A Brief History of Finland from the 16th century to 1917

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The 16th century

In 1521 the Kalmar Union finally collapsed and Gustav Vasa became the King of Sweden. During his rule, the Swedish church was reformed (1527). The state administration underwent extensive reforms and development too, giving it a much stronger grip on the life of local communities - and ability to collect higher taxes. Following the policies of the Reformation, in 1551 Mikael Agricola, bishop of Turku, published his translation of the New Testament into the Finnish language.

In 1550 Helsinki was founded by Gustav Vasa under the name of Helsingfors, but remained little more than a fishing village for more than two centuries.

King Gustav Vasa died in 1560 and his crown was passed to his three sons in separate turns. King Erik XIV started an era of expansion when the Swedish crown took the city of Tallinn in Estonia under its protection in 1561. The Livonian War was the beginning of an extremely warlike era which lasted for 160 years. In the first phase, Sweden fought for the lordship of Estonia and Latvia against Denmark, Poland and Russia. The common people of Finland suffered because of drafts, high taxes, and abuse by military personnel. This resulted in the Cudgel War of 1596-7, a desperate peasant rebellion, which was suppressed brutally and bloodily. A peace treaty (Treaty of Teusina) with Russia in 1595 moved the border of Finland further to the east and north following roughly nowadays borders.

An important part of the 16th century history of Finland was growth of the area settled by the farming population. The crown encouraged farmers from the province of Savonia to settle the vast wilderness regions in Middle Finland. This was done, and the original Sami population often had to leave. Some of the wilderness settled was traditional hunting and fishing territory of Karelian hunters. During the 1580's, this resulted in a bloody guerrilla warfare between the Finnish settlers and Karelians in some regions, especially in Ostrobothnia.

The 17th century - the Swedish Empire

In 1611 - 1632 Sweden was ruled by King Gustavus Adolphus, whose military reforms transformed the Swedish army from a peasant militia into an efficient fighting machine, possibly the best in Europe. The conquest of Livonia was now completed, and some territories were taken from internally divided Russia in the Treaty of Stolbova. In 1630, the Swedish (and Finnish) armies marched into Central Europe, as Sweden had decided to take part in the great struggle between Protestant and Catholic forces in Germany, known as the Thirty Years' War. The Finnish light cavalry, known as the Hakkapeliitat, spread fear among the Catholic troops in Germany who were used to more orderly warfare (and, maybe, less brutal treatment of prisoners and civilians).

After the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Sweden was ranked among the great European powers (the Swedish Empire). During the war, several important reforms had been made in Finland:

* 1637–40 and 1648–54 Count Per Brahe functioned as general governor of Finland. Many important reforms were made and many towns were founded. His period of administration is generally considered very beneficial to the development of Finland.
* 1640 Finland's first university, the Academy of Åbo, was founded in Turku at the proposal of Count Per Brahe by Queen Christina of Sweden. This is said to be the only European university founded by a female.
* 1642 The whole Bible was finally published in Finnish.

However, the high taxation, continuing wars and the cold climate (the Little Ice Age) made the Imperial era of Sweden rather gloomy times for Finnish peasants. In 1655–1660, a new series of bitter wars was fought, taking Finnish soldiers to the battle-fields of Livonia, Poland and Denmark. In 1676, the political system of Sweden was transformed into an absolute monarchy.

In Middle and Eastern Finland, great amounts of tar were produced for export. European nations needed this material for the maintenance of their fleets. According to some theories, the spirit of early capitalism in the tar-producing province of Ostrobothnia may have been the reason for the witch-hunt wave that happened in this region during the late 17th century. The people were developing more expectations and plans for the future, and when these were not realized, they were quick to blame witches - according to a belief system the Lutheran church had imported from Germany.

The Empire had a colony in the New World in the modern-day Delaware-Pennsylvania area between 1638–1655. At least half of the immigrants were of Finnish origin.

In the religious sense, the 17th century was an era of very strict Lutheran orthodoxy. In 1608, the law of Moses was declared the law of the land, in addition to secular legislation. Every subject of the realm was required to confess the Lutheran faith and the church attendance was mandatory. Eccleastialistical penalties were widely used.[4] The rigorous requirements of orthodoxy were revealed in the dismissal of the Bishop of Turku, Johan Terserus, who wrote a cathecism which was decreed heretical in 1664 by the teologists of Academy of Åbo.[5] On the other hand, the Lutheran requirement of the individual study of Bible prompted the first attempts at wide-scale education. The church required from each person a degree of literacy sufficient to read the basic texts of the Lutheran faith. Although the requirements could be fulfilled by learning the texts by heart, also the skill of reading became known among the population.[6]

In 1697–99, a famine caused by climate killed approximately 30% of the Finnish population. Soon afterwards, another war determining Finland's fate began (the Great Northern War of 1700–21).

