

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 181

### “1919 – Finland”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Duchy of Finland was taken from Sweden by Russia in the Napoleonic era. The predominantly Finnish duchy, with a predominately Swedish aristocracy, was ruled by a Russian Emperor for the next century.

But Finland maintained its separate identity, and in the wake of the October Revolution, won its independence, only to suffer its own version of a Red and White civil war.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 181. 1919 – Finland.

This is the sixth episode of our 1919 World Tour, and today we'll be talking about Finland. This seems like a logical transition, since we just finished Poland and Finland, like Poland, won its independence during the chaos that followed the Great War in the East. And in keeping with this theme, next week we'll look at the Baltic States, the three small nations on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea that also won their freedom at this same time.

The first humans settled the region we now call Finland over 10,000 years ago, after the glaciers that covered all of Scandinavia retreated at the end of the most recent Ice Age. The Finnish language is interesting because it is part of the Uralic group of languages and is not an Indo-European tongue. The fact that Finnish is not Indo-European makes it challenging to learn for those of us who do speak Indo-European languages. In our time there are 38 languages that are part of the Uralic group, most of which are spoken by peoples native to the far north of Europe and Asia. Three languages in this group are official languages of sovereign nations: Finnish, Estonian, and Hungarian.

The question of whether the people living in Finland have always spoken a Uralic language or whether we should posit a pre-existing Indo-European population with Uralic-speaking peoples arriving later is a controversial one, and there is no clear answer. But “early” and “later” are relative terms in this context. Everyone seems to agree that a proto-Finnic language was established in Finland by about 2,000 BC at the latest.

We know there was a Finnish nation in ancient times. It is mentioned by the Roman historian Tacitus and in the Norse sagas. Archeology tells us that the Finns traded with the Romans, and apparently did very well for themselves doing it. After the western empire fell, Finns continued to trade with Constantinople and with the Arabs.

Christianity arrived in Finland by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, from Sweden, and what is today Finland was under Swedish rule by the 13<sup>th</sup> century. East of Finland, the region of Karelia is home to a people ethnically and culturally related to the Finns, but it was Novgorod that took control of Karelia and the people there became Orthodox. So the political border between Finland and Karelia also represents the boundary between Catholic and Orthodox Christianity in the far north of Europe. When the Reformation came, Finland, like the rest of Scandinavia, went Lutheran.

There never was serfdom in Finland. Peasant Finns typically owned the land they farmed rather than being beholden to lords and they enjoyed legal rights, though their nobility were Swedish. These Swedish elites tended to look down on the native Finns and enjoyed a good deal of autonomy from the King in Stockholm.

Stockholm was always far away, much farther than St. Petersburg, which lies just across the Gulf of Finland. Russia was a familiar presence to Finns. Russia and Sweden fought multiple wars over control of the Baltic region in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Much of this fighting took place in Finland, to the detriment of the Finnish people. Finland was under Russian occupation twice. Finally, in 1809, during the Napoleonic age, Russia and Sweden fought their final war, which Russia won, taking Finland as its prize.

Finland became a Grand Duchy, with the Russian Emperor as its Grand Duke, in a personal union with the Russian Empire, but not technically part of Russia. The Swedish nobility and the Finnish Diet remained in place, now swearing allegiance to their new Grand Duke, while the Finnish peasants retained their historic freedoms, in contrast to the prevailing serfdom in Russia.

Poland originally was ruled under a similar arrangement, with the Russian Emperor the titular King of Poland, but the Russian Emperors abolished Poland’s separate constitution and government after repeated rebellions. Finland’s relationship with Russia was more placid, but this is not to say that Finland was free or democratic. In practice, Finland did what the Emperor ordered. It’s just that for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Emperors paid Finland very little attention.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the century that brought industrialization, liberalism, and Romantic nationalism to Europe, and Finland was no exception. The Swedish-speaking elites in Finland encouraged Finnish nationalism as a counterweight against the Russification of Finland. The year 1835 saw the publication of the *Kalevala*, a collection of Finnish epic poems that portray the history and mythology of Finland. The release of the *Kalevala* jumpstarted the development of a Finnish national identity.

