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PRESIDENT P. E. SVINHUFVUD AND THE DEFENCE FORCES DURING THE 1932 ABORTIVE MÄNTSÄLÄ COUP ATTEMPT IN FINLAND

Pasi TUUNAINEN (Finland)

Abstract

Finland is a Nordic country that has been a multi-party parliamentary democracy since its independence in 1917. The President of the Republic has had a dual role as the head of state and the peacetime Commander-in-Chief of the country's military forces. The military was to defend the nation and protect the legal societal system and thus they could not participate in any political activities. Yet in late February 1932, the extreme right-wing Lapua Movement supported by some elements of the Finnish Civil Guard Defence Corps staged a coup d'état attempt to overthrow the government. It started with an incident and a show of force in Mäntsälä, a small town in southern Finland. The top civilian and military leaders disagreed on how to respond to the crisis. The Civil Guard and army leadership were divided over the issue and even the loyalty of some national army units was questionable. However, President P. E. Svinhufvud took firm action. He appointed a crisis staff and used the army. With the backing of its commander he declared a state of emergency, alerted the military, and ordered the army to secure the capital Helsinki and ordered the military to place the rebel leaders under arrest. Peace and order were restored and the week-long coup attempt ended without bloodshed after the President gave a radio speech and ordered the rebels to disperse. In this paper I use qualitative analysis and examine the respective roles and relationships of President Svinhufvud and the leaders of the Finnish Defence Forces (including the Civil Guards)

during the Mäntsälä abortive coup. In doing so I use archival records, newspapers and existing research literature commenting on the reasons why the coup attempt failed.

Keywords: P. E. Svinhufvud, presidential leadership, Lapua Movement, Mäntsälä coup attempt (1932), Finnish defence forces

The Finnish political system

President Pehr Evind Svinhufvud (1861–1944) had long experience of public offices and politics. He had been a lawyer, a regent, speaker of the Senate and Prime Minister (1930–1931). He was a man of conviction who always had emphasised legality and constitutional social order. During the last years of Russian rule, he had objected to Russification programmes. As a consequence, he was sentenced to Siberia where he spent two years in exile during World War I. Svinhufvud served as President from 1931 to 1937.⁽¹⁾

Finnish political life was influenced by the result of the Civil War of 1918. The white side had won the war against the reds with the Civil Guard on the winning white side. In correlation with general European trends certain radical elements emerged. Finnish leftist activists initiated strikes, arson and propaganda. Right-wing activism gained popularity in 1929 with the establishment of the radical right-wing Lapua Movement. It had received inspiration from the Italian style of fascism. Its goal was a total ban on Marxism in Finland. Lapua members began to harass left-wing gatherings and print houses and started expulsions of known communists and socialists to the Soviet border.⁽²⁾

The Incident

The coup attempt to oust the government started on 27 February with an incident in Mäntsälä. There an armed party of men consisting of Lapua men and civil guardsmen interrupted a lawful speech by Dr. Mikko Erich, a social democrat (and former conservative) politician and an MP. Some 400 armed men encircled the venue and managed to stop the event by firing shots in the hall. The Governor of the province Bruno Jalander issued an order to arrest the perpetrators, but armed Lapua Movement supporters remained at the Civil Guard House in Mäntsälä. The rebels demanded the removal of the Minister of the

1. Martti Ahti, *Kaappaus?: Suojeluskuntaselkkaus 1921, fascismin aave 1927, Mäntsälän kapina 1932*, (Helsinki: Otava, 1990), 326; Seppo Tiihonen, *Pieni piiri: Vallan verkostot 1919–1939*, (Helsinki: BoD, 2021), 121, 132.

2. Jarl Kronlund, *Suomen puolustuslaitos 1918–1939: Puolustusvoimien rauhan ajan historia*, (Porvoo: WSOY, 1988), 361–362; William J. Stover, "Finnish Politics Between the Two World Wars." *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12 (1977), 745.

Interior and the Governor, and soon afterwards for the resignation of the government. Two days later the rebels issued an ultimatum that read:

“Unless the present cabinet immediately resigns and the political course of the country changes, we do not consider that we can preserve peacefulness in the country. In place of the present cabinet, there must come a new cabinet, which is free from party aims and which depends in its action upon the support of patriotic elements of the people.”⁽³⁾

The demands were backed by the mobilisation of more Civil Guard units. The rebels, numbering some armed 6000 men, took control over some localities. They gathered in a few key cities, but the name comes from Mäntsälä where 500–600 rebels were assembled. In the minds of members of the Lapua Movement, it was believed that the government had Marxists in it. The situation seemed dangerous. The Civil Guard Defence Corps was a 100,000-strong organisation of voluntary militia troops. The national army only had 30,000 soldiers. Even though the Civil Guards were at the same time a part of the Defence Forces, they had not been integrated into the national command structure. The task of the Civil Guards was also that of internal defence for the republic against communist subversion and revolutionary activities. The governmental control of this independent organisation was weak. However, many of the Civil Guardsmen were also national army reservists. Paradoxically, there had been competition between the two organisations.⁽⁴⁾

