
BACKGROUND BOOKS

FINLAND

"Much of the information about Finland available to foreigners is second-hand and second-rate," wrote a senior Finnish diplomat two years ago in *Foreign Affairs*. "As a result," he continued, "Finland is forever at the mercy of the itinerant columnist who, after lunch and cocktails in Helsinki, is ready to pronounce himself upon the fate of the Finnish people."

An English-speaking reader hungering for serious information on contemporary Finnish society soon finds himself on short rations. To be sure, there are respectable books on Finlandization and contemporary Finno-Soviet affairs. These include Roy Allison's outstanding **Finland's Relations with the Soviet Union, 1944-84** (Macmillan, 1985) and Max Jakobson's concise **Finnish Neutrality** (Praeger, 1968). In addition, Jaakko Nousiainen's **The Finnish Political System** (Harvard, 1971) serves as a basic guidebook to the nation's constitution, interest groups, and political parties.

But there is little new published scholarship, in English, on Finnish history. No major works exist that describe key aspects of everyday Finnish life: the state of the family; the quality of education; new trends in art and cultural life; or, all in all, what it means to be a Finn.

W. R. Mead's **Finland** (Praeger, 1968) is a highly readable, if slightly outdated, introduction to the subject. Mead's chronicle starts 12,000 years ago, when the great Quaternary Ice Sheet began to melt and retreat northward, leaving behind a flat landmass flanked by the Gulfs of Finland and Bothnia, and dotted with some 55,000 lakes. Finland, Mead says, "resembles a drowned landscape in the process of emerging from sea, lake, and swamp." Pine, fir, and birch forests, carpeted with

"cushions of green, gold, and milky grey" mosses, cover almost two-thirds of Finland's land area.

Other more comprehensive chronicles include John H. Wuorinen's **A History of Finland** (Columbia, 1965) and Eino Jutikkala's and Kauko Pirinen's **A History of Finland** (Praeger, 1974). Jutikkala and Pirinen, both at the University of Helsinki, sweep through Finnish history—from the Ice Age to the end of World War II—in fewer than 300 pages. Swedish influence over Finland, they point out, began as early as the ninth century, when the Vikings, roving eastward, traded with Finnish trappers living along the peninsula's southwest coast. "The growing demand for furs," they write, "caused the Finns to extend their wilderness treks into remote Lapland and as far as the Arctic coast."

Such surveys aside, there are several excellent works that concentrate on specific periods in Finnish history. Juhani Paasivirta's scholarly **Finland and Europe** (Minnesota, 1982) is probably the best book on the period when Finland was a Grand Duchy of Imperial Russia. Anthony F. Upton's **The Finnish Revolution** (Minnesota, 1981) chronicles the "catastrophic" civil war that followed Finland's declaration of independence on December 6, 1917.

David Kirby's **Finland in the 20th Century** (Minnesota, 1980) traces Finland's transformation from a "remote and backward agrarian region" to a "modern, streamlined European state." He observes that Finns became more wary of the Russians after they separated from the tsar. "Russophobia," Kirby writes, "which had not been a very noticeable feature of Finnish political or cultural life [under the tsar] became virtually synonymous with patriotism during the early 1920s and 1930s."

Several writers and scholars have focused on what may be the most dramatic saga in Finnish history: the 1939–40 Winter War. Allen F. Chew's **The White Death** (Michigan, 1971) is probably the best military analysis of Finland's 100-day stand against the Russians. Jukka Nevakivi's **The Appeal That Was Never Made** (McQuill-Queen's, 1976), demonstrates how Helsinki tried to isolate the Finno-Soviet conflict from the Allies and World War II, then in its early stages. And Väinö Tanner's **The Winter War** (Stanford, 1957) takes the reader behind the scenes. The author, then Finland's foreign minister, recounts late-night negotiations with Josef Stalin, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, and Finland's envoy, Juho Paasikivi.

Anthony F. Upton's analytical **Finland in Crisis, 1940–41** (Faber, 1964) begins where Tanner's narrative (and the Winter War) ends—with the Treaty of Moscow, on March 12, 1940. Upton criticizes Finland's venerable commander-in-chief, Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, for stumbling into a de facto alliance with Hitler in the 1941–44 Continuation War. "Gripped by passivity and a desire to procrastinate," the Finnish regime, Upton says, "... had not issued a clear declaration of its position either to its own people, or to foreign powers."

Perhaps the most widely read account of Finland's involvement in World War II is a vivid novel, **The Unknown Soldier** (Collins, 1957), by Finnish writer Väinö Linna. His tale of a machine gun platoon of young unruly Finns during the grim Continuation War has been bought by more Finns than any other book—ex-

cept the Bible—and translated into 14 different languages.

Unfortunately, few other Finnish novels or collections of poetry have made it into English. Americans can enjoy, of course, the Finnish classics, like Elias Lönnrot's Karelian folk epic, the **Kalevala** (Athlone, 1985), and Johan Ludvig Runeberg's patriotic poems in **The Tales of Ensign Stål**, (Söderström, 1952). Here is one verse from Runeberg's "Finland":

We love the thunder of our streams,
Our torrents' headlong bound,
Our gloomy forests' mournful themes,
Our starry nights, our summer's
beams....

Like Runeberg, many 20th-century Finnish poets, including the 26 writers whose work appears in **Salt of Pleasure** (New Rivers, 1983), have drawn inspiration from the Finnish countryside. Eino Leino (1878–1926) saw in the unyielding climate and the harsh necessities of rural Finnish life the sources of the strength that many outsiders today see in the Finnish character. **Salt of Pleasure** includes some of Leino's work, including this verse from "Drifter's Song":

Life's frost took my flower.
All that remained was work
days unending,
my heartache a winter's night.
Organize, dim-witted wretches,
or heaven's lightning will strike.
Happy-go-lucky man and woman,
who will eat bread next fall?

EDITOR'S NOTE: Keith Olson and Tõnu Parming, a specialist on Finland at the U.S. Department of State, suggested many of the titles in this essay. Of related interest are WQ's *Background Books* essays on Sweden (Autumn '77) and Norway (Spring '84).