As a side note, I should mention that in the twentieth century, the *Kalevala* would become an influential work for English-language writers of modern fantasy and science fiction, writers like Ian Watson, Michael Moorcock, L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, and most notably J.R.R. Tolkien.

Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of the last Russian Emperor, Nikolai II began a program to Russify Finland and bring it more fully into the Russian Empire. This was a bad idea, carried out at the worst possible time, but you could say that about most anything Nikolai attempted during his rule, come to think of it. In a series of manifestoes issued around 1900, Nikolai asserted his power to rule Finland without consulting the Diet, made Russian the language of administration in Finland, and incorporated the previously separate Finnish Army into the Russian Army.

The Finnish reaction to these moves was nationalist solidarity and an even tighter embrace of Finnish culture. And it is impossible to discuss Finnish culture and nationalism during this period of history without also mentioning the composer Jean Sibelius. Born in 1865, Sibelius entered law school at the age of 19, but wisely chose to pursue music instead. He began his music career principally as a violinist, but also studied composition, first in Helsinki, then in Berlin and Vienna. His work as a composer soon overshadowed his violin playing, and in 1892, when he was just 26 years old, his choral work *Kullervo* premiered in Helsinki. It was based on stories from the *Kalevala* and was well received, both as a piece of music and for the novel fact that the libretto was in Finnish. This despite the fact that Sibelius himself was raised in a family that spoke Swedish at home.

Sibelius's idiosyncratic music, inspired by Finland's natural beauty, became popular worldwide and was particularly embraced by Finns, who heard in it a Finnish national music. Sibelius's music would become the anthems of Finnish nationalism, similar to what the music of Verdi was for Italian nationalism, or the music of Smetana and Dvořák was for Czech nationalism. Sibelius would go on to compose seven symphonies, one opera, and numerous shorter works, but he is most famous for *Finlandia*, a tone poem composed in 1899 explicitly as part of a patriotic protest against the Russian Emperor's usurpations of Finnish rights. As such, the piece often had to be performed under other names to conceal its nationalist significance from Russian censors. Names like *Happy Feelings at the Awakening of a Finnish Spring*. The final section of *Finlandia* is known as the *Finlandia Hymn* and is often performed separately. It is familiar worldwide even in our time, and stands as one of Finland's most important patriotic songs.

When the Revolution of 1905 broke out in Russia, it also broke out in Finland. Protests and a weeklong general strike produced a temporary rollback of the Emperor's new policies and the creation of a new unicameral Finnish parliament with universal suffrage to replace the old and outdated four-chamber Diet. Delegates to the parliament would be elected under universal suffrage, including women, which was quite forward looking for the time. But how much power would the new parliament have? As was the case with reforms in Russia, Nikolai II began to backtrack on these Finnish reforms almost as soon as the revolution was over, and would increasingly assert his personal authority for the next decade.

When the February Revolution came in 1917, Nikolai abdicated and his chosen successor, his brother the Grand Duke Mikhail, declined the Imperial title. This put the Grand Duchy of Finland into a legal limbo. Technically speaking, Finland was joined to Russia only through their shared monarch. Now that that monarch had abdicated and the throne was empty, that left the Grand Duchy of Finland with no one holding the title of Grand Duke, which kind of sort of meant that the future of Finland now lay in the hands of the parliament in Helsinki, didn't it?

That at least was the view of the majority of the Finnish parliament in Helsinki. The most recent election, in 1916, had given the Finnish Social Democratic Party a small majority—103 seats out of 200 total—and they were ready to press ahead with full independence. But the more conservative parties in parliament and in Finnish society generally were not so keen on independence, especially not if it meant the newly independent Finland would be governed by a bunch of Helsinki socialists who might push further still and start making even more extreme demands, like universal suffrage in municipal elections, an eight-hour work day, or land reform. You know. Crazy stuff like that.