The rebels had sympathisers in high places, most importantly the Commander of the Civil Guards, General Lauri Malmberg. The League of War Veterans was an organisation of veterans of the white side in the Civil War of 1918. It sided with the rebels and urged that General Rudolf Walden be appointed Prime Minister. Walden agreed but only if his close friend, the white General Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, would become Commander-in-Chief. In actual fact, Mannerheim would be the new President because, according to the Finnish constitution, the President of the Republic had a dual role and was to serve as the peace-time Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces. During the Mäntsälä crisis Mannerheim remained an outsider.⁽⁵⁾

3. Lauri Hyvämäki, *Sinistä ja mustaa: Tutkielma Suomen oikeistoradikalismista*, (Helsinki: Otava, 1971), 269–270; Stover, “Finnish Politics Between the Two World Wars”, 741, 745, 752–753; Einar W. Juva, *P. E. Svinhufvud II, 1917–1944* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1961), 464–465; Vesa Määttä, *K. L. Oesch: Ylivoimaa vastassa*, (Helsinki: Gummerus, 2015), 121–122; Väinö Tanner, *Kahden maailmansodan välissä: Muistelmia 20- ja 30-luvuilta*, (Helsinki: Tammi, 1966), 132–133; HS 28.2.1932.

4. Hyvämäki, *Sinistä ja mustaa*, 269–270; Stover, “Finnish Politics Between the Two World Wars”, 741, 745, 752–753; Martti Häikiö, *Suomen leijona: Svinhufvud itsenäisyysmiehenä*, (Jyväskylä: Docendo, 2017), 508–509.

5. Pertti Hartikainen, *Hugo Österman: Sotaväen päällikkö – rakentaja ja puolustaja*, (Helsinki: SKS, 2001), 60, 161; Ahti, *Kaappaus?*, 212, 233; Aarne Sihvo, *Muistelmani II*, (Helsinki: Otava, 1956), 229, 235; Juva, *P. E. Svinhufvud II*, 473; Vesa Saarikoski, *Keskustajääkäri Aarne Sihvo: Demokraatti ja eheyttäjä murrosaikojen asevoimissa*, (Helsinki: SHS, 1997), 258; T. M. Kivimäki, *Suomalaisen politiikan muistelmat*, (Porvoo: WSOY, 1965), 71; Raimo Seppälä, *Rudolf Walden: Isänmaan mies*, (Helsinki: Otava, 1981), 102; Hugo Österman, *Neljännevuosisata elämästäni*, (Porvoo: WSOY, 1966), 88.

The right-wing circles automatically anticipated that Svinhufvud would accede to the demands of the Lapua Movement but the President, who initially had had positive attitudes towards the Lapua Movement, felt he was the main guardian of the constitution who could not accept unconstitutional demands that threatened the democratically-elected governmental institutions. After hearing the rebels' demands, the President summoned the cabinet and held discussions with high-ranking officers. Svinhufvud's reaction was swift and forceful. He refused to meet the rebels and explicitly ordered: "Not even one armed man may come... to the capital city. For this you generals will be responsible".⁽⁶⁾

Managing the crisis

At the height of the crisis President Svinhufvud, who was frustrated with his ministers, gathered a crisis staff. It was an advisory organ, comprised of trusted high-ranking officers and assumed command of both the Civil Guards and the army. In those meetings several options were deliberated but there was disagreement on the course of action. General Aarne Sihvo, the Army Commander, demanded harsh measures and he was supported by key ministers. However, Colonel Väinö Palojarvi from the Headquarters of the Civil Guard Defence Corps warned that there was a concrete threat of a new civil war. His superior General Malmberg and other members of his organisation demanded, like the Lapua men, that the government should, indeed, resign and pressured other members by announcing that they would be ready to resign themselves. General Hugo Österman, the inspector of the infantry, was hesitant and favoured giving in to the demands of the rebels. For the President the Civil Guards should have remained neutral and not joined the rebels, but Malmberg insisted that Civil Guardsmen were in Mäntsälä as private citizens. He also opted to resign but Svinhufvud did not accept it.⁽⁷⁾

The members of the crisis staff were uncertain of how the military would act in case they were ordered to go to the streets. Even though the officer corps had given their oath to defend and uphold the laws of the country many of them had sympathy for the Lapua Movement. The Commander of the 2nd Infantry Division, Colonel Harald Öhquist, basing his views on an inquiry conducted among the officer corps, doubted the loyalty of the officers, many of whom had demanded that they would not have to fight against the rebels. He expressed doubts whether the army could be ordered to conduct internal security missions. In an attempt to curtail the political activities of the military, Sihvo forbade officers from being members of any political organisations. At the same time the political leaders started to make preparations to use the army to stop the rebels.

