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Our History

Finland's Red Women

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During Finland's bloody civil war, revolutionary women struggled against exploitation in all its forms.

In his recent New Year's address, Finnish president Sauli Niinistö shocked many by discussing the still festering wounds of the 1918 Finnish Civil War. [1] One hundred years ago, a red lantern was lit in the tower of the Helsinki Workers' House late in the evening on January 26, signaling the beginning of brutal hostilities between Finland's socialist Reds and its nationalist Whites. [2]

Having just celebrated the centenary of their independence from Russia, Niinistö reminded Finns that "in the early days of independence we were not 'together,' but very badly apart. This cannot simply be swept away. We must have the courage to be honest about history, because only honesty creates a foundation for trust."

Until recently, part of the "swept away" history of the Civil War were the stories of the Women's Red Guards, and the brutal rapes and summary executions that followed their capture and internment in Finland's concentration camps.

In the summer of 2016, I was a visiting scholar at the University of Helsinki, and a colleague agreed to show me around her hometown of Tampere, or "Red Tampere," as it is often called. The site of the worst urban warfare ever fought in the Nordic countries, the Battle of Tampere was the bloodiest of the Civil War. In a city museum, I stumbled on a photograph of the old City Hall, the last fortress of the Reds. According to the placard beneath the photo, it had been defended by a company of Red Women's Guards.

Curious, I consulted my English guide to the exhibit and learned that, "Although women operated mostly in nursing and supply in the Red Guard, in the spring of 1918, two armed female companies were created comprising around three hundred women. The youngest female Red Guard soldiers were fifteen-year-old girls."

Finland has a long history of leftist women's activism, and in 1906, female socialists fought to make Finland the first country to grant universal suffrage, allowing women both to vote and stand for elected office. Twelve years later, factory workers in Finland's industrial south as well as maids and other servants volunteered to serve in all-female paramilitary units in solidarity with the Red cause. At the start, they performed traditional support roles, but later graduated to guard duty and eventually to combat at the front.

What motivated these women to take up arms? To this day, this remains an incendiary question among many ordinary Finns whose grandparents or great-grandparents fought in the Civil War. According to historian Tauno Saarela, Finland experienced a period of "enforced silence" following the end of hostilities in 1918. The ultranationalist Whites who ruled the country in the 1920s and 1930s demonized the Reds, painting them as barbaric, unpatriotic stooges of Russian Bolshevism. In official discourse, the Whites fought a "War for Freedom" to maintain Finland's independence even though Lenin had officially recognized that independence at the end of 1917. [3]

The first account of the Civil War written from the perspective of the Reds appeared in 1960 as a novel: Väinö Linna's *The Uprising*, the second part of his Under a Northern Star trilogy. Linna's book ushered in a new era of Finnish historiography, but it wasn't until the end of the twentieth century when scholars finally turned their attention to the role of the women who fought as Red Guards. And outside of Finland, few feminists or women's activists have ever heard about this fascinating moment in European history.

Finland's Red Women

Many of the Finnish women who joined the Red Guards were modern, urban dwellers who believed that only socialism would lead to women's full economic and political emancipation. Most of them were young and idealistic, frustrated by ongoing exploitation. Fifteen-years-old sounds young to modern ears, but child labor was common. As waged laborers, they were subject to constant sexual harassment from their employers, and enjoyed few legal protections from abuse.

The women and girls who joined the Red Guards cut their hair short and wore men's trousers, challenging traditional notions of bourgeois femininity. Photos of these women capture the confident, unsmiling faces of those willing to fight for a better world. One of my favorite images shows two members of the Turku Women's Guard, twenty-year-old Helena Aalto and twenty-eight-year-old Elli Vuokko. They stand in loose men's uniforms, their short hair shoved up under casket caps. Helena rests her left arm on Elli's right shoulder, and both hold long rifles. They look calm and determined.

Descriptions of Red Women's Guards in White newspapers from the time were filled with violent vitriol. Accused of being prostitutes and "wolf bitches," women like Helena and Elli faced a Finnish society unwilling to accept challenges to established gender roles. Middle-class Finnish society feared their fierce independence. Even sympathetic Red comrades questioned their political commitment and the value of their military contribution. As in so many leftist movements throughout history, revolutionary men easily accepted their female comrades as cooks and nurses, but squirmed when women asked for full equality on the battlefield.

Though the Whites executed and starved tens of thousands of Reds after the war, they were particularly ruthless with the Women's Guards. White soldiers raped and mutilated them before shooting them dead. Their bodies were stripped naked or twisted into obscene positions. Helena and Elli were among those lost in May 1918.

A 2016 study by a young historian, Marjo Liukkonen, uncovered evidence revealing that the Whites executed far more women and children in the infamous Hennala concentration camp than previously believed. Until recently, Finns learned that women and children captured by the Whites in the final months of the Civil War had been sent home before the mass internment of Reds in Hennala. By digging through the archives and reading the memoirs of Hennala survivors, Liukkosen argues that more than one hundred women were executed before they could be registered at the camp. Similarly, the bodies of murdered children, some of them infants, were taken away and buried outside of the camp to hide that they had ever been interned.

The total number of women who served as members of the Red Guard is still unknown, although most historians estimate that about 2,000 were active combatants out of a total force of between 90,000 to 100,000. Thousands more Finnish women supported the Red Guards in noncombat roles, many of them wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of men at the front.

In a country where ordinary people still feel uncomfortable discussing the Civil War, it's hard to measure the legacy of these fallen Women's Guards on the development of women's rights. But there is no doubt that Finnish women, and particularly Finnish women of the Left, forced social change at a pace unparalleled in other Western democracies.

During the Cold War, Finland's Communist Party (SKP) enjoyed parliamentary success as part of a coalition with the Democratic League of the People of Finland (SKDL), and their most prominent politician from 1944 to 1971 was a woman, Hertta Kuusinen, who served as general secretary of the SKDL from 1952 to 1958 and vice-chairperson from 1958 to 1970. She was a member of the central committee of the Communist Party for three decades from 1944 until she retired from politics in 1974. Kuusinen would later go on to serve as vice-president for the Women's International Democratic Federation, an international leftist organization that advocated for women's rights across the globe.

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Today, Finland is one of the most gender equal nations, with women reaching all of the highest positions in government. In 1990, Finland's Elisabeth Rehn became the first female minister of defense in the world. Ten years later, Finns elected their first woman president, Tarja Halonen. In 2003, Anneli Jäätteenmäki became the first female prime minister. By 2015, women held 41.5 percent of seats in the Finnish parliament.

The Finnish Revolution fell short, buried in a brutal counteroffensive supported by German reinforcements. [4] But the legacy of the Left in that country lives on and the sacrifices of countless women like Helena and Elli were perhaps not completely in vain. [5] [6]

PS:

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[1] <http://www.presidentti.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=370586&nodeid=44810&contentlan=2&culture=en-US>

[2] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/finland-welfare-state-true-finns-centennial>

[3] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/05/dilemmas-vladimir-lenin-tariq-ali-russian-revolution-democracy>

[4] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/05/finland-revolution-russian-empire-tsarism-independence-general-strike>

[5] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/12/li-andersson-left-alliance-true-finns>

[6] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/true-finns-finland-timo-soini-nationalists-far-right-xenophobia-elections>