Across the Gulf of Finland, in Petrograd, the Provisional Government wasn't ready for Finnish independence either. Now as you know, the Provisional Government had quite a lot on its plate at this time, including a world war that was unpopular and going badly, food shortages, and a collapsing economy. And they had to balance the demands of the various political groups that had put them into power. And they had to contend with a number of minorities who wanted to secede from the Empire, Finland being only one of many.

In the early days of the Provisional Government, its policy toward Finland was this: Petrograd was willing to grant the parliament in Helsinki wide latitude regarding internal affairs in Finland, but not full independence, and in the interim the Provisional Government reserved to itself the power to overrule the Finnish parliament when it saw fit. As for the final status of Finland, that was a matter to be taken up by the Constituent Assembly, once it was elected and seated. You remember, that Constituent Assembly we're going to get around to setting up...any...day... now...?

In July of 1917, the Finnish parliament passed the *valtalaki*, what some call the "Power Act." This act was spearheaded by the Social Democrats, who attempted to mollify the conservative

parties by stopping short of declaring full independence. The Power Act subordinated Finland to the Provisional Government in matters of foreign relations and the military, but asserted parliament's supremacy over internal Finnish affairs and further declared that the Finnish parliament could not be dissolved by the government in Petrograd, but only by itself.

This still went too far for the Provisional Government, though in July of 1917, they had more pressing problems. Lenin had just left the comparative safety of Finland to return to Petrograd, the July Days were beginning, the Ukrainian Rada was asserting itself, and the Social Democrats in Helsinki may have calculated that Petrograd had its hands full dealing with these other crises and would be unable to respond effectively to the challenge coming from Finland. Perhaps the Petrograd government would even fall.

If that *was* the calculation, then it was a *miscalculation*. The Provisional Government survived and reorganized into a Kerensky dictatorship. We're now at episode 147 in the chronology of the Russian Revolution, the point where Alexander Kerensky has taken charge, is eyeing Lavr Kornilov with suspicion, and is in no mood to take crap from anybody. His government rejected the Power Act and dissolved the Finnish parliament. When the Social Democratic members of the parliament attempted to meet in defiance of the Provisional Government's authority, Kerensky sent in Russian soldiers to break up the meeting by force.

Non-socialist political groups in Finland supported the dissolution of parliament, because they hoped a new general election would put them into the majority. A general election was held in Finland in October, which indeed put the Social Democrats into the minority. A coalition of more conservative parties now held 108 seats in the 200-seat chamber. I'm not saying they were against Finnish independence, but these parties strove to achieve it in a more measured way, and hoped to get there without any of those radical socialist add-ons.

But this new parliament barely had time to seat itself and elect a speaker before the October Revolution came, and overnight the socialist and non-socialist political factions in Finland had swapped positions. The Social Democrats were intrigued by the establishment of a socialist state in Russia and wanted to hang around and be part of the proletarian revolution, while the conservative coalition wanted to sever ties with Russia like, yesterday, before the Bolshevik madness reached all the way to Helsinki.

But it was only a week after Sovnarkom took power that it issued its "Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia," which included the right of self-determination for the Russian peoples, including independence. That was November 15. On December 15, the first Russian region declared its independence; that was Moldova. Just months later, Moldova, or Bessarabia, would unite with Romania.

Four days after the Moldovan declaration, on December 19, the Finnish parliament declared Finland an independent state. Sixteen days later, on December 31, the Russian government recognized Finnish independence. That same day, France, Germany, and Sweden also

recognized Finland as a sovereign state. Within days, Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, Greece, and Austria-Hungary would follow suit.

