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Braskén, Kasper

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Finland 1917 – A Centenary in the Shadows of Independence Celebrations and Civil War Commemorations

Kasper Braskén

In 2017 there was worldwide commentary on the centenary of the Russian October revolution, not least in the Finnish daily press. The centenary of 1917 was also celebrated in Finland as a commemoration of one hundred years of Finnish independence. As many press reports note, the Russian October revolution was perceived in Finland as a unique moment to push for this independence. At times, however, these celebrations have been disconnected from the Russian revolution, focusing instead on Finnish nationalist activism. The question of how the Russian revolution is related to commemorations of the independent nation remains ambiguous, and is largely left in the shadows of more forward-looking independence celebrations and the bitter remembrance of the subsequent Civil War of 1918.

In interpreting Finnish perceptions and commemorations of 1917, one should bear in mind that until December 1917, Finland was part of the Russian empire. As an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian empire, it had been the victim of harsh Russification and diminishing self-determination during the preceding decades. During the second half of the 19th century both the labour movement and the Finnish independence movements developed as powerful elements of Finnish civil society. On the one hand, the labour movement strove for better working and living conditions for the growing Finnish working class. On the other was the quest for self-determination from the Russian regime. The national question was also of importance for the labour movement. Among the major debates at the time was whether social revolution should come first - directed against the ruling classes of Finland - or whether the labour movement should postpone its socialist demands and first form a broad alliance with the upper classes to make a common bid for independence. As long as tsarist Russia stood intact, both hopes seemed no more than distant dreams.

As noted in the Finnish independence commemorations in 2017, everything started to change with the February Revolution of 1917 and the growing civil unrest and revolutionary turmoil in Russia. After all, the Russian capital Petrograd (later Leningrad/St Petersburg) was only about 50 kilometres from the then Finnish-Russian border. Events unfolding across the border were intensely followed and discussed across all sections in society in the major cities of Helsinki, Tampere, Turku and Viborg (Viipuri) and in the periphery. Would the Russian empire collapse? What would it mean for the Finnish people? In fact, the declaration of independence was adopted by the Finnish parliament on 6 December 1917, a mere four weeks after the Russian revolution. But as bitter Civil War raged across Russia, Finnish independence barely lasted until the end of January 1918 before a bloody Finnish Civil War between the 'reds' and the 'whites' broke out.

As part of the Finnish understanding of that traumatic year of 1918, the Russian revolution is blamed for radicalising the Finnish left, and for pushing it towards an unnecessarily violent uprising. Indisputably, the Russian revolution inspired and motivated the Finnish social democrats to realise the socialist revolution immediately. However, the violence and the terror committed on both sides can not be blamed on only one of the parties as the conflict was an outcome of an escalating political and social crisis that had begun long before the Bolsheviks' rise to power.

Finnish perceptions of the Russian October Revolution and the ensuing Finnish civil war was for decades dominated by the winning side. They declared it to be a "War of Liberation", which was the unchallenged official description until the latter half of the 20th century. The Civil War was such a traumatic and devastating experience for the Finnish people that it has remained a running sore up to the present day. Hence, by extension, the revolution of 1917 was even discussed in the Finnish presidential elections of 2018, as the Civil War was a theme raised in the national televised debates. When asked about the candidates' relation to the Finnish Civil War, the candidates responded with personal stories of how, for example, their families had been divided by support for 'red' or 'white', of imprisonment on the 'red' or the 'white' side, or of times spent in internment camps after the war. Although the bitter fruits of 1918 will continue to be a focus throughout 2018, public debate has however increasingly accepted the existence of a multitude of voices and perspectives on 1917.

Significantly, as events unfolded in Finland, the First World War was still ongoing. At a crucial moment the 'whites' secured the military assistance of imperial Germany. Over ten thousand German troops landed in southern Finland and assisted in securing a total victory for the 'whites'. As a token of gratitude, the 'whites' had agreed to make Finland a parliamentary monarchy with a German Duke in office. The King of Finland was even elected to the throne on 9 October 1918, but owing to the German military collapse and fall of the German monarchy, the German King of Finland rejected his nomination before he could take office.

As the Reds in the Civil War of 1918 had contacts and the support of the Soviet government, their efforts have often been delegitimised as unpatriotic and perceived as foreign elements in Finnish society. In the context of the Russian October Revolution, the Finnish Reds were, from a nationalist perspective, defined by their willingness to ally themselves with the Russians - and they were therefore alleged to have betrayed Finland's newly won independence for a reunion with Russia. Often, as a part of a polarised public debate, all things Russian have been perceived to be antagonistic to the independent Finnish people. This perception has been exacerbated by experiences of the Second World War when Finland and the Soviet Union were engaged in bitter military battles along the Finnish-Soviet border.

In context of this historic red-white divide, a welcome contribution to the debate on the Finnish labour movement's relation to the revolutionary developments of 1917 has been provided by the Finnish Society for Labour History (*Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura*). As the

editors of the society's yearbook "Väki Voimakas" discuss in the introduction, the connotations of the combination "Finland" and "1917" are not particularly clear for a Finnish audience. It was a year of constant turmoil and rapid changes in Finland, closely intertwined with developments in imperial Russia. In an effort to see beyond the obvious divisions between 'red' and 'white', the volume brings to light the multitude of voices and perspectives expressed within the Finnish labour movement in 1917. Although old and new interpretations of the events are discussed, new perspectives are included, for example through the study of language groups and their role in local struggles.