6. Sihvo, *Muistelmani II*, 219; Österman, *Neljännesvuosisata elämästäni*, 86; Lasse Laaksonen, *Kynän ja miekan kenraali Wallenius*, (Jyväskylä: Docendo, 2021), 282; Stover, "Finnish Politics Between the Two World Wars", 744, 748; Tanner, *Kahden maailmansodan välissä*, 134; Juva, *P. E. Svinhufvud II*, 466–467.

7. Antero Jyränki, *Sotavoiman ylin päällikkyyys*, (Helsinki: Suomalainen Lakimiesyhdistys, 1967), 220, 223; Kronlund, *Suomen puolustuslaitos 1918–1939*, 364, 367; Juva, *P. E. Svinhufvud II*, 468–470; Saarikoski, *Keskustajääkäri Aarne Sihvo*, 278; Laaksonen, *Kynän ja miekan kenraali Wallenius*, 285, 291; Ahti, *Kaappaus?*, 219–220; Määttä, K. L. Oesch, 122–123; Hartikainen, *Hugo Österman*, 159; Häikiö, *Suomen leijona*, 506–508.

At first, the President was not anxious to use the army but rather to negotiate, but he listened to Sihvo's advice.⁽⁸⁾

The position of government became even more difficult than before because the cause of the Lapua Movement gained support from the majority of conservative Coalition Party members, Svinhufvud's own party. Two of their ministers left their posts. One of them was replaced as the 2nd Minister of the Interior by Finnish Major General K. L. Oesch with the responsibility to maintain public order and security. He also liaised with the police forces.⁽⁹⁾

The threat by the Civil Guard Defence Corps organisation irritated President Svinhufvud. With the backing of General Sihvo the President decided to apply the law of protection, legislation originally passed to curtail the communists threatening the country's independence. The law offered a way to solve the problem. Svinhufvud declared a national state of emergency, alerted the military and ordered it to secure the capital city, disarm any rebels and place the rebel leaders under arrest. Five companies of infantry, tanks and artillery were deployed to Helsinki. General Oesch issued instructions to military units that they were to secure order in their respective areas. Soldiers' discharges and leaves were temporarily cancelled and weapons depots and factories were guarded closely. Some company-sized units were moved closer to Mäntsälä and used to capture railroad junctions around the rebel-held localities. Train cars were reserved for troop transport. The military functioned in cooperation with Civil Guard units loyal to the government. In addition, communications were severed: cable censorship was initiated and long-distance calls were forbidden.⁽¹⁰⁾

It was not easy to trust conscript-based military units. There were men from both ends of political spectrum among them and some soldiers refused to obey orders. Thus, the commanders were reluctant to order their men outside of the garrisons let alone give them live ammunition. Reason for suspicion was also that the communists could try to benefit from the situation. Nobody wanted to escalate the situation by using force. Both sides were in contact with each other holding many negotiations during the crisis. One highly respected district chief of the Civil Guards Matti Laurila even prevented the gathering of new rebels from western Finland, thus helping to execute presidential orders. The President did not agree to direct negotiations with the rebels, but he used his friends who had leverage over the Lapua leadership as his emissaries in the field.

8. Aarne Sihvon päiväkäsky 2.3.1932, KA; Helge Smedjebacka, *Jääkärikenraalin elämä: F. U. Fagernäs 1894–1980*. Helsinki: Suomen Klassikkokustannus, 2002, 87; Tanner, *Kahden maailmansodan välissä*, 133–134; Kronlund, *Suomen puolustuslaitos 1918–1939*, 361, 363; Sihvo, *Muistelmani II*, 225–227; Österman, *Neljännesvuosisata elämästäni*, 87; Saarikoski, *Keskustajääkäri Aarne Sihvo*, 276–284; Määttä, K. L. Oesch, 126–127; Martti Sinerma, *Lauri Malmberg ja suojeluskunnat*, (Helsinki: Otava, 1995), 220–226.

9. Kivimäki, *Suomalaisen poliitikon muistelmat*, 72; Kronlund, *Suomen puolustuslaitos 1918–1939*, 364; Määttä, K. L. Oesch, 467.

10. Häikiö, *Suomen leijona*, 498–499; Kronlund, *Suomen puolustuslaitos 1918–1939*, 364–366; Ahti, *Kaappaus?*, 166–168, 176; Juva, *Svinhufvud II*, 472; Saarikoski, *Keskustajääkäri Aarne Sihvo*, 280.

