afterwards, that the Jägers played a major role in the war and that they had moral impact on their troops.⁽¹¹⁾

The Peace treaty between Germany and Soviet Russia was signed in Brest-Litovsk, 3 March 1918. As a result of the peace, the influence of the Bolshevik Russians in Finland diminished. As the influence of the Russians declined the influence of the Germans increased. Already before the peace treaty the number of the Russian troops declined. The most important part of the Bolsheviks was the supply of weapons and military advisers. For example at the beginning of February 1918 Lenin sent a military train

8. Jussi T. Lappalainen, *Itsenäisen Suomen synty*, (Jyväskylä: Gummerus, 1967), 114–115.

9. Ohto Manninen, *Vapaussota – osana suursotaa ja Venäjän imperiumin hajoamista*, <https://www.vapaussota.com/copy-of-akateemikko-eino-jutikkala> [accessed 29 August 2024]

10. Vesa Vares, *Viileää veljeyttä - Suomi ja Saksa 1918–1939*, (Helsinki: Otava, 2018), 29.

11. Olof Enckell, *Jääkärien tarina*, (Helsinki: Otava, 1956), 253.

to Finland. The Finnish Reds received about 10,000 rifles and ammunition. The same month Germany sent weapons to the Finnish Whites. The Brest-Litovsk peace treaty was followed by the German troops landing the Åland Islands two days later. Swedish troops, which had occupied the islands, left Åland.

In February 1918 Finnish diplomats in Berlin asked for intervention from Germany. The request was not supported by all Finnish officials. The Germans intervened because of their own interests. In addition to the intervention, Finland and Germany signed a peace treaty on 18 March 1918. Thus, the German influence in Finland was significant. The German expeditionary force, led by von der Goltz, landed at Hanko in Southern Finland, and other German troops at Loviisa in South Eastern Finland, in April 1918. The German troops gained more control over Southern Finland. From Hanko the German troops advanced towards Helsinki, the capital of Finland, which they also conquered.⁽¹²⁾

Military support against the Red menace was welcomed in Finland. In April 1918, a teacher and a Jäger activist wrote: "Our only natural ally is Germany, and it is fortunate that this only ally is strong and righteous".⁽¹³⁾ There was a strong belief in German victory in the First World War. Germany was seen, even as a 'natural ally' of Finland. Germany had defeated Russia.

Not everyone was enthusiastic about the arrival of the Germans. Mannerheim mentions in his memoirs that he was unaware of inviting them to Finland. Before the arrival of German troops, the commander-in-chief of the White Army, General Mannerheim, tried to solve the Civil War by the largest battle of the war in Tampere, in March 1918.⁽¹⁴⁾

Germans stayed in Finland after the Finnish Civil War ended in May 1918 to the victory of the Whites. The White Victory Parade was held in Helsinki on 16 May 1918, with Mannerheim in the lead. The White General in his white fur cap greeted the steel-helmeted German General von der Goltz at the Senate Square, in the centre of Helsinki, which had been captured by von der Goltz. A few weeks later, at the end of May, Mannerheim resigned. The reason for his resignation was disagreement over German influence on Finnish politics. Mannerheim opposed the German orientation.⁽¹⁵⁾ As historian Touko Perko mentions, both Mannerheim and von der Goltz fought their own war, as they had their own goals and they had seen the other as a rival.⁽¹⁶⁾ In Mannerheim's memoirs, in which he is naturally the main character, von der Goltz is mentioned only three times. As a comparison the German general mentions Mannerheim almost 30 times in his own memoirs.⁽¹⁷⁾