[Music: Sibelius, *Finlandia*]

The Finns were fortunate in having been able to win their independence without bloodshed, but unfortunately that independence would soon deteriorate into a brutal civil war between the two factions, the conservatives and the socialists, the ones who had whipsawed back and forth between nationalism and accommodation, consistent only in their distrust of one another. The Social Democrats were bitter that the conservatives had first made common cause with the Russians to oust the Social Democrats from their parliamentary majority and only then had turned around and supported independence themselves, while the non-socialist parties remained steadfast in their opposition to any whiff of socialism in independent Finland. Over the next three months, from November 1917 to January 1918, both sides organized their own fighting forces. The conservatives had what they called the Civil Guard, and later, the White Guard. On the other side was the Finnish Red Guard, organized by the Social Democrats.

But the Finnish Social Democratic Party was not a revolutionary party. In Imperial Russia, socialist political groups had been forced to operate underground, in secret, while the Finnish SDP had been an above-ground political party that competed openly in election campaigns. Some of its leaders had revolutionary leanings, but most were committed to taking power through the ballot box and were in no way military- or revolutionary-minded. Ordinary workers, who made up the rank and file of the SDP, on the other hand, they were influenced by the Russian Bolsheviks and tended to be much more radical. They wanted to go ahead and start the revolution in Finland, but the party leadership dithered. They had called a general strike in November to protest the new parliament, and during the strike there had been calls among the workers to seize control of the government, but the moderate leadership of the SDP just wasn't willing to let it go that far.

In Russia, Commissar for Nationalities Joseph Stalin urged the Finnish socialists to go ahead and overthrow the bourgeois parliament and bring the socialist revolution to Finland. Keep in mind that this was during the early days following the October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks believed theirs was just the first of a series of revolutions destined to sweep the world. They didn't mind granting independence to minorities who wanted it, like the Finns, because the socialist revolution would soon render nations and borders obsolete anyway. Remember when Trotsky became foreign minister and predicted all he'd have to do was to announce the revolution to the world and then shut down the foreign ministry? Within that frame of reference, Stalin naturally believed that a Finnish socialist revolution was destined to arrive any day now and would inevitably prevail.

From November to January, both sides negotiated, but talks got nowhere. By January, violence was breaking out between the Reds and the Whites. Finally, on January 26, the Social

Democrats, frustrated that the majority coalition in parliament refused to meet their demands, lit a red lantern at the top of the Helsinki Workers' Hall, the sign that the revolution was to begin.

The resulting conflict, the Finnish Civil War, lasted about four months. It was brief, but it was brutal. With its White and Red armies, it mirrored the coming Russian Civil War. The Red Guards had the larger force, over 100,000, but it was poorly prepared, made up of working-class volunteers from Helsinki and the other major industrial cities, mostly in the south of Finland. The White Guard controlled the rest of the country outside the major cities, though it was a smaller force of perhaps 80,000.

At the beginning of the conflict, the Red Guards seized Helsinki and the parliament building. Soon they controlled a band of territory along Finland's southern coast, where most of Finland's industrial towns lay. The Finnish parliament, without its socialist members, met and appointed the 51-year old Carl Gustav Mannerheim commander of the White Guard. Mannerheim was a son of the Swedish aristocracy in Finland and a retired veteran of the old Imperial Russian Army who had risen to the rank of lieutenant general.

Parliamentary approval made it possible for Mannerheim and his White Army to claim the moral high ground as the defenders of the elected government against socialist insurrectionaries. Mannerheim was a talented military leader and his White Army was better trained and more experienced. It was also bolstered by the arrival of some 1,200 Finnish nationalists who had been training in Germany.

Remember that this is early 1918. The Great War is still going on. The Germans had been secretly training these young Finnish nationalists with an eye toward returning them to Finland to instigate a nationalist uprising behind Russian lines. Germany and Russia have now agreed to an armistice, but Finland is an independent nation now, recognized as such by Russia and Germany both. The Germans saw Finland as potentially yet another of the German-dominated buffer states they aspired to create along the Russian frontier. Just as they intended for Poland or Ukraine.