Even the archbishop appealed to the rebels and voiced biblical warnings. However, the President personally called the head of the Vaasa garrison to disarm the rebels in the isolated city of Jyväskylä, but the rebels left home before the order was carried out. Pressure and restlessness was building in the Mäntsälä rebel camp by 1 March.⁽¹¹⁾

To solve the problem the President decided to issue a public statement. After General Malmberg, who was siding with the rebels, refused to deliver it by radio, Svinhufvud ordered Defence Secretary Jalo Lahdensuo to read it on his behalf on 1 March. The crisis climaxed on 2 March when the President himself delivered the speech that was a game changing moment. His tone was milder than before. He promised that only the leaders would be prosecuted. By that evening most of the rebels had gone home but the rebellion was not over. Svinhufvud was not sure that General Sihvo enjoyed respect among the officer corps. On 5 March, therefore, he sent Lieutenant Colonel Elja Rihtniemi from the Headquarters of the Civil Guard as his negotiator to Mäntsälä to negotiate with the rebel leadership. Mäntsälä had been encircled by army units and when the rebel leaders understood the hopefulness of the situation, they surrendered on 6 March.⁽¹²⁾

Conclusion

To conclude we can maintain that the extra-governmental Mäntsälä incident was a test of Finnish parliamentary democracy. President Svinhufvud personally handled the situation. He, a believer in legality, took risks but exhibited strong constitutional presidential leadership. He took charge of the Defence Forces and decided to use the army to stop the rebellion. Commander of the Army General Sihvo's role was also central. Even though there were doubts of loyalty, the national army obeyed and the military yielded to political authority. After the President's radio speech the abortive coup ended peacefully. The majority of rebels dispersed. A few of their leaders were sentenced to prison for short times but the ordinary men were acquitted. As a consequence, the Lapua Movement was abolished and the Civil Guard organisation was purged, suffering a blow. Tighter civilian control of the Defence Forces was instituted and reorganisations made,

11. Yleisesikunnan komento-osaston sotapäiväkirja maaliskuulta 1932, KA; Kertomus Suojeluskuntain Yliesikunnan puhelinpäivystäjän toiminnasta Mäntsälän liikehtimisen aikana 29.2.–6.3.1932. Lauri Malmbergin kokoelma, KA; Kivimäki, *Suomalaisen poliitikon muistelmat*, 69–70; Tanner, *Kahden maailmansodan välissä*, 140; Sihvo, *Muistelmani II*, 224–225, 238–239; Vesa Määttä, *Lakeuksien eversti Matti Laurila*, (Helsinki: Gummerus, 2010), 142–150, 152, 162, 167; Ahti, *Kaappaus?*, 184–185, 194–195, 255–261, 265, 269–272; Matti Lappalainen, *Hannes Ignatius: Mannerheimin harmaa eminenssi*, (Porvoo: WSOY, 2005), 390; Juva, *Svinhufvud II*, 468–469; Saarikoski, *Keskustajääkäri Aarne Sihvo*, 289; Smedjebacka, *Jääkärikenraalin elämä*, 72, 88–89, 92–98; Häikiö, *Suomen leijona*, 510–511; Helge Seppälä, *Karl Lennart Oesch: Suomen pelastaja*, (Helsinki: Gummerus, 1998), 64–65.

12. Presidentin julistus suojeluskuntalaisille 1.3.1932, *HS* 2.3.1932; Kalenterimuistiinpanoja 3.3.1932. Kenraali Harald Öhquistin kokoelma, PK-1138/3, KA; Päivystysilmoitukset Yleisesikunnassa 29.2.–1.3.1932. Sotaväen päällikön arkisto, T 21644/2, KA; Aarne Somersalo, *Totuus Mäntsälästä*, (Helsinki: Ajan Sana, 1932), 108–110; Sihvo, *Muistelmani II*, 228–229; Juva: *Svinhufvud II*, 470, 472–473; *US* 3.3.1932; *HS* 3.3.1932; Kivimäki, *Suomalaisen poliitikon muistelmat*, 71; Ahti, *Kaappaus?*, 195, 205–206, 236–238, 272–275; Saarikoski, *Keskustajääkäri Aarne Sihvo*, 282–285; Häikiö, *Suomen leijona*, 507–508; Hartikainen, *Hugo Österman*, 162; Määttä, *K. L. Oesch*, 123; Sinerma, *Lauri Malmberg ja suojeluskunnat*, 227–229; Laaksonen, *Kynän ja miekan kenraali Wallenius*, 292–294, 297–301.

including the establishment of universal male conscription. People started to trust the national army even more than before.⁽¹³⁾

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