The 18th century - the Age of Enlightenment

During the Great Northern War (1700–1721), Finland was occupied by the Russians, and the south-eastern part, including the important town of Vyborg, was annexed to Russia after the Treaty of Nystad. The border with Russia came to lie roughly where it returned to after World War II. Sweden's status as a European great power was gone, and Russia was now the leading might of the

North. The absolute monarchy was finished in Sweden. During this Age of Liberty, the Parliament ruled the country, and the two parties of Hats and Caps struggled for control leaving the lesser Court party, i.e. parliamentarians with close connections to the royal court, with little to no influence. The Caps wanted to have a peaceful relationship with Russia and were supported by many Finns, while other Finns longed for revenge and supported the Hats.

Finland by this time was not a populous land. By the mid-18th century, the population was less than 470 000 according to official statistics (based on (Lutheran) church records, so a few Orthodox Christian parishes in Northern Karelia are not included). However the population grew rapidly, and doubled before the turn of the century. 90% of the population are typically classified as "peasants", most being free taxed yeomen. Society was divided in the four Estates: peasants (free taxed yeomen), the clergy, nobility and burghers. A minority, mostly cottagers, were estateless, and had no political representation. Forty-five percent of the male population were enfranchised with full political representation in the legislature — although clerics, nobles and townsfolk had their own chambers in the parliament, boosting their political influence and excluding the peasantry on matters of foreign policy.

The mid-18th century was a relatively good time, partly because life was now more peaceful. However, during the Lesser Wrath (1741–1742), Finland was again occupied by the Russians after the government, during a period of Hat party dominance, had made a botched attempt to reconquer the lost provinces. Instead the result of the Treaty of Åbo was that the Russian border was moved further to the west. During this time, Russian propaganda hinted at the possibility of creating a separate Finnish kingdom.

Both the ascending Russian Empire and pre-revolutionary France aspired to have Sweden as a client state. Parliamentarians and others with influence were susceptible to taking bribes which they did their best to increase. The integrity and the credibility of the political system waned, and in 1771 the young and charismatic king Gustav III staged a coup-d'état, abolished parliamentarism and reinstated royal power in Sweden — more or less with the support of the parliament. In 1788, he started a new war against Russia. Despite a couple of victorious battles, the war was fruitless, managing only to bring disturbance to the economic life of Finland. The popularity of King Gustav III waned considerably. During the war, a group of officers made the famous Anjala declaration demanding peace negotiations and calling of Riksdag (Parliament). An interesting sideline to this process was the conspiracy of some Finnish officers, who attempted to create an independent Finnish state with Russian support. After an initial shock, Gustav III crushed this opposition. In 1789, the new constitution of Sweden strengthened the royal power further, as well as improving the status of the peasantry. However, the continuing war had to be finished without conquests - and many Swedes now considered the king as a tyrant.

With the interruption of the war 1788–1790, the last decades of the 18th century had been an era of development in Finland. New things were changing even the everyday life, such as starting of potato farming after the 1750s. New scientific and technical inventions were seen. The first hot air balloon in Finland (and in the whole Swedish kingdom) was made in Oulu (Uleåborg) in 1784, only a year after it was invented in France. Trade increased and the peasantry was growing more affluent and

self-conscious. The Age of Enlightenment's climate of broadened debate in the society on issues of politics, religion and morals would in due time highlight the problem that the overwhelming majority of Finns spoke only Finnish, but the cascade of newspapers, belles-lettres and political leaflets was almost exclusively in Swedish — when not in French.

The two Russian occupations had been harsh and were not easily forgotten. These occupations were a seed of a feeling of separateness and otherness, that in a narrow circle of scholars and intellectuals at the university in Turku was forming a sense of a separate Finnish identity representing the eastern part of the realm. The shining influence of the Russian imperial capital Saint Petersburg was also much stronger in southern Finland than in other parts of Sweden, and contacts across the new border dispersed the worst fears for the fate of the educated and trading classes under a Russian régime. At the turn of the century, the Swedish-speaking educated classes of officers, clerics and civil servants were mentally well prepared for a shift of allegiance to the strong Russian Empire.