12. Rüdiger von der Goltz, *Toimintani Suomessa ja Baltian maissa*, (Porvoo: WSOY 1920).

13. Martti Pihkala, *Millainen Suomi meidän on luotava?*, (Jyväskylä: Gummerus, 1918).

14. G. Mannerheim, *Muistelmat, ensimmäinen osa*, (Helsinki: Otava, 1951), 302–303.

15. Mannerheim, *Muistelmat*, 354–355.

16. Touko Perko, *Haastaja Saksasta 1918 - von der Goltz ja Mannerheim*.

17. Mannerheim, *Muistelmat*; von der Goltz, *Toimintani Suomessa*.

After the Finnish Civil War, Finland was a vassal state of Germany. General von der Goltz became a key actor in Finland. It was seen that the Germans would have had the right to veto decisions. Finland was built according to the German model. The Finnish General Staff was organised in the German style and a German Colonel was the chief of the General Staff.⁽¹⁸⁾

Finland was oriented towards Germany, so Germany's enemies were Finland's enemies or possibly future enemies. The British Consul in Helsinki considered the possibility of urging the British to leave Finland, as the British were not warmly welcomed. In the autumn of 1918, there were indications that Germany, together with the Finns, was about to attack the British troops on the Northern Russia. However, British intelligence was partly exaggerated, as German troops in Finland were estimated to a number between 55 000 and 72 000 men. In reality, the number of German troops, did not exceed 13 000.⁽¹⁹⁾

The Germans reconnoitered the roads leading to Finland's eastern border, which might be used for military operations against British troops. The Germans also investigated the situation in East Karelia for a possible military operation, exchanged information with the Finns and carried out secret reconnaissance. Finland, Germany and Great Britain had to find out the situation in their potential areas of operation by means of reconnaissance.⁽²⁰⁾

Pro-German atmosphere was at its peak in October 1918. The Finnish parliament elected Prince Friedrich Karl of Hesse to be the King of Finland. One month later, after the armistice of the First World War, the newly elected king renounced the throne and the German troops left Finland. The reorientation led to the change of both the pro-German Prime Minister Paasikivi's government and regent Svinhufvud. Mannerheim followed pro-German Svinhufvud as the Regent of Finland. The presence of victorious Entente countries grew.⁽²¹⁾

The year 1919

After the armistice of the First World War, the Pro-German orientation was followed by Entente orientation. Finland was seeking cooperation and recognitions of independence, and most of all allies against the threat posed by Soviet Russia. There was also the question of Russia to be resolved. As early as 1918, the White Russian emigrants had been talking to General von der Goltz about an operation against St Petersburg to overthrow the

18. Reino Arimo, *Suomen puolustussuunnitelmat 1918–1939, Ensimmäiset vuodet 1918–1919*, (Helsinki: Sotatieteen laitos, 1986), 36–42.

19. Juho Kotakallio, *Hänen majesteettinsa agentit. Brittiedustelu Suomessa 1918–1941*, (Jyväskylä: Atena, 2014), 44.

20. Kotakallio, *Hänen majesteettinsa agentit*, 44.

21. Vesa Vares, *Kuninkaan tekijät. Suomalainen monarkia 1917–1919. Myytti ja todellisuus*. (Porvoo: WSOY, 1998).

Bolshevik regime. At the turn of 1918–1919, negotiations began with the White Russians and representatives of the Western Entente.⁽²²⁾

General Mannerheim met a British diplomat in Stockholm on 17 November 1918. Mannerheim emphasised three threats: a possible second coup attempt by the Red Finns, supported by the Bolsheviks; an invasion of Finland by the Bolsheviks; and, thirdly, the prevailing political situation. Mannerheim believed that the situation in Finland would be helped by the arrival of the British Royal Navy in the Gulf of Finland, but also by food supplies which would stabilise the internal situation. Still, in early 1919, the German orientation caused difficulties for the Anglo-Finnish relations.⁽²³⁾

But there were also other intrigues in Helsinki where agents from various countries trying to influence events in Finland, Russia and the Baltic States. Some of the Finnish Reds, who had lost the Civil War, sought revanche. The White Finnish activists were dreaming of a Greater Finland and an intervention. The aim of White Russian General Yudenich was in St Petersburg. Finland was strategically located for the planned invasion of St Petersburg. The time looked perfect as the Bolshevik Russia had difficulties.