From the German point of view, it wasn't hard to figure out which side to support in the Civil War. The Red Finns would be allies of the Bolsheviks; therefore, Berlin would support the Whites, and that support began with the deployment of these German-trained fighters to augment the White Army. The Whites also included a few hundred Swedish volunteers who fought in Finland to quash the socialist revolution lest it cross the border into their country.

The socialists' delay in instigating the Civil War proved fatal. They might have succeeded if they had raised that red lantern last November. Back then, they could have counted on arms and support from the Russian Bolsheviks, to say nothing of the 50,000 or so Russian soldiers in Finland, most of whom had Bolshevik sympathies. But by January, with an armistice in place in the East, those Russian soldiers were in no mood to do any more fighting. Most of them wanted to go home, and they did, in many cases surrendering their weapons to the Finnish Whites, although a small number of Russians did join the Red cause.

Then, as you'll recall, on February 18, just three weeks after the Civil War broke out in Finland, the Germans restarted the fighting against Russia, which forced the Bolsheviks to agree to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3. The Russian government had its hands full dealing with the renewed German threat; aiding the Finnish Reds just wasn't on the agenda.

The Finnish Whites were on the offensive by then, and they struck a critical blow in the Battle of Tampere, from March 15 to April 6. Tampere was (and is) the third-largest city in Finland and home to much Finnish industry, making it a center of the Finnish Red movement. This was the bloodiest battle of the war; over a thousand Finns were killed on both sides. Tampere fell to the Whites, which was a blow to the socialist side; even worse was the aftermath. Over a thousand Reds and their supporters were executed by White forces after they had surrendered. The victims included women and children. Afterward, some 10,000 Reds were herded into the town square and transferred to a prison camp, where an additional 1,200 or so would die of starvation and disease before the end of the civil war.

The Battle of Tampere already sealed the fate of the Red side, but just a few days after the fighting ended, German troops landed near Helsinki and took the capital in two days. The Red government retreated, eventually to Petrograd. By May 15, the Whites were in control of the entire country, over ten thousand Red Guards were in prison camps, and a victorious General Mannerheim and his troops were marching in triumph through the streets of Helsinki.

The Finnish Civil War resembles the Russian Civil War in miniature. Like the Russian Civil War, the armies were poorly trained and supplied, most of the movement was along railroad lines, and most of the deaths in the war were caused by starvation, disease, and political reprisals, rather than by actual combat. Both sides engaged in reprisal killings of prisoners and civilians, but many more Reds were killed than Whites, including those thousands of Red prisoners who died from the poor conditions in the prison camps. The Civil War devastated Finland, killing an estimated 36,000 Finns, more than 1% of the country's population, and leaving a swath of destruction across the country. Then came the influenza pandemic.

Finland's rump parliament, shorn of its socialist members, signed a treaty with Germany during the Civil War that included agreements on commerce and navigation. The newly independent Finland's close relationship with Germany caused alarm among the Allied powers. France had already recognized Finnish independence, but the other major Allies—Britain, the United States, Italy, and Japan—refused to follow. To them, it appeared that Finland was well on its way to becoming a German protectorate. These concerns were only aggravated when the parliament began moving toward creating a Finnish monarchy. The German general who commanded the German soldiers occupying Helsinki, Karl Rüdiger von der Goltz, was the most powerful figure in the country, and he began talks with a 50-year old German noble, Prince Friedrich Karl of Hesse, over his assuming the Finnish throne. I'll note that Prince Friedrich was married to Kaiser Wilhelm's little sister, so it was hard to see this as anything other than the Finnish government binding itself very closely to Germany. This was at the moment when Germany's 1918



offensives on the Western Front were getting into high gear, and it is entirely possible the Finns believed Germany was going to win the war.