King Gustav III was assassinated in 1792, and his son Gustav IV Adolf assumed the crown after a period of regency. The new king was not a particularly talented ruler; at least not talented enough to steer his kingdom through the dangerous era of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars.

Meanwhile, the Finnish areas belonging to Russia after the peace treaties in 1721 and 1743 (not including Ingria), called the "Old Finland" were initially governed with the old Swedish laws (not uncommon practice in the expanding Russian Empire in the 18th century). However, gradually the rulers of Russia granted large estates of land to their non-Finnish favorites, ignoring the traditional landownership and peasant freedom laws of Old Finland. There were even cases where the noblemen punished peasants corporally, for example by flogging. The overall situation caused decline in the economy and morale in Old Finland, worsened since 1797 when the area was forced to send men to the Imperial Army. The construction of military installations in the area brought thousands of non-Finnish people to the region. In 1812, after the Russian conquest of Finland, "Old Finland" was rejoined to the rest of the country but the landownership question remained a serious problem until the 1870s.

Russian Grand Duchy

During the Finnish War between Sweden and Russia, Finland was again conquered by the armies of Tsar Alexander I. The four Estates of occupied Finland were assembled at the Diet of Porvoo on March 29, 1809 to pledge allegiance to Alexander I of Russia. Following the Swedish defeat in the war and the signing of the Treaty of Fredrikshamn on September 17, 1809, Finland remained an autonomous Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire until the end of 1917, with Karelia ("Old Finland") handed back to Finland in 1812. During the years of Russian rule the degree of autonomy varied. Periods of censorship and political prosecution occurred, particularly in the two last decades of Russian control, but the Finnish peasantry remained free (unlike their Russian counterparts) as the old Swedish law remained effective (including the relevant parts from Gustav III's Constitution of 1772). The old four-chamber Diet was re-activated in the 1860s agreeing to supplementary new legislation concerning internal affairs. Industrialisation begun during the 19th century from forestry

to industry, mining and machinery and laid the foundation of Finland's current day prosperity, even though agriculture employed a relatively large part of the population until the post-WWII era.

Nationalism and Language

Particularly following Finland's incorporation into the Swedish central administration during the 16th and 17th centuries, Swedish had been the dominant language in administration and education. Before that, in medieval semi-anarchy, German, Latin and Swedish were important languages beside native-spoken Finnish. Finnish recovered its predominance after a 19th-century resurgence of Finnish Nationalism, and Russian controllers working to separate Finns from Sweden and to ensure the Finns' loyalty.

The publication in 1835 of the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala, a collection of traditional myths and legends which is the folklore of the Karelian people (the Finnic Russian Orthodox people who inhabit the Lake Ladoga-region of eastern Finland and present-day NW Russia), first stirred the nationalism that later led to Finland's independence from Russia. The Finnish national awakening in the mid-nineteenth century was the result of members of the Swedish-speaking upper classes deliberately choosing to promote Finnish culture and language as a means of nation building, i.e. to establish a feeling of unity between all people in Finland including (and not of least importance) between the ruling elite and the ruled peasantry.

In 1863, Finnish gained a position in administration, and 1892 Finnish finally became an equal official language and gained a status comparable to that of Swedish. Within a generation Finnish clearly dominated in government and society.

Russification

Democratic change

In 1906, as a result of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the associated Finnish general strike of 1905, the old four-chamber Diet was replaced by a unicameral Parliament of Finland (the "Eduskunta"). For the first time in the world, universal suffrage and eligibility was implemented: Finnish women were the first in the world to gain full eligibility, and membership of an estate, land ownership or inherited titles were no longer required. However, on the local level things were different, as in the municipal elections the number of votes was tied to amount of tax paid. Thus, rich people could cast a number of votes, while the poor perhaps none at all. The municipal voting system was changed to universal suffrage in 1917 when the Parliament got left-wing majority.