In Finland, the plan was that Mannerheim, would be brought to power with the help of the White Finnish activists and St Petersburg would be conquered. Mannerheim himself was in favour of taking St Petersburg.⁽²⁴⁾ According to a British report drawn up by the representative, Mannerheim was, in February 1919, 'very willing to take St Petersburg and crush the Bolsheviks there'. However, Mannerheim expressed the view that the initiative for an operation in St Petersburg must come from either Britain or France. The start of the project was dependent on Finland receiving outside help.⁽²⁵⁾

Admiral Walter Cowan commanded the British naval division that arrived in the Baltic in 1919, following on from the naval division that had arrived in the Gulf of Finland in December 1918. Cowan's naval division was based on the Estonian coast, Tallinn and the Finnish coast. In April 1919, the Finns had requested the British Navy in the Gulf of Finland because of the Red Fleet.

An attack on St Petersburg seemed to be only a matter of time, and rumours of an invasion were rife. In the spring of 1919, Major John Scale, who had arrived from Stockholm, took note of rumours that Finnish troops under Mannerheim were about to attack St Petersburg. Scale dined with Mannerheim but was not told of his intentions. Scale asked Mannerheim directly what he would do when he reached St Petersburg.

22. Juhani Suomi, *Kuin lastu laineilla. Itsenäisen Suomen turvallisuuspolitiikan alkutaival 1918–1925*, (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2023), 69–73.

23. Kotakallio, *Hänen majesteettinsa agentit*, 45.

24. Martti Ahti, *Salaliiton ääriiviivat: oikeistoradikalismi ja hyökkäävä idänpolitiikka 1918–1919*, (Espoo: Weilin + Göös, 1987).

25. Kotakallio, *Hänen majesteettinsa agentit*, 59.

Mannerheim replied: "My dear Major, when I get to St Petersburg, I will crown you King".⁽²⁶⁾

Mannerheim's contribution to the planning of the St Petersburg operation was significant. He knew émigré generals who would also have liked to see St Petersburg captured. General Mannerheim, who was also the Regent of Finland, delayed the establishment of the new form of government. A group of right activists planned a coup d'état in Finland. But there was lack of domestic support and lack of foreign military support.⁽²⁷⁾ This meant that Finland became a republic. The White General Mannerheim was not elected President of Finland in 1919. At the same time there was unrest on the Finnish border. An uprising began in Ingria and Finnish volunteers moved across the border to fight against the Bolshevik threat.

The White Russian General Yudenich advanced as far as Tsarskoye Selo, but in October 1919 he was forced to retreat towards Estonia. The Finnish support was not forthcoming, despite Mannerheim's efforts to secure sufficient support. Mannerheim's appeal for the launch of the St Petersburg operation, which he sent from Paris to President Ståhlberg on 28 October 1919, is well known. At the same time, Mannerheim was in contact with key supporters of the intervention in Paris. From Paris two Finnish men and a well-known anti-Bolshevik Boris Savinkov left for London, where a meeting was arranged with Winston Churchill, the British Minister of War, on 1 November 1919, but the British could not help the St Petersburg operation. The negotiations in Paris were also unsuccessful, and Mannerheim reported this to the activists in Finland, who for a while held out hope of a coup and the St Petersburg operation. With the end of Yudenich's St Petersburg offensive, the Allied intervention policy came to an end.

Conclusions

A review of the historical record reveals that the factors that are subsequently regarded as self-evident were not always so apparent to those who were directly involved in the events in question. The period of military and political upheaval in Finland was shaped not only by developments in the international situation but also by the evolution of internal developments. As the First World War drew to a close, Finland, which initially opted for a monarchy, ultimately became a republic, though not a dictatorship. The process of growth of the newly independent state was not without challenges, as evidenced by the internal conflicts and rival foreign aims.

26. Henry McGrady Bell, *Land of Lakes. Memories Keep Me Company*, (London: Robert Hale, 1950, 117.

27. Ahti, *Salaliiton ääriviivat*.

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DOI for this text: <https://doi.org/10.56092/XSJH3829>