But apparently Carl Gustav Mannerheim, the victorious Finnish White general, didn't expect Germany to win the war. Publicly, Mannerheim had become a controversial figure, due to the brutal treatment of Red prisoners by soldiers under his command. Privately though, he was disturbed by the pro-German direction his country was taking. He resigned his position as commander-in-chief of the Finnish military and in the summer of 1918, traveled to Sweden, ostensibly to vacation and visit relatives, but while he was in Stockholm, he contacted British diplomats to discuss their mutual disapproval of Finland's moving into a German orbit.

In October 1918, the Finnish parliament officially offered the crown to the prince, who would have become Charles I, King of Finland and Karelia. But it was not to be. The Armistice came the following month, and along with it the abdication of the Kaiser. Germany became a republic, and Friedrich Karl was no longer a prince. He renounced his claim to the Finnish throne in December 1918, without ever having set foot inside the country.

The Finnish parliament then made Carl Gustav Mannerheim the Regent of Finland, and Mannerheim was able to secure diplomatic recognition from the Allied nations, and by the summer of 1919, Finland had a new republican constitution. Mannerheim stood for president when parliament met to elect the first president under the new constitution, but there were just too many Finns who still resented the cruelties of the Whites during the recent civil war, and a liberal jurist named Kaarlo Juho Ståhlberg, who was one of the principal drafters of the new constitution, was elected the first President of Finland, a position he would hold until 1925.

As President, Ståhlberg pardoned thousands of former Reds still in prison and promoted land reform and labor legislation sought by Finnish unions in an attempt to make amends with the socialists and heal some of the wounds of the civil war, although many veterans of the White Army would resent him for it. Finland had developed a strong temperance movement in the previous decades and it would enact prohibition in 1919 and then, after prohibition led to a staggering increase in the crime rate, would repeal it in 1932, thus closely paralleling the American experience.

As for Mannerheim, he withdrew from politics after being denied the presidency and became head of the Finnish Red Cross and served on numerous corporate boards, including that of a company called Nokia.

During the Russian Civil War, nationalist Finns made a couple of attempts to seize control of Russian Karelia and annex it to Finland, on the premise that the people of Karelia are ethnically related to Finns. They are; they are also Orthodox and have always been ruled by Russia, so there was little enthusiasm for this project in Karelia.

The right wing would dominate Finnish politics and the Communist Party was banned. The most radical Finnish communists were either exiled to Russia or crossed the border voluntarily. The loss of the radicals made the remaining Finnish Social Democratic Party more moderate and nationalist. Relations between Finland and Russia, though, would remain tense after the Russian Civil War and for the next two decades after that, until...well, that is a story for another episode.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Tom for his donation, and thank you daswed for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep the words flowing and the bits going, so if you have a few extra dollars or pounds or euros weighing you down, head on over to the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons. If that's not your thing, how about a rating or review at the iTunes store, or wherever fine podcasts are distributed. Those will help more people find the podcast, people who hopefully will enjoy it as much as you do.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention to the Baltic States. Of all the many nationalities that hoped to gain independence from Russia, Poland, Finland, and these three small states will be the only ones to succeed. This time. The Baltic States, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned J.R.R. Tolkien as one of the twentieth-century English-language fantasy writers influenced by the *Kalevala*. Tolkien first read the *Kalevala* in 1910, when he was 18 years old. A year later, when he began his studies at Oxford University, Tolkien tried his hand at writing his own version of the Finnish legends, a sort of *Kalevala* for the English. This project developed into his Middle Earth legendarium, which would form the backdrop for all his published works, such as *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, all of which contain characters and situations inspired by stories from the *Kalevala*.

In his day job, Tolkien was a noted philologist, one who studies the use of language in historical sources, and he could speak about three dozen of them, making him something of a connoisseur of languages. He would later write of Finnish that discovering it was like "entering a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind and flavor never tasted before," although even Tolkien struggled to master it. The sound of the Finnish language would inspire the Elven languages that Tolkien created and used in his fiction.

[music: Closing Theme]