Independence and Civil War

In the aftermath of the February Revolution in Russia, Finland received a new Senate, a coalition-Cabinet with the same power structure as the Finnish Parliament. Based on the general election in 1916, the Social Democrats had a small majority, and the Social Democrat Oskari Tokoi

became Prime Minister. The new Senate was willing to cooperate with the provisional government of Russia, but no agreement was reached. The Finns' view was basically that the personal union with Russia was finished after the Tsar was dethroned – although the Finns had de facto recognized the provisional government as the Tsar's successor by accepting its authority to appoint a new Governor General and Senate. They expected the Tsar's authority to be transferred to Finland's Parliament, which the provisional government of Russia refused, suggesting instead that the question should be settled by the Russian Constituent Assembly. For the Finnish Social Democrats it seemed as though the Russian Bourgeoisie was an obstacle on Finland's road to independence as well as on the Proletariat's road to justice. The non-Socialists in Tokoi's Senate were however more confident. They, and most of the non-Socialists in the Parliament, rejected the Social Democrats' proposal on Parliamentarism (the so-called "Power Act") as being too far-reaching and provocative. The act restricted Russia's influence on domestic Finnish matters, but didn't touch the Russian government's power on matters of defence and foreign affairs. For the Russian Provisional government this was however far too radical. As the Parliament had exceeded its authority, it was dissolved.

The minority of the Parliament, and of the Senate, were content. New elections promised a chance to gain majority, which they were convinced would improve the chances to reach an understanding with Russia. The non-Socialists were also inclined to cooperate with the Russian Provisional government because they feared the Socialists' power would grow, resulting in radical reforms, such as equal suffrage in municipal elections, or a land reform. The majority had, of course, the squarely opposite opinion. They didn't accept the Provisional government's right to dissolve the Parliament.

The Social Democrats held on to the Power Act and opposed the publication of the decree of dissolution of the Parliament, whereas the non-Socialists voted for publishing it. The disagreement over the Power Act led to the Social Democrats leaving the Senate. When the Parliament met again after the summer recess in August 1917, only the groups supporting the Power Act were present. Russian troops took possession of the chamber, the Parliament was dissolved, and new elections were carried out. The result was a (small) non-Socialist majority and a purely non-Socialist Senate. The abolition of the Power Act, and the cooperation between Finnish non-Socialist forces and oppressive Russia provoked great bitterness among the Socialists, and dozens of politically motivated terror assaults, including murders.

Successful independence

The October Revolution turned Finnish politics upside down. Now the new non-Socialist majority of the Parliament felt a great urge for total independence, and the Socialists came gradually to view Russia as an example to follow. On November 15, 1917, the Bolsheviks declared a general right of self-determination, including the right of complete secession, "for the Peoples of Russia". On the same day the Finnish Parliament issued a declaration by which it assumed, pro tempore, all powers of the Sovereign in Finland.

Worried by the development in Russia, and Finland, the non-Socialist Senate proposed for the parliament to declare Finland's independence, which was agreed on in the parliament on December 6, 1917. On December 18 (December 31 N. S.) the Soviet government issued a Decree, recognizing

Finland's independence, and on December 22 (January 4, 1918 N. S.) it was approved by the highest Soviet executive body - VTsIK. Germany and the Scandinavian countries followed without delay.

From January to May 1918, Finland experienced the brief but bitter Finnish Civil War that colored domestic politics and the foreign relations of Finland for many years. On the one side there were the "white" civil guards, who fought for the anti-Socialists. On the other side fought the Red Guards, which consisted of workers and tenant farmers. The Finnish Socialist Workers' Republic had been proclaimed. The defeat of the Red Guards was achieved with support from Imperial Germany; and only Germany's defeat in World War I saved Finland from becoming a German satellite state. Had the Red Guards won, Finland would have eventually become a part of the emerging communist state. The neighbor-country Sweden was in the midst of her own process of democratization, with socialists in government for the first time. For many decades, Finns on both sides remained bitter over Sweden's reluctance to become involved in the Civil War.

During the Civil War, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed between the Central Powers and Bolshevist Russia, stating regarding Finland:

Finland and the Åland Islands will immediately be cleared of Russian troops and the Russian Red Guard, and the Finnish ports of the Russian fleet and of the Russian naval forces. So long as the ice prevents the transfer of warships into Russian ports, only limited forces will remain on board the warships. Russia is to put an end to all agitation or propaganda against the Government or the public institutions of Finland.

The fortresses built on the Åland Islands are to be removed as soon as possible. As regards the permanent non-fortification of these islands as well as their further treatment in respect to military technical navigation matters, a special agreement is to be concluded between Germany, Finland, Russia, and Sweden; there exists an understanding to the effect that, upon Germany's desire, still other countries bordering upon the Baltic Sea would be consulted in this matter.