In the Finnish media all news outlets have commented on the anniversary of the Russian revolution during 2017. Among the more notable contributions one should mention the efforts of the Finnish Broadcasting Company "Yle". Through its analytical and unbiased approach it has played a major role in informing and debating the meaning of 1917 as a year of revolution, independence and subsequent civil war. For the centenary it produced a documentary film, which was among others acknowledged in the principal liberal newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*. The 60-minute documentary by Marko Lönnqvist used the anniversary in an innovative way to look at Russia a century after the revolution, rather than focusing on the revolutionary events themselves. In this retrospective documentary the politics of remembrance utilised by the Putin regime are followed, likewise the views and thoughts of people in the Russian periphery on the revolution and on life in the Soviet Union. Through interviews with residents and communist politicians in Irkutsk in Siberia, it analyses the rising influence of a patriotic education and civil defence preparations among Russian youth. The present is thus effectively mirrored in the past century where, for example, beliefs of 'Russia being under attack' were, then as now, effectively used to engender patriotic sentiments. Just as during the Soviet era, it is maintained that Russia will be a victim of a malign foreign attack, but at the same time Russia itself is paradoxically not perceived as a danger to anyone else. The Russian preoccupation with war, and war preparation, is indeed intriguing from a Finnish perspective and feeds a certain degree of Russophobia in Finland.

In this context, the Finnish media has discussed widely the way Putin's Russia provides significance and political meaning to Victory Day (in Russia celebrated on 9 May), as a day of everlasting patriotic heroism. From a Finnish viewpoint it is inconceivable that Victory Day celebrations can be combined with a steady revival of the Stalin cult in modern-day Russia. Of importance here is that with the focus on the Great Patriotic War, Stalin rather than Lenin is remembered in Russia today. As noted in Marko Lönnqvist's documentary, the suffering of individuals is quickly forgotten and accepted when looking at the "greater good" accomplished by Stalin. He represents stability, and personifies the need to maintain a powerful state. In this uncritical appraisal of Stalin, the word revolution becomes a curse and Lenin's role as the father of the Soviet Union becomes much more elusive.

In the Finnish popular press, Putin's understanding of Lenin becomes therefore a question of direct interest. From the perspective of Putin's Russia, Stalin was the one who fixed everything that Lenin had destroyed as the revolution brought above all chaos, instability, and geographical losses. In this light, the Finnish media even observed a kind of modern-day fear of revolution in Russia that could be caught, like wildfire or plague, from the outside world. From a Finnish perspective, the most worrying aspect connected to the delegitimising of Lenin is that Lenin has always been noted in Finnish history as the one guaranteeing Finland its independence with his signature. During the cold war, for example, the Finnish president Urho Kekkonen always referred to Lenin as the guardian of Finland's independence during discussions with Soviet leaders. Therefore, if the Putin regime was prepared to argue that Lenin had seized power through an illegal coup, Lenin's acceptance of Finnish independence could in principle be deemed illegal. Although there are of course no annexation plans from the Russian side, this is a sensational question often repeated in the Finnish popular press, which was also raised in 2017.

More academic contributions to the debates in Finland during 2017 were provided by the Centre of Excellence 'Rethinking Finland'. It organised, among others, a conference on 'Reform and Revolution in Finland 1917-1919' and a public seminar on 'the Russian revolution and Finland 1917' in Tampere. In connection with these events, notable Finnish historians such as Professor Kimmo Rentola at the University of Helsinki and Pertti Haapala at the University of Tampere were given the opportunity to provide a historical perspective on the centenary to the general public in the Finnish daily newspapers and other media.

As the above examples show, the general focus in Finland has been on questions related to classical questions of political history. The Finnish Broadcasting Company's channel "Yle Teema", with its focus on documentaries, culture, and science, played therefore a major role in diversifying the centenary. In autumn 2017 it offered, for example, a vast program on the October Revolution's impact on the artistic revolution in the Soviet film industry during the 1920s. It screened several early Soviet films, including films by Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Abram Room and Boris Barnet. Moreover, it showed Emmanuel Hamon's documentary 'L'utopie des images de la Révolution Russe' and a documentary on new Soviet art. Significantly, all "Yle" shows were accessible for an extended time period on the online platform "Yle Areena", which opened up the programmes to a much broader audience.

In conclusion, the centenary of the Russian revolution has been of intense interest in the context of analysing Finnish domestic politics, but also in rethinking Finland's relation to revolutionary Russia, the Soviet Union and modern-day Russia. As the popular press and media have shown, the October Revolution had a direct impact on both the declaration of Finnish independence and the Finnish Civil War. Undoubtedly, the October revolution will remain for many years to come a contested part of Finland's history and Finnish national identity.

Sources: Ulkolinja (Yle), Yle Teema, Helsingin Sanomat, Aamulehti, Iltalehti, Demokraatti, Kansan Uutiset, Turun Sanomat, Hufvudstadsbladet, suomifinland100.fi,

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